

# XENOS

Issue 41

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# XENOS

## MISSION STATEMENT

**F**or over seven years now, XENOS has been serving writers and readers alike by providing, in every bimonthly issue:

- 6 or 7 excellent stories
- reader evaluations of previous offerings

At the time of going to press, issue 43 is available. No issues have been missed, a record which is almost unique! We emphasise:

- *Real* plots
- *Real* characterisation
- A wide mix of story types

Move on through this file and you'll find a sample issue of XENOS. Issue 41 – our Feb 97 issue – announced one winner and runner-up from our 1996 Competition. Read and enjoy!

The writers featured here have consented to their stories being read and copied/printed out.

XENOS also provides writers with a variety of additional services:

- Two annual competitions, with cash prizes and publication
- A World Wide Web site – writers can view sample stories as well as read about our additional services. Our Web address is:

<http://www.xenos.demon.co.uk>



- A story evaluation service – although we comment free of charge on most stories submitted, for a small fee writers can have a fuller evaluation carried out
- A writers' information service – we supply Writers' Tips, a bimonthly factsheet providing details of fiction and non-fiction markets, at a price considerably lower than our competitors
- A book assessment service – for a reasonable fee, we undertake to use our expertise to:
  - correct spelling, grammar and punctuation
  - implement optimum presentation
  - provide realistic guidelines in how to improve characterisation and plot

It is also our intention to publish selected novels on our Web site

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In addition, we plan to publish selected novels (**at this stage, only those submitted for proofreading**) on our World Wide Web site.

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# MARLOWE'S FIERY REGRESS

by

© H. T. Ball

“Enjoy the play?” Brooks asked, throwing Marlowe a wry smile.

Marlowe threw it right back at her. “The experience begins to pale a little after you’ve been through it thirty of forty times, y ‘know? But what does *that* matter, as long as the punters are happy, right?” She jerked her thumb in the direction of the glut of jabbering people in the process of squeezing themselves out through the regression room’s only door.

Her partner’s smile broadened as she watched another group of satisfied customers depart and she said, “It’s getting to meet the great man himself that gets them; I remember he always impressed the hell out of me. Any problems?”

Marlowe shook her head. “No, thank God, they were all as good as gold this time.” She still cringed at the memory of her last trip back when one of their clients, brought face to face with George Bernard Shaw at the end of the performance, suddenly lashed out and knocked the playwright to the ground. Everyone’s a critic . . .

Marlowe and the grinning focus began heading for the door. “Oh I almost forgot,” Brooks said, clicking her fingers. “I picked up a message for you while you were schmoozing with the clients. Big Chief Spiritwalker wants to see you ASAP. Apparently he’s got a prospective focus upstairs with a little breakthrough problem and he wants *you* to do the intervention.” Marlowe groaned. The message could mean only one thing: more damned *ad hoc* psychiatry. Would Holbein never learn to leave well enough alone?

Still, what could you expect from a man who, unlike the rest of the company’s staff, had never recovered so much as one single, solitary past-life experience yet still clung to the belief that he was the reincarnation of *Herr Doktor* Carl Jung?

You could expect the worse. When Marlowe was shown into his office, the head of the London office of **Time-Lives, Inc.** was deeply engrossed in explaining his theories on consciousness to a slightly worried looking middle-aged black woman who was sat next to him pressed back into the corner of the office’s huge green leather couch. “Temporary corporeal existence is simply our overself’s way of . . . of . . . opening a window on the physical world every now and again to see which way the wind’s blowing,” Marlowe’s boss pronounced with his usual mixture of forceful exposition and colourful metaphor.

Marlowe could feel the woman’s overwhelming nervousness like a fourth presence in the room as her boss went on, “My own guiding entity Philemon —“ before stopping abruptly as he finally noticed her. “Ah . . . Tess! Yes!” He turned back to the woman beside him and said, “Here, Mrs. Parkes, living proof of what I’ve been telling you.” Marlowe inwardly groaned; she hated been held up to public scrutiny like this. “It’s because of psychic guides like Tess that we’re able to allow people to share in the past-lives experienced by our foci. But the most extraordinary thing of all is how Tess herself acquired these psychic gifts. Tell her Tess; tell Mrs. Parkes how your gifts were revealed to you —“

*She’d been told that there was big money in being born again; that companies like **Time-Lives** were paying fortunes to people who could access a past-life experience of sufficient import as to be interesting to others. However, Marlowe liked to think that it was the possibility of finding within herself, as a historian, fragments of the past that drew her to finally attempt regression. (But, as a poorly paid historian, she would also have to admit that she was looking for a way to escape the academic money trap). So one day, she put herself in the hands of the regression therapist; laid back; closed her eyes.*

*And awoke bound and gagged with flames licking at the hem of her skirts . . .*

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## Winner

### 1996 Competition

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“My name was Sarah Vincent; and on the twenty-third day of August in the year of our Lord Sixteen Hundred and Forty-four, I was burned at the stake for witchcraft.” Mrs. Parkes’s eyes widened as Marlowe spoke these words; she jerked her head round to look back at Holbein. The huge, leonine executive nodded excitedly at her - some point seemed to have been made - then turned and gestured for Marlowe to continue.

The guide duly went on, “Unfortunately that was the one and only time I experienced any kind of flash-back to a previous life. Like a lot of people –“

At that point, Holbein cut her off, telling Mrs. Parkes, “The *real* significance of Tess’s experience with regression is not what she saw in the past, but, rather, what it awoke in her *in the present*.” He nodded at Marlowe once more. The **Time-Lives** supremo had an unfortunate way of making employees like Marlowe feel like an organ grinder’s monkey.

“I went back to the university, a little shaken, but ready to write off the whole experience,” Marlowe recalled, fighting to keep the irritation out of her voice. “But over the next couple of weeks, I began to notice something weird: I was growing more and more in tune with other people’s emotional states; I could *sense* their moods. It was so wild that I went back to the therapist and –“

– He put Tess in touch with us,” Holbein finished for her; *cranking that handle*. That was it for Marlowe; she was just too damn tired to dance any more. So this time, when Holbein looked to her to go on, she simply stared silently back at him. This silence continued for a few moments until Holbein relented and finished the story himself. “We recognised the effect instantly. The psychic powers manifested by Tess’s earlier self - the powers that had seen Sarah Vincent branded a witch - had been awakened in Tess; triggered by the regression. Almost half our guides come to us through the same process. You see, our overselves possess *tremendous* psychic powers but these are only very occasionally manifested in the corporeal phase. To see this happen, Mrs. Parkes, is the *ultimate* proof of the existence of immortal incarnates of whom we are all, each of us, whether knowingly or not, merely projections cast upon the physical plane.”

His impassioned exposition completed, the **Times-Lives** supremo sat back in his seat. A few feet away across the office Marlowe shifted uneasily on her feet. Holbein suddenly jerked his huge frame forward again, “Tess! I’m so sorry, sit yourself down. We’ve a lot more to discuss.”

And, so, as Marlowe wearily complied, her boss *finally* got round to the point of her summons. It was as bad as she’d feared. But it was also as intriguing as she could ever have wished . . .

Jewel Parkes had a problem. The fragile-looking woman explained that shortly after arriving in London on a visit to her son and his family, she’d started having these dreams – of burning. (As she stumbled over this part of her story, showing signs of the distress that these dreams had raised in her, Holbein threw Marlowe a telling glance. *Burning*; both an earlier observation and her particular presence explained.)

Mrs. Parkes’s family had been sufficiently alarmed at her condition to insist that she visit the doctor’s. That first doctor had sent her to a psychiatrist and that psychiatrist had sent her to a regression therapist. And that regression therapist had sold Jewel Parkes on the idea of taking her problem to Holbein and **Time-Lives**. “My dreams were about an earlier life,” she explained. “And something about the way I died *then*, had come back to haunt me now -”

– It was coming to London that did it, Tess; the city was the key,” Holbein put in; he just couldn’t stay silent. “Go on, Mrs. Parkes, tell Tess who you were in your previous existence; tell her how you *died*,” he prompted.

The trembling figure on the couch turned her large, sad eyes on Marlowe and said, “I remembered being a man called Henry Wells. And I . . . I remembered dying; I remembered dying on the second day of September, sixteen hundred and sixty-six - burned to death in the Great Fire.”

And that statement alone was enough to explain the whole of Holbein’s interest in her. The Great Fire of London; a company like **Time-Lives** would *kill* to get access to a disaster as famous and momentous as that. With Mrs. Parkes as her focus, a guide such as Marlowe could psychically link dozens of other people to the recovered memory, allowing them unique access to the experience. And she could well imagine how Holbein had persuaded Mrs. Parkes to let one of **Time-Lives**’s guides loose on her - Marlowe had seen him in operation many times before. “Think of all the things you’ll be able to get for your family; think of the future you’ll be able to give them thanks to your special memories of the past.” Oh, he was a hell of a salesman, all right.

The 17th century wasn’t actually her period but she could remember enough about it to comment, “That was the first day of the Fire, wasn’t it; the Sunday?” Holbein confirmed her recollection - with a note of regret in his voice: of course he’d have preferred to have access to the *whole* show. But before anything at all could be made of it, there was the small matter of Jewel Parkes’s distress; while she viewed the whole experience with such dread, she wouldn’t be any use as a focus: she’d fight the regress all the way.

For all her earlier reservations, Marlowe was now hopelessly hooked; the promise of this sort of thing was

what got her through the tedium of repeated excursions to the same little moments in history that were the company's bread and butter. A virgin regress; the chance to be the first to see some moment in time; some past perspective thought lost forever, was what she lived for. "Mrs. Parkes, tell me everything you remember about your life as Henry Wells," she said, softly.

"Hell's teeth, 'tis fair taken hold. I fear you'll loose St. Magnus again before 'tis done, William," gasped the portly gentleman to Marlowe's left, his fleshy face still flushed from the climb. "And only three score years since you dedicated it," a second man added, raising his voice so as to carry over the blustery wind that swept across the top of the tower. The person at whom their comments were directed, the churchman whose largesse had given the merchants this vantage point, acknowledged their words with little more than a sigh that was lost to the wind as soon as it left his lips. There was no sign of alarm in any of the men's reactions. But, then, what was one more fire in London?

London; Marlowe paid little attention to their conversation, she was instead transfixed by the vista before her. If Jewel Parkes *qua* Henry Wells had no more to offer than this sight, it would still be worth any endeavour to gain it. The only part of the old city *not* visible from the top of the church tower on that fine, bright morning was that hidden under the dense, yellow-black cloud of smoke that streamed westwards away from the fire taking hold at the bottom of the hill. That city was a wonder to behold, there was no denying it, with its hundred steeples rising up above the roofs of both the low, mean houses of the masses and the more substantial dwellings of the prosperous; with its single shop-cluttered bridge; its wall and gates; and old St. Paul's, massive, decaying old St. Paul's, towering above it all . . .

"Damn this wind! 'Tis driving the fire west. 'Twill touch Coldharbour, I swear." One of the other men on the roof exclaimed, drawing Marlowe's attention away from her survey of the city. The man who'd just spoken *did* sound concerned. But, then, he should, because this tall, bewigged gentleman clutching at his hat as a gust threatened to lift it off his head was the man who'd drawn her here; the man from whose consciousness this whole scene had been shaped. In short, this was the soon-to-be late Henry Wells.

Marlowe had gleaned much about Jewel Parkes's recovered past-self from just talking to the woman as she was regressed by another of the **Time-Lives**'s staff on the morning after the meeting in Holbein's office. She'd followed the familiar routine of asking the who; the when; the where of the focus's past-life experience, looking for a point at which to begin more direct observations prior to the full-blown intervention. And when Jewel Parkes *qua* Henry Wells had mentioned a climb to the top of church tower early on Sunday morning to view the conflagration, Marlowe knew that she'd found just what she needed. "Concentrate on that climb, Henry," she'd said to the supine female figure. "And begin to count the steps as you climb. One . . . two . . . three . . . four - count with me, Henry - . . . five . . . six . . ."

By the time they'd both reached ten, Marlowe had slipped inside Jewel Parkes's recovered memories and was climbing too . . .

