

PROBE

186



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Editorial

Gail

We have gone past 8 months in Covid-19 Lockdown in South Africa. Somehow the time has gone swiftly and yet also very slowly. At least we are down to Level one and life is looking as if it may finally return to normal. But we hear this morning that for the first time since August, the number of new cases has exceeded 3000 in a day. And we see that many other places in the world are re-instating more severe lockdowns. The news about vaccines has been promising, but not yet convincing.



And I wonder how governments are going to decide who should receive them first? One hopes we will not have a “Logan’s Run” type of scenario. In less than a year our world has been completely reshuffled and it feels increasingly as if we are living in a crazy Science Fiction novel.

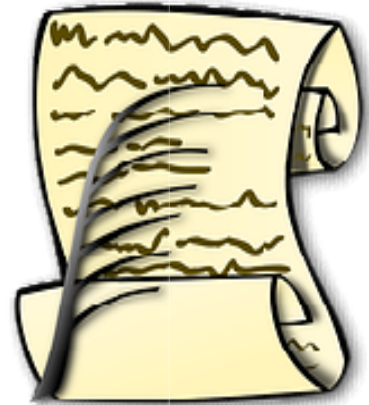
On a more positive note we have now been offering Zoom meetings in place of our monthly get-togethers and we keep in touch on WhatsApp. Cathy Lister - Palmer from Quebec also tells us that they are also able to meet up with members whom live too far away to attend in person, so I guess some good has come from the pandemic. I truly hope that at some time in the not too distant future we may be able to meet again normally.

Lloyd Penny, also from Canada, tells us that he received PROBE 182,184 and 184 on the same day. 182, 11 months after it was posted. I must admit that 183 and 184 were posted together once it seemed as if postal services were starting to work again. And if PROBE has reached Canada I guess there is still some normality in the world.

It just remains for me to wish you all a safe Festive Season and the sincere hope that you may be able to spend some time with your loved ones. Take care and stay safe.

Chairman's Note

Hi everyone. So by the time you read this is should be heading towards the end of the year, and boy, quite the year it was as well. It will certainly be one of the most memorable ones for just about everyone, and for all sorts of different reasons. So the regular monthly meetings didn't happen for many months, but at least we have started them again, albeit only on whatever digital device you chose to view: laptop, desktop, mobile phone, whatever.



Unfortunately I don't expect the Level 1 lockdown we are currently in to decrease any time soon, not this year at least. They are still being, in my personal opinion, still too overly cautious, but by now I think most people are pretty much used to the way things have become. Never leave home without your facemask! That means the virtual meetings are likely to continue for a while, though the social coming up at my dad's place will be the first possible physical meeting for everyone in a while.

Then, you would think with so many people having to work from home, or simply having to stay home for extended periods as many work places were not open for months, that we would have an overabundance of short stories for the competition? Sadly, it seems everyone was possibly more concerned with what was happening in the world, than considering spending the time writing short stories. As such, for the first time since the club started the short story competition, there will not be one this year due to the lack of entries. Such a pity. I cannot say I am completely unhappy about it. Having to read some of those dreadful stories, and then write a critique for the writer where I try to tell in the nicest way possible just how bad the story was, it can be really hard sometimes. Still, the good stories did make up for it, and I can say this, every year so far that I have been a judge there have always been a few stories that I really enjoyed.

I recently watched a Japanese anime movie called Welcome to the Space Show. With how dramatic things have been in the world, watching something like this which was so incredibly full of colour, and sights and sounds, it was truly amazing. There was an incredible amount of content and ideas coming

from the movie, they must have spent a long time coming up with everything and putting it into the movie. It is very much a family friendly movie full of the joys of youth, of seeing something new and fantastical, and being a lot of fun at the same time. I would recommend it to anyone interested in something like that.

In the mean, all this time spent at home means I have actually managed to catch up on all the TV series I had set aside with the high quality files that take up a lot of computer disk space. I got to admit, I was surprised, and overjoyed as it basically means I can now start any new TV series that comes out without being behind on anything. It also means I can now start trying to catch up on the older TV series that I have chosen to keep but watch later. That... will take me a lot, lot longer than six months to catch up! However, before that, time to catch up on all the comics that I have been ignoring for a while, so time to read my Modesty Blaise graphic novels (they really are very good for having been written almost 50 years ago). Don't worry, whilst there isn't much in the way of science fiction or fantasy in these stories (more spies and some odd things), I have plenty of other comics to read full of the more common themes for this club. I mustn't forget to start catching up on my computer games as well!

Anyway, let us hope that with the passing of the current year, that the next year starts bright and cheery and in a better state than we leave this one. That we can restart the normal club activities and get everyone meeting again, though this virtual thing has worked pretty well, but you can't have dinner with a laptop. I hope you all have also managed to be as productive as myself these past 6 or more months, if not, get to it. Keep safe, keep well, and see you all in the New Year.

Cheers

Andrew

Books Received

JonathanBall *Publishers*

Veronica Roth Chosen Ones Hodder & Stoughton R355.00

Terry Goodkind Into Darkness: Children of Dhara 5 Head of Zeus R325.00

Trudie Canavan Makers Curse: Millennium Rule 4 Little Brown R355.00

Holly Race Midnight's Twins Hot Key Books Children R190.00

Kathryn Scanian The Dominant Animal Faber Factory Plus R250.00

Dean Koontz The Eyes of Darkness Headline R215.00

Charlie & Stephanie Wentzel The Marvel Studios Story HarperCollins Leadership R325.00

Magazines Received

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

Reece Moorhead reecebm@gmail.com

Issue #41 October 2020

Issue #42 November 2020

Ansible David Langford

October 2020 398 <http://news.ansible.uk/a398.html>

November 2020 399 <http://news.ansible.uk/a399.html>

MonSFFA's WARP 108 is now on line for your reading pleasure. :-)

http://www.monsffa.ca/?page_id=6915

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Nova 2019 Editor's Choice

Philip Machanick

Relife

He feels warm. He opens his eyes, turns away from the harsh brightness, blinks. Then there is a shadow over his face. He turns to face the shadow and feels coolness on his back as it touches the bench – the bench he is lying on. His garment has a gap at the back.

He looks up to the source of the shadow. It is large, a not unfriendly dark face atop a strongly-built body. The body is clad in dark blue and is topped with a cap. There is a badge somewhere too; it is all too much and he blinks again.

The mouth opens and words form. Aren't you supposed to be in hospital?

He sits up and the words register. "Hospital? Isn't that where sick people go? " He is confused. He feels well. Physically. He shakes his head. Mentally, he feels fine too. But he is confused and nothing makes sense.

A policeman. A memory. The policeman nods. "I don't know what is wrong with you but people only wear a gown like that in a hospital. Do you remember anything? "

He hesitates, then says haltingly: "No. No, ...I just woke up on this bench. I don't know how I got here."

"What is your name? Where do you live? "

He suddenly feels a rush of panic and sits up abruptly. "I have no idea." The action of sitting is strangely reassuring. Physical competence. Words are coming to him. He knows how to describe where he is. A park. Close to a beach. Nothing about it is familiar but he recognizes things. A bike path. A footpath. Cyclists. Pedestrians. In the distance, waves. Further, ships.

The policeman shows decision. "You showed no weakness sitting up. Can you walk? "

He stands up and takes a step. The hospital gown flaps loose behind him and he reflexively closes it.

The policeman nods. "Come with me to the station. My car is right here. We can try to work out who you are and what to do about you."

The car has a blue light on the roof and stripes on the side. The central stripe is blue, surrounded by yellow stripes. The word "Police" is prominently emblazoned, along with a badge. It invokes thoughts of police but the detail feels wrong. He notes other writing: "Crime Stop" and a number. It is all so unfamiliar. He feels he should know what a police car looks like. He walks to the right-side front door. The cop motions to the other side; he has approached the steering wheel.

After a short ride through unfamiliar streets, they arrive at a large brick building with a secured entrance. He cannot shake the feeling of being in the wrong place. Concepts like police, driving cars, street scenes and so on keep seeming familiar yet wrong, as if he is on the wrong side of a mirror.

Inside the police station, the cop takes him to a bare room with a table and chairs. "Wait here. I will fetch a superior to help." The cop removes his cap revealing crinkly hair: distinctly African. Another recollection. From where?

The cop returns promptly with another, much skinnier cop, in a jacket and tie, a firearm strapped to his waist. The newcomer has a businesslike look to him. He is a little lighter-skinned than the first cop and has straighter hair. "Constable Nxele" – the name has an unfamiliar click sound – "says he found you asleep on a bench near the waterfront. Can

you tell us which hospital you were in? " Something in his head aligns. This man must be a detective. Not uniformed.

"No. I don't recall being in hospital.."

"Never? " asks the detective.

"I can't say never. I don't remember anything before I woke up."

"And you don't remember how you got to Port Elizabeth? "

His brow creases. "I don't even know where Port Elizabeth is. Everything here seems strange. I recognize things like palm trees along the roads. But the roads seem wrong somehow, everything is back to front."

The constable looks at him knowingly. "You tried to get into the car on the wrong side. You have an American accent. So you would be used to driving on the other side. If you forgot where you were ..."

The detective gives the constable a look as if to say this is my gig. "So you are probably an American citizen then? We will contact your consulate and see if they have any idea who you are. In the meantime we will check hospitals. As a foreigner you must have been at a private hospital. Do you really not remember a thing? "

He shakes his head. "I really remember nothing – things come to me like what a car is, what police are and so on – but the detail is all wrong."

The constable says: "As if you woke up in the wrong place? "

As he responds with "Yes, that is so *disconcerting*," he goes cold. This is something he has heard before. He shakes his head but fails to clear it.

"Constable, can you start by phoning all the local hospitals? Check government ones

as well to be on the safe side. If anyone is missing a patient, that should help. Particularly one with memory loss. I will phone the American consulate in Cape Town."

"Right, sir. Meantime though can I get our guest some tea? "

The detective is about to retort but decides better of it. "OK, if you can organize something, that is up to you. But I want to hear from those hospitals."

An hour later, the constable reappears and notes the empty teacup. "I have asked all the hospitals and the American consulate knows of no one of your description has who been reported as missing. My superior says I should take you to Elizabeth Donkin for psychiatric evaluation."

"Elizabeth Donkin?"

"A government hospital. We can get a government psychiatrist to try to work out what the memory loss problem is about."

"And did you ask them if they knew about someone like me?"

