

TWILIGHT ZINE

45

About us

just what you've always wanted to know
but never bothered to check

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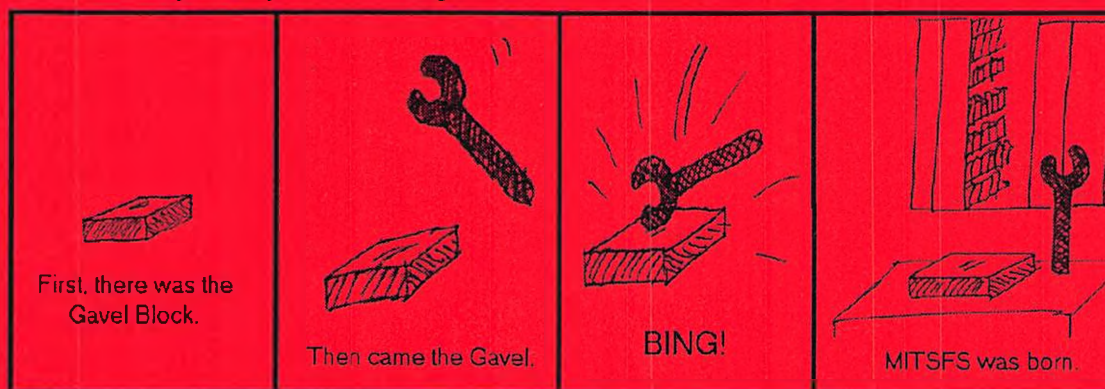
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Creation Myths, by Jade Wang



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* the story is not appropriate for easily disturbed readers due to some graphic descriptions of violence

** same thing as (*), but to a greater degree: very graphic scenes of violence and child abuse, as well as strong language

Art

All of the art in this issue was drawn by Jade Wang, Skinner Almighty.

Star Chamber

President and Skinner:
Vice:
Onseck:
Lady High Embezzler:

Jade Wang
Yevgeniya Nusinovich
Ed Keyes
Stephanie Fried

JourComm

JourComm:

Yevgeniya Nusinovich

The Meaning of Life, the Universe, and the *Twilight Zine* (editorial)

by Yevgeniya Nusinovich, still JourComm

So we've got this thing, no, creature, called the *Twilight Zine*. And sometimes it behaves, sometimes it doesn't, but it always comes back to be petted. And no wonder. I treat it well, feed it nice little stories and pictures, and protect it from mean people with my Vicely implements of destruction (story of how an innocent little 'prentice suddenly transformed into Vice itself is for another time... maybe...).

Being treated so nicely, of course, the *Twilight Zine* could not possibly die out, so it started to reproduce by budding. First, issue 44 appeared. Then it lay still for a bit and ate things, and I watched it grow. All of a sudden a part split off and started eating and growing on its own. It called itself *Twilight Zine 45*. Soon, it grew so big it could almost look down on its parent. That was when I decided it's about time to introduce it to the rest of the world.

So, ladies and gentlemen, I present to you... *Twilight Zine 45*! Yes, it still exists!

I'm sure this all relates to the meaning of life somehow...

By the way, our next issue is the official 40th anniversary issue (*drum roll*), so submit the coolest things you've ever written! We want them!

State of the MITSFS Address

by Jade Wang, Skinner

suddenly turns around, startled

Oh. Ahem. Hi.

glances around, looking for something

I seem to have misplaced my notes. I didn't quite expect you all so early. Well, I suppose I'd better get started. I'm supposed to be ranting about something or other, I think.

Um, the MITSFS. We're doing all right financially, pretty poor spacially (if only we could make use of L-space...) and not that well temporally. We need plenty more key-holders, young ones, not like me. Unfortunately, the influx is pretty low. Why is this?

Is it because we aren't being publicized well enough? Membership is also down. We sold on the order of 10 memberships during rush. Is it because all these young'uns are wusses, nothing like the Good Old Days when people actually had the gumption and nerves to read our books, and resist the dangerous undertow of ideas that leaked from the pages of the tomes we carried, threatening to suck you down below to drown in their beauty? Or is it that they are too strong, resisting the temptation of these seductive parcels of imagination disguised as mere paper and ink?

I looked over some old *Twilight Zines* the other day, because I couldn't think of anything to rant about, so I wanted to see what other Skinners had to say. When in doubt, copy! But there have not been a whole lot of State of the MITSFS addresses that I could see. On the other hand, I got sucked into reading the old issues (hmm...), and I saw this section where we'd printed some old schedules. *Sweet Singing Shoggoths!* They're so full! I was staring at it for minutes in awe, unable to move from sheer wonder! I'd say maybe 90% of all the hours in the week were taken. that's like 140 hours! (Shh! I don't criticize *your* math!) If only...

Hm, now that I think about it, I think my last theory about why membership and prentices have declined is correct. People just have too much discipline, too much self-will. Where are the days when they would collapse under the gentle pressure of the Vice and hold many hours on end, or when they would see a book and be unable to resist paying oodles of money in order to take it back home and caress its pages gently in the glow of the dormitory lights before laying their heads down to sleep, to dream; to be drawn back to the library the

next day, until they had failed all their classes and stayed on as a permanent fixture of the library, doing all those jobs that everyone else had more discipline to avoid?

We should start a campaign to destroy people's self-will. It's for their own good. They'll be happier for it, dreaming of angels and fairies, the darkness of the stars and the cold beauty of a different world. Anyone with me? I'll be the one procrastinating in the corner over there, lost amidst the worlds of Gaiman or Friedman or Hobb.

A Taste of the Minutes

by Ed Keyes, the Onseck (of course)

Friday, November 10, 2000

MITSFS meeting called to order, 1710 SST,
Jade Wang, President and Skinner, presiding.

Ed Keyes is the rain-speckled Onseck.

Minutes read, with many interruptions.

Motion: Condemn the minutes as inappropriate. Fails 1-4-2+Spehn.

Lots of motions, none seconded. The Onseck starts to record the motions and then is forced to cross them out. Discussion of this policy, with most of the members in favor of the Onseck recording even unseconded motions.

Motion: Put the Onseck on a cross. Passes 7-0-2+Spehn.

BING!

Committee Reports

Mobcomm/Atlascomm: We have more boxes from donations, and John probably strained something lifting them. Yay, hardcovers.

Bluebellcomm: Boo, hardcovers.

Pseudo-Panthercomm: Panthercomm is falling behind.

Bluebellcomm: We're not falling behind very much, but not catching up either, since it's not very fun to cover a hardcover anthology and immediately toss it back in a box. Bluebellcomm is the immune system of the library (if a book doesn't "feel" a part of the library, we engulf it in a protective vacuole). Or it might be the part of the oyster that makes pearls.

Jade: "Oysters will take over the world!"

Oysters were genetically engineered by aliens to create pearls as a supply of interplanetary trade goods. "Oooh, premise, premise!"

A member comes in to renew his membership. We're out of membership sheets! The Onseck will probably be blamed for this.

There is a call to pry open the Onseck to get at his pearl. It is remarked that oysters can be coaxed to open up with a few stiff drinks. Then there's the famous urban legend about the oyster who wakes up in a bathtub full of ice with a note saying, "Call 911, your pearl has been removed."

Somerandomcomm: Something about the alarm key.

Plantcomm: The lights in the Circulating Room were fixed, indeed very quickly after we finally remembered to request it.

Lots of stuff, none of it seconded. "You can't second your own motion!"

Jadecomm: Two hair thingies, two braids. They don't match.

Motion: Commend the Skinner for having huge tracts of hair. Passes 6-0-1+Spehn.

Fancomm: Tech Review has an article about us in it, towards the back. "Are they the anti-Tech... lots and lots of accurate quotes?" The library expansion rate was off by a factor of ten, but no one noticed.

Alohalenscomm: Foley bypassed us to put up a picture on his own. Now he's in color! There are various grumbles about new keyholders only being entitled to one color: black or white.

Pseudo-Pianocomm: Is there anyone in the prentice pipeline as cool as Foley?

Mobcomm: The flow of books from Harper-Collins continues. Mobcomm attempts to take credit for Jourcomm's accomplishment here.

Motion: Commend Mobcomm for being greedy and backstabbing Jourcomm in Yev-niya's absence. Passes 7-0-2+Spehn.

Pseudo-Jourcomm: TZ is late, late, late! It is remarked that "fall" actually extends to December 22, but Pseudo-Jourcomm sticks by the initial report. A short discussion follows about the seasons and the Earth's motion, and there is much confusion on precession versus procession.

The Onseck finally receives his Star Chamber key. "He didn't kneel!"

BING!

Old Business

The Skinner is hungry and loud.

We had some authors come in, specifically Carl West and Katherine MacLean. They gave us some money and checked out a magazine.

The Alumni Office is still not getting back to us. We'll go ahead without the extra information, although this could in fact just be a cunning bluff to shake the info loose.

Discussion of the size of keyrings. jhawk wins, despite not being present.

We probably never paid for our LSC slide, but they don't seem to care. Although, we ought to track this down just in case LSC has found a way to tap directly into our endowment fund.

A bunch of old shelves are still sitting around.

Discussion of monetary donations. There is much confusion about the signs of the quantities on the report... a donation is a negative expense, but only sometimes.

The usual stuff.

BING!

New Business

"Your head would splatter like a ripe melon with a skull in it!" It is explained that heads and ripe melons don't splatter the same way, due to the presence of a skull.

Pens are mightier than swords if they have cool lasers in them like James Bond's pens do. And maybe if the sword is more of a letter opener or a pocket-knife.

Discussion about the shelves. Jamie is attempting to find shelves for our shelf-holders.

Phonecomm: RING! It's a wrong number. The caller wants directions to Kresge from Rhode Island. Being the Center of the Universe car-

ries with its obligations like this, unfortunately, and John attempts to provide directions.

Jade rebraids her hair.

Motion: "... Hungry." Passes very much-very little-0+Spehn. There is a very quiet bing because John's still on the phone.

Discussion of chairs.

Motion: Not to make any motions about bananas. Passes 7-2.5-1+Spehn.

Meeting adjourned, 1800 SST.

The Blacker Cloud

By John Carr

A review of *Eater* by Gregory Benford.

In this mixed astronomy tutorial plus disaster novel Benford updates Fred Hoyle's classic *Black Cloud*. The plot follows the same lines — astronomers discover a mysterious object headed for earth and try to learn about it — but the style, technology, and physics are turn-of-the-century. Hoyle's intruder was a then-new object, a dense molecular cloud, and the earthlings use state-of-the-art photographic and microwave equipment to investigate it. Benford's is the late-20th-century favorite, a black hole, observed by earth- and space-borne instruments covering the spectrum from radio to gamma rays.

Benford (like Hoyle) is an astrophysicist. The beginning of the book is a lesson in observational techniques, technology, and office politics as we watch astronomers try to make sense of a mysterious new object. Is it a gamma ray burster? An active galactic nucleus? Or something yet unknown?

First one, and gradually all of the scientists come to believe that the object is show-

ing signs of intelligent action. The intruder might as well be a god, ancient, powerful, and intelligent. While the *Black Cloud* was benign if unintentionally harmful, retaliating only when provoked, the *Eater* follows the Old Testament model. The literature has given us aliens as friends, aliens as mysteries, and aliens as enemies. After the *Eater* has progressed from mystery to friend to enemy, the last part of the book describes the conflict between the intruder and the Earth and its band of scientists.

If you aren't a reader who likes to nit-pick physics this is a good hard-SF book. *Eater* is hard SF in the modern style — science is the basis of the story but the author makes some attempt to show the human side. (Forty years of advance in literature: while Hoyle left sex discreetly off stage, Benford isn't so reluctant.) The novel might have been better with a dozen or so pages less human interest — despite the effort the humans still aren't as interesting as the science — but it still comes in at a reasonable length.

Set in the near future, the novel has a solid basis in present day science, technology, society, and government. The centralization of power is reasonably extrapolated, and the hardware is plausible (even if parts of it read like an astronomer's wish list). The concept of an intelligent black hole is an interesting one.

However, for those who *do* like to nit-pick there will be plenty of material. A lot of the astronomy and physics struck me as implausible, for example: due to a miscalculated tidal effect (as in *Neutron Star*), the hole's orbit would have destroyed the earth, or at least the characters in the book; the astronomers are unable to determine the distance to the object at first, but with sub-arcsecond resolution and a baseline spanning the solar system parallax would have made the proximity of the object immediately obvious; the environment near the black hole is probably too hostile, and the timescale too short, for spacecraft to sur-

vive and be able to report their observations; the Eater is implausibly maneuverable — diving three times into Jupiter's atmosphere for fuel — and would grow too quickly to be as small as it is.

Benford takes on the classic questions: what is a superior intelligence like and what does it want from us? Mix in a lesson in astronomy and astrophysics and speculation on near-future technology and you get a better than average novel with room for improvement.

The Jigsaw Man

by James Goodwin

NOTE: not appropriate for easily disturbed readers due to graphic descriptions of racism and violence

Lyle was just thinking how much of a shit assignment this all was when the clouds above stopped brooding and finally dropped a cool May rain over the faded circus spread. It was late afternoon, a time when the rains tend to come. Lyle turned up his jacket collar and trudged through the sudden muck underfoot. Within a week of arrival, the Edward Farlington Carnival and Traveling Museum of Natural History had transformed Widow Vaughn's back pasture from a lush meadow into a rough and rutted patch of bare dirt.