"Faith, Henry, what ails thee?" one of the merchant's friends asked as he too caught the worry in Wells's voice. *Yes, Henry, what ails thee?* The psychic echoed silently as she watched from a little way back, an invisible presence amongst the men on the top of the tower.

She saw the merchant's face twist into a grimace. "I have goods . . . samples . . . for a new venture of mine sitting in a warehouse in the Steelyard," he said after some moments hesitation. Several of the other merchants expressed surprise at this - Wells had obviously been keeping secrets - but the small, thin man dressed in the simple garb of a Quaker who'd asked the question said, reassuringly, "Don't worry, old friend, I'm sure the fire will be done afore it can peril the Hanse's holding."

But the instant the Quaker had finished speaking a clap of thunder rolled over the men on the tower roof and they all shrank back and watched in awful silence as a great gout of flame shot up into the sky at the far side of the fire. A second later the tip of the flame turned into thick, black, smoke and began to slowly curl back downwards. The gusting wind smeared the smoke across the sky and as the stunned merchants watched, it settled over the burning city streets like a spectre.

After a short while one of the men muttered, "'Tis amongst the wharves." Just that. But, then, even Marlowe knew that he didn't have to say any more. The explosion meant that the fire had reached the riverside, reached the dense clutter of warehouses and wharves at the bottom of the hill loaded with every combustible imaginable. The wind that whipped around the merchants' heads may have been the driving force behind the fire before now, but from this point on it was the rich pickings that it found along the river that would fuel its inexorable advance; its inexorable advance towards the place where Henry Wells had stored his own goods.

"Damnation!" the merchant exclaimed, startling the Dean of St. Mary's who'd moved to stand beside him. Marlowe listened as the others tried both to reassure their increasingly agitated friend and to coax out of him the reason for his very great concern. They met with little success. Marlowe shared their frustration. She could very well have commenced her intervention there; approached Wells and asked him anything; it would

be just like asking the question of Jewel Parkes, but was loathe to do so, so early. It was too risky, she recognised, she could trigger the crisis, and if that happened, then her intervention would be over before it had properly begun. As she studied the troubled face of the merchant she had a growing feeling that, in order to get the job done, she was going to have to ride this one out right to the very end; right to the moment of Henry Wells's fiery demise.

" 'Tis no use, I'll have to see to their rescue or be ruined," Wells flatly stated. (Somewhat ominously, from Marlowe's point of view.)

"Ruined, Henry? Surely not. I know this damned war with the Hollanders has fair struck at thy trade, but ruined by this loss alone. . .?" The Quaker, Wells's staunchest supporter, was growing quite alarmed at the pronouncements of his friend.

Wells turned and looked the flustered merchant in the eye and said, quietly, "Aye, ruined, Morgan. I had the news just this last week - my ships are all burned off Brandaris - by the *English* fleet, mark you. I will not - *I can not* - sit idly by while *another* fire robs me of my last hope." Then he turned towards the others and declared, "I'm for the river to hire a lighter and see what I can save. Who's with me?"

"I," said his friend, Morgan. "And I," said a second man; and a third.

"And you can count me in, too," said the ghostly Marlowe.

The journey to the river that followed was a descent into pandemonium. The narrow streets that ran up the side of the hill were awash with shouting, cursing people fleeing the destruction being wrought down by the riverside. Time and time again the merchants (trailed by an insubstantial Marlowe) were forced to turn away from the more direct route by some obstruction; here an stricken cart, its wheel lost in collision with one of the posts that divided the walkway from the street proper; there a mob tearing up the cobblestones and flinging them through the windows of a house belonging to a Catholic, or Frenchman, or Hollander or whomever else the latest rumour blamed for setting the fire.

Wells and the other merchants railed against the world gone mad around them. But Marlowe drank it all in like good liquor. Within just a few minutes of setting out from the merchants' homes on Cheapside, she was giddy from the thrill of naked interaction. Drawing deep on Jewel Parkes's recovered memories, she let the world as Henry Wells remembered it swirl around her in a mad dance of sights, sounds, and smells. *This* was the true power - and the glory - of the regress; *this* was what Marlowe longed for; this was . . . *living*.

It took the sound of mad desperation in Henry Wells's voice to bring her back to her senses.

They'd reached the river by then. The smoke cloud that they'd seen from the top of the church tower streaming west in advance of the fire now swirled over their heads, showering them with burning debris, and the curses of the fleeing populace had been replaced by the crackling roar of the fire. It was like being caught in an infernal blizzard. And there, amongst it all, at the end of a rotting landing stage, stood Henry Wells, screaming, "Name your price; name your price to carry me to the Steelyard!" at the boatmen out on the river.

Like a dead man calling to Charon to be carried over into hell.

It was a sobering sight. And Marlowe finally realised why, when so few had fallen victim to the fire, Henry Wells had succumbed: *nothing* short of death could have turned the driven man she saw on the end of the rickety landing from the path he'd chosen.

It took five whole minutes for Wells to attract the attention of one of the dozens of boats criss-crossing the river laden with people and their rescued possessions. Only after he'd been joined in his cries by the other merchants did a pair of them pole their boat over to the landing. The price the older of the two bargees demanded was pure extortion but Wells accepted even before the thick-tongued river-rat had finished speaking. And the next second, he'd leapt down into the boat and was calling for the others to follow.

Once they'd begun to float downstream, Marlowe joined Wells and the other merchants at the bow. Looking out she saw that at least a quarter mile of the waterfront extending upstream from old London Bridge was now in flames; flames that spilled their awful light out onto the river staining it blood red, adding an eerie depth to her earlier impression that Wells was heading towards some Stygian doom.

"I'm afraid we're too late, Henry. Look there, the Hanse's warehouses are already aflame. We're too late," Marlowe heard the merchant's Quaker friend say sorrowfully, as the full extent of the fire's progress since they'd left the church was now made clear to them. But Wells seemed deaf to his words; his whole steely-faced attention remained focused on the burning waterfront. The little Quaker's face creased with concern and he reached up and put his arm on Wells's shoulder, "We must go back, Henry," he whispered. "There's nothing more can be done."

"No!" Wells growled, shrugging off the Quaker's hand. He turned away from the fire and looked down at his friend, "We go on," he insisted. "On; on to the landing!" He called back to the two bargees.

The other merchants immediately turned on the watermen and insisted that they turn back, but, to their riotous frustration, the older river-rat stuck by the articles of his guild, "Contrac's za contrac'," he slurred, through rotting teeth. "Tha' gen'lemun's paid 'is munny an' zo I goes whur 'e wants." The boat descended into violent argument as the merchants began to rail against Wells and the watermen.

Even though Marlowe knew that they *would* make the landing, for a few moments she really did believe that the Wells's opponents might carry the argument as they started waving their bulging purses at the watermen. But then, suddenly the barge lurched in the water, sending everyone on board crashing to the slime-covered deck. They'd struck something and when Marlowe regained her feet, she looked forward and saw what: a landing; and with all the dreamlike certainty of the knowledge imparted to her by her infusion of Jewel Parkes's past-life memories she knew just which landing: the Steelyard wharf. While they'd been arguing, the drifting boat had fetched up against Wells's destination.

"No!" The Quaker cried as Henry Wells hauled himself up out of the bottom of the boat and clambered onto the dock. "I pray thee, Henry, come back!"

Wells spun around and looked back down into the boat. "I cannot, Morgan," he said, "I cannot turn back now." Then he turned to Marlowe; ghostly, invisible Marlowe and, framed by the terrible fire that raged amongst the buildings behind him, said again, for her alone, "I cannot turn back now." The next instant he was gone, heading off along the dock.

Marlowe was so stunned that the merchant had almost reached the warren of buildings that led off the end of the dock before she was able to stir herself and climb up out of the boat and go after him, the futile pleas of Wells's deserted friends sounding around her. She cursed herself for not recognising straight away that the moment of crisis was near now and the distress felt by Jewel Parkes was washing back over her recovered memories of these last few minutes of her past-self's life, subtly altering events as Marlowe now experienced them. It was Jewel Parkes and not Henry Wells that had looked down into the boat and seen her there. Whether she liked it or not, the intervention had begun. From now on, Marlowe knew that she'd be walking a tripwire in a hurricane, as more and more of the rush of emotions Jewel Parkes was experiencing began to impinge upon the regress.

Everything was in the balance now; she had to hope that Jewel Parkes had the willpower to hold her recovered memories together long enough for Marlowe to experience the crisis firsthand. Whatever the outcome, she knew that she was running out of time. And everywhere she looked, the world around her confirmed it; it *burned*.

Marlowe took off along the dock after the racing figure of Henry Wells. She ran, though there was no real need for her to do so - Wells couldn't escape her no matter where he went, she could have stood stock still and still stayed with him. But the urgency she felt seemed to lend itself to running. So she ran; she ran past buildings upon which the fire had little more than a foothold on the roof and down streets awash with burning debris.

Slowly she caught up to Wells. The merchant was running along ahead of her with his arms raised to protect his head. He'd lost his coat and wig somewhere and his back smoked from where it had been grazed by some burning brand. As she came up behind him, in another of those dreamlike moments of certainty, she recognised that the building that stretched across the end of the street before them was the merchant's goal - the warehouse where his still-mysterious goods were stored. They'd been heading east all the while - into the face of the fire - and the timber roof of stone-built structure in front of them was a mass of flames; it couldn't be long before it gave way and came crashing down on whatever was inside.

As if to emphasise this danger, suddenly, to her right, Marlowe heard a rending crash. She looked up just in time to see the roof of a burning building set back from the street disappear. The building's windows exploded outwards and great tongues of flame shot sideways into the street. Enveloping Henry Wells.

Marlowe rushed forward; fighting *not* to feel the heat and pain that began to radiate from the merchant. She ran into the fire and out the other side and saw Wells staggering away; beating at flames that coursed over his right arm. His thin, fair hair was singed and smoking and the whole of the right side of his face was a raw, ugly red weal. But he was still moving forward - towards the warehouse.

Marlowe ran round to the merchant's left side and put out both hands to support him. Wells seemed barely aware of the gesture. His eyes, streaming with tears, were fixed on the small wooden door set into the wall of the warehouse twenty yards ahead, half hidden behind a screen of burning debris raining down from the roof. Elements of what must have been the excruciating pain that the merchant was experiencing leaked through the walls Marlowe had put up between Wells and herself. She flinched involuntarily and shouted out, to be heard above the roar of the flames all around them, "What could be worth all this pain, Henry? What's in there?" she cried.

*The world fell strangely silent; the flames retreated. All was still. Wells slowly turned his scarred face towards Marlowe and said, simply, "I am."*

The next instant the roar of the fire had returned and before Marlowe could react, Wells pulled away and

began running again, crossing the last of the distance to the warehouse.

Marlowe stayed frozen to the spot where the merchant had left her. "*I am.*" Though the voice was Henry Wells's, the accent was far removed from the Londoner's own. But still she recognised it and as the merchant wrenched open the warehouse door and ran into the cloud of smoke that swirled around inside, she called out after him, incredulously, "*Jewel?*"

That's when she began to hear the screams; the screams coming from the open door of the warehouse. She started running forward again into the smoke. "Oh my God, Henry, what have you done. *What have you done!*" She shouted.

The warehouse must have been built to hold valuables of some kind; the inside was divided up into a number of strong rooms that ran along both sides of a central aisle. And as Marlowe ran inside through the smoke, in the intense orange light cast by the fire that coursed over the roof timbers, she saw, reaching out through the iron bars of the small window mounted in the door of one of these strong rooms, a forest of hands; a forest of *black* hands.

"What have you done, what have you done," she shouted over and over; the anger rising in her. But her words couldn't possibly have carried over the roar of the fire; over the cries of the trapped and dying slaves.

By the time she'd caught up with the merchant, he'd already reached the door. He'd collapsed against it, holding himself up by gripping the bars of the window with both hands while his face pressed against the wood beneath. He was weeping; great sobs that racked his whole body as he cried out, "There was no key. I'm sorry. There was no key." The words drifted in accent from that of Henry Wells to that of Jewel Parkes, and back again. "I'm sorry. There was no key." Back and forth . . .