"I did. I said *all* of the hospitals. No one is missing a patient."

* * * * *

Elizabeth Donkin is not a large hospital. He knows this without a recollection of what any other hospital looks like. The constable leads him to a doctor – a psychiatrist. She seems friendly. She is sitting at a desk with a computer and is facing him. He is in a marginally comfortable chair. The room is bare, undecorated.

Constable Nxele stands at his side. "Excuse me doctor. I should introduce your patient but he doesn't have a name. I have been thinking of him in my head as X."

He swivels in the chair and asks "X? Is that rather generic as an unknown? "

Nxele smiles. "Try pronouncing my name. It is spelled N-X-E-L-E. The 'X' is a click sound in our language that foreigners struggle with so many of my friends with names starting with an X in self-defence call themselves 'X'. So calling you X is not so foreign to me."

He smiles, "Thanks, but what do I call you then? Not also X? "

"No, no. If you want to be formal, Constable. But my first name is Ben. That is also a defense: my Xhosa name is too hard for foreigners." The word 'Xhosa' starts with a click too.

"Koa-sa," says X uncomfortably and quizzically.

"Our language."

The doctor takes charge. "Thank you Constable. You can leave me with the patient. We can work on his isXhosa pronunciation later." Despite her Caucasian appearance, she says the click convincingly, at least to X's ears.

Nxele nods and walks out. She waits for the door to close. "I am Dr Coetze." She notes his puzzled expression. "The constable said you had this feeling of waking up in the wrong place. Does my name trigger anything? "

"The opposite. It is part of the strangeness, not a name I have encountered before. At least I think I can pronounce it, unlike the constable's." He tries and judging from her expression, manages to mangle it.

"It seems we are doing well triggering a feeling of strangeness. Perhaps we should try to find something familiar that may unlock a memory or two. I am not a great expert on American accents, but I don't think yours is from the South. Does that ring any bells? "

He shakes his head slowly. "Texas."

"You have a memory of Texas?"

"No. I just remembered it is in the South."

She goes through a succession of place names. All trigger memories but none that shed any light.

She looks frustrated then composes herself. "Memory loss is a peculiar thing, particularly if there is no physical cause. You seem otherwise healthy, though I will order some tests. Sometimes it just comes back like that –" she clicks her fingers – "or it can be a slow and tedious process.

"One thing for sure: I cannot put you out in the street like this. Since no one has claimed you, we can admit you as a state patient so you will have a place to stay."

X is in a ward with patients in various states of hopelessness. He instinctively straightens up his bed and tidies the blanket. "Mil spec" pops into his mind but he keeps it to himself. Dr Coetze says: "I will leave you until tomorrow; a little rest may clear your head. Then we can work on a treatment programme." He sits on the bed,

watching her briskly departing form. His next thought is that if you were not admitted for depression, this place would fix that. He looks around the ward and the other patients show no interest. He walks over to the window and looks out. It is a sunny day but windy. Nothing he sees triggers a memory.

* * * * *

A bright shiny morning in a dull place. X sits up in bed. He has been issued with hospital pyjamas, a step up from a hospital gown open at the back. It imparts some dignity. He rubs his chest and runs his right hand over his left arm. Everything feels very real, very solid.

He feels in need of exercise, movement. Anything but being confined to this grey lifeless space. The other patients all have a look of being on drugs – none stirs despite the growing early-morning sunlight. He steps out of bed and feels the urge to do push-ups. He is at fifty when he senses a presence and stops. It is Nxele again, with a stranger. “Apologies; I did not expect visitors. My head may be questionable but at least my body is not and I needed to test that.”

X gets up onto the bed and does a double take. The newcomer looks startlingly like himself – different in detail but similar features. He has not looked at himself in a mirror yet he senses the resemblance – and the difference. Again: the non-specific feeling that something is not quite right.

Nxele says: “No need for apology. It is after all rather early. But I thought you would be happy to know we have a positive result from your government. They know who you are. Your name is David Cramer, and we have a visitor from your consulate. I met him on my way into the hospital.”

The stranger introduces himself. “Good morning. I am Fredrick Jones, and we are very pleased you have turned up. I have a new passport for you and will be escorting you to the airport. We have a flight booked at 8am, which will connect to a flight out of the country in Johannesburg. We will have you home and with your family without delay.”

He hands over a passport. “I will be accompanying you. I also have some cash you can use for expenses on the way.” He hands over a wad of currency – some X does not recognize but assumes is local; the rest is \$100 bills.

X takes the money without interest and puts it under his pillow. He pages through the passport carefully, noting the photo page with the name. Perhaps it looks like him – but it could also be his visitor.

The visitor is looking at him expectantly. X slowly comes to a conclusion. “I am not ready to go. I have profound memory loss and I need to get a diagnosis.”

Jones remonstrates: “But your family, the US government –”

X stares at him coldly. “Yes, the US government. You say you are from the consulate. Do you have any ID? A passport? Proof of credentials? ”

“I have *your* passport. I left my own passport in my car, as it happens. But why do I have to prove my credentials? Who else could deliver you a passport? ”

“I don’t care. Go away. I need time. And when you come back, bring convincing proof of who you are.”

Jones prepares to argue and Nxele intervenes. “Look, he has a point. He isn’t under arrest. We have no allegation of an offence or that he is in the country legally. You cannot force him to leave. However, I can force you to leave. This hospital is in my country, not yours.”

Jones looks angry but backs off. Nxele sees him out of the ward then watches through the window until he drives off.

X is staring at him. "Thank you. I didn't expect you to support me like that."

"I know the type – expect to get their way. If he forced you to go with him, it would be abduction. If you are on the run from the US, they should extradite you. If you are an illegal immigrant, my government will send you on your way. Until any of that happens, no one can force you to do anything.

"But tell me now: why were you so suspicious? Oh, and by the way, nice move keeping the money."

"He did give it to me unconditionally and made no move to take it back."

X counts the money. Local notes say *200* in large print and in fine print *TWO HUNDRED RAND*. "How much does twenty thousand rand buy?"

"It is more than I make in a month but my job doesn't pay so well. You have a pile of dollars too."

"I *think* I know what those buy. Can I spend them here? "

"Not legally. You need to go to a foreign exchange dealer and you need a passport."

"I have a passport now. That's what made me suspicious. How does a passport to appear so fast? Where did they find a photo of me? You normally use a new one each time. Jones looks enough like me that it could be his passport."

"If his name is Jones. Tell you what. I'll check with the consulate whether they sent someone called Jones to pick you up. If not, I will arrest him as soon as he shows up again."

"Thanks. In the meantime, could you take me to buy me clothes? I imagine the hospital won't stop me going. They only checked me in because I had no place to go."

“How many pushups did you do when we walked in? ”

“About 50. Why? ”

“Definitely nothing wrong physically. And after the way you dealt with that crook, your head can’t be that bad. Let’s talk to the doctor but I am sure it will not be a problem.”

It wasn’t and they soon are at a shop called Woolworths. X looks around in bewilderment. Nxele wrinkles his brow. “Another wrong thing? ”

“The name is familiar. But not quite right ...Looks way too classy. And ...I just remembered. *Woolworths*: went bust more than 20 years ago.”

A few people are giving them odd looks because of X’s hospital pyjamas but the Nxele’s police uniform seems to settle them and they look away.

“This is the place the larneys get clothes. Too expensive for me but you have enough cash.”

At the station, Nxele leads the way to his desk. “OK, let me try to get the American consulate in Cape Town.”

After various calls he eventually gets the consulate. “Hello. Do you have someone there called Jones who was sent to Port Elizabeth this morning? Frederick Jones? ...no ...”

X grabs the receiver. “Hi, can you tell me anything about David Cramer?”

The voice on the other end sounds puzzled. “Mr Cramer? He has taken a few days off. A personal matter ...”

“Thank you. Thank you very much.”

As X hands the phone back to Nxele he nods grimly; X says: “Exactly as I guessed. Cramer had a passport ready for me because it was his own. It happened that I look close enough to him that he could get away with that. How he organized an unused one, issued today, at such short notice is interesting.”

“So what do we do now?”

“I don’t think it is safe for me at the hospital.”

Before Nxele can respond, another cop appears in the doorway and addresses Nxele. “There’s someone in the charge office demanding to see you. He says you are creating an international incident and will take it higher if you do not sort it out at once.”

Nxele follows his colleague at a rapid clip, followed by X.

Jones is there, looking agitated. “You are detaining an American citizen without charge.”

“No he’s not,” says X. “I am here voluntarily. You still have not established who you are.”

“Well, here is my passport. A US diplomatic passport. It shows my name and photo. You cannot get more official than that.”

“Now here’s the thing. We called the consulate in Cape Town and they know of no Frederick Jones. But an employee called David Cramer has taken a few days off. This passport is completely unused and looks new. I think it’s a fake and you’re trying to abduct me. Constable, is that sufficient grounds to arrest him? ”

Nxele shakes his head. “This is above my level. I’m still in uniformed. You cannot get a more junior detective. I’ll call the station commander.” He turns to one of the other cops and whispers in his ear. He scurries off and returns shortly with a strongly-built Caucasian female with short blonde hair.

She looks at X, then Jones, then Nxele. “Righto, what’s going on?”

Jones opens his mouth but Nxele beats him to it. “Colonel, this man showed up at the waterfront yesterday morning in a hospital gown and with no memory. I took him to Elizabeth Donkin and they found nothing wrong with him except his memory. Our

enquiries to the Americans because of his accent led to *this* man” – he points to Jones – “showing up at the hospital claiming to be from their consulate in Cape Town. I just phoned the consulate and they’ve never heard of Frederick Jones, which is what he calls himself. He produced a passport back at the hospital for our visitor in the name David Cramer. But a David Cramer working at the consulate has taken a few days off.

“So this looks very suspicious. Our visitor, who we are calling X, is accusing this man of trying to abduct him.”

X adds: “If he has this alleged diplomatic passport and his consulate doesn’t know him, that is really suspicious. I insist that he be held for attempted abduction.”

The colonel looks troubled. Diplomatic immunity is not something to take lightly. “I cannot arrest him unless I am sure that there is a problem with his passport. Mr Jones, could you accompany me to my office while I make some calls? Constable, stay here.”

Jones is clearly not happy. “No, ma’am. I will not accompany you anywhere. Are you unfamiliar with the basics of diplomatic immunity? ”

“Of course I am. But if there’s evidence that the passport is a forgery, I ...”