This annual transformation took place each spring in this same field as a means of slight income for the aging widow ever since her husband died. The Kaiser had claimed her only child a decade earlier during the war, leaving nobody to help work the farm.

And then, one year, the young, handsome, smooth-tongued Eddie Farlington came to town. A man with still much of the child about him and so full of ambition that the widow's heart tumbled and she saw nothing but her own son, Charles, there on her doorstep, asking to use her pasture. Every year since, the carnival nomads sprouted in the

shadow of her house with the coming of spring.

Lyle sighed, jamming his hands into his jacket pockets and hopping across a puddle. He ducked into a nearby tent.

He knew the story of the circus; everybody in Coretta County knew it. The article he had to write was the same article written each year by the newest reporter on staff. It was the same shit assignment; go out to the carnival, get a quote or two from Farlington, recount the history of the troupe in Coretta County, a few "man-in-the-street" reaction pieces for local color, and that was it. It was simple-minded and Lyle was more than a little dissatisfied to have it handed down to him.

"Hey Buddy, hey, let's see your ticket!"

Lyle blinked out of his sulky musings and looked down. An old midget in a dirty orange and brown plaid suit scowled back at him around an unlit cigar. He jabbed at Lyle with a sawed off cane.

"Come on in, where's your ticket? Need a ticket to enter."

Lyle fumbled at the badge clipped to his lapel: "The Laslow Chronicle," it read.

He muttered, "Press", hopefully. The midget frowned, holding his hand out. He shook his head.

"Sorry kid, I need a ticket or you go back out there to swim."

The thought of braving the rain and mud of the gaudy midway was enough to make Lyle wince. He pulled out a handful of tickets he had to purchase with his own money. They were already damp in his pockets. With the rain still on his glasses, Lyle could only see a blue pulpy lump in his hands. He picked at it, then stopped, feeling them tear. The midget suddenly reached out and snatched the entire wad.

"That'll do", he grunted and turned to scurry under one of the inner flaps.

"But-!" Lyle stammered, then was silenced by the sharp clanging of a bell from

inside. The show was beginning. He sniffed. Water ran down to hang from his nose. He looked through the gaping outer flaps. The rain was falling harder now, causing a wet chill to rise from the soaked earth, to rise and mingle with the empty light of colored bulbs and twisted neons. Lyle sniffed again and turned down his collar. Spreading the inner flaps, he bowed his head and entered the warmth and noise of the tent. He wondered absently what the attraction was; he had forgotten to read the billboard outside.

The stench of stagnant air, humid with all manner of bodily fluids, primarily sweat, was almost overpowering. Cheek to jowl, the decent folk of Laslow had come to see the sights and be enriched. Packed in the dim tent, lit by two lanterns hung on the center support pole, they all resembled neanderthals huddled in a cave, expectant and fearful of the storm outside. There was a buzz of noise, Lyle couldn't quite catch any meaningful phrases, but apparently this was a show to be seen. Down front was a stage of sorts: a platform of wooden slats set over large cinderblocks. A dirty red curtain blocked full view of the stage, but its very presence was working the crowd into anxious agitation.

Lyle stayed near the back, securing himself a seat at the end of a rickety bench. The midget suddenly appeared from under the curtain clenching a bunch of lit incense sticks in his fists like dead flowers. He grunted, hopped down from the planks and busily stuck each stick into the dirt along the base of the stage. The crowd calmed somewhat with his appearance, some laughing malice and taunts at his expense. He finished abruptly and turned hands high over his head.

"Silence!" he shouted, louder than had seemed possible, loud enough to stun everyone momentarily. There was a gleam in his eye now. He scrambled back upon the stage and nodded to someone in the back. The lanterns were dimmed to near pitch black. By the smoke and glow of the incense, the old man

seemed to double in size, to triple, larger than the voice which now boomed from everywhere. Lyle glanced around nervously, seeing others do the same.

"Ladies and gentlemen..." He began to walk the length of the stage, hands behind his back.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please...if you will. Consider yourselves for a moment. Creatures of God, children of God, fashioned and molded in His divine image..." It was completely quiet now, save for the rain against canvas. All eyes were on the old man, strung on his words, his presence. He leaped down from the stage and scooped dirt into his hands. Holding them up, he slowly turned them over, letting the earth fall out.

"Creatures of dirt and earth, of stones and worms...taken and pressed like clay into His image, His divine image." He dusted his hands together, all the while his eyes alive and on fire, wide and wet and unblinking. Moving into the crowd, slow and inexplicably menacing, hands up and active, molding and working imaginary figures, somehow god-like himself.

"And we live our lives, secure in the belief that what we see in each other as beauty... youth... age... or as grotesque... that all these things are reflections of God and are still somehow good." He paused briefly with each step, fixing the audience one at a time with his withering gaze. Then he suddenly spat on the ground and turned violently, storming back down to the platform. He leapt up and leered.

"But good people, I'm here today to tell you that there are things, creatures like you and I, creatures that stand and walk like a man, that can think and kill and bleed blood as red as yours...and mine...but exist outside the light of the Almighty! Yes, things that take and twist the divine image of God Himself into the most hideous perversity..."

"Ahh, but I sense some disbelief still lingering in the room...I see that I will have to

do more than just tell you, my friends... I will have to show you."

He grinned, obviously pleased to have all these mortified faces upturned and pensive, awaiting his next merest gesture. He quickly paced over to the curtains edge and deftly reached behind it, pulling down on the drawing cord with a flourish.

"And so, now I ask you... Is this, too, a man?"

The curtain parted, splitting down the middle, to the sound of a hundred gasps and a backstage cymbal crash.

Nothing but rain and the clinking of chains from inside a large cage. It was too dark to see what it was clearly, and for a brief moment, the imagination conjured images of tentacles and beaks and wings and snouts and barbs and, and... But then there was movement. A cry from the front row. It was still too dark and Lyle squinted, wishing someone would relight the lanterns. As best he could see, there was a large shape shuffling about inside the cage. The midget strode into view holding a small torch. He circled the cage once, twice, tapping the bars with his cane.

"Can you see it?" He yelled to the crowd. There was a low murmuring now, a young man stood up and pointed.

"It's just a nigger, he's got a nigger in that cage!" Others stood, looking and leaning forward. Nods of agreement, questioning shrugs. The old midget came to the edge and motioned for them to all sit back down.

"Oh no, young man... I know what you are thinking. But no, what is before you is not that simple freakish creature from the black pits of the jungle. Beasts that were so common in the fields and plantations of these parts. No no, this is so much more...look closely, look carefully, see for yourself the abomination within..." He thrust the torch into the cage. The resulting howl and clamor knocking him back, knocking the torch out of his hands. In the flare of light, what reared up and shook the cage was the oddest thing Lyle had ever seen

before in his life. It looked human, meaning it had two legs and two arms and a head and so on. And in places, the skin did look a rich dark brown. But splashed over and criss-crossed, sometimes in patterns, sometimes in rough blotches was white skin. Its head was covered with thick black ropes of matted hair, tangled locks that hung away from the face like a great mane. On the left temple though, sprouting from a small patch of white skin, was an obvious length of straight, blonde hair. An delicate young woman had apparently noticed that "it" was definitely male and suddenly screamed, fainting dead away. There was a tumultuous uproar of confusion and the preliminary motions of a rush on the stage en masse, when the midget regained his footing and shouted for everyone to be quiet.

Lyle snapped out of his stupor almost immediately, never before had this show been mentioned in the yearly carnival synopsis. Farlington must have just added this attraction. Now here was a story, a chance to actually record something new. The midget was speaking, but ineffectually, since the crowd was all trying to get down front, passing by the cage and babbling loudly. Lyle decided to wait it out and get the story after the show.

When the last straggler was rather rudely ushered out, the old man came after Lyle, cane out front.

"Alright, let's go, show's over." Lyle was sitting on the back bench at the time, and almost made the mistake of standing up before he spoke.

Looking the old man in the eye he said, "I'm a reporter, with the Laslow Chronicle, remember?" He fingered his badge again. The old man grunted.

"So, you want a medal? That was the last show for today, beat it."

Make or break time, Lyle thought.

"Now wait just a minute, think about this: I saw something this afternoon I've never seen or even heard of before. If I write about it, if you'll let me get this story, I guarantee you a

good write-up... Think of it as free advertising."

"Nothing in this world's free, kid." He relented, chuckling...and turned from Lyle shuffling away, no longer the dynamo on stage but a grizzled old man.

Over his shoulder, "If you want to see him so bad, his trailer's out back. He don't like questions too much." He turned, "and he's not too keen on white boys either, so watch your step. We take care of our own around here." Cigar from pocket to mouth, patting himself for matches, he exited out the flaps and was gone.

"Out back" turned out to be the least helpful way of putting it. After wandering around the rainy backside of the circus tents, first stepping in camel then zebra shit, Lyle stumbled upon a rusting trailer with a stream of smoke pouring out the top. In smeared black letters were painted the words "Jigsaw Man." Hopeful, he stepped up to the door and knocked. Through the rain, he heard a radio from the next trailer. A tent was pitched out front and several clowns, in various stages of costume, were busy smoking, applying makeup, swapping lies and dirty jokes. One was painting another's lips blood red, acting as a mirror. He turned, hair slicked back for his bald cap, and stared Lyle directly in the face. The others looked over at him as well, then started to laugh at something Lyle couldn't quite hear. They made him nervous and he banged a little harder at the trailer door.

"Who is it?" from inside. The trailer shook slightly. Lyle stepped back, in view of the curtained window in case he meant to look out. But nothing happened. The eyes of the clowns like coals on his back. He reached out to knock again and the door clicked open then partially shut.

"Come on in, it's open now."

In time, his pupils relented, dilating to suck in the meager candlelight. That was the first thing he could see: a large candle, melting in a mason jar, the ashes of flies curled around

its base, some trapped in the cooling wax. The Jigsaw Man was sitting on a crate, washing himself by a basin at his feet. Lyle cleared his throat. It was warm inside, the same scent of incense filled the cramped room as in the tent.

The Jigsaw Man lifted a cupped handful of water and tilted it into his face, splashing everywhere. Reaching for a towel, he wiped himself dry then flung it at Lyle.

"Here, you look fit to drown, yourself." The voice was calm and low. Not the howls and screeches from the performance. And Lyle came to realize that it actually was a performance, a show. The creature in the cage was here before him, washing and humming and cool and collected. Obviously a man, ridiculously so in this setting. Lyle tried to remember the intensity from the tent, the air charged with tension and xenophobia; a fear that eluded him at the moment. He looked around awkwardly. The Jigsaw Man stopped scrubbing greasepaint off his foot and pointed, black soap in hand, at a low stool.

"You can sit there if you like." Back to his ritual, humming softly. Lyle sat and took out his notepad. He clicked his ballpoint, almost dropping it.

"Um, I'm Crawford, Lyle Crawford, uh... I'm with the Laslow Chronicle - the paper in town." The Jigsaw Man picked at his toenail, nodding. Lyle continued.

"I'm here to do a story on the circus coming to town and all.. It's nothing much, but it'd be nice if I could ask you a few questions." The dark man, satisfied with the state of one foot, switched to the other, immersing it into the basin. Lyle sat near the edge of the stool.

"Here's my badge." Outstretched in his fingertips. The Jigsaw Man didn't even notice, didn't even look up. Lyle put his badge away. He sighed.

"Look, they didn't give me a budget for this; it's supposed to be a simpleminded article, but I'm willing to pay you for your time. I don't have mu-"

"Keep your money, boy." Lyle stiffened. So now he was "boy", eh? Fine, let this black fool keep his damn tale. He...

"Now, calm down. Sit. Be still. I'm not a reporter myself, but I believe that's unethical." He looked at Lyle carefully, then let the soap plunk into murky water. He reached out to Lyle, reaching out for the towel. Lyle gave it back to him. His hands...

"Your hands!" The Jigsaw Man furrowed his brow at Lyle and turned over his hands, not understanding the young man's outburst.

"You had your hands in all that soap and water, but those spots--"

"Ah, I see." Thin smile. He moved, fast, shifting off the crate and kneeling before Lyle. The smell of lye soap and new sweat. Bright eyes, one dark brown, one brown with a pie slice of ice blue. He held his hand close to Lyle's face.

"You want to look? One show not enough for you...boy?" The skin was not just mottled, that he had seen before. He'd seen an old Negro one time whose forearms speckled and faded to bone white from the elbows to the fingers. But that was a sickness; that was nature, God even, at work. There was no pattern to vitiligo. Yet the Jigsaw Man's hands were the strong hands of a black man with lines, zebra stripes, circles and polygons of flesh with skin tight and pink. Fine blonde hairs growing from the patches of white skin. He stood, smiling humorlessly, pushing back the fallen lock of limp hair. A streak of gold against the black mass around his face. He could see Lyle's bulging eyes and blinked slowly, stepping away.

"There, I think you see now... yeah, I think you do." He sat down again and resumed his wash.

"No, ain't all paint and bullshit for the stage, was it? Naw, you could see it wasn't. Of course I couldn't just show the truth like I did just now. The only reason they eat it up, they love it so, is cause at the end of the day they

can leave that tent and believe it was all a trick, a show. They can leave and feel secure about who they are. Cause in a cage, I'm safe...

"See, put me in a cage, and they can go home and sleep. Home to their pure little girls and wives. Don't wanna think about me, don't wanna see me unless I'm locked up. 'Less I act it up and make it seem fake and phony-like, they gonna be scared of me. Scared of what I might mean."