And then as, Marlowe looked on, the forest of hands began to fall away from the window until only two remained. Gently this pair of hands slipped down to rest over Wells's own as he gripped the bars. The merchant started at the moment of contact and dragged his eyes up to look into the dark space behind the window. A face appeared there; the sweat-streaked face of a young woman with coffee-coloured skin *and large, sad eyes.*

Marlowe's jaw dropped. She stepped closer to the door and said, tentatively, "*Jewel?*" Seeing her for the first time, the woman turned her tear-streaked face to the bewildered psychic and nodded slowly. Yes, Jewel.

Then, suddenly, without warning, before Marlowe could say anything more, the whole world fell on her . . .

"Hold on, so Jewel Parkes's past-self was really this slave *woman*, not Henry Wells, the slave *trader*? This wasn't, like, the ultimate karmic payback: slave trader reborn as the descendent of slaves?" Marlowe answered no to both of Brooks's questions. The older woman's eyes narrowed in a look of puzzlement. "Then I don't understand, how come when they regressed Jewel Parkes, they turned up Henry Wells?"

Marlowe stirred her tea and watched the currents die away before answering her partner. "Oh Henry Wells was in there all right. That moment of contact at the instant that they both died must have done it. The young *Kongo* woman, Tsuna, went on to the next life carrying an unwelcome stowaway; an alien consciousness. And when Jewel Parkes came to Wells's old stomping ground, his dormant persona began exert its influence, fighting with Tsuna for control. Jewel Parkes began to loose touch with who she was."

"But that's all over, right? You went in there and sorted things out by recognising that Mrs. Parkes real past-self was this woman Tsuna?"

"Yes, what Jewel needed was for someone to recognise her true self and say, '*This* is who you really are, not him. *Not him,*' so she could be free of Wells's damaging influence. If I hadn't have gone in there we might never have see the truth and the poor woman might have descended into schizophrenia."

Brooks took a sip of her coffee and winced. She reached for the sugar to sweeten it and said, "Okay, so that explains that. But what I still don't get is why this Henry Wells gave a damn in the first place. I mean, the tears you saw, I can understand - they belonged to Jewel Parkes. But you're not going to tell me that the rest was how it *really* happened; that a slave trader gave up his life to try to save a few slaves. Humanitarians, they weren't."

"No, they weren't," Marlowe agreed. "They were businessmen; men like Henry Wells who saw the people they traded as merely goods. The only reason those slaves were in that warehouse was because Wells had brought them secretly to London to show potential investors the quality of his wares. And with the rest of his businesses so recently lost, he needed them more than ever to save himself from ruin. And, besides, even today, you'll find *plenty* of businessmen who'd rather face death than the shame of ruin." She paused to take another sip of her tea. "But y' know, despite all that, I'm still not so sure that what I saw wasn't *exactly* the way it really happened. The Big Chief isn't saying much of anything at the minute, but if he was, I know that he'd say that Henry Wells was already acting under the influence of Jewel Parkes when he actually experienced these events. He'd say that things like linear time and causality don't mean a thing on the plane of con-

sciousness inhabited by our immortal incarnates.” Marlowe shrugged. “Me? I don’t know about that. All I *do* know is that, right now, Jewel Parkes is upstairs in the regression room sleeping better than she has in weeks.”

“You’ve lost me again,” Brooks put in, “What’s Harry Holbein so unhappy about. You did it, didn’t you? You cleared Jewel Parkes of her distress and opened the way for her to be a focus –“ Then she stopped herself. “Oh, *right*. Jewel Parkes has waved good-bye to the Henry Wells persona.” She laughed. “So there’ll be no trips to Restoration London and the Great Fire!” She looked over at Marlowe and declared, “Harry has a right to be PO’ed. But what about you? I mean, going back to that little lot would sure have beaten the hell out of sitting through the same performance of the same play day, after day, after day . . .”

“Oh, no, you’re wrong,” Marlowe said vehemently, “I’m glad that’s all over and done with. ‘Cos I’m telling you, Zoe, after what I saw in that warehouse, I’ve had enough of fires to last me a *hundred* lifetimes.”

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# ***SPEED AND TENSION***

by

© Andrew Williamson

**W**ith a familiar sense of foreboding, Alan paused the Dictaphone and flicked the switch. “Cyber Organiser version 7.3 On-line - what is your command?” The device lit up on his wrist in time with its toneless question. “Diary,” he commanded, noticing that in front of him the traffic appeared to be slowing slightly.

“Diary open. Ready,” the device intoned emotionlessly.

“Next appointment,” he commanded. Yes, the traffic was definitely slowing down. He took his foot off the accelerator slightly.

“Next Appointment is: 2:30pm Belane Industrial Products, Mr Joseph McArthur - discussion of systems upgrade and recent crash problems. Contact link: McArthur@BELANE2.CO.UK. Ready.”

He looked at the time display projected onto his window screen in front of him, one twenty four PM, beside it the estimated time to arrival produced an all too familiar sinking feeling “93 minutes”.

He knew he should have objected to his call schedule today; installations at Jansen always overran due to that god dammed technophreak Kensit who buzzed round you double guessing every softlink you installed. If he wasn't a paymaster for the company Alan would have told him to sod off long before. Worst kind of client, a technophreak Paymaster.

“SLOW DOWN – HAZARD. SLOW DOWN - HAZARD,” the car's pseudo soothing female voice broke his reverie and instinctively he moved his foot to the brake.

“I am sorry, I did not understand that command. Please repeat it. Ready,” his wrist organiser dumbly responded to the car's warning.

With increasing tension, he watched the speedometer drop in reverse synchronisation with the ETA increments. He momentarily considered calling with a lame excuse of some type, then dismissed the idea. He had four more calls after this next one and to have to make four lame excuses today was more than he cared to contemplate. Not to mention the possibly of being downgraded when the month's performstats were analysed. No, he had to make up the time.

He peered ahead; some jerk was cruising in the fast lane about seven cars in front. He glanced at the speed readout: 105. He was only five above the limit! Must be a bloody rich kid; anyone with a living to make wouldn't be so cautious.

The car immediately behind him was raging at him to move aside, lights blazing and horns wailing, but the kid was having difficulty getting out of the way: a convoy of fourteen wheelers had come up in the middle lanes and was undertaking him. You couldn't blame them: they were docked severely if they missed a drop-off time.

“Ready,” the organiser repeated plaintively and Alan realised he'd been wasting time. With a reflexive guilty feeling he un-paused the Dictaphone strapped to his steering wheel. After a few minutes collecting his thoughts, he started dictating again.

“Yep, right, er, I recommend the installation of a Decium based pre-processor network, using tachotransmitter card topology,” he announced into the mike.

“I am sorry I did not understand that command. Please repeat it. Ready,” his wrist organiser piped up again.

Alan sighed and flicked his organiser to standby. He was about to continue dictating the quote when an explosion of light and noise resounded around him. He glanced up to see the rich kid's car bounce up off the front of one of the fourteen wheelers in a flurry of sparks and fragments.

“Damn,” he muttered and instinctively started to brake.

“IMPACT HAZARD! IMPACT HAZARD!” the car announced with what the brochure described as an “urgent yet not panic-invoking tone”.

“You don’t say, you dumb-assed pile of junk,” Alan hissed through fear-locked teeth.

The next few moments shot past in an adrenaline-filled haze. Alan veered from the fast lane, between two juggernauts, clipped the back left corner of a National Express-Speed coach, then spun out slightly, his wheels screaming, but pulled it back to skid round onto the hard shoulder. He tore up some of the verge then blasted along the shoulder, tail-shunting someone with the same instinctive reactions as himself. He locked fenders with the other guy for a few seconds and in bizarre tandem they rocketed through the gathering cloud of black smoke to career exultantly into the clear motorway in front of the pile up. A slight twist of the steering wheel broke him free of his companion in survival and he sped on his way breathing rapidly and shallowly.

The other guy expressed his elation at avoiding what would probably be a career-terminating delay by flashing his lights, indicators and horns in a medley of happiness. All Alan could see was the logo of the express speed coach flashing in his memory.

“National Express Speed. Speed with Care - we’ll get you there!”

He hoped that the poor sods behind him had paid up their medical insurance.

“102.3 Media City Transmission. OOPS there fellow citizens, we have a major pile up on the M478. Initial calculations for clearance times estimate thirty-four minutes so I hope you guys behind it have some homework to do. No indications of casualties as yet but the medivacs are on their way. So if you are experiencing pain, have your credit cards ready. Talking about credit cards, never forget that Bertha, our on-line traffic re-routing AI, is ready for your uploads, guaranteed to cut at least 15% off your journey time. Log on now - with the M478 out her circuits are going to be cooking.”

Alan flicked off the traffic broadcast and glanced at the ETA read-out; it was now 102 minutes. He activated his on board router: no traffic hazards ahead but he was about to enter a fifty mile stretch of SafeTrav Inc. toll road. SafeTrav patrols were renowned for collecting the highest number of speeding convictions in the country. Rumour had it that they had just made a big pay off to the Roads minister and could expect all their busts to go through without a problem.

It couldn’t be helped. The Belane contract was a level 2er; if he screwed up he would be out leading a social security chain gang. He activated his speedtrap scanner at maximum range and floored it. As the speedometer hit 110, ten percent above the national speed limit he blasted through the SafeTrav toll gate and saw his credit card readout start to click down.

The old paranoia switched in and he instinctively started to perform the ‘Driver’s Eye Dance’. In a continuous circle he scanned the sides of the road looking for parked up patrollers or automatic speed cameras; then the cars in front for anyone going unusually slowly; then behind for anyone tailing him too closely and matching his weave across the lanes; then above for choppers that appeared to be taking undue interest in the traffic below. Finally he studied every bridge and sliplane for suspiciously parked vehicles with a view of the motorway.

Of course, since this was a toll road system it would be a simple matter to time his passage through it, calculate his speed and thus impose his inevitable penalty. But the various toll corporations had long since discovered that, faced with the unavoidable  $\text{speed} = \text{distance}/\text{time}$  equation, drivers would either avoid their roads entirely or not exceed the limits, and thus not provide any income to the Corporation’s speedcops.

A subtle brown envelope credit transfer to a junior minister in the Highways Agency had ensured that all ‘time of passage’ schemes suddenly ceased to be mandatory. In complete justification of their fully tax-deductible investment, the Toll Road Corps, by giving the hard pressed drivers an outside chance of getting through, found that they had trebled their revenue from speeding violations.

At 140, still paying more attention to the possibility of SafeTrav traffic cops than driving, Alan resumed his dictation.

“In terms of Microsoftware, the Corp. has recently released version 27.4 of their combined office package. This contains the latest in staff efficiency monitoring routines. It includes full activity and location tracking of all staff activity including the recent idle chit-chat logger and guarantees to give on-line staff cost to corporate income (SCCI) quotient with an accuracy of 87.5% over a 20 hour sampling period...”

“Incoming Call from John Benson. Do you wish to answer? Ready,” Alan’s wrist Organiser interrupted his dictation. Without stopping his eye dance, Alan flicked the Dictaphone to pause and replied.

“Yes.” Instant worry assailed him as he wondered what could have gone wrong to prompt his fellow engineer to call him.

“Hi Alan -” John’s face looked impossibly strained as it flickered into existence on Alan’s head-up display. Alan’s heart jumped. Oh no, it was bad. His thoughts flew to the Meon Schools Corporation installation - it must have gone down again. Damn the Contracts Costing Department; he knew they had shaved just a little

too much off the system specs this time. That discbank had definitely not been inside the 2% cost performance ratio. Well, he wasn't going to take the can for it this time.

"It's Meon Schools, isn't it?" Alan asked, his neck aching with tension.

"No, that's fine," John replied tight-lipped, a tick twitching on his left cheek.

Relief flooded Alan for a second, then was whisked away again as he wondered what other disaster had occurred.

"Alan," John started then hesitated. "I need a favour. You know the Tyren quote..."

John's face contorted in pain; he looked close to tears. "Alan, I wouldn't ask you normally but, Jean was ill last night again, you know with the baby. I had to drive her to the Hospitalshop and I didn't finish it, and if it's not in today, I'm certain for a downgrade or -" he paused, tears now in his eyes, "Or worse."

Alan's relief relaxed him for a second then anger surged. Why did they all dump their problems on him? He had his own problems!