“Have you any idea what kind of trouble you will be in if you pursue this? ”

The colonel puts the passport down. She turns to Jones and says icily, “I also have some idea what kind of trouble there will be if I don’t and it turns out there are solid grounds for suspicion.”

A raging argument ensues and while they are distracted, X pockets the Jones diplomatic passport. In a brief break in the shouting, he says, “Apologies for interrupting. This is obviously going to take time to sort out. Could the constable take me to a coffee shop while you work it out? I missed breakfast.”

The station commander obviously does not entertain being interrupted and is about to give X a piece of her mind when he holds up a hand to stop her. "I am hungry and confused. I mean no disrespect."

She grunts and refocuses on Jones. Nxele leads X away before anyone stop them. As they head out of the station, Nxele says, "Neat move, palming that passport."

"Oh. You saw that."

Nxele laughed. "I have seen plenty of crooks in my time. But you aren't one: he is as bent as a jailed politician. Without his diplomatic passport he's nothing. I would love to know how he sorts it out but I am delegated to take you for breakfast."

Over cappuccino and eggs, X takes his bearings. "I really am not ill. Except for this memory thing. Whatever Jones is up to, I would rather he did not find me again. Perhaps a hotel? But if he has the resources to rustle up a diplomatic passport in a few hours, he could track me down there too."

"How about you sleep tonight at my home? Then I can keep an eye on you."

"Won't you get in trouble?"

"I don't see why. You aren't under arrest. I agree that hospital isn't safe with strange people trying to abduct you. I will talk to my superiors to make sure there is no problem. It may be a bit irregular but this is easier for them than putting a police guard at the hospital."

Back at the station, Nxele checks at the charge office. No one knows where the Colonel or the fake diplomat has gone. Nxele says: "I have a lot of paperwork to catch up. How about you just sit with me while I do that? If no one appears to tell me what to do by the time I knock off, we can just go home together."

"Fine."

X closes his eyes and feels a susurraton of background noise that had almost faded

and is moving to the fore again. Indeterminate time passes. Suddenly he senses snatches of conversation.

How did he get away?

There are no sounds, but he senses different personalities.

There's a limit to how fast we can make passports.

There is other noise, not part of the conversation. But the critical bits are clear.

Who would have thought the South African Police would be so difficult? Normally a junior cop is ...

Detail is lost in the noise.

How did we lose that diplomatic passport? Not easy to make on short notice.

Best guess. He took it. So he has two identities but we know them both.

Yes, but one is diplomatic. If he has any idea, he can use it to slip under the radar.

Then the noise is too extreme to pick out anything intelligible. He opens his eyes.

Nxele is talking anxiously on his cell. X catches his eye. Nxele finishes the call.

"Robbery in town. Lots of the messaging. But I don't think I will be involved. Not my sector and it's not big enough to call in all sectors.

"You look as if you woke up and saw a ghost."

"Almost. I told you I was in good health except for memory so don't take this the wrong way. I am picking up conversations between people who are after me."

Nxele looks concerned. "Voices in your head? "

"No. Not really – it is as if I was tapping their phone calls. I couldn't actually *hear* voices. Very weird. I picked up that they tricked up the diplomatic passport at short notice and were worried that I could use it. Then there was too much noise to make sense of anything else – about when you started using your phone.

"Maybe I do need to take you to that doctor again. But look – it's been a long day. I

am on early shift so I can go home now. I am still happy to take you with me as I promised.

“The passport story is interesting. It seems they tried a quick and dirty thing of giving you a passport that already existed then when that failed, faked a new one for themselves to try to use diplomatic immunity. Tomorrow, we can worry about who can do that sort of thing in a matter of hours. They will not follow us into the township. They would be too conspicuous there.”

Nxele’s home is quite a trip out of the city. They take a taxi – a crammed minibus. Big yards and well-built houses fade into scenes of trash and small run-down houses. After their stop, they walk for about 10 minutes. Nxele’s house is small with a rough fence but the interior is clean and inviting. Interior walls are bright, strong colours and windows have friendly curtains concealing serious burglar bars. Modest furnishings look well-used but not decrepit. “Welcome to my castle.”

X almost breaks down. “You have no idea what it feels like to be in a friendly place. I only have memories since yesterday and I have no idea what it feels like to have a home, except the feeling that I *should* know. That hospital was so depressing.”

“Well good. If you remember nothing, you will not find my humble dwelling too modest. My wife gets home later. She teaches at a school nearby. I am sure she will cook us something nice.”

“Cook? I know how to cook a few things.”

“Like what? ”

“I don’t know.”

“Ah, the memory. Stop worrying. Sit down and let’s have a beer.”

Nxele returns with two large bottles. Seeing X’s expression, he says: “Beer strange to you to?”

"I know what beer is. But the bottle is unfamiliar. I don't know the brand and the size looks wrong."

Nxele opens both bottles. "Only one thing to do: taste. Then tell me if it's strange."

X samples his. "I am sure I had a beer something like this before. I think. My memory of taste is hazy. Beer. Coffee. Eggs. These are such distinctive things, flavours you cannot mistake – yet it is as if I know *of* them. As if someone told me what they were but I had never tasted anything before."

"X, you are a puzzle. But not one to solve now. Sit back, relax."

They settle down to watch television: local news. X absorbs what he can, not making much sense of anything. In the meantime dull noises in his head persist, but nothing as clear as the earlier conversation.

The door opens and Nxele's wife breezes in. Nxele jumps up and makes the introductions. "X, meet Gladys."

She examines X quizzically. "You don't look like an X."

Nxele laughs. "I told him about that nickname. His is the western version: X for unknown. I found him on the beachfront yesterday and he has no memory of his past. We thought he was American. Someone claiming to be from the Cape Town American consulate tried to take him away this morning but the whole thing was very fishy. He doesn't have a place to stay so I brought him home."

"You would bring a guest when I have nothing to cook. I hope your guest likes umngqusho."

X looks at Nxele for guidance. "Samp and beans. Samp is dried mealies and beans are beans."

"Mealies?"

"Ah, corn. Another thing wrong? "

Gladys looks askance. “Wrong? I know how to cook. And these have been soaking since yesterday.”

“No, no. X keeps running into things where something seems wrong to him. This time it’s because he doesn’t know the word ‘mealies’.”

* * * * *

X sits up. Everything is dark, unfamiliar. Then he remembers – Nxele’s house. The argument over whether the guest gets the bed. How he insisted that he was comfortable sleeping on the floor then wondered how he knew that. And here he is, awake in the dark, in a strange place – strangely comfortable with being on the floor. But not totally comfortable. The voices are there again.

The signal is not strong enough to triangulate.

If only we had better equipment.

Somewhere between New Brighton and Zwide.

We can track the cop when his phone is on.

Can he hear us?

Maybe. Not likely, he is not fully functional.

To be safe, not too much chatter.

The voices stop. X resists the urge to join the conversation, something he suddenly senses he could do.

He gets up and starts’ pacing quietly – but possibly not quietly enough, as Nxele suddenly appears. “What’s the matter? ”

X repeats the snatch of conversation.

“Either you are seriously wrong in the head or these people are seriously after you.”

“I do not feel safe in the city. It seems that they have some way of communicating

that maybe is supposed to work for me, but they are not sure. If they can track me, they will find me. But if this thing has limited range, going far away, make me safe from discovery.”

A light goes on. Gladys’s voice floats out of the bedroom doorway. “If you are going to wake me up with talk I might as well get up too.”

Nxele says: “Ignore her – she wakes up pretty early and is used to my early shifts.” He turns on a light too.

X goes on. “Yesterday, when you had that robbery situation with a lot of cellphone chatter, it severely interfered with their conversation. So I am guessing it is something similar to the cell network. If I could go somewhere off the network for a while, maybe I would lose them.”

Nxele contemplates for a while. “I am due a day off so I could take a long weekend; take you to my gogo in the Transkei. She is very rural. You have to go to the nearest hill to get cell signal. We could check if you really lose the voices in your head over there and it could be good for you to get away from the city to relax and get your memories back.”

“Gogo? ”

“Granny. What we call them up north. It is not a polite term down here.”

“Aren’t you worried about dumping a stranger with weird problems on her?”

“Believe me, my gogo can handle anything. The apartheid cops were scared of *her*. And anyway we will check how good your head’s reception is and if you get the voices while I am there, I will bring you back with me.”

The word *apartheid* sounds wrong: as if he was used to hearing it with a different accent but X lets it go. “I have no better plan. But why are you doing all this for me? ”

“I love a good mystery and helping people who have a problem. Your mystery is one

that I really want to solve. It is the sort of thing I joined the police for, not patrolling beaches and solving petty crime. My gogo may be very rural but she made me read from an early age – detective stories, science fiction, anything she could find cheap in second-hand stores. I sometimes used to think she only went to the city for that. Rural people have little money. So growing up with books is not usual.

“I was the first in the family who could have gone to university. She was determined that I should have the chance in life that she and my parents didn’t have. She was disappointed that I joined the police – she saw me as a lawyer or doctor. But we did not have the money to send me to university. I refused to let my gogo struggle to find the money. Policing pays OK if you are good at exams. You move up fast.”

“What about your parents?”

“You really know *nothing* about this country. So many of us end up being brought up by our grannies. Our parents see themselves as failures and give up. My gogo taught me not to do that. I don’t think she blames my mother for dying young but my dad – don’t talk to her about him.”

There is a silence. X senses a need to allow the subject to drift off. Eventually, he says, “How do we get there? Taxi?”

“No, no chance. It is a six-hour drive. There are long-distance taxis but you sit in them waiting until they fill up and sometimes they don’t. I have a cousin who likes going out that way and is overdue for a trip. We will go with him. He is just waiting for an opportunity for someone to share petrol.”

“Petrol?”

“Stuff you put in a car to make it go.”

“Ah, gasoline.”

“Right. It is about eight hundred rand each way. He needs help with that.”

X says, "There, I can help. Happy to pay the whole cost. It's not like I am spending money on anything else."

"Don't be too hasty. You need food for the trip and more clothes. Then, who knows what? But if you pay half, which is a bit more than your share, that will be good."

Shortly after, they are sitting around the kitchen table. Gladys offers corn flakes and instant coffee. She passes around the sugar. Nxele takes a generous helping; X takes none. "Did you always take no sugar in your coffee?" Gladys asks.

"I ...don't think so. Or, maybe when I was a kid Yes, my mom was a bit of health nut and didn't like sugar. Eventually she won me over."