Lyle looked to the door. The Jigsaw Man chuckled.

"You think I'm crazy. You wanna bolt like a rabbit 'cause you thinking that right now, you're trapped in this tiny room with a crazy nigger." He nodded and tapped his forehead.

"Yes, I can tell how you think. You see this? It don't just stop at the skin. It goes deep. Deep inside... My brain is a little like yours, Mister Crawford." He hissed "mister" as though it were an ancient curse. The sun was beginning to set. A blue-grey twilight cast through the trailer's curtained windows. The Jigsaw Man yawned and stretched, rubbing his stomach. The markings, in the gloom and at a distance, appeared as scars. They erupted everywhere on his body, curling around muscle patterns, straight lines like knife wounds. The Jigsaw man turned at his waist, reaching back into the dark recesses of the trailer. He came up with a loose shirt and threaded into it. Buttoning it, he watched Lyle watching him.

"Sorry Mr. Crawford, but I charge admission for my... show", he grinned. "As it is, you've already seen me up close for next to nothing and you still gonna want a story ain'tcha?"

Lyle swallowed and nodded, remembering his pen, his pad, his job.

"Oh, yes. Yes, that's right.. thank you for co-operating. Um, perhaps you can tell me more about your... your..."

"My stains?"

"Well, yes. Were you born this way?"

"Like this? Oh naw... I'm an old fashioned colored boy, just like my mama."

Lyle shifted his weight.

"...Or am I, eh reporter man? I mean if I admit to being born this way then you can set in your mind that some sorry fate has befallen this poor negro. So here he is and the world is sane again. But what if... what if I was some misfortunate white man in the last stages of some horrible disfigurative disorder. What then? Would that add some drama to your report?" Lyle listened, hearing the man's tone shift fluidly as he spoke, from one dialect to another. He was like a two headed coin spinning on edge.

"I think the readers would like to hear the truth, mister, uh.. ah.."

"'Smith'...'Mr. Smith' will do fine, and I don't think your readers would know the truth if it bit them in the neck or would even want to hear it."

An awkward and hostile silence.

"Mr. Crawford, are you a reading man? You script for a newspaper, but do you read yourself? I mean, are you familiar with the concept of assimilation? Of identity loss? Of slavery? Oppression? Emasculation?"

Lyle stared blankly.

"No, of course not. Want one?" he asked, hand out with a pack of cigarettes. Lyle took one and held it. The Jigsaw Man pulled out another with his lips, deft despite their lop-sided appearance. Match flare, smoke.

"How 'bout in your life, then.. you been beat down for who you are, for no better reason than who you are? Hell, you ain't got to read a book to know what I'm getting at. We all think at one time or another how things would turn out "if only this" or "if I were only that". And sometimes, you get to hating yourself so bad that you dream about it. That you go to sleep at night and dream about it, about waking up and being different, about being like "them". Them that's got the power over you. Like a caterpillar going to sleep and coming out a butterfly. You dream about it and then after a while when things get too bad, you crave it; reaching for it so long and hard that

you'd do anything, give anything to slip off your skin and your old life."

He inhaled deeply, red embers aglow.

"See, I made this man a promise, a deal, a long time ago. Funny thing is, at the time, it was what I wanted; at least, what I thought I wanted. Times was hard then, harder than now for colored folk if you can imagine, and I was desperate, eager to change my world. He came and offered me a way out and I took it, just as any man would..."

"Of course, just like any man, I couldn't see the truth beyond my desperation, the truth of the price he asked.

"I've got your story, Mr.Crawford. Here, write this down:

* * *

I've been with this bunch for about four months now. And before that, I was with another show traveling out west. Yes, I've seen every state in this damned country; some more than once. Never could stay put, even before It happened. In fact, I've been across the water. Down south on a galley out of New Orleans, sailing over to the islands. The Carribean, Haiti. You see me smiling? You see this? This the smile I get when I think of my homeplace.

Was born there years ago; many, many years ago. And I aim to die there too. I was son to a slave – yes a slave, to my mother, Ma Mary, and my father who she said was a tall big man with nine fingers. Yes, nine... lost the little finger off his left hand for slacking in the fields. Old Joe was a slacking negro, he was. It was a way we had to swing back... to needle the Massa and cut holes in his pockets. We all claimed to be lazy and shiftless; fighting back without fighting back, you see? They'd whip my daddy to strips, she'd tell me. I don't remember him none. I was still suckling when he got killed trying to head for the bush. The dogs tore him down, she said. He had gone to meet a few others in the hills, they were com-

ing together in knots out there; plotting in the dark. But he didn't make it...

And my mama, she got sick... badly sick, a few months after. One of the white-hands, I think it Massa's cousin, took to my mother when Joe died. He was young and mean – an evil man. Came by the place to scare us and smack Ma Mary around all the time. Came sometimes with this small whip or switch in one hand, his cock in the other. I was the man then, had to be with Joe gone, though I was no more than 12 or so. Couldn't let that happen, you see. First time, I jumped him like I'd seen cats do. Low and fast and all tooth and nail. Made to kill him if I could... He broke my arm and then left. Came back that night with Massa and that shit nigger foreman, Cain. "Cain," do you believe that? That's what they called him. That's what he was. Did the whippings when Massa wanted to make a point.

So they all come down into camp looking like the wrath of God and call my mama to bring me out. And I'm hurting bad with my arm swollen and stinging. And that man had me whipped... had this child whipped. Wanted to show me and the rest what acting up was going to cost me. Wanted to put me in my place, and I cried and screamed, not so much from the pain as from the bound helplessness.

It ate at my soul. I was just a child, but dry and angry inside... brittle as glass. Left me in a bloody pile in the dirt, torn open from the lash. I don't remember this, I passed out, but Ma Mary told me later that Massa wanted me fit to work by week's end or I had to go.

Don't look at me so.. I don't give a damn if you believe or not.

I almost died that week. Word went out bout what happened, and folks kept coming by to see. All kinds of people, but mostly other slaves to see for themselves the child that was whupped for fighting a white man. I think back now, and I could almost feel lucky I wasn't killed outright. What it was, I believe, was that Massa was more mad at the idea of Ma Mary and his cousin. He wasn't a righteous man,

mind you, but it was known that he had his eye on mama for himself. And I knew that too. I could see the boiling pit we all were in, black and white alike; we were cooking out in that heat. Under a wet sun that burned us to cinders inside, left us empty. No hope, no redemption, just pain and suffering and death.

Death came for me that week... just as sure as us talking right now, Death came to claim me after that beating. I remember it clearly. One of the house niggers had just left. It was Marcus, stopping by with a little food.

Heh, he told me... he told me that I was a damn fool. That I was too smart to die like that. Marcus claimed to know the facts of life, of living in the white man's world. He said I was born a nigger and was going to die a nigger slave's death if I didn't learn to stop fighting it. I didn't say a word, I was crazy with pain, but not crazy enough to think he was right. I could see I was different, that I was somehow special. And then I heard this voice. Lying there alone on my stomach, I couldn't see who it was. It was an easy voice, like honey and flies, flies on my back; landing and crawling over dried blood and pus. I could only barely feel them, but it suddenly sounded like hundreds were dancing on my wounds. And this sweet voice in my ear. It was a man's voice, but low like thunder. He says to me, "You are special." It was the truest thing in the world from those lips; he said it and I knew it was so.

"Too special to pass in this manner." It was strange how he spoke, calming me with those buzzing flies, almost as if his voice was the music of their wings like a sweaty bebop band. I felt a light hand on my neck move and vanish into the nest of pain along my spine. He was touching my welts, but there wasn't any sting... just cooling honey over my wounds.

"There is a man outside, here to take you away." Images in my mind of the shack from above, covered in shadow and the dust of ground bones.

"But I can keep him busy for you. I can make him bide his time," he says. And I'm seeing my father, just standing there waiting for me to come and go with him. I want to be with him, I want this pain to end, to go into the bush with Old Joe and be free and upright. And this voice goes to shushing me and the shack gets a hot as the sun, almost full with flies from the sound of it. I can't see anything but my daddy shot with holes all over, just waiting outside.

"You don't want to die like this, do you? No... You are too young, there is so much you don't know about... life. A real life, with no whips and dogs and burning fields. When you die, do you want to die like this?" The voice is in my head now, coming out Joe's mouth like it's always been his. And I see that he's right, I'm bout to die wallowing in scabs and flies and-

"You deserve a white man's death. And the respect that comes with it. I can give it to you. I can help you. Will you let me?"

Well, that room started to spinning and my heart seized up tight and all could keep thinking was that I was afraid and didn't want die. So I said, "yes."

I said, "yes, you're right. Help me, please." But them flies just got louder and louder and though I couldn't see, I could feel them burrowing and sinking into my back, into my bones. And next thing I knew...

* * *

He shrugged, letting the smoking butt fall into the basin to sizzle and spit one last time. "Well? And then what?" Lyle was gripping both pen and pad tightly. Now covered in a sheen of perspiration, now leaving greasy print marks on the blank yellow page. His heart was pounding and he didn't know why. It was stifling in here, he needed some air. The Jigsaw Man watched the reporter loosen his tie and top collar. Standing from his shadowed corner, he stretched, cracking several joints at once. Then shrugged at Lyle. "What do you

mean 'then what'? Then I blacked out." He bent and lifted the basin with a grunt.

"Scuse me." Lyle shifted his stool so he could pass. At the front door, the Jigsaw Man propped the tub on his side, letting himself out. It was evening now. A welcome cool breeze flooded the room, the sounds of crickets just starting to screech. He heaved the water out to the ground, drawing the attention of someone nearby.

"Naw, you go on, I got company. Huh? Hell no... get out of here with that." He drew back inside, chuckling in darkly good humor. The door closed with a bang. Closed darkness, a loud piercing roar. The two sounds came so close together in time, it made Lyle jump. The Jigsaw Man set the tub down and kicked it under a cluttered counter.

"Oh, that's just the tigers; they always get hungry around this time." He raised his shirt on the side.

"See this? That's where one bit me, when I first got here." Lyle blinked, his hand moving before he knew it, to touch, to feel the large, jagged white ring, an eclipsed sun emblazoned on the skin. The Jigsaw Man staring down at him knowingly.

"It's pretty innit? Better then a god-damn tattoo. Look, look right there. You can see where each tooth went in."

"How does this happen to you?" asked Lyle, wide-eyed. The Jigsaw Man shrugged.

"I don't try to reason it anymore. The day after He came, I woke up to the sound of birds in the trees. That was the first time, it was what saved me and is what's keeping me alive today. I've been alive for a little less than a hundred years. What do you think of that?"

"I said, how does that strike you, Mr. Crawford?"

Lyle blinked. Too many odd things in succession, unbelievable revelations. He was actually astounded.

"That's what I thought. I've gotten pretty skilled at reading people, Mr. Crawford. And I think you understand what I am, what

kind of man I am, what I did that day, long ago, to save my hide." He grinned, boring into Lyle.

Lyle stood up, stepping back, knocking over the stool, almost falling himself.

"Stay back! You, you sold your soul didn't you? You made a pact with the devil!"

"Oh, well I don't know who He was. Can't say for certain; lot of odd things crawling around over this earth. And I didn't 'sell' anything, far as I'm concerned. I don't know what He wanted with me. Shit, I've never seen anyone like Him since, either."

He looked away from Lyle and sighed.

"All I do know is I been around a long time, long enough to scare me if I think about it too hard. And the bloody cuts that could hurt and kill another man, heal faster than you can blink. But you seen my scars, you know how they leave me. I'm turning white bit by bit, scratch by scratch, hunk of flesh by hunk of flesh. The way I see it, I won't die till I'm a white man, I won't even bleed..."

"Oh sit down, Mr. Crawford, and stop looking at me like that."

"No, no, you're not human! You're evil or crazy or... or, both and..."

The Jigsaw Man scowled at him.

"And just what the hell do you know about me? That was an act out there. You struck me as being smarter than that, Crawford. Now sit down and be quiet, I'm not finished."

Lyle relented hesitantly, the man's demeanor was disturbingly calm and rational, at odds with all he was saying, all that he appeared. He pulled together some spine.

"I think I'll stand right here, thank you." The Jigsaw Man cocked his head, assessing Lyle. Then he arched his brows, nodding.

"Suit yourself. I won't make you stay, but you want to get the whole story, don't you?"

"...yes"

* * *

Like I said, that Man was good on his word; I didn't die after that beating even though by all rights I should have. The next day, I felt fine, better than fine even. No pain, no aches.. not even my teeth were bothering me, and I'd always had rotten teeth. Which was dandy as far as I was concerned. See, to me that Man had kept his word. I reached around to feel my back and the skin was smooth as ever; almost like it'd never happened. And my arm was better too. Heh, the way I was feeling right then, I had a mind to go jump the first white man I could find and tear him to pieces. Ran outside with no shirt and no shoes, just ragged pants Massa's boy had outgrown. Ran outside laughing and whooping. Tore into the fields to find Ma Mary. Folks stopped picking and came around me to see. They all knew what had happened. But when I got right up to her, all flushed and breathless, someone out that field screamed. And she pointed, they all were pointing and staring.. with faces twisted up into hard masks. Looked round to mama to find she was backing away, they all were; like you just did. Oh it's alright now, I got used to it and worse after a while.

But that first time, when others saw me, saw the white streaks criss-crossing my back in angry bolts...

Well, of course I couldn't tell... But one ran off to get the foreman and I knew something was wrong. Ma Mary came up behind me then, held me by the shoulders and shook me.