"John, look I am sorry but my schedule's about to blow with the stuff I've got already. Have you asked Sue? She's more familiar with Tyren, in any case."

"She's refused to take my call. You're my last hope. Please Alan, I'll do anything. I won't ask again, just this one time, please," John babbled.

Alan wished he had the sense to refuse the call himself: he should have guessed what it would be about. Since John's wife became pregnant, he had been heading for the drop faster than a politician who refuses corporate payoffs.

"OK OK, I'll see what I can do. Upload it to me on channel -"

"ALERT. ALERT. SENSOR INDICATES A PASSIVE RADAR SCAN IS IN PROGRESS," the feminine tones of the car interrupted Alan.

"Oh no! Look John, I've just been scanned. I'll call you back." Alan flicked the Com channel closed and, heart pumping, looked in his rear mirror. No patrols on his tail yet. Hoping that it was going to justify the ECUs he had blown on it, he activated his newly installed countermeasures system.

A battery of speed cameras suddenly popped up from camouflaged pits in the bank at the side of the road, and Alan was assailed by a lightning storm of bright flashes. He mentally noted that such devices must be a new installation and that he should post a warning about them on the Free Drivers Newsgroup at first opportunity, then glanced in hope at the countermeasures subdisplay in his window.

Intecorp speedsnapper cameras version 1.1 detected.--- Threat neutralised

was displayed in a neat font at the bottom of the display.

Obviously the countermeasure system knew about the cameras! Then he realised why: his system was an Intecorp Drive Master 4.0. He smiled to himself. Talk about cornering both ends of the market! Curious, he pushed the 'more information' tab and seconds later was studying a technical readout on the Speedsnapper version 1.1.

Speedsnapper 1.1 - the latest in radar triggered covert camera arrays. Rapid action and fully relocatable. In-built link to nearest patroller vehicle, images fully 2016 traffic act compliant. Information received indicates that an ultraviolet counterblast fogs the image receptors to make vehicle identity un-resolvable.'

Alan wondered whether this was really the case or whether some chip deep inside his 2000 ECU Drive-master simply told the cameras that he was one of them and to accidentally mislay his prints. Whatever, the effect was the same: he was in the clear.

He glanced at his trip computer. He had 42 minutes to make a 51 minute journey - no worries. With a determined grimace, he locked his leg on the accelerator and felt the rush as his body was pushed back into the pneumatic seat.

The smog-darkened scenery shot past him at 195 mile per hour as he powered along the motorway, still performing his eye dance despite the added, although illegal, protection of the Drivemaster. He was just wondering if he should call John back when a driver he had been leapfrogging for the last four miles hailed him.

"The driver of the Ford Corp. Aquarius Mk3 is hailing you," his wrist organiser broke the news. "He is sending an open road callsign; do you wish to take the call? Ready."

Alan had been a driver long enough to realise that when another driver hailed you it was something serious. Suspiciously, he accepted the call.

"Hey buddy, name of Janus. May the road never delay you." The other driver came over voice-only with

one of the Free Drivers' standard greetings. Alan searched his memory for the correct counter code. Fearful of entrapment he returned his Free Drivers nickname.

"Hey back buddy, name of Deep; may you route away your jams."

"Look pal, my office just buzzed me there's a full scale road check up ahead. I've got a meet that will fry me if I miss it. I'm looking to form a steamer posse - you in or what?"

Alan checked his countermeasures display; sure enough, in its concise lettering the words flicked on his screen.

Aerial vehicle detected 5 miles ahead. Patrol unit detected 4.5 miles ahead. Patrol unit detected 5.2 miles ahead. On bridge watcher vehicle detected 3.7 miles ahead. Sumrise speed control action in progress. Threat unavoidable. Advise legal compliance immediately.

A quick glance at his trip computer indicated that he now had 36 minutes to make a 35 minute journey, but only if he continued at almost twice the speed limit.

"I'm in, let's do it!" Alan replied.

"Tag me friend and good luck," Janus replied and sped into the lane in front of him.

Alan accelerated to 220, maximum speed, and tucked in tight behind Janus. Shortly afterwards another car joined the file behind him, then two more. A mile further on, there were ten cars burning along at 200 plus mph in close formation. Alan mentally calculated the odds of him being one of the unlucky ones to bite the ticket for the rest of the posse. That was the logic of a steamer posse, each of the drivers could not, for their own reason, afford the delay of adhering to the speed limit. Each would individually, without qualm, bust through the road check and attempt to get away with it. If they all busted through at once each had an increased chance of making it.

There were two patrollers and one chopper. That meant three drivers would probably catch it. The odds were just over two to one that Alan would make it, odds worth taking. He pushed a button marked 'Camouflage' on the Drivemaster 4.0, again hoping that its advertising hype had not been too inflated.

If a casual observer had stood on a bridge watching the headlong rush at that moment, he would have been impressed by the sudden rearrangement of the characters on Alan's number plate; intrigued by the darkening of Alan's paintwork from red to black; and amazed by the subtle holographic changes to the shape of the vehicle. But luckily for Alan, the world in which he survived had no room for any activity that could be remotely classified as casual.

'Camouflage mode active. 2.3 miles to predicted speed control action. Estimated time to encounter 36 seconds,' the Drivemaster coolly informed him.

'30, 29, 28...' Alan watched the time tick down, then switched his windscreens to externally opaque; another illegal add-on he had found to be useful.

'20, 19, 18...' Weaving in and out like a supercharged snake the posse approached the road check. Alan tuned his radio to the police frequencies and hunched his shoulders for some high speed manoeuvring.

'10, 9, 8...' Born to be wild suddenly blasted out on all the police channels interspersed by 'Yahoos!' and 'Here we go's!'. One of the other drivers must have a multi-channel jammer, Alan thought, smiling to himself.

'5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Speed Control Action Encountered!' Even the Drivemaster appeared to be feeling the excitement in the form of an erroneous exclamation mark.

The posse broke and Alan found himself running neck and neck with Janus. Sirens wailed all around and a megaphone-enhanced voiced boomed down from overhead.

"CEASE TRAVELLING AND PULL OVER IMMEDIATELY, YOU ARE IN VIOLATION OF THE 2016 ROAD TRAFFIC ACT. WE ARE LICENSED MEMBERS OF SAFETRAV'S TRAFFIC POLICE DIVISION. ACTION WILL BE TAKEN IF YOU DO NOT COMPLY."

Messages flashed up on Alan's countermeasures screen in rapid succession.

Engine cut out command trying to breach countermeasure firewall. -- Threat Neutralised

ID seeker program intercepted -- False data submitted. -- Threat Neutralised.

Electromagnetic Burner Pulse detected -- Electronics shielding holding... holding... held -- Threat Neutralised.

X-ray scan of driver's dental structures detected. -- Scan jammed -- Threat Neutralised

Alan barely noticed the courageous efforts of the Drivemaster: he was too intent on dodging the slower moving traffic and trying to stay on the road. Behind him, two cars succumbed to the electronic barrage of the police vehicles and slowly steered onto the hard shoulder boxed in by their respective patrollers. Alan hoped they could afford a pay off. Although it was probably academic as they wouldn't have joined the steamer if

they could have afforded any delay; being caught would undoubtedly bankrupt them as it would have him.

'Born to be wild' suddenly stopped assailing the police airways. Alan smiled sadly and silently wished the erstwhile DJ a low fine and an understanding boss.

An ominous clank sounded above Alan, followed by the creaking sounds of net grapples crawling over the outside of his car.

Vehicle has been accosted by aerial vehicle. Estimated time to removal from highway: 123 seconds.

Alan looked blankly at the screen, too distressed even to curse.

This unit has no inbuilt countermeasure for this form of action. Suggest driver abandons vehicle to avoid imminent arrest.

Abandon Vehicle! At 212mph, someone has a sense of humour. Alan's mind filled with images of being sacked, of the long painful hunt for another job with an efficiency black on his CV, of losing his home, of becoming a loser, an unproductive, of losing his girl, of losing his life.

"Incoming Call from Intecorp Marketing division. Do you wish to answer? Ready." Alan's wrist addressed him, breaking through his gloom.

"What?" he asked in confusion.

"Incoming Call from Intecorp Marketing division. Do you wish to answer? Ready." Alan's Wrist organiser reiterated insistently.

"Sorry?" he began. Then the window in front lit up with a bland-faced smiling female.

"Hi Mr James! Sorry to jump past your Org like this, but you do seem to be in trouble and I feel that we can help you out." She smiled winningly.

Alan looked at the girl open-mouthed, narrowly avoiding a tanker that had strayed into his lane.

"We have received notification from your mark 4 Drivemaster that you have a problem beyond its capacity to deal with. We take pride in ensuring that whenever possible all our clients have every opportunity to avoid unnecessary litigation, and we are able to..."

Alan had been taken aback but he would not have survived this long in the corporate jungle if he hadn't been able to recover fast.

"How much?" he asked, breaking into the girl's well rehearsed spiel.

"As I was saying, sir, we are able to upgrade your mark 4 to a mark 5 that will be able to resolve this difficulty that you now..."

"How much?" Alan asked again, watching the seconds before he would be hoisted unceremoniously off the motorway tick away.

With a look of irritation, the girl gave in. "3999 ECU's, which I am sure you'll agree is well worth it in your current..."

Alan did a mental calculation. It was steep, in fact twice as much as an upgrade would normally cost, but he could cover it.

"Do it!" he commanded.

"Oh good," she beamed. "I am sure you will not regret your pur..."

"Yeah, Yeah, Yeah," he replied and flicked the Com channel closed as the Drivemaster screen bounced into life again.

Accepting software upload from Intecorp satellite relay station.... Upgrade bootstrap activated.... loading version 5.0 primary config data... loading version 5.0 interchangeable countermeasure modules... decompressing.... powering up..."

Alan watched, trying to remember how long he had had left before the screen changed to display the upgrade progress. The creaking noise had stopped now, and through the darkened windows he could see the filaments of the capture mesh criss-cross his car like pastry lattice work. With a long awaited 'beep', the Drivemaster finished the upload and just as Alan felt his car lift from the road it swung into action.

"Vehicle has been accosted by aerial vehicle.... scanning capture net logic array .... inserting viral demapping program... capture net disengaging...."

The strands of the net fell away like cotton and with a reassuring bump Alan's car hit the road again. He drove into a slight skid then straightened up and kicked the gas pedal hard just as the words:

Threat neutralised

appeared on the countermeasures display. A quick glance at his trip computer showed him just five miles to the end of SafeTrav controlled roadspace. He was going to make it!

As he screamed towards the toll gate array, he caught sight of Janus in his rear mirror being hoisted from the road in his stead. A momentary pang of guilt burnt his stomach, then he turned his attention back to the road.

“Thank you for using SafeTrav roadspace, please drive us again and we wish you safe travelling ‘til next time,” intoned the toll system blandly as his credit card monitor ceased its stepped reduction. The immediate threat passed, he reached for the Dictaphone’s On button, switched his newly upgraded Drivemaster to standby and recommenced his eye dance in time with the stuttered paragraphs of the latest system manual he was writing. Twelve minutes later he skidded to a halt in the carpark of Belane Industrial Products and leapt out of the car, briefcase in hand. He reached the front door just as Joseph McArthur was coming out of it. Perturbed, he checked his wrist Org,

“Time,” he commanded

“2:29:12. Ready,” it returned obediently.

He stepped to intercept McArthur.

“Mr McArthur. Do we have a meeting at 2.30, sir?” he asked.

“I’m sorry, the company’s been taken over. You’ll have to speak to someone else. Goodbye.”

He scurried off, head down, face grim, and not in the direction of the executive parking lot. Alan stepped through the door to be confronted by two burly security guards with the BritTel Corp. Logo emblazoned on their shoulders.

“I’m from Zavion Computers. I, er, had an appointment with Mr McArthur,” he announced feebly. A petite woman pushed through them and looked him up and down with cold eyes.

“Ah yes. Your company used to support the systems here. I am Miss Nillons, BritTel Corporate acquisitions. Your appointment has been cancelled. If you are in possession of any material or data that relates to Belane’s information systems, please hand it to me now. Our own systems division will be taking over this installation, effective immediately.”