"Don't you miss the sweetness?"

"I ...don't know." X looks distressed.

Nxele laughs. "Gladys my love, you made him remember something. But he is struggling with some strange things like remembering what things taste like. It is a big breakthrough that he even remembers his mother."

"The thing is, I remember I *had* a mother – and this one little detail. I can't even picture her. Was she tall or short? Long or short hair? Blonde or dark? "

"Don't worry my buddy. If little things come back when you don't think about it, maybe big things will too."

Their ride, Mjolo arrives. He is more slightly built than Nxele, with a pencil moustache and a jolly manner. His car is dilapidated – it has an Opel badge and has a vaguely far-eastern look, a hatchback model completely unfamiliar to X. The engine however runs sweetly.

Mjolo leans out of the car window to stare at X. "My, bro," he says to Nxele, "who is this, the black sheep of the family?"

He and Nxele have a good laugh. X self-consciously looks at himself, as if for the

first time registering that he is much lighter-skinned than his companions, a pale shade of coffee, indistinguishable from well-tanned Caucasian, Arabic or mixed-race – “coloured” as someone said on TV news the previous night.

Nxele gets into the car and invites X in. “A long story – let’s get the shopping out of the way and talk on the road. My buddy X needs some clothes and is a Woolies fan. I just need some *padkos*.” To Mjolo, he adds, “As your first episode in the mystery, my new buddy has no idea who he is, hence X.” He then notes the quizzical expression on X’s face. “A bit of Afrikaans: *pad* means road, *kos* means food. So stuff to keep me going on the road. I keep forgetting you aren’t one of our native whities.”

Afrikaans? ” X pronounces the unfamiliar word with deliberation.

Mjolo looks incredulous. “Man, you are ignorant. Afrikaans is the language of the Boer tribe who ran this place until 1994.” He meantime has started driving and is manoeuvring around impressive ruts.

“As in Boer War?”

Nxele laughs. “You are *such* a mystery. You don’t know your own name but you know about history from more than 100 years ago.”

Shopping in Uitenhage is not much of an adventure. Mjolo goes to buy food, with a generous handful of X’s cash while Nxele takes X to Woolies, which is clearly a branch of the same shop as they went to in Port Elizabeth. He looks quizzical as he browses. “Still feel strange?” Nxele asks.

“Very. But no different than last time. I’m also thinking: shouldn’t we tell the hospital?”

“When I took you out, I was vague about when you would be back and it didn’t trouble them. It’s not as if you were arrested or a danger to the public.”

They pay for the clothes and find Mjolo outside waiting in the car. “Guys, I bought some KFC for the road. And some refreshments for when we get there. Put your stuff in the boot.”

X looks puzzled again then gets it. “Ah, the trunk.”

Mjolo laughs. “Man, we’re in Africa now. Only elephants have trunks.”

“OK, but I think I know what KFC is. Chicken, right?”

As he stashes his shopping he stares at crates of large bottles filling the boot.

Mjolo shakes his head. “You know what KFC is but you don’t know what beer is.”

“As it happens I do know, but that looks like an awful lot of beer for two people.”

Nxele claps him on the back. “For a start, it’s three. We bought it with your money so we can hardly cut you out. Secondly, where we are going, it’s a *long* trip to buy booze so we have to bring enough for everyone to party. Come on. You can go in front because I know the scenery.”

X loses himself in the rolling hills, sweeping valleys, huts dotted around the countryside, the occasional smarter house or government building breaking the pattern. Every now and then they see cattle and goats wandering around, mostly clear of the traffic.

The sun is sinking by the time they turn off the N2 onto a short stretch of tar that quickly deteriorates to very rough dirt. Mjolo slows somewhat but drives as if his car was made for this, which it obviously isn’t judging from numerous creaks and rattles. After about half an hour, they crest a hill to the sight of a clump of neatly-built modest-sized houses.

Nxele taps X on the shoulder. “My gogo’s. She is a very strong person and you may need to learn how to talk to her. Wait here, while I tell her what to expect.” Nxele strides energetically to the biggest house and an elderly woman emerges and starts

talking sternly to him, gesturing to the car. Nxele motions for X to approach. He does so cautiously and extends a hand. "My apologies. I do not speak your language. I also do not remember my name so people call me X." She takes his hand perfunctorily and turns on Nxele again, particularly as the crates of beer start to emerge from Mjolo's car. She stalks into the house.

"Does that mean I am welcome?"

"That is not the issue at all. She always harangues me because I wasted my talents and became a cop. You are just an irritation: she has never known any white person who was in her mind any good."

The room is small and minimally furnished, but clean. There is a bed and a shelf of books. X takes a look at the titles and fixates on the science fiction titles – Asimov, Heinlein, the old school.

Nxele notices he is transfixed. "Another memory? "

"Yes. I know these authors. I can't remember when I read them though. Was this your high school reading? "

"My gogo wanted me to learn science but she bought anything that was going cheap. I liked reading about aliens and robots and androids all that stuff."

X has another moment – but can't place the memory that is trying to surface and leaves it because there is another distraction: the sound of raucous voices outside. The neighbours have arrived. Nxele makes introductions. "X, these are my cousins, the ones who are still trying to find work. There is nothing here except growing your own food and only the older people are into that."

Mjolo emerges from a nearby house. "Enough of that. The sun is going down. Time to party"

The beer bottles emerge. They are thoroughly warm from the car trip but no one

seems to mind. A few bottles later, everyone is very keen to get to know X better. He tries his best between their broken English and his broken memory; they do not get very far. After about an hour, everyone else seems to be rather plastered. He has not taken note of how much beer he has drunk, but he is not feeling any ill effects. As he is contemplating this Nxele's Gogo emerges with a huge steaming pot of umngqusho and another of unfamiliar vegetables. Everyone is obviously famished and the food goes fast.

It is well past midnight when the party breaks up, and X finds himself alone in his room. It does not seem an opportune time to ask about a bathroom so he strips down to his boxers and goes to bed. The noises in his head are completely stilled. He falls asleep almost as soon as his head hits the pillow.

* * * * *

Light streams through the window. X sits up, shakes his head to clear his thoughts and remembers where he is. The Gogo's house. The wild party. He gets out of bed and feels rested. Still no noises or voices in his head. At least that part of the plan is working.

He walks out and finds the Gogo striding towards the vegetable patch. He walks over and greets her. "Gogo, good morning."

"Molo," she says curtly, which he takes as a response as she opens a section of the fence. Inside, there is a bare patch with a shovel next to it.

"Umlungu, uyazi yokusebenzisa ifosholo?" She is looking at the shovel so he walks to it and picks it up.

With assertive instructions that he does not understand and hand gestures that he does, it seems he is to dig trenches around the unworked patch to match the patch

where things are already growing. After some progress, she alerts him to the presence of two large buckets and by verbal and physical commands makes him aware of a distant glimmer of water – at least a click away. *A click? Who measures distances like that?*

Despite his good physical condition, walking back is awkward as carrying two full buckets without spilling takes concentration. The Gogo surprises him by meeting him halfway back. She grabs a bucket and plonks it on her head as if it was a lightweight fashion accessory and walks back with him soundlessly, clearly making a point.

As they get to the garden, she removes the bucket from her head and shows by gestures that he must empty the water around the new bed. She turns and heads for her house, shouting loudly.

Nxele and a few occupants of the other houses stumble out, including Mjolo, looking the worse for wear.

Before anyone can say anything, two strangers appear from around the back of the Gogo's house. They have a resemblance to 'Fredrick Jones' – yet have a bland anonymity about them as if they could be anyone with blurred features.

X feels a strange surge of both recognition and bewilderment and Nxele swaps glances between him and the strangers.

"OK, time we sorted out the mystery," says X.

Nxele rubs his head. "The biggest mystery is why you drank so much and look so fit and healthy today."

X stares at Nxele, a memory coming back. Andy is saying: *About the one thing I can think of that is not part of my daily life that's part of yours is ...getting drunk.* He alternates his stare with Nxele and the newcomers. "Droids ...Andy ...Heidelberg ..."

Nxele grabs him by the shoulders. "Heidelberg in Gauteng? What are you talking

about? Droid as in android? ”

“No. Heidelberg, Germany. US air force base, working with German scientists. We had droids, good enough to pass for human. *But this makes no sense.* I remember being a controller ...”

One of the strangers speaks up for the first time.

“You were a senior droid controller. A droid malfunctioned and exploded in your presence. We were able to transfer much of your memory to an android brain but before we could be sure it had taken, you walked out of the hospital.”

Nxele looks suspicious, “A secret US government operation in South Africa?”

“No, no,” says the other stranger, “It was in Germany. We don’t know how the commander – X – got to South Africa. We think he had help, that is why we have desperately been trying to track him down. And of course to complete the memory transfer.”

X is struggling to regain his composure as memory fragments start to align. “Now, wait a minute. Something still doesn’t fit. If this is a US government operation, why the clumsiness over the David Cramer passport? ” Memories are stitching together thick and fast. “I’ve got it now. I was starting to suspect. There was a professor who spoke like an android, the repetition of phrases as if he was one of them. You were getting too good at passing for human; you somehow were making droids out of human control ... You had to eliminate me, stop me talking.”

The first stranger shakes his head. “No, no, it wasn’t like that. Why would we restore your memories to a new body if we wanted to eliminate you? The explosion was a mistake. The base body ...”

“Yes, I remember now. Droids were sent to target jihadists, with a bomb built into their bodies – and some were becoming unhappy about being blown up and relived

into their base body, which wasn't supposed to contain a bomb. How did they put it? *Disconcerting.*" The word echoes in his head.

Without thinking, he communicates without speech. *And now you want me back because something failed, some experiment didn't work. What was it? Relife me and tamper with my memories so I didn't know? Seems the experiment failed. That, it did,* replies the first stranger. X suddenly realises that only one of the strangers is with him and the other has distracted the locals, who are some distance away.

* * * * *

He feels warm. He opens his eyes, turns away from the harsh brightness, blinks. Then there is a shadow over his face. He turns to face the shadow and feels coolness on his back as it touches the bench – the bench he is lying on. His garment has a gap at the back.

He looks up to the source of the shadow. It is large, a not unfriendly dark face atop a strongly-built body. The body is clad in dark blue and is topped with a cap. There is a badge somewhere too; it is all too much and he blinks again.

He says: "How did I get back here? This is so *disconcerting.*"

L.O.C Cathy Lister-Palmer - Canada

Thank you! Nice to hear from you. And thanks also for the link to our WARP.