"Boy, what's wrong with you?" she cried. And I wanted to tell her "nothing," that I was fine and that nothing was ever going to be wrong with me anymore.

They got a doctor out there to look at me. Massa was afraid I had some disease, something that might be catching, you see. We was in the Big House, in the kitchen. Smell of cooked meat tainted with alcohol. Stripped me down and poked me with his metal rods. Mas-

ter had Cain hold me, but I wasn't squirming, I was calm. All of them, in that room, quiet and scared of me... looking at me like I fell out the sky. The doctor is nodding and perspiring, stinking in the heat. He tells Cain to be ready and pulls out a scalpel. Puts his hands on me and draws a thin red line into my chest. It hurts for a second or two, then closes up just as fast, leaving this white streak over my nipple. They all get quiet and look round at each other. Then the doctor just grits his teeth and stabs me with that knife... right here in the belly. And I wriggle fishlike in pain, but before I can cry, it passes and I feel fine. Cain is bugging his eyes at this point, digging into my arms as he's holding me.

"Jesus Christ," he says.

Heh, I was on top of the world.

* * *

"But now, that was a long time ago."

"Could you say that last part again?"

asked Lyle, looking up from his frantic scribbles.

* * *

[torn from *The Laslow Chronicle*]

(*CIRCUS cont'd*)

"...clowns certain to delight children of all ages and those still young at heart.

By far the most intriguing attraction at this year's carnival is surprisingly not to be found under the big tent, but on the midway. Daniel Smith, a mulatto performer with the circus and part-time actor, is presenting a unique show entitled "The Jigsaw Man." His costume and antics are bizarre enough to merit a second or even third visit to the midway, and make for a interesting contrast to the sugary world found

beneath the striped tent. While Junior is enjoying himself with the lion tamers, a stop at "The Jigsaw Man" is highly recommended for the more adult patrons to..."

* * *

"Yeah, I read it."

"Well what are we going to do about it?"

Thin lips and hot blue flecks of ice.

"Come on, Samuel, we got to do something. Can't have that -"

"Abomination!"

"Right, that abomination loose right outside of town. Hell you know how those circus folks are. They're probably all part nigger anyhow. I almost took little Emma to see that damned thing. She begged me to see it, for God's sake!"

Hard stares, slight nods all around.

"Samuel, we got to do what's right.

What's gonna happen if we don't? What if we just sit here on our asses and don't do anything? They come here every year, you know that."

"Yeah, Emma's almost 12 and so are most of her friends. What's going to happen when they get a little older? What if that thing decides to come to town for a drink before the show? Or does something to one of our kids he sees down in the audience?"

"What about your boy, Samuel?"

Slow blink.

"And what will the others say if we sit here and do nothing?"

Fists clench and uncurl and squeeze shut again.

"Right. Get Bobby and Earl, tell them tonight to come over to my house before we go. I know Earl done lost his, but I got a spare uniform in the attic."

"We're doing the right thing. It's God's will."

* * *

The Jigsaw Man awoke with a start. The same dream of a thousand nights lingering in his head. He is back in the room, the room with the flies and savannah heat. There are drums resounding outside. It is a rhythm he can't quite catch; non-repeating, ever changing. It is his father calling him out of this cracked and peeling room. Turning over to get up, he disturbs the flies on his back. There, standing beside the bed, a man with skin like honey, shining and drizzling onto the dirt floor. He smiles, holding out his hand. Drums in his ears and he wakes.

Not drums, pounding fists at his front door. The trailer shifts uneasily on its cinder-blocks. Bang. The windows crash. Small eager flames dance from the landing torch to catch and devour. The Jigsaw Man leaps from his cot. There is fire everywhere now, crowding him out of the small trailer.

He tumbles out into the night, into screams all around. The suddenly beautiful and terrible sight of the Big Tent ablaze snatches his breath away. Still tangled in sheets he feels around for a foothold. The earth is spinning in crazy loops. Burning monies screeching and howling, rolling by like tumbleweeds. Hands pulling at him. The sound of gunfire all around. His head pulled back by his hair, his neck cool and exposed to the night. White shadows snap into view. White ghosts with hollow black eyes.

"That him?" A nod and a sack cinched over his face, drawn tight at the neck. He is dragged to his feet. More sounds of Hell; the tigers are loose and clawing back. Someone screams. His heart pounds itself into an aching bruise. He feels he will explode soon from sheer adrenaline. More hands on his body. Rope. Around his neck. Around his hands. Wet tree bark against his bare back. Sweat filling his nose and blackness his eyes. A bright light and heat, even through the sack, draws near. Dogs barking now. Smoke rising around him.

They set him on fire to the tune of "Onward Christian Soldiers."

* * *

In the quiet morning that followed, Coretta County police and volunteer fire fighters picked through the charred bones of trapped elephants, dispensing consolation and wide-eyed looks of disbelief. Those that escaped had come back during the night, scavenging the tattered calico for keepsakes beneath the ashes.

On a nearby hill, an old dwarf pokes a burnt tree stump and shakes his head sadly. He can't meet the perfect blue eyes of a naked white youth quite alive and sobbing in the dirt. He kicks at a rock and looks up at the sky, just now turning red with the dawn.

Star City

by Martyn Peck

"Here's your drink, sir."

"Thank you," said Mr. Anderson as he picked up the drink and started sipping it. He looked over the railing down at Main Street. Most people had already staked out their territory, to get a good look when the marathon runners went by. Others, marathon helpers, were still busily setting up a water station just below him. Still others were busy doing other things, some important, some totally irrelevant.

But whatever they were doing, he had a perfect view of it. Of course, that's what he paid for. The Groundhog café in which he was sitting was perfectly placed. It had an elevated deck so you could watch the race, even over the heads of the people lining the street. And to make things even better, it was situated at the 50 km marker, the distance most runners "hit the wall" and started dropping like flies. And as a final touch, he could also see the starting line from where he was sitting.

The building next door blocked part of the view of Main Street, but looking above it, he could easily pick it up again. Following it up the arc of the habitable area, he could see where the light gray of the road suddenly turned into the brown-gray of the runners massed at the starting line. He looked over his shoulder, following Main Street up the other way. Somewhere up there was the finish line, but without the mass of people around it, it was impossible to spot at this distance.

Mr. Anderson absent-mindedly wondered why they didn't extend the race to go around the whole circumference of the habitat area. They could make the starting line the finish line. But as soon as he started wondering about it, he knew the answer. Few enough could make it a quarter way around to where he is now. Fewer still could make it to the current finish line. And as for all the way around, nobody would make that.

Someone had turned on the TV in the café, showing the starting line of the marathon. The announcer had just said that the race would start in a few minutes, so Mathew sat back and looked up at the starting line again and waited. When the starter gun went off, the well defined line of brown-gray runners melted into the light gray of the road. They were off.

However, it would still be a while before they made it all the way here. So he finished off the last of his drink and called the waitress over to order a second one.

* * *

When Jill first stepped into the public bathroom and sniffed the acrid smell of vomit in the air, her feelings weren't so much of disgust as they were of surprise. Normally the public bathrooms were kept exceptionally clean. But she ignored it, figuring the maintenance staff was overworked from cleaning up around the marathon, and just hadn't gotten here yet. Besides, she was in a hurry, and didn't have time to worry about it.

Her fiancé, Jack, was in the marathon, and she had promised that she would be there when he crossed the finish line. She had even talked her boss at the café into letting her go early when the progress indicator showed he was less than half an hour from finishing the race. Unfortunately, he was going to be all hot and sweaty from the race, and she couldn't afford to let her uniform get messed up, which is why she had stopped to change in the first place.

Jill thought back to when he had proposed to her. He had gone the whole nine yards. It had been her birthday, so she had expected him to do something special, but never anything like what he did. And all without a hint that he was going to propose later. He had gotten all dressed up, and rented a limo to take them to one of the most expensive restaurants on the ship. He even arranged to have violins play while they ate. Then, just after they had finished eating, he had gotten down on one knee, pulled out a diamond ring from his pocket and proposed. It had all been so perfect, she almost didn't want to answer, just to keep it from ending. But she had said yes, he had put the ring on her finger, and every one in the restaurant applauded them both.

Of course to Jill it didn't matter where he had taken her. He could have just as easily taken her to a burger joint, and proposed with a ring he'd gotten out of a Cracker Jack box, and she still would have said yes. But looking down at her ring she realized that even though she didn't care how he did it, he could never have lived with himself if he had done anything less.

Jill carefully folded her uniform and put it in her bag. She took one last look in the mirror before finally heading off to the finish line. The last report on Jack had said that he was holding a steady pace in 98th place, and should cross the finish line in just about fifteen minutes. As she looked at her watch, she realized she only had a few minutes to spare. And she did have a promise to keep.

* * *

The first thing Rebecka remembered when she woke up was the acrid stench of vomit. She couldn't smell it as much as feel its remnants in her throat and mouth. At first she just wanted to try and go back to sleep, but the position she was in was too uncomfortable for that. The first time she tried to open her eyes, the light was too bright, and she had to squeeze them closed again right away. But after blinking a few times her eyes adjusted, and she could finally see the pale yellow walls of a stall in one of the public bathrooms somewhere. And the reason she was so uncomfortable was that she was sitting against the wall, behind the toilet bowl, with her legs wedged between it and the stall walls. The seat of the bowl was down and was covered with dried, crusty vomit, and more running down the sides. The bowl itself was still filled with it. But as she looked around, she realized little of it actually made it into the bowl. In fact, from the look of things, most of it was on her. She knew she should be sick and disgusted about where she was, sitting behind a toilet covered in vomit. Especially when she was able to recognize pieces of last night's dinner. But she didn't care about any of it. She just plain didn't care.

Great, she thought to herself. When her father saw her like this, he was going to hit the roof. Not that he ever needed a good reason to start yelling. She even had a good idea of what he would say. It was usually that same stuff over and over again. "Where have you been? What have you been doing to yourself? You've been out getting drunk again haven't you? When are you going to start acting like a decent human being again? Bla. Bla. Bla. Bla."

When she saw the razor blade on the floor, she absent-mindedly picked it up. It wasn't until she was actually holding it that she realized what she was holding. It felt rather flimsy and very thin. It was also unusually warm, not like a piece of cold metal. It

occurred to her that this is the first time she had ever actually seen a razor blade, and she had always thought of it as a hunk of cold metal with sharp edges that could cut through steel as easily as it could cut through flesh. This, on the other hand, felt so light and thin, she wasn't sure it was even real. But she could also feel the sharpness of the edges, even just lying on her fingers. Real or not, it would cut. Easily.

It occurred to her that all this time she had been thinking of the razor blade in connection to suicide. Of course that's because she never heard of them anywhere else. And it also worked the other way around. It was always either with a gun, pills, or a razor blade. It was practically a cliché, using a razor to commit suicide.

On the other hand, it may be a cliché, but it was also very effective. Just find that nice pale blue line on your wrist. Put the razor blade to it, and pull. A small sting, a gush of blood and then it was all over. And that was the appealing part. Having an end to it all. An end to the pointless arguments with her father. An end to the redundant school daze. An end to being stuck on this hopeless ship with nowhere to go. An end to constantly being alone. Just having it end.

She found the vein on her wrist easily enough, and put the razor blade against it. Her father would regret never doing anything but yelling at her. The other adults would regret pushing her around and treating her like an idiot. The kids at school would regret never even trying to make friends with her. They'd all regret everything they ever did to her. All she had to do was take a deep breath and pull. So she took a deep breath.

* * *

Kevin always loved camping out in the wild, under the stars. Even after his family moved here, where the wild was just a corner of the park allowed to grow uncontrolled, and the stars were just street lights on the opposite

side of the habitable area. But almost everything else was still the same. They still had to carry everything with them. They still had to build their own fire. And they still had to tell their own ghost stories. Besides, unlike on earth, here no one worries about three ten-year-olds going out on their own.

Actually that wasn't completely true. Sheldon's mother was worried. But then she worried about everything. The fact that there were no wild predators, or any sheer cliffs, or even sudden rain storms, didn't seem to matter to her.

The hike out had been uneventful. They had passed one of the cow fields along the way, and had stopped to watch them for a while. Somehow the conversation tuned to cow tipping. Yet even though they had all heard of it, none of them knew exactly what was supposed to happen. Sheldon finally suggested that maybe they should try it if no one was watching. But when one got close to them and they actually saw how big a cow was compared to themselves, they decided better of it.

They finally found a nice place to camp, just off the hiking path. David and Sheldon laid out the sleeping bags and unpacked the hot dogs, while Kevin was the one who built the fire since he was the only one who had learned how to make one safely. Sheldon's mom had also insisted that they take tents along, but they never even bothered to unpack them. Since rain wasn't scheduled for another two days, they had decided to sleep out in the open all night.

They were in the middle of roasting marshmallows when they started talking about their mothers. Kevin had started it by saying how his mother was such a health nut. To her, the only acceptable foods were organic vegetables and tofu, and she would freak out knowing they were eating hot dogs and marshmallows. That's when Sheldon spoke up and reminded Kevin that she was also the one who taught him everything he knew about camping on his own. And she was the one who

convinced Sheldon's father to let him go, in spite of his mother's protests. Now as for his own mother, if it weren't for his father running interference all the time, she would never let him do anything. She worries about just about everything.