Alan backed towards the door. “Sorry. I have no material of that nature; this was merely a meeting to discuss a possible upgrade,” he answered mechanically. Not waiting for a response he turned and walked back to his car. As he sped on to his next appointment, he realised that he had over two hours to make a thirty-minute trip! Feeling slightly elated by the prospect of so much free time, he immediately began to plan all the work he could catch up on. Perhaps he could avoid a major pay dock this month; that would be a first! He was just wondering if he should inform his office about the loss of Belane when his wrist Org piped up.

“Incoming Call from Carl Davis. Do you wish to answer? Ready.”

Carl was his section head; reluctantly he accepted the call.

“Alan, bad news, I’m afraid. John’s been dropped. His SCCI Quotient dropped below his contracted 4.3 and due to our low overall department Q he’s not being replaced.” For the third time today, a flash of guilt twisted Alan’s guts.

“I’m sorry to lay this on you but we’ve got to split his load. I’m uploading your share now. He had a couple of appointments in your area. Check em out, OK?” Alan started to speak, but was interrupted.

“Oh, I received notification from BritTel’s lawyers about Belane two minutes ago,” Davis continued. “Bad call. Their loss is going to bite. Hang in there, pal - got to shoot.” The Com channel closed, leaving Alan dazed. Robotically, he addressed his Org.

“Diary.”

“Diary open. Ready.”

“Next Appointment.”

“Next Appointment is: 2:45pm Tyren Foodstuffs, Mrs Melanie Gordon, presentation of systems upgrade package and staff monitoring enhancements. Contact link: Mel@TYRENFOODS.CO.UK. - Appointment transfer from John Benson due to dismissal. Ready.”

Alan looked at his trip computer: ten minutes to make a seventeen-minute journey.

He floored it.

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# THE DRAGON

by

© Iain Benson

I first saw the Dragon's Apprentice approaching my father's home from some distance.

My initial reaction was that he was lost. Our road led only to our home. I watched from my upstairs room, chin resting on clasped hands, as he passed our small herb garden and orchard.

I could tell he was not of these parts, for his skin was a dark ebony and he was in excess of six feet (and well built with it). He was dressed in a cape of flowing, midday blue, with scarlet hose. His upper torso was bare, revealing a muscled chest the eunuchs of the emperor's palace would have been proud of.

Although it was a cool summer evening, he carried an air of one who notices not such an inconsequentiality.

He stride was determined, carrying him easily up the incline to where I watched. Before he reached us, he stopped and swirled his cape, revealing a small brown leather bottle strapped to his waist. He drank deeply from it.

He waved up at me before continuing. Somehow, I knew it was to me he waved. I roused myself to wave back. I could see the white flash of his grin from quarter of a mile.

The stranger came right up to the gate of the farm-yard, forced into a stoop to open the latch and enter. Closer, it was possible to make out more of his features. His hair was dark and curly, tight to his head. His eyes were large and the brown of a willow's bark. He touched his forehead in my direction, inclining his head ever so slightly. I could tell his gesture was facetious and returned a large smile. Overwhelmed with the curiosity of a twelve year old at this stranger, I started to go downstairs.

At that moment, my father came around the corner of the house with a wicker basket of eggs half full from the hen-house. The stranger turned to my father.

"Well met, Nan Jin. I am here to meet your eldest son, Nan Sin."

I almost fell from the window when my normally taciturn father laid down the basket of eggs and greeted the stranger enthusiastically, as though they were long parted friends reunited under happy circumstance. Claspng the stranger's arm, my father called out for my mother, who emerged beneath me, a large chopping knife held in one hand. When she saw the stranger, a large smile split her face, and she laid the knife down on the kitchen window sill and gave the tall black man a hug the like of which was normally reserved for close cousins and siblings we were currently allowed to mention.

I was shocked, and my mouth hung open.

"Close your mouth, boy, you're catching flies," the black stranger told me. I looked down at him, he was still talking with my parents.

I closed the shutter, and trotted down the dark wooden stairs into the airy kitchen as my mother ushered the newcomer into our home. My father followed in, conscientiously bringing in the basket of eggs and the kitchen knife.

"Son," my father said to me, seeing me stood beside the stairs. "This is -"

"Espoo." I knew not where the name had come from. Perhaps I had heard his name mentioned in the yard beneath my window.

"You remember him then?" asked my mother.

"No," I replied, honestly, for I had never seen him before.

"You would have been, what?"

"Three," Espoo prompted.

"Three," my mother said. "Espoo was performing in the town. We all went to see his show."

I looked askance at this tall man who had cast such a strange spell over my parents. Normally they delighted

in revealing my entire history to any friends I made whilst working exchanges in neighbouring farms. They had never mentioned a show. I resolved to ask my grandmother when I went to see her later that week.

“Espoo would like you to join him for his next show in Beijing.” My father sounded enthusiastic.

“And you would let me go?” I was amazed. Normally, my parents would not let me beyond the gate unless I had a ball of string to find my way home, never mind accompany a complete stranger over three weeks walk away.

“Of course.” My father smiled. “It would be a pleasure if my son was to accompany the great Espoo.”

May I be forgiven if I admit that I almost swooned. I was but twelve, and witnessing a great reversal in my parent’s attitude. Once the amazement had passed, I felt an exultation like I had never felt before. Accompanying my father on market day paled in comparison to this.

“Well Espoo,” I said, acting as grown up as I knew, “when will we begin this great journey of ours?”

“On the morrow.” He spoke as though unaccustomed with conversation.

As the birds of day heralded the sun, I awoke. I clattered down the stairs, ensuring anybody asleep in the house would be awake. An adventure lay out before me. I wanted to be on my way as quickly as possible. This I could not do with sleeping magicians.

Fortunately, Espoo was awake, and sat at my parent’s table, breaking fast with them. My mother was preparing food for the journey; good hard travelling cakes and boiled eggs were the order of the day. My father was in the yard chopping wood with a mindless monotony. I wondered what this man had done to bewitch my parents.

“You can talk freely, boy,” Espoo said, pausing in his eating of my family’s fare. “They will not hear you.”

I had no understanding of what he meant, and kept my mouth clamped firmly shut, opening it only to spoon in my own breakfast. My mother ignored me. My father split more logs than even my mother could use in one winter. I was beginning to worry. If this man had cast a spell over my mother and father, what did he want with me.

“I want to show you the world, boy,” he said, as though reading my thoughts.

He had finished his breakfast, and it seemed as though my parents could not wait to get rid of me. Mother pushed a sack into my hands containing clothing and food for three weeks. They stood at the gate, more to ensure I left than to see me off.

We were half way down the track towards the village when I started having thoughts of turning back.

“It’s no use, boy. They won’t remember who you are.” Espoo spoke my thoughts aloud.

“You read my mind!” I cried out loud, preparing to run back.

“I can show you how,” he said. “You have the power. That is why I came here. I came for you. I want to take you to meet the dragon.”

As he spoke, images flooded my mind of persuading huge crowds of people; becoming respected and wealthy. Also of facing a fearsome beast with a long green scaly hide, belching smoke and flames from its wide aperture of a mouth. I quailed like an infant alone. Fear coursed through my veins setting them aflame. I could not face a dragon. I was a mere child. Oh, I had joined in the New Year celebrations with the pretend dragons. I had not, for one moment, ever envisaged I would meet the real thing.

Only the certainty that Espoo spoke truly about my parents no longer remembering who or what I was stayed me from sprinting back the way we had come and hiding under my bed covers.

“The only way to force remembrance from your parents,” Espoo continued, “is to learn how to do it yourself. I shall never do it for you.”

He spoke sternly and I lapsed into silence. If his words were genuine, and I did have a magical power within me, then that would explain why Espoo had not merely overpowered me with his mystical abilities. I smiled a secret smile.

“If you are to keep secrets from me, boy, you’d best learn how to mask your thoughts.” Espoo spoke directly into my mind, his voice like a huge echoing drum beneath my skull.

I imagined a large soup-tureen upturned over my head, and Espoo’s voice became quieter. “Good, but I can still see some things, boy.”

“My name,” I spoke clearly, using my mouth, “is Nan Sin.”

“It will be boy, until you prove yourself worthy of a man’s name.” Espoo’s voice was booming again. I slammed an imaginary wok over my head, and the voice vanished entirely.

We spoke little during the next few weeks. I learned to stop Espoo prying into my personal thoughts very early. Remembering to block him continuously was difficult at first, but second nature after a few hours. Every time my screen slipped, his voice would bang around the inside of my head until it pounded like a New Year

drum. This was lesson enough.

Our food was running low on the fifth week, and we had left civilisation behind, heading up for the Mongol border. Hills surrounded us, rolling and green, lush with mid-summer growth. Trees filled the valleys and some of the hills. Mountains dominated the sky like a wall of grey, green and brown, their tops capped at their summit with snow. Tibet rose away to our left, soaring into the sky. I could see where the massive mountains pushed through the clouds, and their jagged peaks came through white - as though some of the clouds had stuck to the shadowy rocks.

We had skirted the fairly major city of Lanzhou the previous week. Although our food was running low, Espoo had insisted we push on. Seeing Lanzhou confirmed my fears: we were not heading for Beijing, instead, away from it. My knowledge of the lands to the North West of my home was scanty, for travellers from that direction were a rarity I had never seen.

We came across a town I had never heard of. Larger than my home, and built across a narrow river of crystal clear water. Espoo identified it as Xining. Here we were to wait for others who would face the dragon on the following full moon. Once more, fear filled my being. The mere mention of the dragon, I could still so vividly imagine, overwhelmed me. Espoo did not know of my fear now, for my mental screen was permanently in place.

Espoo led us to a tavern with overhanging eaves, painted in the traditional red and gold. The tavern was situated on the main road through the town. It served as a focal point for the whole populace. Before we entered, I looked up the inclined road towards the mountains, where I saw the source of the river which halved the town. A blue lake, like a second sky between two peaks. I knew without knowing, this was Qinghai Lake.

There were several people in the main drinking area of the tavern, sat around an open, unlit fire-place. A serving counter cut off a corner of the room. A short man stood behind it.

Espoo's conspiratorial whisper spoke in my mind: "Watch."

He stalked up to the bar and smiled a warm smile at the owner. "Qang Ho, my old friend, have you any rooms?"

"Espoo!" The man's face broke into recognition. A trick I now knew. The same trick he had pulled on my parents. Casting a wicked spell over the unsuspecting victim. A spell I would have to learn in order to free my parents.

"A room?" Espoo prompted. "You wish us to have a room for the night?"

"I wish you to have a room for the night, my good friend, Espoo."

I looked at the man, sensing his confusion, it seemed etched upon his face. I tried to do what Espoo did so well, filling in the blanks in the inn-keeper's confusion with my name and the fact I was hungry.

"And I shall lay on a feast. Young Nan Sin looks like he could do with a good feed."

Espoo shot a hard glance in my direction. I returned it with a slight smile. "That would be wonderful, my friend," he said to the owner.

Qang Ho led us to a small room up a narrow flight of stairs. Two small beds, made up with thin mattresses. An oil lamp stood on a small shelf under which I stored my sack of clothes.

"You should not have intervened." Espoo blasted through my mental screen as though it was not there. "We each bring candidates for the dragon we think will survive! Do you think yourself so superior that you could face the dragon alone? Do you want the dragon to think I have been training you? If this is the case, the dragon will reject you. Nobody will mark your passage. Your parents do not know you. I can easily forget you." Espoo threw up his hands in disgust as I trembled before him.

He seemed so large then, as wide and massive as the Tibetan Mountains. Power radiated from him like the spokes of an ornate wheel. His black skin glistened and heaved as he stared at me. My bag flew from under the shelf to crash against the side of my head. The beds lifted clear from the floor to crash against the walls. Espoo seemed to swell to fill the space he had created in his wild frenzy.

As suddenly as he had rounded on me, Espoo calmed. The beds returned to their normal places, and he no longer seemed the giant he had moments before.

"Every seven years," Espoo said in my mind, "we are required to bring a candidate for the dragon. Without doing so, our powers fade, until we are little more than weaklings like you." Espoo turned away from me to look out of the window at the vista beyond.

I stumbled into silence, clutching my sack. Much of what Espoo said made no sense. Who was the 'we'? Why every seven years? The full moon was three days away, I would have to wait that long to gain answers.