Most of Quebec province is in a semi-lockdown, so we are also "meeting" on line. Our panellists are preparing everything on the webpage, which is much more work than giving an oral presentation with a few slides. The silver lining is that everything is archived on the webpage. Our October meeting is here. (*Bit late for SA*) <http://www.monsffa.ca/?p=14109> We have a zoom session at the "break". Like you we are finding a silver lining--some members who cannot attend in person are able to join us in our zooms. Up till now, they've just been paying memberships because they want to support us. Not many clubs still in existence, and fan run cons were

folding even before the pandemic. We cannot compete with the professionals. Of course all the cons are shut down now, and will be for the rest of the year.

Thanksgiving was cancelled. In some places, so is Halloween and we expect Christmas to be cancelled too, or at least kept to immediate family living together. I have not seen my sister since last Christmas, my brother since March. Stay safe, Gail! It's not over yet.

Cathy



MEDIA RELEASE

From the South African National Space Agency

Pretoria, South Africa, 31 August 2020

South African space sector set to grow with new Space Infrastructure Hub

Amidst the global Covid-19 pandemic and a financial recession, the South African government has secured funding for a number of strategic infrastructure projects as part of its effective economic recovery plan. Digital infrastructure investment has ranked as a high priority due to our ever-increasing dependency on technological systems which rely on space infrastructure such as satellites and ground stations. Daily weather forecasts, instantaneous worldwide communications, navigation systems, and a constant ability to record high-resolution images are all examples of space infrastructure that are extensively utilised. Even basic commodities, such as food and energy resources, are facilitated through the use of space-based technology.

South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa and Minister of Public Works and Infrastructure, Patricia De Lille have mobilised public and private sector funding to prioritise infrastructure development to support economic growth and job creation through the Sustainable Infrastructure Development Symposium (SIDS). The South African National Space Agency (SANSA), an entity of the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI), has been awarded a significant R4.47 billion in additional funding over the next three years, to develop a Space Infrastructure Hub as part of the SIDS initiative.

“The Space Infrastructure Hub marks a significant milestone for the South African space sector to build an indigenous space capability that will service the needs of the

country. This project will position space data as a tool for sustainable development, especially addressing government's national priorities and for commercial use in thematic areas such as remote sensing, navigation, and space sciences," says SANSA CEO, Dr Val Munsami.

In early 2020, SANSA submitted a proposal to the SIDS, an initiative of government to access funding as part of the country's economic recovery plan and to respond to the National Development Plan 2030 and the Infrastructure Development Act. Over 270 projects were submitted for consideration by the SIDS. Of these, 88 projects were classified as bankable and five were considered high priority for the country in terms of the associated impact that was expected. The projects were divided into six sectors, namely, Water and Sanitation, Energy, Transport, Digital Infrastructure, Agriculture and Agro-processing and Human Settlements sectors.

SANSA's proposal for the Space Infrastructure Hub falls under the Digital Infrastructure sector and was selected as one of the Strategic Infrastructure Projects (SIPS), which forms part of the Presidential Infrastructure Coordination Committee (PICC), as gazetted on 24 July 2020. The Space Infrastructure Hub is declared as SIP 22, which implies that space infrastructure is now seen as a national priority, and is viewed in a similar footing, for example, as the Square Kilometre Array Project (SIP 16), another major infrastructure priority for the country.

The R4.47 billion projects will include a number of satellite builds (Earth observation and space science missions), a new ground station, an expanded data segment and a new data visualisation centre, activation of the satellite based augmentation system over Southern Africa, the development of products and services for use across all spheres of government, and human capital development and training.

In addition to the R4.47 billion funding secured through SIDS, the Space Infrastructure Hub also includes other projects for which separate ring-fenced funding has already been secured, namely:

- Upgrade of the Houwteq Satellite Testing Facility – R75 million
- Establishment of a Concurrent Engineering Design Facility – R25 million
- Establishment of a new Space Weather Regional Warning Centre – R90 million
- Establishment of an Earth Observation Data Cube Facility – R12.5 million
- A Research, Development and Innovation Fund for the development of space products and services – R60 million.

A keystone in the way forward is that SANSA will now be working with the Presidency, DSI and the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies

(DCDT), as well as Sentech to secure funding for a Telecommunications Satellite for South Africa through the SIDS initiative, which is an annual process.

The basis for this large funding allocation to SANSA is that space technology; products and services contribute to sustainable development and provide many benefits to the country. Of late, there has been an increasing appreciation of the value proposition of space applications. Space-derived services, such as Earth observation, satellite communications, navigation, space weather monitoring and space exploration, are increasingly being used to inform policy choices relating to political, social, economic and environmental challenges.

The global space sector was valued at \$360 billion in 2018 and is projected to grow at an annual average of 5.6 percent reaching \$558 billion by 2026. The African space industry is currently worth \$7.37 billion and is projected to grow to over \$10.29 billion in the next five years, according to the 2019 African Space Industry Annual Report. In a 2017/18 study commissioned by the Department of Science and Innovation, South Africa had approximately 30 space companies in the upstream segment with a turnover of R308 million, R114 million of which was for the export market. The turnover of the downstream segment was even more impressive, accounting for R205 billion, inclusive of satellite telecommunications. The savings accrued to government in 2017/18 through the use of satellite technology is estimated to be around R3 billion.

SANSA aims to ensure that the South African space sector is developed to match the optimum growth experienced throughout the rest of the globe.

“Our business case shows that with every Rand we spend, we can recoup about R10 in benefits,” says Munsami. “If we spend an estimated R10 billion in the next 10 years, the direct and indirect benefits would be around R100 billion. Our primary vision going forward is to position ourselves for the African Space Programme to benefit all 55 countries on the continent.”

SANSA is currently refining the details of each aspect of the deliverables within the Space Infrastructure Hub and will be hosting various engagement workshops with local space stakeholders over the coming months. A media briefing is planned for 2 September 2020 to clarify the projects and associated partnerships.

Additional information

SANSA aims to leverage the benefits of space science and technology for socio-economic development, environmental conservation and natural resource management.

The consolidation of South Africa’s primary space entities under one banner has brought together a significant range of competencies in satellite applications, satellite engineering and research in space science and technology to play an important role

in the country's future space initiatives. The space agency is also committed to delivering quality services to the international space sector and growing its Earth observation data management capability as well as houses the Regional Space Weather Warning Centre and hosts a state-of-the-art ground station.

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Nova 2019 Top Ten

Andre Ian Clarke The Poacher

Although the sun was veiled by pendulous grey clouds, the humidity was insufferable. Simply taking deep breaths of the dense air was a trial, and Murphy's eyes stung from the sweat that trickled constantly from his drenched blonde curls. What was left of his ragged clothes clung to him like a torn, soggy skin. Far to the north he glimpsed flashes of distant lightning. The peals of thunder which followed promised relief from the agonising heat, but in all the time he had been in this godforsaken wilderness, proper rain had yet to fall.

The land's savage beauty had long since failed to impress Murphy. Every minute under the sweltering, clouded sun was exhausting; the heat a constant, almost physical presence. He had already spent nearly three months in this primal place, but it had been ages since Murphy had last caught sight of his quarry, let alone make another kill. All of that time alone, to think. He had not seen the animals he had come to hunt for weeks, apart from the odd stale spoor or desiccated dung. His conscience was preying on him, the only preying that had been done for some time. The evidence was becoming impossible to ignore.

Human beings are the reason these magnificent creatures are going extinct, he thought.

*

The money had been beyond reason to a humble young man such as Murphy. Nonetheless, even allowing for the desperation his humble background had wrought on his life, he was beginning to feel no amount of money would ever justify the wanton slaughter of these beasts.

For almost two full days he had barely moved from his current position hidden among a huge pile of bus-sized boulders, one of several such formations in the rolling hills of the forest. The forest floor was covered in dull, shoulder high grasses and the tall, scraggly trees stuck out from the ground like badly broken bones, the dense mists a constant swirling grey carpet.

Murphy's relief had been due at dawn yet had never arrived, nor had any word or reason for the delay.

He felt something brush his bare shoulder. It was a millipede the length of his forearm, something that would have induced horrified screaming when he had first arrived.

Now, the obscenely large bugs, the sweltering heat, the untold dangers of this alien place affected him little. Sure, the physical pain and discomfort was ever present and real - but they had become his daily reality. The worst was how alone he was, because the longer he was alone, the more his thoughts drifted to his old life. And how his previous poverty had forced him into this current hell. The current hell where *he* was the demon, his only task to kill the spectacular creatures who, unlike him, actually belonged there.

*

The death of his father had been the catalyst for Murphy's deficiency in his early years. Ironically, his father had been in law enforcement, yet it hadn't been misguided heroism nor selfless sacrifice in the line of duty that had ended Murphy senior's life. Nor had the tragedy

of a vulgar little disease or serious injury been the cause of his premature death.

No, it was the obscenely mundane.

A fatal fall off a ladder while fixing the roof of the modest, neat house he had shared with his wife, Murphy's mother. She hadn't even known she was pregnant at the time.

Although the police had paid out a fair sum to the family, and his insurance policy had complied to their most basic of obligations, Murphy's mother still had to find work to feed herself, her newborn baby and Murphy's older sister. She had struggled throughout her children's young lives, without privilege or even simple good luck. Her strong work ethic did little to improve their lives, but Murphy had still been blessed with a happy childhood. However, as soon as his sister had been old enough, she had disappeared from their lives. The occasional letter had attested to her continued health and wellbeing, but after she had turned eighteen, her visits had been sporadic at best, becoming almost nonexistent ten years later when Murphy turned twenty.

As for when he had come of age, Murphy's mother had been his main priority. Upon being able to work, Murphy had taken much pressure from her, yet she had continued her two menial jobs with minimal complaints. Murphy's modest income as a bartender had supplemented their household well enough, but the daily struggle of life still remained.

The bar, thought Murphy, wiping sweat from this tired eyes. That's where it all happened.

Where I met the members of the syndicate, so charming and friendly, all business yet so disarming in their persuasion. *And where I could have said no.*

*

The deal the syndicate members had offered was beyond comprehension. Three years of training prior to his eventual assignment, and an income of over a million dollars each

year, to be spent as he saw fit. Not to mention the other perks - the time off for leisure, the massive house in the suburbs, the unlimited travel expenses (an inordinate amount being for travelling for meetings with the twisted kingpins of the Enterprise as it was ironically named) - the parties, the women - all of which Murphy had admittedly indulged in. If a recruit somehow reneged on the deal, either by changing their mind when it came to their final destination or by otherwise trying to cheat the Enterprise - they simply disappeared. Once chosen, completing the bargain was not negotiable.