An awkward silence fell over them as they looked at David and remembered that his mother had died less than a year earlier. And here they were talking away about their own mothers, totally ignoring what it might be doing to David. His whole family never quite got over her death. In fact, even as they were leaving, his father had to cut short the goodbye, when his older sister came back all covered in puke and they started arguing again. David almost couldn't get away fast enough. Finally it was David himself who changed the subject talking about Mrs. Abbot at school and how tyrannical she was.

Later that night Kevin was woken up by some cold stuff hitting his face. As he opened his eyes, he saw that it was raining, even though rain wasn't scheduled for today. As he sat up, he saw Sheldon and David also waking up, looking around. They all knew that if Sheldon's mother ever found out this happened, she'd never let them go camping again.

* * *

"Excuse me?"

"She said she'd been abducted by aliens."

"After she moved here?"

"Yup."

Howard just floated there, trying to absorb what he had just heard. He and George had been sent to find a broken circuit in the air conditioning system. The unexpected rainstorm it caused wasn't really serious. It wasn't even much of an annoyance, since it was contained totally to the park, and should have been left to the next workday. But they had gotten a complaint from a mother who had said that her son was out there and insisted they fix it now.

"And how, pray tell, did they get through all the radar, trackers, and sensors, not to mention the hull?"

"I never got around to asking that."

Of course the main air conditioning system was in the middle of the ship, where the gravity was almost non-existent. It was also next to the 2 meter optical fibers that carried the 'day light' from the reactor for to the habitable area. And even though they only lost .013% of the light along the way, it would still be bright enough to completely blind someone. So whenever work had to be done on these circuits, it had to be done 'after dark'. The fact that the complaint didn't come until after dark was pure luck.

"Boy, that must have been a really bad date."

"Actually, the rest of the dinner was pretty good. For that matter, so was breakfast."

"You didn't!"

"I did."

"How . . . ?" Said Howard, having no idea how to finish the question.

"Hey, after you get past the alien abduction thing, she was a rather nice person."

"George, my father always said that when your dates start resembling people in the National Enquirer, it's time to think about settling down."

Howard unplugged the tester from a circuit and plugged it into the next one in line.

"Hey, I have thought about it. In fact, every now and then, I get the urge to settle down, get married, and have kids. And every time I get one of those urges, I go straight to my sister's and volunteer to baby-sit for her three kids. One night of that, my urge to settle down is completely gone."

"George Elmao, confirmed bachelor for life."

"You got it."

Howard moved the tester again.

"Woa, Jackpot!" said George

"Is that the bad one?"

"Definitely. It is completely fried," said George, letting the tester float there and pushing himself over to help Howard get it out.

"So, you and Liz going to that new movie tomorrow?"

"No, she said she didn't want to go this weekend."

"Really? That's odd. I thought she went to all the new movie openings?"

"Yea, she usually does. But her council work seems to be keeping her on edge lately. I think she just wants a weekend off at home, to recover."

"Gee, I didn't think the marathon was that hard to take care of."

"No, it's not the marathon. I mean that's part of it. But there's something else too."

"What?"

"I don't know, she said she's not allowed to talk about it. At least not until after tomorrow."

"Wow. Sounds serious. And you have no idea what it might be?"

"No, I guess I'll just have to wait and see."

* * *

Susan, Tom and Johnny had been sitting at the bar for quite some time. Johnny was still sipping his second drink. He was trying to keep from getting too drunk, but the announcement was so long in coming that it wasn't easy. Susan had avoided that problem all together by ordering ginger ale to begin with. Tom, on the other hand, was deliberately trying to get drunk, and looked like he was failing miserably.

Johnny looked at the clock on the wall. It was almost time for the captain's announcement. It took forever for the council members to figure out when would be a good time to make the announcement. They finally decided for today, during the start of the evening news.

The TV in the bar was showing some minor baseball game. It was too early in the season to be of any consequence. But there were still a couple of groans when the game was faded out and they switched back to the studios.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Captain Hewit." Said the announcer.

Suddenly, the stain on Tom's napkin had become the most interesting thing in the universe to him.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," The captain looked like he hadn't gotten any sleep in days, and maybe hadn't. "I'm sorry to announce that civil war has broken out between the Jupiter colonies."

Susan was listening intently, even though she knew what he was going to say. In fact the three of them had helped write what he was going to say. And more importantly, what not to say.

"We first heard about this a few days ago, but decided to wait on an announcement until we received confirmation from Earth and Mars governments."

They had decided not to mention the fact that Earth and Mars had also confirmed that a nuclear device was used against at least one of the colony satellites. Details were still a bit sketchy, but basically, one colony, along with its million or so inhabitants, were now so much interstellar dust.

"Of course we are still two years out, and a lot can change in those two years. Ideally, by the time we get there the war will be over, and everything will have returned to a state of normalcy. But we must also prepare for the possibility that it will not be."

Yea, thought Johnny, at worst we could end up flying right into a free fire zone, with every one armed with nukes. In fact they were so big, that a nuke wouldn't kill them all at once. Just knock a two or three mile wide hole into the side of the ship. The lucky ones would be the ones who died in the initial blast. With that big a hole, no one would ever make it into

any kind of shelter in time to survive the loss of atmosphere.

"We've also used the last few days to plot out some basic alternative courses and actions. I expect many of these alternatives to be refined over the next few weeks. Unfortunately, we still need Jupiter's gravity to slow us down, either to go into orbit around Jupiter, or to sling shot us around on a course back to Earth."

Johnny thought about the colonists that they were transporting. The residents and crew were going to head back to Earth eventually anyway. Even without the precious cargo they were supposed to take back, it still wasn't that much of a loss. But many of the colonists had left behind family, friends, home and careers to make a new start in one of the Jupiter colonies. Now they won't even have that.

"We, of course, are determined to remain neutral in this conflict, but it would be a bit naive to believe that all elements would respect that neutrality."

There had been talk about the possibility of being boarded. Of one side or the other confiscating the ship, the cargo, or the residence as their own. It was almost unconceivable for one side to become tyrannical enough to have forced conscription. On the other hand, a government that would blow away a whole colony might do anything. And of course there was also the possibility of pirates who would just take advantage of the fighting to raid a ship like theirs.

"I'm going to turn this over to your local broadcasters, who'll give you more details. And, of course, we'll be placing all the details on-line for everyone to review. We have a lot of decisions and preparations that need to be made, and soon. I'm confident that working together, we'll all come out of this all right. Thank you." The cut back to the station's news studio was a bit awkward. But the news anchors were there, ready to take over right away.

Johnny finished the last of his drink, and said goodbye to Tom and Susan. It was a long walk from the bar to his home, but right now he didn't care. He was the one who had written that closing line of the captains. The one about everyone being all right if they all worked together. But for the life of him, he just couldn't believe it. He just couldn't see how they were going to survive this.

* * *

"Here's your drink, sir."

"Thank you," said Mr. Anderson as he picked up the drink and started sipping it. He looked over the railing down at Main Street. Cleaning crews were still cleaning up the remnants of the marathon. Most of the trash was gone, and they had switched to the small street sweepers to clean the remaining stains off the sidewalk. And Mr. Anderson sat there sipping his drink, like he did every weekend. But there was a difference now. There was a tension in the air, in the face of everyone he saw. A kind of fatalism. Everyone seemed to be wondering if they were going to survive the next two years.

But he also saw something else when he talked to people. An attitude of defiance. An 'if I'm going to die, then I'm going to die fighting' sort of attitude. There were already people volunteering for some kind of civil defiance force. Others were talking about building shelters and other defenses. And still others just seemed to be waiting for someone to give them something to do.

Maybe they were just fooling themselves. Or maybe they really did have a chance of surviving this after all. And maybe it really didn't matter anymore. They'd all find out soon enough. So he finished off the last of his drink and called the waitress over to order a second one.

A book review

by Alex Coventry

A really successful Science Fiction author's style often gets looser and looser over time, and his books larger and larger. For instance, one of Heinlein's last novels includes a detailed two page description of ballistics on the moon that have relatively little importance to the story he is telling. Perhaps a successful author is subject to less editorial control, and less pressure to write something of a reasonable size. At any rate, Stephenson seems to have achieved this sort of independence with respect to the writing of *Cryptonomicon*. It has a detailed description of a secure symmetric encryption scheme (even source code for a working implementation of it), an extended treatise on the dynamics of a young man's libido as he falls in love, boiler plate for a high-tech business plan, and a procedure for finding a good book on deep-sea diving. This sort of nonsense could have turned out to be as tedious as Heinlein's parentheses, but Stephenson delivers it all in the hilarious, hyperbolic style that he perfected in *Snow Crash*, and delivers it on top of a thrilling tale of intrigue.

Cryptonomicon has four main threads. The one contemporary thread centers on Randy, an awkward high-technology startup employee bumbling through modern sexual politics and Southeast Asian business practices. The other three are set in WWII, and show how the lives of three military men are distorted by massive exertions by the German and Japanese armies to hide their spoils as their defeat looms. One of these men, a gifted cryptanalyst called Lawrence who analyzes German and Japanese communications, falls under the spell of the one encryption scheme he cannot crack, which turns out to be used for administering the hiding of the spoils. Another thread concerns Bobby, a US marine closely affiliated with Lawrence who perpetrates outlandish invasions of enemy territory hoped to confuse German intelligence about

the extent to which the likes of Lawrence have uncovered their plans. He inadvertently comes upon gold the Germans are transporting for hiding. Witnessing this indirectly brings him under attack from the German leaders behind the concealment effort, who seem much more interested in hiding their loot than prosecuting their war. The third WWII thread follows a Japanese miner, Goto, pressed into administering the construction of the redoubt in which the spoils are to be hidden.

When *Cryptonomicon* came out in 1999, there was widespread anticipation of sweeping social changes resulting from ubiquitous network access, and *Cryptonomicon* seems infected by this anticipation. Its plot is woven around machinations to root out the hidden war loot. Among the goals this is hoped to realize, a prominent one is the establishment of a viable anonymous digital currency, and a 'data haven,' a network service that will disseminate any information delivered to it without risk of censorship or reprisals against the disseminators. Avi, a Jewish business manager with a penchant for the darker corners of history, hopes that any social group that finds itself at risk of subjugation can use this service to tell the world of its plight and to learn military skills that will help it force a more stable balance of power. The idea is that this will complicate the life of any community planning to systematically murder a large portion of any other. As obviously impractical as this plan is, that Stephenson presents it as at all worthy of consideration in the contemporary thread of the novel is in stark contrast to the WWII threads, where helpless people are quietly and systematically enslaved and murdered without the slightest hope of rescuing or even calling attention to themselves.

Cryptonomicon is a sprawling story, but to the extent that it could be said to have a dominant theme, it deals with the roles of knowledge and innovation in the survival and growth of a culture, and how modern telecommunication amplifies those roles. While the

men in the WWII threads are sharply unique heroes, most of the time they fit into their communities as cogs in massive formal organizations whose goals they will never be fully privy to. Only as they accidentally piece together their stories and capabilities do they form an independent plan to locate the wealth the Axis powers are hiding. There are implacable, faceless organizations in Randy and Avi's world, too, but they owe these organizations nothing, and achieve remarkable feats with nothing but their own ideas and the skills they harness in their loose community of friends. In the end, *Cryptonomicon* seems to be saying that the treasure its characters are focussed on has drastically lost relevance in modern life.

"Gold is the corpse of value ...they thought that The General would march into Tokyo and steal it. But The General didn't care about the gold. He understood the real gold is here --" he points to his head "in the intelligence of the people, and here --" he holds out his hands " – in the work that they do. Getting rid of our gold was the best thing that ever happened to Nippon. It made us rich."

Cryptonomicon, p 858

Poem based on *Inconstant Moon* by

Larry Niven

by Ken Jenks

The end of the world, in Duxford,
where the last bus leaves at six pm
and the one shop shuts at seven
and you find out at a quarter past
that the world is ending tonight,
and everyone all round the internet
is heading for Disneyworld

and flying aeroplanes and making love
and there you are, alone, in Duxford.

It might be worth calling a taxi
if there were anywhere in reach
you were sure you wanted to be,
if the taxis were running, if it wouldn't
be horribly, hideously, unfair, to
make a taxi driver waste two hours
so you could have a last and solitary lobster -
it's their end of the world too.

So you go outside and stand in damp grass
and look up at the cold far stars
where we're not going to make it,
at the velvet night, at the traitor moon,
that smiling shining friendly face
that lights the locked church, the playground,
the clean technology factory
and all the little closed-in houses
with strangers boxed inside who won't know
or care.

The people you want to be with
(because it is the end of the world
after all, and you want to be with people
you care about for the end of the world)
are far away and out of reach, and busy
with their own last minute plans.
What could you do but disturb them
as the flame licks round the round world?

You go back in, put music on, boot up,
what's different, after all, what
does it change to change your choices?
The phone sits quiet on its perch and you
spend
your last hours happily enough
reading usenet, answering email
(which does not importune) and writing poetry
like every night, because every night
is the end of the world, in Duxford.

Love

by James Goodwin

NOTE: very strong language and graphic scenes of violence and child abuse; read at your own risk

And you know, it never occurred to me
once, not once during that entire time, that I
wasn't anything more than what he said. He
called me his little faggot bitch. Bent me over,
face ground into cool bathroom tile, as he
fucked me. Stifled my screams with the same
rag he made me clean the blood up with afterwards.
Never let me wash that rag either. Kept
it in the plastic basket beneath the sink, with
the soap and scrub-brushes. Dried shit and
semen and blood and pus and saliva and...

"Shut the hell up." Shoved it right in
and the rag sopped up my pain as well.