I knew there was somebody like me coming before she arrived. I could hear her. Whereas Espoo had forced me to hide my thoughts, this candidate for the dragon had no such need. Thus, her approach was like an army wearing cymbals for armour. Her companion I heard through inference; he himself was too quiet. Before she arrived, her name had preceded her: Cheng Kuan. I sat on the porch to meet her.

I could single her out of the midday rush. Long black hair, a wide, honest face, chattering fiercely with an old, stooped man. The man stopped both her and himself by lifting his hand. A boy pulling a cart swerved to avoid them, carrying on up the street partially obscuring the ill-matched couple from view.

The scene was striking. Mountains climbing to the side; rolling green hills behind. Gaudily painted buildings towering around the street; people milling in seeming confusion. Stood, isolated by some force I could not see (but I suspect lay within the ageing wizard), people flowed around the pair. They appeared as statues. The old man was looking at me. He was not Chinese, I could not guess at his origins. He was pale, thin of features, with hair the colour of iron.

“Franz Mertin.” Espoo’s voice came clear in mind. “A great man. The first to find a dragon.”

Mertin and Cheng Kuan moved once more, approaching rapidly, steadily, without seeming to hurry. He was dressed in a similar style to Espoo, only with a full bodice of quilted cotton. His blue cloak wrapped around his legs, clutched in one hand. His other gnarled fist was curled around a long staff.

I watched them approach as Espoo came to stand at my shoulder. There was no obvious communication between the two, but something passed. These two great sages spoke volumes to each other on the old man’s approach.

I greeted Kuan with a shy smile. She was older than I by two summers, and in my eyes the prettiest girl in China. Until her mind-chatter began. It drowned out all else. I had to shut it out, put up a huge wall between us. She never noticed, but the ringing bell in my mind lessened enough so I could greet her. Had the cacophony continued, I would probably have fainted.

Later that day, a third candidate arrived. He was a tall gangling youth of sixteen with the flat, wide cheekbones of a Mongol. This close to the border, I was surprised that he was not struck down. He was accompanied by a lithe, athletic looking man I suspected of being Japanese. All things considered, it was surprising the pair had not been attacked and murdered on their journey.

I discovered why they remained unscathed. The slim man exuded such an air of authority, it would have been a scandal to attack him. This pagoda of protection covered his lumbering companion also. Khanis Jan and Takamoto, I learned they were called.

That night I lay away awhile, hearing the banging dreams of Kuan, and sensing the dull throb of Khanis. I wondered if they could hear my thoughts as loudly as I could hear theirs. I doubted it. Espoo’s mental shouting had ensured I was quiet.

As sleep neared, I realised that the next day we would set out, to arrive in time for the full moon at the lair of the dragon. Yet we were only three candidates. There were only three sponsors. Surely, if they had been coming every seven years, there would be a whole host of aspirants to await the test.

Unless failure was fatal.

The thought chilled me, giving me terrible dreams of fiery beasts, and demons of all shapes and sizes. Dragons assailing me from one side, banshee’s from the other. I awoke with relief.

A cloud bank formed over the plains behind us as we climbed towards Lake Qinghai. The path became tortuous as our six strong party climbed higher, leaving the main route behind.

Always the lake seemed far away, a rainbow ever receding into the distance.

Clouds continued to pile up threatening rain. It added urgency to our hike.

The terrain was rocky. Scrub like growth springing up on either side of the track. Few trees survived on this wind-blasted side.

As we crested a bluff, the landscape changed. Trees grew in long swathes, interspersed with meadows filled with delicate flowers. It was a beautiful valley, nestled down the centre of which was Qinghai Lake. I must confess, I did pause for a moment, the sight was so wondrous. Espoo quickly urged me on once more, his voice a threatening murmur at the back of my mind.

We trudged through shin high grass, inhaling the summer scents. I could sense Kuan’s and Khanis’ joy at the view. This was the first time I truly understood what a miracle it was to have been blessed with this power. I could share the joy of others; console the misery of grief sufferers; prevent a rascal tricking an innocent.

Or like Espoo had done, become a travelling entertainer.

Or Takamoto, a warrior and a thief.

Takamoto and Khanis were a surly pair together. The lumbering Mongolian and the lithe Japanese communicated entirely mentally. From the patterns I could sense around the Mongol, his conversation was not pleasant. I framed a question, trying to imagine it on the outside of my mind in the area Espoo spoke to me.

“What do Khanis and Takamoto speak of?”

“I fear Khanis is being instructed in the way of the dragon.” Espoo’s reply tasted of surprise. My ability to understand the nuances of this power grew with every passing footfall. Like a bloom picked shortly before the

bud is open, making the bloom brighter, stronger and longer lasting, Espoo had found me. What had drawn him to our remote village I do not know.

“What is wrong with instruction?” I framed the question carefully, taking my time, but the reply was instantaneous.

“The dragon would know.” Espoo’s words smelled of pain. “Please do not shout. It is painful.”

I framed the words smaller, apologising. Espoo smiled a tight smile, and clamped a hand on my shoulder. I winced, for he was a strong man.

Whilst our exchange was going on, Khanis and Takamoto had reached the edge of the lake. Takamoto skipped lightly out across the surface of the lake.

“Can you do that?” I asked Espoo, marvelling at Takamoto stood several feet from the bank, barely a ripple about his dry feet.

“Should I want to, I can fly,” Espoo said. “But the birds get jealous, so I do not do it often.”

“What is Mertin’s story?” I asked, looking at where the old man plodded on footstep after footstep, not moving fast, but moving steadily. Whenever we paused, Mertin would catch up with us within moments.

“He is the most powerful here.” Espoo glanced at the old man. “And older than you think. He has seen the world. Travelled through distant countries. Seen continents you can never imagine. He found the first dragon, and became the greatest magician to ever walk the face of Earth. Now he brings us here. I believe he knows where all the dragons rest.”

“There are more than one?” I was dumbstruck enough to temporarily let the wall slip between Kuan and myself. Instantly, her mind chatter flooded out all sensations with her own images.

It was a blizzard across my vision; a thunderstorm in my ears; a foul taste in my mouth; pin-pricks across all of my body.

“Shut up!” I cried mentally, writing the letters in fiery red in the air above me.

Kuan silenced, and all five people stopped, temporarily stunned.

“Thank-you, young man,” Mertin said. “I wondered when she would control her mind-talk.”

Kuan looked at me with wide eyes. I could see that she was hurt by my shout.

“I’m sorry,” I said aloud. “You overwhelmed me. I over-reacted.”

“You’ve found a fierce one, Espoo,” Takamoto called from the lake. “He might actually survive and challenge me one day!”

Chagrined, I continued along the pebbled beach, blind to the beauty of the trees dipping leaves in the calm waters around me. The heady fragrance on the late afternoon air helped lull my senses. Only when darkness started to fall, and my fear rise, did I snap out of my melancholy. Terror of meeting with the dragon forcing me to return to myself.

We had neared the head of the lake, a waterfall some fifty feet across and thirty feet high. Water flowed into the lake from here from the surrounding mountains. The stone wall behind the frothing water was darker than I would have expected. I looked closer, seeing beyond the water. There was a cave. Mertin halted the flow of the waterfall as we approached. The path we now followed was narrow and slippery.

Takamoto strode in first, followed by his candidate. I ushered Kuan in before me, Espoo followed myself, and Mertin brought up the rear. Inside, Takamoto conjured light from his hands, and led us deep into the cave. Before Mertin released the water in the falls, I heard a deep bass rumble in the depths of the cave, rising and falling. Like the breath of an immense sleeping man. Or dragon.

There was no heat in the cave, and I felt myself shivering. Looking at Khanis and Kuan, I saw that they too were trembling with the cold. Although the rushing water, and the damp stone robbed the cave of all heat, our sponsors seemed to feel no chill. I would have thought Espoo and Takamoto, wearing no shirts, would feel it, but they appeared unaffected.

The corridor twisted sharply. And there, in a spherical hollow, lay the sleeping, curled dragon.

Thick, oily smoke curled about the base of the beast, obscuring it slightly, but I could make it out well enough. There was an odour of sulphur. Strong in the confines of the cave. A green glow pulsed through the entire chamber, occluded at our entrance by Takamoto’s brighter light.

The mouth lay open. Orange-yellow light deep in its belly issued forth rhythmically. The skin of the coiled beast was made up of countless small scales. Just touching, but never overlapping like the scales of a snake. There was a sheen about the scales, as though they were tougher than stone. I could not see where the eyes were or could be, though I searched intently. The nostrils were visible as black slits above the open ramp of a mouth.

The huge body of the beast was wrapped into a circle, its spine arched in the centre, lifting the heart of the unnatural monster. The tail wrapped under the chin, causing the gaping mouth to stand slightly off the sandy floor.

I cannot describe it fully: the majesty; the power; the barely contained fury this creature emanated. It was a scent. It was a sound. It was a taste. It was all of these, and more. It was in my head. My universe was expanding. I felt I had died and was journeying around the Wheel of Life. I could hear the stars calling. Infinity beckoned. My senses swirled.

"It will get worse," Espoo warned.

"No coaching," Mertin warned, his voice strong in my mind. "The dragon will know."

"Firstly, you three shall enter," Takamoto beamed at us.

"Why does the dragon replenish your power after we go through?" I asked, halting at the edge of the tunnel mouth.

It was a fifteen foot drop. I felt myself being lifted down it. I held onto the thought I was heavy. The sensation of somebody pulling me stopped. I saw that Takamoto looked under strain.

"The kindness of its heart?" Espoo patted me on the shoulder. "I have a feeling you will be fine."

"If I fail I will die," I said.

The announcement caused me to forget I was holding out against Takamoto. I was thrown over the edge into the dragon's lair.

I think it was Espoo who caught me, lowering me to the ground.

"Try to leave and you will die!" Takamoto called at us. "I shall personally see to that!"

The warrior-thief fashioned a blade of shining, blazing metal from the air, and caused it to vanish again.

"Enter the dragon's mouth," Mertin called. "There is a passage beyond. Always head for the heart!"

Kuan hung back. Khanis Jan sprinted into the dragon's mouth, his face set with determination. I approached more sedately, leaving Kuan to her own devices. She looked terrified. I set my mind, and decided to get it over with.

At the step to the dragon's mouth, the sulphurous smelling oily clouds coiled about my feet. I hesitated, inside I could hear Khanis screaming. One look over my shoulder at the stern Espoo, the gleeful Takamoto and the kindly Mertin forced me onwards, into the ammonia and sulphur smelling belly of the dragon.

Alas, my memory of the inside of the dragon is scanty. All I have is impressions.

The universe was there with me. In that smooth white mouth leading towards the throbbing, pulsating, fiery heart of the beast.

The throat was abnormally regular, covered in a smooth and shiny black substance which contained inhuman shifting patterns at the edge of vision. The smell of sulphur was choking.

The deeper I got, the more impressions flooded my mind. Alien concepts. Images of different landscapes assailed me from all sides. I was buffeted, scared, acting merely on impulse and reaction. Monsters came at me from all sides, bearing fangs, dripping ichor. It was an image of Hell's torment. At one point I think I may have floated over a pit. At the bottom I saw the writhing form of Khanis. If I could have stopped I would have.

I reached the heart of the beast. A huge globe of fiery light hanging at the centre of the dragon's belly. It pulsed regularly, giving out no heat. Towards the heart they had said. Well I was here.

I looked into the dancing flame, feeling myself drawn into it, as a moth with a candle flame. Watching it twist and dance and writhe, I was hypnotised. Without volition I walked into the heart of the flame. The source of the dragon's power. I stood bathed in it.

Images flooded me: Khanis, dead at the bottom of a pit, his form a black silhouette. The pink and purple silhouette of Kuan, dying by degrees of terror from the monsters in her own mind. Around it all swirled stars in alien constellations.

Following us, drinking upon the energies of drained minds were Mertin, Espoo and Takamoto. I could read their innermost desires. See their darkest fears. Read their most sacred thoughts. Nothing was hidden. Everything was plain.

Espoo disliked these excursions, only partaking because he had no wish to become weak and lose his hopefully long life. Mertin was inured to it, having done it countless times before in lands more distant than I could possibly imagine.