As much as Murphy had enjoyed the benefits of his training period, he continued to have the foresight to look out for his mother.

Once his three years had been completed, he would have to travel to this place. To this dangerous, lethal chaos of heat and humidity, where the insects were large enough to sever fingers and toes in a single bite. Where every hoot, scream and bellow of creatures unseen in the abyssal fog highlighted how much he did not belong there. He was an imposter there - a stranger, an anomaly. Yet he could never go home, he could never return.

He had a job to do now. He had to pay back the kingpins for the generosity of the three years he had been living at their expense. He had to *kill* for them, his end of the bargain for the time they had previously gifted him. He had to send them treasure - precious, priceless horns.

*

He had at least ensured his mother would live in comfort until the end of her days.

When he had first been “employed”, as he put it - Murphy had been exceptionally vague about the nature of his work, despite his mother’s suspicions. He had never done anything illegal, neither directly nor indirectly. At least not then.

The years of luxury Murphy had experienced would inevitably end, when he finally began his “job” proper.

He had been cryptic as to the source of his initial incredible fortune and employment. Murphy had been extremely ambiguous when he had explained to his mother his destination and the period of his employment. He had never mentioned when he was returning. Nevertheless, he had sworn he would do everything possible to remain in contact, if not physically see her - for as long as he could.

That was the only time he had ever lied to his mother.

*

Even as his emotions had threatened to overwhelm him, Murphy had still been pleased to see the relief and gratitude in her weary but still beautiful face.

He even saw pride there, in eyes prematurely seamed with the stress and worries of her difficult life. When said goodbye to his mother for the last time, something had broken inside of him.

Because you can only travel one way. Forward or back, never both. And only once.

He was officially a poacher the moment he left.

He had to provide horns for the insatiable Enterprise. No amount of bitter regret and introspection would ever change that.

*

The shrill sound of Flute’s trademark whistle roused Murphy from his thoughts.

“Boy still ain’t caught shit,” Flute taunted. “What’s it been, a couple of days?”

Murphy ignored him, and stood up to stretch his sore muscles.

Flute was a small man, his skin bronzed but severely aged from his years spent under the swampy sun. He was somewhat of a loudmouth, as well as a bully to Murphy and the

other newcomers. However, he was a braggart and a bully only while in the company of other more dangerous of his brethren. Murphy had quickly learned to ignore him and his mocking, high pitched whistles.

However, the second man of the pair was someone who commanded actual fear.

Croc was his name. He was at best, a sociopath - at worst, perilously insane - the perfect hunter for the Enterprise.

To Murphy's knowledge, Croc had never actually assaulted any of the crew, yet there had been at least four other poachers killed or missing whose deaths or disappearances had seemed suspicious. Croc had insisted they had been tragic victims in predator attacks.

The explanation seemed farfetched when considering the bullets lodged in Old Tim's skull, one of the unfortunates. Bullets which perfectly matched the ammunition of the high powered rifles they were all equipped with.

Croc had been adamant a crocodile had attacked the elder man. He claimed he had fired upon the gargantuan reptile in an attempt to free grumpy Old Tim from the massive creature's savage jaws.

"I missed my aim," Croc had shrugged.

The fact that there was no crocodile spoor made his story seem unlikely. Croc's tale was tantamount to admitting to murder, but what law was there in this savage land? What justice was there in a place where survival was the only law; where every poacher broke the laws of both man and nature.

A man like Croc belonged here more than most; where death was forever lurking.

Croc was taller than both Murphy and Flute (whose only competition in height would admittedly have been one of the Seven Dwarves), but he was skinny as a twig. He might

have been considered good looking except for the massive scars which ruined the right side of his face. The disfigurement had also rendered his right eye a cloudy white, his vision reduced. The injuries had been courtesy of a juvenile crocodile which had given Croc not only his nickname, but its skin as well. Which Croc had fashioned into a belt.

Another body had been found in mysterious circumstances, almost completely stripped of flesh. Judging from the teeth marks on the bones; Croc's predator story seemed plausible and certainly at least partly true in this instance. However, some of the strange, angular incisions on the almost denuded skeleton were too precise for even the largest predator's teeth. In fact, the marks were rather more like those from a blade. Such as blades like the knives Croc wore on either side of his hips, on his handmade belt.

Croc was someone to avoid. Flute someone to tolerate.

Yet, such as they were, the unpleasant pair had clearly arrived to relieve Murphy. Sociopath and small-minded bully or not - Murphy deserved his break. He began to pack up his meagre supplies and slung his rifle over his shoulder.

"Not so fast Blondie," Flute warned, grinning awfully which exposed his picket fence-like teeth.

Murphy paused, puzzled.

"What now Flute?" Murphy groaned. "I've been here for two days. There has been nothing. *Nothing*. The rumours are true. We're killing these animals faster than they can recover."

Croc stared impassively, his torn face betraying nothing. Flute sneered unpleasantly.

"That's rich coming from you Murphy. What have you ever sent to the Enterprise? Like, three horns, all under sized? You reckon that's your side of the bargain cleared is it?"

Flute laughed shrilly, the sound as high pitched as his annoying whistles.

“You reckon you can live large on their big Dollar - then shrug off all your responsibilities when push comes to shit? Typical newbie, gets a little upset with a bit of blood under the fingernails.”

Flute chuckled and elbowed Croc in the ribs. The tall man with the scarred face merely glared at Flute, who actually flinched. The two men were clearly not allies.

“I’m not making excuses Flute,” Murphy said, not wanting further tension. “I’m just saying, there hasn’t been any *treasure* for weeks - not from any of us. And you all know it.”

Flute snorted, but had the good grace to say nothing.

“It doesn’t matter right now,” Croc said in his quiet, monotone rasp. “We’re not here to relieve you. We’re all getting out of this sector.”

Murphy frowned. The news was unexpected.

“Skunks have been spotted,” Flute said.

Skunks were the name they had for the anti-poaching units that occasionally surfaced. Murphy had never seen any, so they were almost a myth to him.

“You’re serious?” Murphy blurted, surprised.

The other two men nodded silently.

“We’ve gotta go meet Hendricks,” Flute muttered. “And we gotta go *now*.”

Hendricks was Murphy’s squad leader, a grizzled, tough old guy who was nonetheless fair to his men. Why he had chosen these two to inform him, Murphy had not the faintest idea.

Still, at least he was leaving this particular piece of hell for good.

*

Murphy followed the two men to a clearing, in a bowl shaped depression amongst the sparse trees. There were two custom quad bikes hidden by camouflage netting, both re-engineered to carry up to three people each as well as their equipment. They were cumbersome vehicles when carrying that many passengers, but for two people, and preferably one - they were efficient and hardy transport. Murphy made his way to the closest vehicle to stash his weapons and equipment.

Flute blocked his way. Murphy tried to brush past the smaller man, but Flute grabbed his arm. Murphy's temper flared, but as he reached for Flute's hand, he saw an uncharacteristic earnestness in Flute's rodent-like face.

"We have a protocol now Blondie," Flute said quietly. "No driving when skunks are around." He spat on the ground to show what he thought of this order - and their adversaries.

"Well that's just goddamned awesome," Murphy blurted. "How the hell are we supposed to get to Hendricks, fly?"

Croc said nothing; his grotesque features a mask of impassiveness. Flute pointed west, where the vegetation and strangled trees grew thicker, the mists denser.

"He's somewhere near Red Mountain," Flute said. "We make our way west, then follow the base of the Mountain. The fog will hide us until we're there. Three hours tops."

Murphy didn't like this news one bit, yet they had no choice. Skunks shot to kill on sight, and they were easily more merciless than the poachers they hunted.

"Okay," he said wearily. "Let's go and get on with it."

*

But nature, or fate - or karma - or some avenging God - had other plans for these men, these poachers of beasts. A deafening bellow sounded from the north eastern side of the

depression. For the first time in weeks, Murphy heard a sign of his valuable prey. And from the answering cacophony, there was more than one. And they were *angry*.

Flute went pale beneath his leathery skin, and even Croc's mouth dropped open in sudden shock.

"Oh shit, not now!" Murphy yelled, retrieving his rifle and crouching by one of the bikes.

The other two slunk towards the second bike, but Flute was too slow.

A huge horn, the length of a man's arm, emerged from the mist like a lance. It was followed by another pair of horns, these almost the full length of a human body. Beneath the two horns were beady eyes, red and angry and full of *hate*.

After his first ever encounter with these animals, Murphy had realised the level of intelligence, the depth of emotion these horned beasts possessed. He had regretted every decision that had led up to this cursed new life and ultimately - his first kill.

These creatures had souls - beautiful souls. They deserved to live - not die for the ludicrous cultural concept that their horns had potent properties of healing and rejuvenation.

And Murphy and his ilk were driving them to extinction.

The triceratops emerged fully from the humid, swirling mists and snorted aggressively.

The rest of its herd stampeded through the forest, pounding Flute into the dust and fallen leaves.

*

Time travel had been possible since the 1960's. However, after careful experimentation, it was discovered that matter could only ever travel one way in time - either into the future or into the past - but once there; it was stranded. Any attempt to return to the current time via science's artificially created wormholes resulted in a cataclysmic event.

Krakatoa, Pompeii - countless others were the results of these failed experiments.

The technology was soon outlawed on pain of death. However, as always with humanity and its own potentially devastating advancements - the ban allowed the time travel black market to flourish.

The great depression, the World Wars - even seemingly beneficial events in human history - remained means for those ruthless and cunning enough to exploit for personal gain. The truth of the matter is; history has already been altered and interfered with. However - as there remains no means of ever *returning*, who could or would ever know?

Because you can only travel one way. Forward or back, never both. And only once.

Time travellers have the infinite impunity.

And when wildlife criminal syndicates found themselves in possession of this technology, they contrived to send specially trained hunters back in time. The task: to poach various species, both prehistoric and those animals of time periods who had the ultimate misfortune of evolving alongside man.

A return wormhole was relatively easily constructed upon arrival in another time; but only for the bones, horns, claws, scales, wings, organs, skins, feathers, meat and whatever other parts of the innocent creatures was desired in the present by the syndicates.