Soft little mammal. Scrabbling over
cool bathroom tile. Blunt fingers clawing at
nothing.

Black and white tile. Black. White.
Black. White. Checkerboard moire madness
from this awkward angle. And so, I learned to
drift... leave my body to his grip; counted the
tiles until it was over. It was not an easy task.
The bathroom was not a regular square; it was
rectangular. And the tub, sink, and toilet took
up space that I had to account for. The toilet
had a footprint of 82 tiles. If it weren't there,
there would have been 82 more tiles on that
floor; 41 white and 41 black. The sink knocked
a corner of the room, opposite the bathtub. It
covered an area of 210 tiles; 105 white and 105
black. What I eventually noticed was that
along the walls, the tiles were cut in half. This
meant that, were the sink not there, a quarter
tile would have been in its corner. Fascinating.

There lay a whole world of subtle wonder
in that room, mine for the taking.

Something wet on my legs.

* * *

That was when I first fell in love with
chrome. The fixtures in our house were all

chrome. Shiny faucets and knobs beaming funhouse reflections of a funhouse world. Turn one and out comes hot.. turn the other, you get cold; it was a simple magic to me. And I soon came to install such knobs on my insides. You should have seen it. A beautiful jungle gym of pipes and knobs, a place to play and count tiles from within.

* * *

It was only a matter of time before the refrigerator started talking to me.

It was Friday, payday. He was out, so I had the house to myself. I do remember thinking that there should have been a third person there. Someone tall and warm and always with a smile for me. I was almost certain that at one point in time there was, but as it stood.. my world was that house, the tiles and my friends.

The refrigerator was the first. The Man had left to get drunk. It would be until nightfall before he returned. As per ritual, I watched him from the window in my room. He drove a dusty sky blue pick-up truck, pocked and rusting. Loud enough for me to hear him roaring out of sight around the bend, tearing off down the dirt road. I ran to the front door, trying the knob. It was locked of course. As was the rear, and the door to the cellar. The windows had long since been nailed shut. Try to understand as well, that something as loud and violent as breaking the glass had never even entered my realm of possibility yet. I was eight years old, you see.

In the kitchen, I dug around for something to eat. A box of cereal, cornflakes. Opened the top and ate it straight from the bag inside. No dishes meant no evidence. I was so very clever.

"No milk?"

I dropped the box, startled. It was him, he had come back. I was caught. It would-

But no, after the yelp and the panic, I calmed down and realized that I was alone in

the room. I had heard a voice, a man's voice, but not His voice.

"Who's there?" I looked under the dinette table.. nothing but ants.

"Here, Boy. You were going to eat those with no milk?" That was my name, that was what He called me. I grew afraid. And still nothing, nobody in the room save me.

"Why would you do a thing like that?"

I blinked, the icebox was talking to me. I went over to it. It was an aqua blue relic, with rounded corners and trimmed for speed. A streamlined artifact made when things like appliances were built for fast living. Bottle cap magnets dotted the front.

"It's Him isn't it? You think he would find out."

I nodded quietly, touching the machine. There was a slight hum and vibration beneath my fingers.

"That's it. Pleased to meet you. Yes, oh that's nice... just like that. You have such nice ha-"

I jerked my hand away, holding it, stepping back. He talked to me like that. When He wasn't angry, when I could coax Him into other things besides fucking me. It always sickened me to hear such sweetness in His voice.

"That makes you scared doesn't it?"

"Shut up."

"But you see," it continued, "I won't hurt you... and you, you can't hurt me either. Go ahead, try it. Hit me."

Crackle of corn flakes underfoot.

"Shut up!"

"Make me. Go on, I won't break."

Fingers curling into fists.

"What's the matter... sissy?"

And that was all it took; I lunged at the icebox, slamming into it with my body then falling back to kick and hit, hit and kick.

"Ouch, careful now, faggot cunt. Wouldn't want to hurt yourself."

And I ran out the kitchen, crying.

In my room, I eventually fall asleep...

* * *

I awoke mid-tumble down the stairs. It was Him, He had come back, drunk as usual. Lifted me out of bed and dropped me from the first landing.

"What the fuck happened in the kitchen, Boy?" Came down after me, staggering. The boom thunder of His weight straining the worn slats as He descended. He had a bottle of something clear and brown in His hand. A sheen of sweat on His face.

I snapped from my groggy shock and tried to stand up. He grabbed my arm, lifting me at an awkward angle.

"Get in there... and clean that shit up, now!"

My kicking toes skimming linoleum until he throws me back to the floor. There are cornflakes everywhere, alive it seemed. No, not really - just covered with ants. A steady stream of the black insects from beneath the table. They scatter wildly around me, onto me.

"Do you think I spend my money on food just so you can throw it all over this god-damned house?" He up ends the bottle, sucking the last drizzle down, then wipes his mouth on his sleeve. His eyes are on fire.

Dull ache as my heart threatens to split open, throbbing.

"I want you to pick up and eat every last one, every last fucking one. You think you'll waste my money and my food, in _this_ house?"

"imsorryimsorryiwontdoitagainiwont-doit"

"You damn right you won't do it again."

He beat me some, right there on the spot with the empty bottle. No tiles to count in the kitchen, but I was too worried about the glass breaking on me that I didn't miss them. And then he pulled up a chair and sat, tired and breathing heavy, to watch me eat. Later, we go upstairs to the bathroom.

The following day, I find small bits of chitin mixed in with the blood and the shit in the toilet. The web of pipes inside me grows more intricate with each passing minute. Yet not all the ants died; when I dream, I sometimes see one, here and there, lost in my maze.

* * *

I stayed out of the kitchen as much as possible after that, and when he would send me to get a beer or something, I never stayed longer than I could hold my breath. Nothing happened for two weeks. And so I began to forget. It was easy to do, I did it often enough.

But next payday came. The shifting gears of that blue truck fading down the road again. I stayed out of the kitchen, subconsciously avoiding it. A handful of plastic green soldiers to play God with; trench warfare on the stairs. Just before the final assault on the banister, there was a crash from the kitchen then a low whining noise.

I try to ignore it, but the illusion is shattered. I'm on the stairs with a few stupid toys and something very wrong downstairs. Clutching the figurine in my hand I quietly move down the steps. I stand at the doorway, at the threshold. The icebox is whirring and whining and making a noise like it's grinding bones.

* * *

Pipes.

Miles and miles of conduit, suspended in a void, wind whistling through the lattice. The pipe he is in is large and encrusted from the inside. Random drips and sudden splashes echo into him, past him like he wasn't even there. Avatar is a spirit, disembodied to the point of inconsequence. Though he does not feel alone with the solitude. He focuses, materializing enough to press his hand against the pipe's inside curve. It is vibrating. It is trembling. There is a body in motion nearby, therefore he is not alone. Cool, foul air.. stagnant

and still at first, then shifting, moving as a column, harbinger to whatever it is coming closer. The tinkling splish splash of seething vermin as out of the darkness spill slick coats and shining eyes. The rats tumble past, fleeing, trampling mindless millipedes and smaller, slower such creatures into the muck. Surge surge surge. There are teeth.. so many teeth.. filling the pipe like rising petroleum. A solid wave moving.. a subway, a worm, shit sliding through ruptured intestines. Roaring and screaming, closer and faster, filling the pipe completely, forcing the air to move... an impatient black jelly boiling with teeth. The oily surface ripples eagerly to kiss his face.. and fear...

..washes..

....over....

.....him, completely.....

.....

* * *

“Something the matter, Boy?”

I blinked. I was in the kitchen, it was a hot clear late spring day. Bright, shiny sunlight, and outside I could see the tops of green trees swaying. My hands were empty. Looking down, I saw the green soldier by my feet. Gun ready with a scowling, lopsided face.

It takes a minute or two until I realize that the whining noise isn't coming from me, that it isn't the song of my mind playing in the background. I open the freezer door and the noise flies out into the room. The ice maker is stuck. Small plastic white cogs strain against each other, trying to right the ice tray. It is caught on a large bulge of frost.

I reach in and twist the tray counter-clockwise on its axle, forcing it past the ice. The noise stops. Nothing now but the mist of my breath and cold air in my lungs.

Close the door and reach down to get my toy. Kick it by accident and it skitters under the refrigerator. Get on my hands and

knees and look into the dusty thin void to try and see it... but nothing.

“Something the matter, Boy?”

I stand and squint. Holding out my hand and puffing my chest,

“Give it back.”

“No.”

“It's mine.”

“Get it yourself.”

“I can't see it. Give it to me.”

I kick the icebox, “You piece of shit, give it back!”

It screeches, shifting and digging into the linoleum as I kick it. I stop, flushed.

“You finished?”

“...”

“Thought so. You know, Boy, I've been doing some thinking... and it seems to me that we didn't quite start on the right foot together. I was a little nervous the last time we talked and I might have said some things I didn't exactly mean. And well, what I'm trying to get across is that I'm sorry. I wish we could still be friends, though. Would that be okay?”

No, it was very much not okay. I was angry, I had a right to be. And again, I was scared. I turned and walked out, went back to my troops and continued the war as if nothing had happened.

On the way out, it says to me, “I can help you.” But I don't hear this until later in my dreams.

I wake up sweating in my bed with that phrase, that voice, in my head. Shafts of light careening across the ceiling. Headlights from the truck as He returns howling into the front yard. Glass breaks outside and I hear doors open and shut. Nestled beneath the window in my bed in my darkness, I can hear the world outside so clearly. Voices. Male voices, laughing like dogs, and I draw deeper down into the covers. He is not alone tonight.

They crash into the front door and shake the whole house with their boots and barkings. The radio is turned on. They are below me, in the kitchen. Chairs are dragged

about, the table is moved. They must be preparing to play cards. In the stillness, I can hear everything. But I understand little of their conversation, little of their humor. Eventually, I slip from my vigil and touch something like sleep...

Only to wake at the first creaking step; someone is coming up the stairs. There are still voices in the kitchen, I must have dozed for only a minute or two. Or was it an hour? I don't know; I was careless. Stupid stupid stupid. Closer come the footfalls, heavy, lumbering. They reach the top of the stairs and recede. I hear a thick cough, then spit. A zipper. Fluids in free fall. He finishes urinating with a sniff. Flush. Footsteps again. They come to the top of the staircase. Then silence. They come closer. My eyes are wide and stinging, tearing since I do not blink, I do not breathe, shifting into familiar paralysis.

Just outside the door now. It rattles and opens, letting in a dim yellow light and the echos of downstairs noise. A shadow enters.

Comes to the bed and sits down. Stroking my hair. It is not Him. And despite what followed, that was the most horrifying thing of all.

* * *

In his dreams, the landscape is dense with moisture. The pipes in the void, twisting like briars into all directions, drip with condensation. Avatar is floating there in the mist. Looking down, all he can see is nothingness. Shell's insides are becoming more complex, yet increasingly corroded. The pipes are pocked and cracking. Double thumps, then a grunt of exertion as it lands, briefly coiling to spring again. Winding its way through the pipes, apelike. He hears it first, before he can see it; the noise it makes swinging and leaping up to him. It is a pale dot moving up to him through the pipes. The thump and spring of its motions form a rhythm that he can't turn away from. And as it draws closer to where he hovers, Avatar can see it grinning with exertion.

Wisps of vapor blast from its face to curl into the air. Closer still and he can make out its color, the pale aqua scales lying flat against the skin. Ram horns like a smoker's teeth jut from its head. The demon bounds up to him.

So it lands, digging its claws into the rounded concrete pipe, righting itself, perching before him. With a final snort of cold air, smelling of rotting vegetables, it winks a milky white eye.

"Found you at last, eh Boy?"

It is a gangly creature, long bony fingers, long oddly jointed neck, waspish narrow waist and a limp scaled phallus the size of his arm. It yawns, the random spines along its back rearing up with the motion. He drifts away without realizing it. Just being this close to it, pains him, freezes him. More like drooling than breathing; its cold breath spills from its maw, down around its talons, out over the edge of the pipe, twisting into thin air.

It blinks, seeing Avatar fade away.

"Hey! Where you going?" It cries angrily, reaching for him.

"You can't leave now, come back here!" Arms impossibly large sweep out to snatch him, yet passing through as a ghost.

* * *

I wake up shivering in sweat.

I awake on the floor of my room, beside my bed. My body throbs with pain in several places when I try to move. My pajamas are tangled around my ankles. A pasty, familiar taste in my mouth. I don't know how I got here - perhaps I just rolled out of the bed. There is a yellow light against the window; dawn. I press my ears to the floor. Nothing from downstairs, the party must be over.

After a while, I rise, pulling away from the sticky residues that hold me down. I place a hand against the bed to balance and step out of my pajamas.

I move quickly across the wooden floors, down the hall to His room. The door is

slightly ajar, and I can see him splayed out on the bed, snoring. I'm afraid to try and shut his door completely and risk waking him. But I want to clean myself. He would hear me in the bathroom otherwise. After thinking for a long minute, I turn and tiptoe to the stairs. I know which steps to avoid and where to place my feet. The hours of practice have made me skilled enough to navigate the distance silently.

Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I enter the kitchen and go to the sink. I douse a rag with cold water briefly, then rub away the stains on my body. It is a still and bright morning; the bruises stand out brilliantly in the light.

Birds chirp from outside.

"That wasn't very sociable, Boy, what you did last night," says the icebox. I ignore it and wring out the rag, folding it and putting it back, just the way I found it. I pull a chair from the table over to the refrigerator and climb up to get the bread from on top of it. A plastic bag with half a loaf molding away inside.