It seemed as though the dragon was focusing my thoughts on Takamoto. His ambitions were enormous.

This was his fifth visit to the dragon, he deliberately chose people he knew would fail. Wilfully wanted the most energy he could drink to make himself as powerful as possible. He would defeat Espoo and Mertin, and crown himself emperor.

I sensed that the dragon wanted him stopped. And stop him I would! The full power of my magic had been granted to me in that moment of pure fire.

I stepped from my trial by immolation and waited for Takamoto.

He arrived soon enough, wanting to be the first into the flames.

“Stop,” I commanded straight past his mental shield, putting up an invisible wall between us.

“You are a puny child, you cannot harm me.” Takamoto brushed aside my wall, I felt physical pain as it crumbled.

A ghostly blue ball of fire flew towards me from Takamoto’s outstretched palms. I caught it easier than I expected. Dispersing it like candle smoke. Peripherally I saw Mertin and Espoo arrive. They did not intervene. Takamoto used his experience to his advantage, throwing at me the many tricks he had learned over the years.

He tried to asphyxiate me; I breathed. He tried to engulf me in fire; I quenched his flames. For every attack, I readily came up with the riposte. As though the dragon was feeding me both power and knowledge.

I sensed Takamoto beginning to flag. I pressed an attack of my own. I threw Takamoto back.

It caught the flagging warrior by surprise. He toppled from his feet. Mentally I pressed down on him, almost crushing him. He had expected no fight from a child. I pursued my advantage now. I used that which Takamoto had inadvertently taught me. I had the reserves of youth and the inexperience not to know my own limits.

I exceeded them.

In the belly of the dragon, I threw one last fireball at Takamoto and tumbled to the floor, all strength gone. Darkness descended.

The next thing I knew, I was lying on the hillside outside the cave, the sparkling blue lake lay out like a carpet before me. Mertin was crouched on his heels a few yards away, Espoo was dripping conjured water over my brow.

“What happened?” I asked.

“You beat Takamoto,” Espoo told me. “And in doing so exhausted your powers.”

I realised then that I could no longer sense their presence. Espoo was forced to talk mouth to mouth.

“Will my powers return?” I asked, fearing for my parents.

“They might, in time,” Mertin said. “I cannot say. As for your parents, if Espoo will not remedy what he has done, I shall. I saw in the flame what Takamoto was planning. You have done us all a great service. Should your powers ever return, I shall come for you and take you through the dragon again. I know you will survive, and join our number.”

I was not sure I wanted that experience again. I lay back and looked at the early morning sky, had I been asleep that long?

“Two days,” answered Espoo, reading my mind. I could no longer stop him. “We’d best be getting back. There’s no need for Mertin to remedy my actions, I am capable of doing it myself.”

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# PYGMALION BY PEN

by

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For some people, life is a battle in which every step must be fought for, and everything but the immediate future is obscured by the smoke of cannon. For others, it resembles being lost in a forest: no matter how far between the trees they can see, there is no difference between each path. Life as a meander, rather than life as a waterfall.

Aldis Calder's life, though, was of the waterfall kind. He had a brief uninterrupted space of wandering, without purpose, meaning or point, and then his life was taken, shaken and set on a course that neither man-kind nor the gods could alter,

He was fourteen at the time; an unusually serious youth. It happened that he was trying out metaphors for the paths that lives take; so, he was walking deep in the forest, becoming lost.

Aldis didn't worry, though. He was a level-headed lad. Every adult who knew him marked in him an uncommon level of confidence, and at present he had no conception of being lost 'forever', or even for enough time to discomfort him in any way. He knew well enough that home would find him when it was ready.

Another characteristic his elders had seen in him, and one that vexed them much, was that although he took all manner of things in, and thought about them perhaps more than was healthy, Aldis had no idea whatsoever what he wanted out of life. They would ask him, 'Aldis, what do you want to be when you grow up?' and he would get such a look on his serious face, a look that suggested the question had been referred to the relevant committee, and was under due and correct consideration. They would not get an answer, however.

Before him now, Aldis saw a wonderful sight. There was a pool bordered by the overhanging fir trees, lined with rocks and fed by a four-foot fall of water cascading down to trouble the fish. To Aldis it was just another thing to ponder on. He was surely not going to let his young jaw drop at every vision of natural beauty that he happened to come across. Even so, Aldis was fourteen, and the idea of taking his shoes and socks off and paddling his feet in the water seemed an attractive one, and worthy of further thought. In order to fully experience this aspect of nature, he stepped onto the water-slick rock, sat down, and began to tug at his laces.

Although he was of such tender years, with most of his life stretching out before him like a vast, blank canvas, if we were to plot out Aldis' history in terms of significance, this moment, this very absolute second, would be placed exactly halfway along his lifeline. There was before, and there was after, and the two Aldises on either side might stretch their index fingers towards each other like God and Adam, but never the twain would meet. For abruptly, without any manner of warning, Aldis was given a *real* vision. Above the clear water, or perhaps between the trees on the far side, he saw a dream take form.

It existed for only a second, although it stamped itself so deeply into Aldis' mind that it might have taken whole years of his life. He saw, in that union of wood and water and light, a woman. She was radiant, and surrounded by radiance; hair caught at by a breeze that was peculiar to her; white gown seeming to be cut from cloud-stuff. When she flickered into his sight she was looking upwards, as if contemplating heaven, but her eyes, blue in a way no metaphor could describe, fell until they were looking directly into his own, and he thought, in the last harried segments of time before she was taken from him, that her lips mouthed the first syllable of his name.

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## Runner-up

### 1996 Competition

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As suddenly and unexpectedly as she had appeared to him, she was gone, leaving behind a very different Aldis Calder.

His parents finally found him as evening drew nigh, and were furious, initially. By the time they had marched him home they were beginning to wonder what precisely had happened to their son in the forest. He had always looked closely at things, but before it had been in curiosity. Now he was searching for something.

They noticed another difference in the next few days. As noted, Aldis had never been overly keen on discussing his future. Now he would have nothing else but that he drained his parents' minds of every scrap of advice or opinion, and was still not satisfied. The truth was that Aldis had found his reason for living. He had been given a dream.

That transient vision in the heart of the wood, by a pool he never could find again no matter how diligently he searched, had lodged itself in the very depths of his soul. What part of it appealed to him, precisely, he could not have said. He might have been but fourteen, but it was not impossible that simple physical attraction was one of the factors that drove him. On the other hand, the force that drew him to the figure he had seen could almost be as a supplicant before a queen, or a goddess. There was the sense of incompleteness as well: her lips in his mind always about to form the second syllable of his name, never quite there. Then once again, despite his vow to carefully categorise all nature before formulating an opinion on it, Aldis knew, beyond all shades of doubt, that what had been given to him was a gift no other person in the world had. He had been presented with a unique and miraculous event, for his eyes only. He had a duty to make something of it. For whatever reason, and in whatever sense of the words, it was love at first sight, and the most fleeting, immaterial first sight that could be imagined.

Making something of it, in fact, was precisely what he planned to do. It might be that Aldis did not think in the exact same way as other people. Some said that he was a dreamer, although no more serious youth could be found. It might even be that the roads his thought took, that seemed so circuitous to other people, were far more direct routes to the truth. Whatever the fact of the matter, Aldis had made up his mind about something for the first time. He felt driven, more than anything else in the world, to realise his vision.

This was not meant in any way but the literal. Aldis had it in his head that if he could somehow capture that shining woman properly in his mind and translate that image into the world, then she would be there. It was not that such a replica would call her. Aldis believed, indeed Aldis *knew*, that the vision he saw was of someone waiting to *be*. Only his industry could bring her into being. She needed him just as he needed her.

So it was that, having exhausted his parents' knowledge, he made himself a nuisance about town, finding out what he might become, and which trade might further him in his mission.

It was reckoned by Aldis' peers that one of the great tests set by the priest for any who might wish to become his acolytes was the vileness of the man's appearance and habits. He was not deformed in any way, nor disfigured, but he limped and shambled nonetheless, and washed infrequently, and his face was pock-marked and craggy. His hairline had steadily retreated from the baleful visage, until it clung, out of sight, to the back of his head, but once it had removed itself from his piercing stare, it grew long and lank and greasy to below his shoulders.

With trepidation, Aldis approached him as he knelt at the altar, and asked him about the visions that were said to come to holy men, and whether such a vision might be made real.

'Of course,' spat the priest, and his breath muscled up to the boy and nearly drove him away before any more of the answer could be heard. 'It is a priest's duty to make the visions sent to him by the Lord into the works of man. We must always strive to better the world according to God's plan, boy, and the visions we are gifted with can direct us in our strivings.'

'It's all work then, just normal work?' Aldis asked, disappointed.

'Do not expect miracles,' the priest warned. Disheartened, but also somewhat relieved that the path to his dream was not to be found in such rank company, Aldis departed.

If prayer cannot help me realise her, Aldis decided, then perhaps ingenuity and the skilled work of hands can do so. Thus it was that the next recipient of Aldis' insistent questions was to the town's artificer. He was a difficult man to see, for his workshop was set some way into the woods, where the sound of his machines might not disturb his neighbours, and he was well known as a recluse, a man not used to nor pleased by human

company.

In contrast to the priest, the artificer was a welcome sight. In his white coat, with neatly combed hair and wire-rimmed spectacles, he presented a much more positive role model. Aldis discovered him sitting at a table in the sunlight outside the iron-sheet walls of his workshop, examining the entrails of a watch.

‘What is it, child?’ the artificer asked sharply. Obviously he was not a man with time, save for the dismembered watch, on his hands.

‘I was wondering,’ Aldis addressed him politely. ‘What kind of things is it possible for an artificer to make?’

‘There is no limit to science,’ he was told tersely, and the artificer returned to the workings of the time-piece.

‘Can you make people?’ Aldis pressed. The man looked up sharply.

‘Can I make people?’ he demanded. ‘Of course I cannot make people. I make machines, child, which I consider infinitely more satisfying.’

‘Could you make a machine that was a person, though?’ asked Aldis, determined to get to the bottom of the matter.

‘Machines are machines,’ the artificer explained patiently. ‘People are people. The two are inseparable.’

Aldis thanked him, and went home to think.

It seemed to him that simple mechanics was not the answer anyway. He needed something that would identify the subject of his dreams far more exactly. It must be the radiant woman herself, not some artificial facsimile.

His feet took him, then, to another domain on the outskirts of town. It was the studio of the artist.

The artist was a woman in her middle years, with a few lines of world-weary cynicism crows-footing their way across her face and the first tint of an older colour amidst her fair hair. Her studio was a riot of half-completed work: semi-hewn sculpture and paintings that were mostly sketch still, the bones not yet fleshed.

Aldis’ eyes flashed with enthusiasm as soon as he set foot inside. Here, surely, was the means to realise anything that he might have in his head. He stared in open admiration at the statuesque spear-holding warrior that was nearing completion in one corner, and at the elegant portrait in another that looked far more lifelike than the original had ever done.

‘Can I help you?’ the artist asked him, seeing him lost amidst her work.

‘I want to make a dream real,’ Aldis said without further deliberation. ‘Is this where I could do it?’

The artist looked at him long and hard, as if trying to ferret out which subtle shade of the word ‘real’ he was using, and finally said, ‘Maybe.’

That very day, Aldis was apprenticed, not entirely to his parents’ satisfaction, to the artist.

There was one problem. Whichever lord of providence it was that had given him his star to follow had not thought to provide him with transport for the journey.

‘I don’t understand!’ Aldis complained. ‘No matter how hard I try, no matter how much care I take, it never comes out right!’

The artist scrutinised his work thoughtfully. He was not as bad as some, in truth. His renditions of the human form did indeed look human, and not like something drawn by a surrealist in a moment of alarm, but it was obvious that his reach exceeded his grasp, and if he wanted to realise his dream, this was hardly adequate.

It was not that Aldis was bad at painting, but his criteria for success were obviously higher than his ability. Sculpture, on the other hand, he was bad at, absolutely and definitively.

‘It’s not going to work,’ Aldis told her sadly. ‘I don’t have the... the hands for it.’ He was almost in tears at being thwarted by a mere peculiarity of physiology.

The artist considered him carefully. ‘You want to realise your dream, yes? You must have a very exacting dream to realise.’