Only a one way ticket.

Once the laws of the universe had been broken, by bending time itself - the universe would not allow a second breach.

Any attempt for a person to return had often resulted in the afore mentioned natural catastrophes, but it was more likely for the desperate individual to be dissolved painfully in a matter of seconds into their constituent atoms. The return wormhole was often destroyed

as well, resulting in a significant lack of product and thus profit. Which would simply not do for the Enterprise and similarly minded syndicates. Wormholes, whether into the past or future - were strictly Exit doors only.

Therefore, potential hunters were recruited amongst the greedy, the deadly - or the simply destitute or desperate. Whatever their individual backgrounds, all these souls possessed either great skill, intellect, physical prowess and loyalty - or all these qualities. The most significant and desirable quality however, was to be easily manipulated by the Enterprise.

During training, their monetary compensation and access to luxuries was beyond compare, ensuring absolute dedication to their task once sent into the distant past.

Although attempts had been made, it remained a mystery what happened when people were sent into the distant future. As there never had been even the simplest communication from future travelers sent back to the present - it was assumed no return wormholes were ever created. *Best case scenario.*

Nonetheless, the black market in dinosaur parts flourished. Triceratops horns, raptor claws, megalodon fins and tyrannosaur teeth to name but a few were some of the most popular. And as Murphy believed, this unbridled greed seemed to be the ultimate cause of the demise of these titans of the past, not the apocalyptic meteor scientists were convinced had wiped them out.

*

Flute was still alive, but he wouldn't live much longer. His entire body had been crushed. His limbs had distorted grotesquely, like a poorly drawn child's stick figure. As he exhaled, a red froth bubbled from his lips. Still, Murphy couldn't leave the man, as repellent a little thug as he was.

The triceratops herd had eventually destroyed the second bike, and even though its leader had seemed hell bent on trampling all the three humans - the crazed dinosaurs had not lingered; as though something had been driving them on.

“Croc!” Murphy yelled to the scarred psychopath. “Help me get him on this bike.”

“No driving, remember,” Croc said without expression.

“The hell with that,” Murphy shouted, panting as he struggled with Flute. “I’d say it’s safe to say our cover has been blown, wouldn’t you think?”

He pointed to the devastation the triceratops had wrought upon the forest. Bulldozers couldn’t have done a better job. Countless trees lay scattered like scrawny bowling pins, the ground churned into an impassable mess. Their way west was now an impossibility.

Croc said nothing, but joined Murphy by their fallen comrade.

A sudden overhead buzz instinctively forced them both to the ground.

What had at first sounded like nothing more than the whine of the damned oversized insects proved to be a lot more. Bullet holes suddenly appeared in the quad bike’s side.

And Flute’s head.

Skunks had found them.

“Shit!” Murphy screamed, ducking for cover as the Skunks continued their barrage.

Croc displayed no emotion, but grabbed Murphy’s rifle, stood up and calmly aimed.

There was a very human shriek of pain, followed by total silence.

Croc fired a few more shots.

“Let’s go,” he said softly.

Murphy was too shocked to move. Croc hauled him up by the arm and shoved him onto the functioning bike. Murphy returned to his senses and turned the ignition. Murphy

steered with scant thought as to where they were headed through the eeriness of the trees and mist. Croc sat facing the rear, rifle at the ready. Over the drone of the bike's engine, Murphy would occasionally hear the odd gunshot and the odd shouted order from the shrouds of the mists, but there was no other sign of their pursuers as they hurtled on. The sounds soon faded away. Murphy was exhausted, and the sudden assault and Flute's death had affected him more than he would have imagined. Yet, he had been trained to peak physical performance. Deprivation, danger and the prehistoric elements had only hardened his resolve further, and escape was his only conscious thought.

*

After what may have been ten minutes, or an hour - or a day - the two men reached a dirty river snaking its twisted way through the trees. Croc silently tapped Murphy's shoulder to halt. Murphy slowed down near a mound of stones, and switched off the engine. The men dismounted.

Once again, the stillness of the misty, humid forest was palpable. Murphy sat down on the stone pile, breathing deeply and trying to make sense of what had just happened.

He had barely sat down before feeling the gun barrel sticking into the base of his skull. Murphy raised his hands immediately, his breathing now rapid gasps of air.

Through his sweat blurred vision, Murphy saw Croc slide from behind the bike, both his knives drawn.

It appeared Croc had lost Murphy's rifle at some stage during their crazed flight from the Skunks. *How unfortunate*, Murphy thought bitterly.

"Just drop those knives," the Skunk behind Murphy commanded. His accent was strange, one Murphy didn't recognise. Perhaps this poacher hunter had come from a completely different time to Murphy? Not that it mattered now.

Croc hesitated slightly, lowering his blades. Suddenly, his scarred mouth twitched in a wicked grin. Somewhere to the rear of him, beyond the Skunk behind him, Murphy heard a warning snarl. He quickly risked a glance down, at his chosen resting spot.

Not rocks, he thought. Eggs.

The pressure of the Skunk's gun barrel suddenly ceased, as a horrible screech pierced the eerie stillness of the forest. Murphy scrambled desperately away, to hide beneath a canopy of dense bushes.

The T Rex was not the largest he had ever seen, but even an average sized T Rex could dangle a grown man from its mouth like a stand of spaghetti. The Skunk, the hunter of hunters, was trapped in the mighty jaws of earth's most ultimate hunter.

Murphy watched in fascinated horror as the screaming man fell from the dinosaurs mouth into a crumpled pile, his left arm missing at the shoulder. The wound spurted a fountain of gore.

Croc, heedless of his own safety, sprinted to the fallen man's pistol, retrieved it and fired expertly at the T Rex's head. The massive predator fell to the ground, its brain pierced by the bullet that had entered its eye.

Croc began to laugh, softly at first, then louder and louder, the echoing cackles of a madman unleashed. He threw back his head, his laughter more like the howls of a beast. There was nobody here to stop his murderous impulses. Murphy watched, horrified, as Croc raised the pistol to him. He raised his arms once more, this time to a comrade.

"Don't do it Croc," he pleaded. "Please."

The scarred lunatic simply continued to laugh.

The reptile erupted from the river so rapidly, Murphy hardly registered its movement.

Suddenly, Croc's maniacal laughter turned to screams of agony in the massive prehistoric crocodile's jaws. The pistol dropped from his grip as he thrashed futilely at the monster's scaled head. Without a sound, the reptilian giant disappeared back into the river, Croc still wailing wildly in its blade-like teeth.

Murphy blinked stupidly, unable to fully comprehend the events of the last few seconds. He crept cautiously from his shelter, finding the discarded pistol.

The mortally injured Skunk lay unmoving next to the carcass of the T Rex.

The man's dark skin had a pallid grey undertone, and his eyes were closed. He was dressed in the mirror-camo tunics the likes of Murphy and his comrades had been trained to recognise. It was tech they never possessed, and was either from some shadowy underground agency or indeed; from a different, more advanced future than his own.

The Skunk opened his eyes, still lucid, and turned his head to stare at Murphy.

This man was ostensibly Murphy's enemy, yet the poacher bore the dying man no ill will. He had simply been doing his duty, same as he.

Instead, Murphy felt pity for him - for his pain. Just as he felt nothing but regret for the mercifully few creatures he had killed.

He also felt pity for the dead T Rex besides him, that legendary lethal predator that was also a parent, as capable of compassion as violence and aggression.

The young dinosaurs would probably not survive, but Murphy decided he would attempt some recompense for all the wrong he had done in this primal world. He would gather the eggs, and try raise the hatchlings. Old Tim had once had a pet Deinonychus, a creature he had raised when it had been found in an abandoned nest. Although bonding with or domesticating the prehistoric wildlife wasn't necessarily actively discouraged, the nature

of their duties as poachers meant it was ill advised. Nevertheless, Old Tim's dinosaur had grown to adulthood and had followed him everywhere like a loyal pet. A pet that was capable of disembowelling a man with a single strike of its clawed foot.

The reptile had howled inconsolably for days after its master's death.

It was a brutal world, and it was kill to survive - or be killed. Old Tim was hardly old, barely into his mid fifties - but he was older than any other poacher of their crew. Each of them was destined to die in the Cretaceous, and a violent death was most likely.

Because you can only travel one way. Forward or back, never both. And only once.

*

So Murphy would try do something right while he still could. He would save. He would protect. He would help.

He was no longer a poacher, he decided. Perhaps he would find out from the dying man where his fellows were, and join their squad as intelligence. He sneered to himself. *They'd shoot me on sight.* But he would at least *try*.

Murphy raised the Skunk's pistol.

"I don't think you have much longer," he said, pointing the man's own pistol at his head.

"If you want - I'll end it quickly."

The Skunk stared at him with eyes dulled with pain.

"It really doesn't matter now," he said with gritted teeth in his unrecognizable accent.

"We're all doomed anyway."

Murphy frowned. His firm grip on the pistol wavered.

"I promise you I am done with killing. If you want me to spare you your suffering, just tell me and that will be the last death here courtesy of me. But from now on, I shall save lives - not end them."

The dying man chuckled obscenely, spraying blood. It put Murphy in mind of Flute's last moments.

"You, me - killing - or protecting, none of it matters in this place," the dying Skunk bubbled. "It's all for nothing. Poachers killing dinosaurs and us saving them - it's all been an utter waste of time."

"Time," he murmured, as if talking to someone else. "It was inevitable. We realised far too late, yet we never let it prevent us doing our *duty*."

The dying man made a great show of raising his remaining arm. On his dark skinned wrist was a device like a watch, except it was counting backwards. The timer had less than two minutes left.

"What the hell are you saying?" Murphy demanded, raising the gun once more.

The Skunk cackled wetly again, as his eyes glazed over for good.

Out of sheer frustration Murphy kicked at the corpse.

Murphy had never felt such silence, nor such loneliness. It was as if he was the sole living thing on the planet.*

The weird timer on the man's wrist shattered the illusion of solitude.

There was less than a minute and a half on the countdown, and it began a series of beeps which sharply increased in volume.

Suddenly, there was a flash of bright orange light. For several seconds, Murphy was completely blinded.

A deafening roar thundered, followed by an unseen force which threw Murphy head over heels dozens of feet. The forest suddenly erupted into panicked life. The trees echoed with screams, hoots and chirps. Dinosaurs of all shapes and sizes, primitive birds, innumerable

smaller reptiles, insects and other stranger creatures hurtled past Murphy, reckless in their terror. Murphy somehow managed to find his feet amidst the chaos. Shielding his eyes from the dust and debris, he looked upwards.