"It took me a while and considerable effort to find you and, without so much as a 'Hello', you up and leave. Now that's rude don't you think?" I sling the bag down onto the counter and go to the pantry to get the peanut butter, then a knife and a plate.

"Hello? Are you listening to me?" Jelly. I hesitate enough to blink then open the refrigerator door. There is a scream of wind and the door blows open, wrenched from my grasp. Inside is madness, a window to the place of pipes and drowned ants. It is there for an instant then the image constricts and there is nothing but bland whiteness, spotty fungus and dull racks with little food. I find my breath.

"Cute trick, eh? Let me show you another."

The few eggs on the door shelf suddenly quiver and tip over like lemmings to sea. They shatter in a bloom of clear yolk and lush yellow color. A tinkle of music. I look look down and see there among the shells and thick fluids a key.

"See it? It's the key to the basement. Take it."

The slow spread of yolk reaches my toes and slips between them quickly.

I clean up the mess, washing the key and setting it aside. As I eat my sandwich at the table it sits shining before me. The icebox smiles smugly.

* * *

I stand in the door way, staring down into the pit. This is dangerous, almost stupid. He would kill me if he caught me now. He would simply just kill me. Taking a last look over my shoulder at the icebox, now grown innocently quiet, I place my foot gingerly on the first step. A cool draft rises from the basement and I'm caught in a surge of *deja vu*. The place of dreams, the Shell. A damp draft rises, chilling me.

* * *

Avatar turns his head. There is a shaft of light from above, shifting as sunlight through deep water. The creaking of wood, the trembling of the pipes. He drifts to gain a better vantage point. Long slick tongue coils upwards around his ankle and he looks down to see the Demon crouched in the air behind him. It wraps around him without seeming to notice, its rheumy gaze fixed on the descending rays of light. Avatar reaches down to stroke its large head.

"You see, Boy? You are here! You have come!" It hisses, releasing him, turning in loops like a grinning chinese dragon.

"I give you this!" It shrieks to the seamless icon, and in a whirlwind of icy fog the demon bounds off up to the light. Already, gentle glowing motes drift down the beam, mothlike, dustlike, riding on currents of warm air, a staircase for God.

* * *

He listened to the distant radio thrum of a collapsed star, two beats every three seconds. A pulsar was one of the marvels of astrophysics; its calm, steady echo reminded him of the joys of astronomy, and the value of his career to human knowledge.

The pulsar's steady beat continued for another five seconds. And then the guitar and drums kicked in.

Even out here on this desolate little planet far from Earth, the sky was filled with the noise of extraterrestrial civilizations. He had heard from at least six of them tonight.

Vlad threw off his headphones and thrust open the window of his room. He stuck his head through, looked up at the night sky and shouted, "Shut the hell up!"

He sat down heavily in his chair, unaware that his right hand was tapping out the rhythm of the pulsar song he'd heard, until a completely unexpected call came from someone who happened to be in orbit overhead.

* * *

"When this ship was built during the War," said Carla, "it was optimized for squirrel use -- no need for a big human crew, obviously. These rooms were added after the War, where two of the torpedo bays used to be."

Vlad occupied a white-walled room not much bigger than a phone booth. He was listening to Carla through a small square window in one wall, with Carla's face and another room on the other side. On the second wall was a food dispenser, on the third were several devices for human sanitation, and on the fourth was a large closed hatch at chest level.

"Hearing about your accommodations for this mission didn't seem to bother you, though," she observed.

"No, it didn't."

"You seemed eager to get away from that research center," she remarked.

"I was."

"Would you like to know why I came looking for you halfway across the galaxy in a starship crewed by squirrels?"

"Because you still love me after all?" he asked through the little window.

Unfazed, she started: "It's because..."

Humans! We have arrived at our target. Report to the bridge.

"How do we do that?" asked Vlad. The overhead radio gave no reply. Vlad sighed.

Carla, slim and nimble, had already climbed out of her room through the door-panel and was knocking on Vlad's door. With some difficulty, Vlad followed her into the largest hallway on the ship.

"This way," said Carla. They were on their hands and knees in the hallway, which was one meter high and one wide. The hall was painted to resemble a small road running through a forest. He had an excellent view of Carla, who led the way.

They were able to stand close together on the bridge, though Vlad had to stoop a bit to fit under the ceiling and a squirrel was swearing at him for covering the navigation console with his left elbow. There were wooden walkways a few inches wide running all over the bridge at various heights, with instrument panels stationed along them. His right elbow rested on one of the little catwalks, making it creak.

"Mister Tanner," said a voice from below. "My diplomatic advisor said that you had some skill with radio signals." Vlad looked down to see the captain, who had red fur and sharpened front teeth. An acorn-shaped goblet rested on the chair behind him.

"Some skill, yes."

Captain Loki nodded to Siegfried, who had climbed to approximately Vlad's eye level to address him. "What you are about to hear does not leave this ship."

Vlad was about to ask why, but saw Carla nodding *no* and said "All right," instead.

"Then," said Siegfried, "listen!"

There was a confused jumble of sounds. Vlad immediately picked out three overlapping commercials for Black Hole Lite beer, Kithrupian mineral water, and a new kind of toothpaste from Mars. But there was something else in the signal as well: a faint rasping hiss, like a steam engine. He was sure he had heard it before, maybe in an old movie.

"This signal," Siegfried explained, "comes from there." And he pointed to the viewscreen.

* * *

The jungle planet Eulithes was now the only one in its star system. Earth's geologists were excited when they discovered that the planet had extensive deposits of gold, dilithium, and six other rare minerals spread throughout the crust. Unfortunately, these deposits were buried deep underground all over the planet, in low concentrations hardly worth mining.

Earth's biologists were amazed when they discovered the planet's most advanced species, a large insectoid animal that skillfully sought out and collected minerals to build simple tools. Unfortunately, these creatures were still thousands of years from evolving true intelligence and the level of cultural sophistication that would allow them to be hired by Earth's mining corporations for minimum wage.

Earth's military leaders, grizzled old squirrels who remembered the war with the Hiryyu, were unimpressed by the geology and biology. They proposed disassembling the entire planet with nano-machines and sifting through the remains, but their suggestion was voted down by the human-dominated government.

And so an enterprising and extremely patient advertising company disassembled all the other planets in the system instead, to build a ring-world around the star. Just outside Eulithes' orbit, this huge metal ribbon con-

stantly displayed programs from Earth television, visible in Eulithes' night sky. Someday, it was hoped, the natives would be ready to start selling their planets mineral wealth and buying Earth consumer goods which had become deeply embedded in their culture and religion over the millennia.

The jungle world Eulithes, and the circular metal ribbon running next to its orbit, were what was on the starship *Yggdrasil*'s display screen.

* * *

"So," said the human scientist Vlad, "the natives have suddenly developed radio?"

Loki let Siegfried do the talking.

"That's what we want to know. Analyze this signal, and tell us about the natives. What are their current technologies? Their cultural practices?"

"Their weaknesses," added Loki from the floor of the bridge.

Vlad shook his head. "This will take a little while."

"Then I will retire to my quarters. Siegfried, you will assist the human in his analysis of the signals." From up on the catwalk, Siegfried started to protest -- "working for a civilian, and a human, no less!" -- but Loki silenced him with a wave. "You also have control of the bridge."

* * *

Ensign Freya wore a fragrance of fresh pine; it was convenient that Loki did not need her on the bridge at the moment. The captain's quarters were spacious with deep green walls; a sharp foot-long katana sword hung on the wall above his writing desk, and he happened to have an unopened bottle of red wine and several glasses cluttering his mahogany table. He invited Freya to help him deal with the problem.

"Thank you, Captain," she said, sipping the wine.

"Mm-hmm."

"Sir, I was wondering..."

"You're off duty now."

Freya raised an eyebrow at this, then took another drink. I was wondering what we will do with the planet.

Loki spread his paws. "Isn't it obvious? The natives are ripe for the picking. We'll establish contact, offer some trinkets, and welcome them into Galactic civilization. Of course the planet will need a governor -- a military governor. Let me refill your glass."

"What about the humans?" she asked.

"The ones on board? Unimportant. We're a long way from home. Once we've made contact, the woman Carla will report to Earth and probably get herself assigned as overseer or some other important-sounding title. But that will take weeks! By that time, we will have conducted the important... negotiations, on our own terms. Our mission orders authorize us to handle the situation ourselves."

"Excellent plan, Capt -- I mean, Loki."

Loki sighed happily. "You know, sometimes I wonder..." Maybe he'd had enough wine already. "The humans bred us to fight their war -- they picked the lightest, smallest, best-looking species they could for the job of running starships. If humans hadn't needed to make a brilliant, efficient warrior race, would we still be simple creatures living on trees on Earth?"

"I like to think we'd have colonized the galaxy anyway," she said. "Maybe brought along by humans to live peacefully on all the forest planets."

"I wonder what that would be like."

"Me too."

* * *

Vlad had filtered out the commercials, and Siegfried had helped to screen out one of those annoying prime-number lists sent out by

some developing race that wanted the Universe to know how good it was at mathematics. Carla was in her room, trying to compose a message of greeting. When all the junk was gone from the signal, one sound obviously coming from the planet itself remained: a faint hiss. Vlad's pulse quickened when he finally recognized it, even before the tiny computer screen by his elbow displayed the search results.

"It's the, the..." said Siegfried.

"Hiryuu," said Vlad.

"Captain to the bridge!" yelled Siegfried.

A few moments later Loki arrived looking irritated. "What?"

A few moments after that, Loki's fur was bristled again. "Scan the system for Hiryuu ships!"

Vlad and the bridge officers watched as Siegfried made an impressive leap from one catwalk to another to check a different console.

"I see wrecks buried under vegetation on the planet," said Siegfried, "but that's all. The Hiryuu ships *Invincible*, *Victorious*, and *Indiscriminate Carnage* are scattered in small pieces on the ocean floor."

"My uncle Heimdall fell in battle with the *Victorious*," Loki said wistfully.

"It appears these ships didn't make it to the planet intact. But there's something else -- a small settlement."

Loki stepped forward, confused. "Then was it the natives who sent this radio signal after all?"

Vlad answered, taking a knee to get a better view of the captain. "No, it was the Hiryuu. Judging from the weak signal and the fact that no ones trying to kill us yet, I'd say an escape pod landed here and tried to build a colony from scratch."

"What is the content of the signal?" asked the captain.

Vlad reached out and carefully tapped a computer panel with one little finger, putting the signal onscreen.

Shown before the bridge crew of *Yggdrasil* was a Hiryuu, one of the race subdued by squirrel-kind after long decades of war. Judging by the picture's jungle background, it sat four meters tall on its four great clawed feet; its scaly wings and two arms with vicious-looking talons were raised high in the air as a puff of steam escaped its fang-lined mouth.

The Hiryuu was singing, in a voice that hissed like a pipe organ.

"Praise be unto the Climbers, who have taught us humility. We few who survive have forgotten the old weapons, and want only peace. Come and help us rebuild, O Nimble Ones." It hissed a melody that sounded like Ride of the Valkyries.

"A trap," said Loki.

"By the Great Tree, no," Siegfried answered, busily checking computers all over the room and shoving aside the squirrels whose job it was to check them. "All they have is one large village, and they really have lost some of their technology."

Ensign Freya hurried into the room, because Carla had entered the main hallway just after her and there was no room for Carla to pass her. "What's going on?" both asked at once.

"Something unexpected has appeared," Loki said. Vlad filled them in.

"A colony of war refugees, here?" Carla asked. "What about the natives? We need to make sure the Hiryuu won't interfere with their development."

"Oh, certainly. Draw up all the treaties you like," Loki advised, chuckling. "Meanwhile, we will make sure the Hiryuu colony is properly subdued."

"Now look here," Carla said indignantly. "I can't have..." By this time Loki had hopped up to a catwalk at her eye level and was staring intimidatingly into her eyes. "I can't have any influence over your decisions as Captain, sir," she finished more humbly. "But as appointed diplomatic official I must insist..."

"This is a military operation, and it takes precedence over..."

Vlad interrupted: "Er, people?"

"What?"

Another transmission. "They know we're here."

"Onscreen!" said Loki.

This Hiryuu stood on a wooden platform surrounded by crude metal statues in the blurry distance. Insectoid creatures the size of large dogs crawled around a pile of dilithium ore off to one side.

"O Climbers, you have come! We receive you happily."

"They look pretty pacified to me," Vlad said.

Loki had Siegfried open a two-way channel. "Hiryuu! Your kind has been conquered; your colony is powerless against us. Declare your surrender to the forces of Earth or be destroyed!"

"We gladly surrender," said the alien, bowing with its wings folded.

Loki tried Carla's angle. "We will not allow you to harm the innocent natives of this planet!"

"We have seen many of your world's nature programs, O Nimble One, and have vowed to protect these wonderful creatures. They help us with our mining of their own accord. We think very differently of them than our misguided ancestors thought of your mighty people."

"How did the Hiryuu think of squirrels, exactly?" Vlad whispered to Carla.

"As snacks," she whispered back.

* * *

Loki was exasperated at the lack of resistance. The aliens were giving him no excuse! He *knew* he could take down a four-meter Hiryuu in single combat, at least with that holodeck program Siegfried had written. Now it seemed there was no way to have a good, clean conquest.

"You have not proven your loyalty," he said in what he hoped was a patronizing and provoking voice. "You are probably waiting in ambush."

The Hiryyu averted its slit-pupil eyes and hissed "No!" It muttered something in the direction of whatever camera it was using. The view became blurry as the cameraman fiddled with the controls.

Carla said, "Captain, I believe sending a diplomatic party to the surface would be in order."

The view focused again, this time showing the statues behind the Hiryyu more clearly. They were statues of squirrels. Large ones.

"Please," said the alien, "We want only your guidance and commercial friendship."

Loki ignored the alien, turning to Carla instead. He sighed. "A diplomatic party?"

"Yes."

"With military guard?" he asked hopefully.

"It would be prudent."

"Make it so."

The Hiryyu's voice came once more from the screen, having overheard: "Oh, thank you, Nimble One!"

Nimble One. It didn't sound quite as good as Supreme Planetary Commander, but Loki supposed he could put up with it.

* * *

"Is everything all right, Captain?" Siegfried looked skeptically at the viewscreen, which showed a close-up of Loki's face. The captain's fur was ruffled, and he was trying unsuccessfully to maintain an angry scowl. Siegfried said, "The diplomatic party seemed to be making a lot of noise."

"All under control," Siegfried, "the captain assured him. You, get that camera over here. Good." There was some static, then the view switched to one of the Hiryyu's crude video cameras.

Siegfried could see part of the diplomatic party in a jungle clearing. There was a massive Hiryyu standing there, pointing out the sights to four squirrel security officers who came up to its ankles and carried small weapons. Ensign Freya was up on the aliens shoulders.

Siegfried blinked. "What happened?"

Loki looked up and laughed at something Freya said, then recovered and spoke to the camera: "Ah, well, the military occupation of Eulithes is complete. We have subdued the population with minimal resistance."

"Where are the humans?"

"Carla insisted on investigating the jungle herself to insure its protection. She brought along the human scientist, Vlad, to assist her. I believe they'll be gone all day."

"Captain," said Siegfried, "what about our mission?"

"We've completed it! But considering the nature of what we found, we'll need to stay here while we wait for orders from Earth and finish up negotiations. It may be several weeks."

"Captain?"

"Siegfried," Loki said, "you've been an excellent officer. I think it's necessary for you to assume temporary command of *Yggdrasil*."

Has the Captain gone mad? Siegfried wondered. *What could be more important to him than command of a starship?*

"I, I'm honored, Sir," was all he could say.

"Very good, Acting Captain Siegfried." Loki saluted. "We'll take care of everything here."

Siegfried cut the channel. The humans had done this! They had made the Captain soft, and willing to settle for less than a total conquest of the last Hiryyu holdouts. They had *tamed* him!

But the humans were gone now, and even now Siegfried knew better than to talk the Captain out of his plans. The ship was his for

the moment, and even if he had to remain in the area, he didn't mind being in charge of it.

Siegfried settled into the Captain's chair. He glanced over at the empty acorn goblet and picked it up.

"Mead!" he called experimentally.

Startled, the nearest bridge officer scurried out of the room to carry out the order. Thoughtfully, Siegfried watched her go, and thought about the glory of command.

A book review

by John Hawkinson.

His Dark Materials:

The Golden Compass

The Subtle Knife

The Amber Spyglass

by Philip Pullman

Here I sit, reading Michael Swanwick's *Moon Dogs*, and writing up a review of Philip Pullman's trilogy. It is the last week in the first month of this millenium, and I have mounds of work piled up around me — can't see the forest for the trees. TZ's Editor is hounding me for the reviews I've promised her, I'm behind at the office, I'm just making inroads with the stuff I had to do last month, and I have to teach 6 hours of class time next week.

But I'm reading Michael Swanwick! It was the Boskone Book from February of 2000, almost a full year ago. It brings back memories of me, listening to Deb Geisler hawk it throughout the con. "Buy Michael Swanwick's *Moon Dogs*! You won't regret it!". And she was right. Not just because it's a good story collection (go read it), but because it turns itself into a time machine to take me back to last February, so I can write from the proper perspective.

At that point in time, I'd read *The Golden Compass*, and also *The Subtle Knife*, and was awaiting the much-delayed arrival of *The Amber Spyglass*. All of the books are dif-

ferent, but I start this review from the perspective of two-read-and-awaiting-the-next.

I first read *The Golden Compass* in 1997, not too long after it first came out, and I was enchanted. At first it felt like an excellent children's fantasy that could be enjoyed by adults, and was just a romping lot of fun. It featured a terribly likable protagonist, Lyra Belacqua, a young teenage girl, in a world very much like our own, but with subtle differences. The observation and cataloguing of the differences between our world and hers was a fun exercise to go along with reading the book; for instance, the Lyra's favored drink is chocolatl, rather than chocolate.

One of the most notable features of Lyra's world is that all people have a magical animal familiar; Pullman calls these creatures "daemons." While a child is growing up, her daemon can change shape, from one animal to another, but once grown up, the daemon becomes fixed to one form, reflecting something significant about the character of the person. Lyra's daemon has not yet fixed its shape.

The world of Lyra and her daemon, Pantalaimon, is governed rather differently from ours, there being a world-wide Church hierarchy that rules over and above secular authority, and is recognized to do so. With high-ranking circles in the church, such as the "Consistorial Court of Discipline," or the "General Oblation Board," conflicting amongst each other and warring for power within and without the Church, but still dictating the lives of everyday people, much of Lyra's world feels quite different from our own.

In *The Golden Compass*, Lyra, an orphan who has grown up at Jordan College in Oxford, discovers a great wrong in the world, and sets off on a grand adventure to help to right that wrong (little does she know what she's getting into). As the story develops, it turns quite complex and detailed, but never loses the plain simplicity that makes the story quite accessible to the young and old alike.

The Golden Compass can be read on many levels, both as a children's book, and as a serious adult book. As one might guess from the trilogy's title, *His Dark Materials* is all not happiness and light throughout; deep concepts and theology do arise, and the book can be well appreciated by a reader seeking complexity. Lyra's continuing adventure takes her up against the mysterious substance of "Dust," thought to be the physical manifestation of Original Sin, and those who would seek to harness its power for their own self-interest.

As much as *The Golden Compass* is a delightful romp that has much of the feel of a Diana Wynne Jones novel, its serious side and multi-level nature allow it to be re-read over and over without boredom.

The second book, *The Subtle Knife*, is somewhat of a letdown. It has a lot to live up to, and doesn't quite make it. In *The Subtle Knife*, Lyra learns to cross between worlds, from her world into our own, and meets up with a young compatriot, Will Parry. Will bears a knife, the title object, which has the power to cut "windows" between worlds. Will and Lyra journey between the two worlds, attempting to solve the mysteries of "Dust" and discover that Lyra is prophesied to do great or terrible things to the world.

The Subtle Knife concentrates on laying a lot of detailed groundwork for the third book, and to some extent suffers because of it. It's worth the read, but unfortunately falls short of the mark of *The Golden Compass*.

Having firmly fixed myself in last February, I can turn the clock forward some, which is always easier than turning it back. In October of this year, quite a brouhhaha was made over *The Amber Spyglass*, and I was selected to receive an advance copy of it from a raffle at Wordsworth. It was terribly exciting to win that book and have a copy in-hand, and I read through the book the same day.

That long-awaited third book, *The Amber Spyglass*, is somewhat different in character. Many hitherto mysterious threads weave

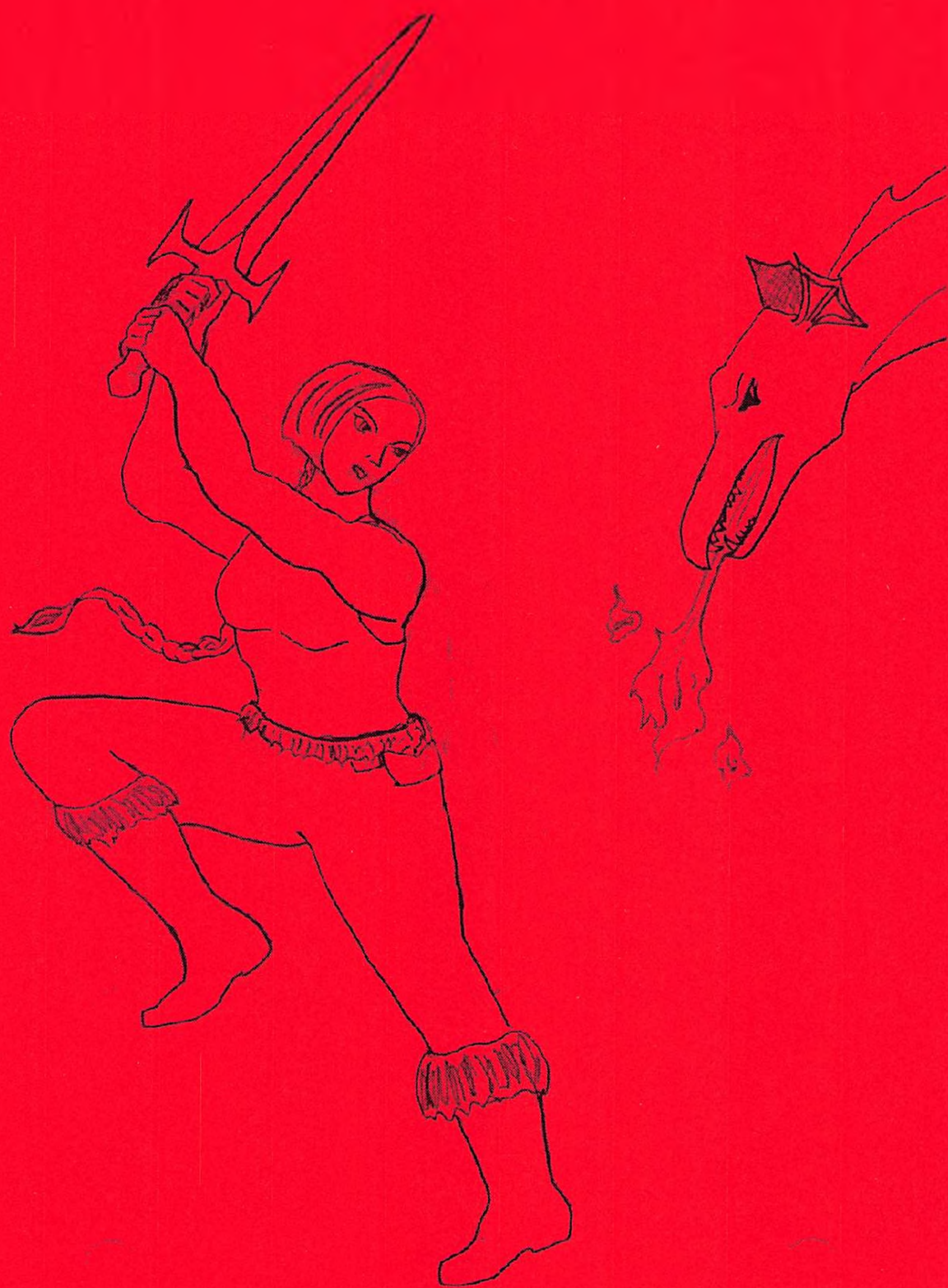
together, but this reviewer is loathe to give too much away. From the perspective of religion, though, this book is at times profoundly disturbing. The characters in the book face harsh tests of what their faith means, and the question of who is on whose side greys considerably.

More fast-paced than *The Subtle Knife*, *The Amber Spyglass* unfortunately fails to live up to the excellent high mark of first book, but pulls itself ahead of the second book. There's a certain feeling that Pullman may have roped himself into an ending that has difficulty preserving the high Sense of Wonder felt in *The Golden Compass*, and is complex enough to weigh down the story somewhat. The forces of the Church continue their battle with Lord Asriel, Lyra's father, which began at the beginning of the trilogy, but up until now, we never truly grasped the meaning of.

In the end, the results are stunning, yet quite serious. In *The Golden Compass*, it was quite feasible to ignore or fail to catch some of the religious themes. By the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, they are so prominent as to reach the point of disturbing. This is not to say that Pullman is preachy, certainly not in the C.S. Lewis/George MacDonald way. Religion is a part of his novels, but not veiled in allegory. Instead, it is an all-too-real unveiled issue.

The Golden Compass is a novel you can read again and again, and it will win almost anyone over; it also lends itself rather well to reading aloud in groups. The rest of *His Dark Materials* is above par, but fails to live up to its stellar forerunner. Thus is the curse of trilogies--not all components can be as good as each other.

Drifting onwards through October and into January, I return to Michael Swanwick and *Moon Dogs*, and struggle to get it and the rest of last year's pile of books out of the way before this year's Boskone.



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- _You're a filthy pro.
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- X>Your name is on a mailing list, so we took the liberty of assuming you exist.
- _You sent me e-mail and came up with a good excuse why you should get it.
- _Somebody likes you.
- _Somebody doesn't like you.
- _We found your name in a fortune cookie.
- _We found you in a fortune cookie.
- _We tried to put you into a fortune cookie.
- _You're the Skinner.
- _You used to be Skinner.
- _You're not the Skinner, but you used to be JourComm.
- _You're not the Skinner, but you're engaged to the JourComm.
- _You're not the Skinner, but you've been making fun of the JourComm and then bribed her to give you an issue anyway.
- _You're the Skinner's favorite gavel.
- _You're the Skinner's least favorite gavel (oh wait, there's no such thing...)
- _We found you in an Albanian encyclopedia.
- _We just wanted to share the love!



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