Well, imagine that, Murphy thought bitterly. We weren't responsible for the extinction of the dinosaurs after all. The scientist eggheads were actually right.

As he watched the meteor carve its fiery path through the cloudy sky, Murphy's final thoughts were of his mother.

Blast from the Past – from PROBE 31 March 1976

T.V in SA - Simon Scott

At long last, the Little Bioscope has arrived in S.A! We are certainly the last industrialised country to get TV, in fact only a handful of African states are without it. Fifty two years ago Baird demonstrated Monochrome, followed by a colour demonstration in 1928. The first monochrome public broadcasting began in London in 1936 and in the USA in 1941.

The first "non-compatible" colour broadcasts were made in the USA in 1951 – the non-compatibility being that black and white sets were unable to receive any picture at all from them. The first compatible colour broadcasts using the American NTSC system were made in 1954. NTSC is used by the USA, Canada, Japan and some South American countries, but has the disadvantage, that in some poor reception conditions, the colour can "wander". (Green faces and red skins may be fine in an SF story, but a bit off-putting otherwise.)

In SA we are using a system basically similar to NTSC, but with the refinement of an automated colour correction device. This is the PAL (Phase Alternating Line) system developed by Prof. Bruch of West Germany, who incidentally was here for the inauguration of SABC TV. (South African Broadcasting Company.)

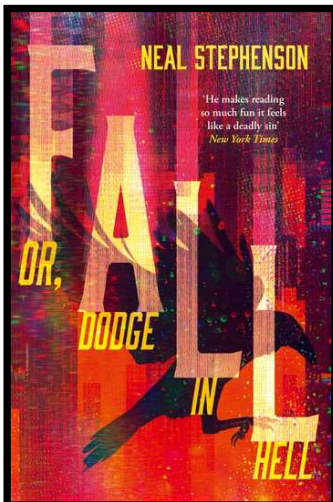
Today (1976) the world's TV set population is about 300 million, and has doubled in the past 10 years. Most are in America and Japan. In the major metropolitan areas of the

USA, viewers have a choice of up to 24 channels and it is possible to watch TV 24 hours a day, provided one's eyes remain uncrossed and the electricity bill is paid. A TV signal is a real hog of the frequency spectrum. Where a good hi-fi sound signal may go up to 20 KHz, a reasonable picture needs about 200 000 elements with an upper video frequency of 5 MHz. Hence a TC channel is about 8 MHz wide, or about 400 times as wide as a sound broadcast channel. It boggles the mind that such a complex signal can be recorded and played on video cassettes and tapes; but VCR may become the home movies of the future.

TV should greatly stimulate interest in SF, if overseas experience is anything to go by. Colour TV and SF go together like bacon and eggs, as programs like “Star Trek” will show.

Book Reviews Gail Jamieson

Neal Stephenson Fall or, Dodge in Hell



This novel is a sequel to Stephenson’s *Reamde*, which I have not read and I have to say that it reads perfectly as a standalone story. Richard “Dodge” Forthrust dies as a result of foolishly dismissing the instructions of his dentist. His family refuse to lose his consciousness and eventually decide to have him scanned and uploaded into the cloud. The scanning process destroys his memory and he awakes as an amnesiac into his new virtual life. He calls himself “Egdod” (His Avatar from the previous novel). At first alone, he is joined by other scanned brains and they start to create a world to live in. This includes landscapes and cities.

But life does not go as planned as an insane billionaire, called Elmo Shepherd is uploaded into the cloud as “EL”. He uses his superior computing powers to set himself up as a god and to overthrow Egdod. It’s very complex and involved, but as nobody can die a second time, they just get rebooted and the struggle goes on. While all of this is going on, life continues in the real world.

A fake nuclear attack destroys a town called Moab in the Midwest, or as it is a hoax, it is not actually blown up, but a huge faked online video causes general disbelief when the hoax is uncovered.

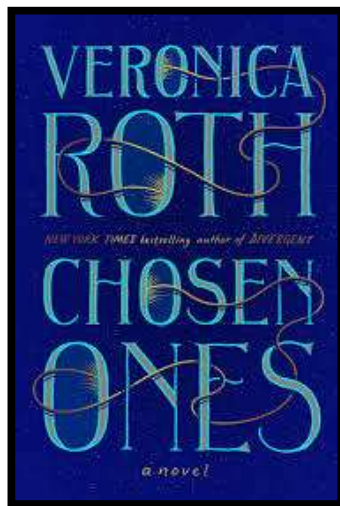
The novel shows us how easily untruths can be orchestrated to convince large numbers of people of blatant lies

Dodge’s grandniece Sophia travels into the Midwest states of “Ameristan”, where the rules of Leviticus are strictly enforced and “criminals” will be stoned.

Stephenson is obviously dismayed by the way our culture is affected by political and other fakery and by how the “real” life we live can actually be manipulated by the power of the Internet.

It turns out that post truth life is not very pleasant and I certainly hope we don’t end up living there. This is a long novel and I had to work to get through the final third of it, but I cannot deny that it is well written and fans of Stephenson will probably enjoy it more than I did.

Veronica Roth Chosen Ones



On reading the blurb on the back of this novel, I thought that it was a sequel and that I had missed the first novel but it turns out that the information that is referred to is all part of this clever novel. Ten years previously, Sloane, was one of five young people who were named “The Chosen Ones, who were called on to save the world from a generic evil overlord, called “The Dark One”. He brings an ability to use magic in a very destructive way into a world we can recognise

As the novel progresses we learn that they did indeed save the world and so are revered as saviours. But Sloane is not a comfortable heroine and when on the 10th anniversary of their triumph, one of the Chosen Ones dies, her world is again thrown into chaos, and in fact she is thrown into another world, which

seems to be a very close parallel to the one she has come from . And to muddy the waters further, The Dark One, who she knows was killed, is alive and terrorising this world. She finds out, to her horror that the authorities have pulled 5 “Chosen” ones from various other worlds, to try and destroy their nemesis, but all the previous ones have been killed. All the characters we have been beginning to know are discarded and new ones are introduced.

Sloane is a very conflicted character, and throughout the novel we are given documentation, such as news stories and intelligence reports she has been able to access, that give a better picture of where the situation has come to at this point.

I found in this novel a plot and ending that I had not expected in any way and this has not happened in my reading experience for a long time.

This is the first adult novel that Veronica Roth has published and I have not read any of her YA books.

I would wholehearted suggest that you read this novel.

L.O.C Lloyd Penney

On this very day, three issues of Probe arrived at in Etobicoke Canada, 182, 183 and 184. Suddenly, I am nine months behind, if not more, so I thought I'd better get with it, and get a letter going as soon as I could. I will see if I can get at least one issue responded to, and get it to you soon, and then carry on from there. Let's give this a try... 182... Quite the unique cover, and looks great. I see this is a pre-pandemic issue...I cheated a little, went to issue 183, and saw that you had mailed 182 in January. So, it took about 11 months for the international mails to get this issue to me. All-time late record, I suspect. Better late than never, but 11 months? The post takes ages to deliver Probe to Canada is very true. Another reason to respond

immediately. Wonder if Tony Davis just got his issues, too? My greetings to Tex and Rita Cooper.

Andrew, I hate wearing glasses, but I have been wearing them for about 55 years now and never did trust a laser operation to adjust my prescription, or need for one. So many SF shows coming out, but interest is minimal at best, and even if it wasn't, the money to subscribe to these streaming services is just not there. I am lucky in that while the various new Star Trek series (Discovery, Picard, Lower Decks) are on streaming services for many, I can see them on our local SF channel, and PVR them for later. It helps that much of Discovery, and some of Picard, was shot in Toronto and area.

I very much enjoyed Valentino Poppi's In Front of the Mirror. It very much reminded me of a Twilight Zone episode, and if the idea wasn't from such an episode, it would make a fine episode for the future. Other stories were read and enjoyed, but no particular comments.

Old letters from me...I am continuing to work on Amazing Stories magazine, and have worked on five issues now. Plus ten books, one of which I am finishing up my copyedit/proof. I am still hopeful this might lead to employment, but even if it doesn't it has been a great chance to combine my occupation of copy editor and proof reader and my enjoyment of science fiction. One of the books I have worked on is actually a history text on one of Canada's early prime ministers, so I hope there is also the opportunity to move out of the genre and into other categories of books. (I hope there are South African writers who have submitting their work to the editors of Amazing Stories!)

183... A bit of steampunk in the front cover, very good. Thanks to the pandemic, nothing is happening steampunk-wise, but we remain hopeful that the interest will survive the pandemic, and we can get right back in having some steamy fun.

Gail, I hope you were able to get everything postal cleared up. I suspect a mailbox has been forgotten and neglected; that happens from time to time here, too. Excellent news with your collaboration with the Italian club. There are so many clubs worldwide outside of North America. I wonder if such collaboration could be arranged with other groups? I know one in Romania.

I liked The Void by Benjamin Keyworth. The editor in me spotted something on page 13, where Tal asked for three tenants. I usually blame Autocorrect, but that word should be tenets. Another old letter... more and more, I see old, white men as one of the greatest problems the world has to deal with. I read the newspapers, and see the news on television and online, and I stay with that opinion. It will take younger and non-white souls to pull us out our rut, and move the world forward to newer ideas.

I think at this point, I am rapidly tiring, so I will wind it up here, and save issue 184 for another day. Who knows, 185 might arrive! Many thanks for this paper fanzine you send to me, a delightful anachronism in this online world, and I will send some comments on 184 soon.

Yours

Lloyd Penney

PROBE 186

December 2020

www.sffsa.org.za

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Nebulas (from a Google search)

Fox Fur Nebula



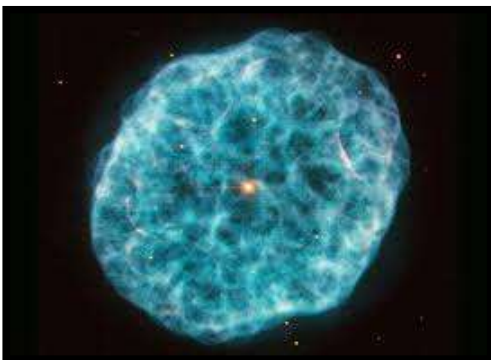
Green Ring Nebula



Crab Nebula



Oyster Nebula



Ring Nebula