‘It must be perfect,’ Aldis stressed.

She nodded sagely. ‘I believe I have a suggestion. Not all of the arts require such delicacy of hand and eye. There are non-visual arts as well, you know.’

‘I don’t understand you,’ Aldis admitted.

‘If your dream will not rise up on the canvas,’ she explained, ‘or in stone, then perhaps you can cut it into shape with a pen.’

‘Write my dream?’ Aldis asked dubiously.

‘I won’t be able to instruct you,’ she admitted. ‘I’m no writer myself, but the path is there, if you think you can take it.’

Was it possible, Aldis wondered, to scribe such a perfect, subtle written description that the object itself would be created in the world of the writer? He felt a rising excitement within him. The more he thought about it, the more it seemed just as reasonable as prayer, or tinkering, painting or carving. To others those means and ends might have seemed lunatic, had he ever fully confided them to someone, but to Aldis they were the very meat and drink of his life.

It was decided then. Aldis Calder would write.

Of course, nothing is settled just by a simple decision. Four years had passed from that youthful idealism, and Aldis Calder was a week or so past his eighteenth birthday. Whilst maintaining his original course, struggling valiantly to master his vision, his life had drifted somewhat. The reasons for this, whilst trivial and mundane from Aldis’ perspective, had ganged up on him and forced him onto poor times. His parents had been unimpressed with his bold decision, and his first writings, such as they were, had not boded well for his future financial security. Despite his unbreakable arrow of destiny forever driving him onwards, his actual life had slipped a gear somewhere along the line.

He had left his home town, to start with. There was too much distraction there, and his parents were continually trying to get the lumberjack, a huge and terrifying creature, to take him on as a prentice. In the end he had taken the bus and moved along.

Aldis was a lad of imagination and wit, but writing is a craft, and so, whilst he practised his skills, he went hungry. Now his home was a garret above a general store. For a pittance, he wrote articles for the local paper, which the shopkeeper ground out on his own antiquated printing press. Aldis survived, as did his dream, but the two of them were forced onto somewhat bohemian straits.

It was winter, and a cold one, and Aldis was wearing his wardrobe as he worked. He had realised, some time ago, that an attempt on the virgin country of his dream was doomed to failure. If one has lived all one’s life in a valley, a little preparation is needed before one can climb the highest mountain in the world. Since that time his desk had become increasingly cluttered, not with attempts to realise his shining vision, but attempts to realise absolutely anything at all. Now, with the chill, and a hollow sensation in his belly, he had never felt quite so forlorn and hopeless.

*In its very crouched poise it was loathsome, he wrote. There was something in the hunching of its body, the low-slung head dominated by over-large eyes and the jutting spikes of antennae. It seemed some kind of diabolic auditor, missing nothing, forgiving nothing and with the greatest grudge set against its own misshapen form.*

How the mighty had fallen. Aldis Calder, recipient of miracles, was writing a beetle. He had started larger, with people, birds, deer, trees. Now, at the very frayed end of his emotional tether, he was trying to realise an insect. He did not tell his audience the scientific details the artificer would have demanded. He had long since learned that such sterile words created nothing but wastepaper and a faint taste of disinfectant in the mouth. Instead, he wrote about the impact of his insect. He told his hypothetical reader what it felt to look upon the creature. The sense of it, the sound of it, the malignant gleam of its eyes and the very character of the chitinous carapace. It was the work of a single page, but each word chosen from thousands. The artificer himself could have had no harder time of it, had he set out to make the world.

*...as it makes its slow, purposeful way through the minutiae of the world.* In a way, the beetle was Aldis, at his lowest ebb. He was putting himself into his creation.

He laid down the pen. It would require a moment for his mind to resurface from its generative trance and come face to face with the cold and the garret and life in general. Aldis leant back in the old chair and took a deep, weary breath.

As he sagged back, slowly accepting the anticlimax of it all, he was disturbed by a faint scratching sound, similar to the very pen he had put away. Frowning, he looked up, and saw, making its slow (and purposeful, no doubt) way across the desk, an insect. Not just any insect, of course. He recognised it immediately with a rush of paternal emotion. He loved every jutting spike and overlarge eye of it, and the crouched poise that was so

loathsome.

'I did it,' Aldis announced to the world. 'Praise everything, I did it!'

He got halfway to the stairs to show his landlord his wonderful bug, but some latent speck of common sense warned him that the shopkeeper would not be overjoyed to find a hunching, diabolic arthropod auditor on the premises, and might squash it. Instead, he retired to his desk and watched his pride and joy perambulate.

It soon became clear that although the creature did indeed make its slow and purposeful way through the minutiae of the world, it did not, in fact, seem to have any purpose, slow or otherwise, in doing so. Its wanderings, whilst infused, as specified, with the very essence of determined attention, were strictly random. The little monster had nothing to do, and no reason to do it.

The explanation came to him quickly. When designing a character, a good writer must always start with the background, rather than just preparing a current sketch and letting go. Not so much the sum of its parts as the sum of its past. One could not build a pyramid from the top.

His next project would be a little more ambitious. A dog, say, or a terrapin, or a rosebush. Whatever it was, though, it would spring into being with a history behind it. Drives, motives, beliefs and reasons, the very tools of characterisation. With his bug at his side, Aldis Calder set to work again, but this time his heart was singing.

There had been a time, when he was fourteen or fifteen, when the realisation of his woodland vision had seemed surely only the work of a year or two. Aldis had learned through trial and error that a very great run up is required to create anything nearing perfection. Twelve years had passed since Aldis sat in his garret, watching the slow and purposeful insect beetle its way across the desk. The years, though long and many, had not been unkind to him, quite the opposite in fact. Aldis had secured for himself a great house outside of town, designed by himself, and built by his writing, although in a far less literal sense than might be imagined. He had begun to earn a moderate living by ghost-writing for men and women of importance, and after that, a good living by writing under his own name, and the house had been one of the many things paid for by that career. Although he lived in a small town in the woods, one could find his works on shelves far and wide. Aldis Calder was a well-known self-made man.

He did not live alone, either. He was attended on by a large staff of servants, cooks, butlers, dogs and even a chauffeur, and friends of his thronged his drawing-room night and day. All of them, from his closest confidante to the boy who put a shine on his expensive shoes, were of his own design, and products of his own pen. Why risk the vagaries of other people, he had realised, when I can write everyone I'll ever need?

He did not have a wife, however, or a girlfriend, a paramour, a lover, or even a concubine. Many of the daughters, and even a son or two, of the locals had presented themselves at his door, and the butler, with impeccably written manners, had turned them away. Aldis was saving himself.

As might be guessed, Aldis had grown skilled at his craft, and although his faithful insect was still with him, slow and purposeful as ever, he had reached a stage where, waking up one morning, he knew that the greatest test of his abilities had arrived. The very issue for which he had practised every day in sixteen years was going to be tackled.

He gathered his household together and explained the situation. They listened, silent and attentive, as he drew his courage around him. All of them knew just how much this meant to him. They themselves had been mere by-products of this insatiable drive. They wished him luck, and drank to his endeavour, and assured him that they were all behind him, his friends, his comrades, his creations.

'The time has come,' he told himself, and them. 'I will retire to my study now. I may be some time.'

They gathered about the study door as he closed it, and heard the sound of the key turning in the lock.

This would be the make or the wreck of him, and he went to his desk like one anticipating mortal combat. A ream of blank paper stood ready for the mark of his pen, and he might well need it all. He sat, took the first sheet before him, and thought about background. He had only that second's-length glimpse from so many years ago to work with, and even though it was as clear in his mind as locking the study door a moment ago, how could he guess at the past that was attached to that ephemeral form?

Nothing for it but to start writing, Aldis decided. He had a strange feeling that whatever past he bestowed on his vision would be the right one. He could not do wrong by his dream.

His pen started into motion, and he wrote.

It was a Herculean task, and he wrote like one bewitched. A bug had taken a page to create, and he passed that in minutes. His favourite dog had been eight pages of carefully chosen behaviour, and in an hour he might have produced a second, should he have wanted to. His pen dragged on, and he wrote like an enchanted man, or like one of the artificer's machines.

His butler had been the work of some eighty pages. The thought crossed his mind as he began page number eighty-one. The greatest and more complex of his companions had been a novel of some two-hundred sheets of his fine, cramped writing, some ninety thousand words. He knew that this project, the be-all and end-all of his career, would be far, far longer.

Outside the door, his friends and staff listened to the steady scratching of his pen, and wondered how long it would take him. Leaving the room for necessities, and rarely for sleep, he had been working for over a week.

When they asked him how his struggle went, he told them that he had no idea. The only option left to him now was that he write onwards, until the end came in sight. He was cast adrift on his own creative drive, and there was not a soul who could tell how long the road was that he walked.

One morning, Aldis Calder woke and sensed that something had changed. As he had done frequently, he had written himself into an exhausted slumber the previous night, beyond even remembering to what hour he had slaved, and now he found himself slumped across his desk, but something was different. Something had definitely changed.

All around him, on every available surface, the pages of his work lay. The room was carpeted with them, save for a narrow channel of safe sailing that led to the door. He had used up his original ream some time ago, and the next stack as well. He had never seen so much paper in one place before.

A subversive idea occurred to him. Surely he had not... finished?

He recalled some vague thought from the previous night that seemed to back it up, some indistinct feeling of conclusion that he had finally drifted off with.

Expectantly, he looked around his study, and his stomach began to sink, for his vision, his dream, Aldis' Angel, was not present.

No, he told himself. Surely not.

The artist had once quoted to him: 'A man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?' He had been violently opposed to that notion, that dreams were forever unattainable. His entire life had been based on the precept that if he worked at it hard enough, his dream, his heaven, could become reality, the vision that had so fascinated and captivated him could be made into a real thing. He had written a beetle, he had written a bangle, he had written a butler. Why could he not write *her*?

Something really had changed, though, and if it was not that his angel had been realised, then what was it?

He looked around at the mess of paper across the floor, and at the walls of his study, and realised, slowly, that it wasn't. Perhaps it took him so long because he was unused to dealing with anything that he, personally, had not designed, and with a decade of knowing the most intimate details of everything he looked at, he had ceased to look so hard. The fact was occurring to him that this study, whilst resembling his own in many particulars, was not his.

'What the devil?' he wondered aloud, and plucked a piece of paper from the floor. He read:

*Aldis Calder's life, though, was of the waterfall kind. He had a brief and uninterrupted space of wandering, without purpose, meaning or point, and then his life was taken, shaken and set on a course that neither mankind nor the gods could alter.*

Aldis stared at the sheet blankly, unable to comprehend quite what it meant. Somebody had been writing about *him*? But why? What possible reason could anyone have for such an activity...?

Then again, another subversive thought suggested slyly, maybe it isn't that somebody is writing about *you*.

Excuse me? Aldis asked it, but the subversive thought, having troubled him, was silent.

At that moment, he heard the familiar sound of the key in the study door, despite the fact that neither study nor door were quite the ones he remembered. He braced himself for action as the brass handle turned and the door swung open, ruffling the pages of his life.

His angel walked in, wearing not a white cloud-like dress, but sensible modern clothes. The two of them stared at one another for a long while, both apparently afflicted with the same disbelief and wonder, and eventually, he saw her lips form the word 'Aldis'.

He felt that the whole of his life up until that point vindicated simply by seeing that second syllable shaped. He felt, seeing her before him, as real as him, that he could turn on all the doubters who had dogged his steps and laugh. He had reached and grasped, he wanted to say, and heaven was his. He also wanted to know how he had done it, and why all the sheets on the floor were the life story of the wrong person.

'I don't understand,' he whispered. 'What happened? What is all this?' His hands described the ocean of paper, and for a moment he felt terribly vulnerable, out of his element for the first time in years.

'This?' she asked him, looking around with a wry smile. 'There's an awful lot of it, isn't there.' She looked up, and the expression of welcome and wonder on her face dispelled any lingering doubts or worries he might have had. 'I finally did it, even though it took me weeks, and hundreds of pages. Perhaps you could have been shorter, it's just that I had to start with your background...'

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# STANDING TALL

by

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Derek was sure that there wasn't normally a Wild West theme pub down Pine Street. His eyes might not have been as good as they once were, his optician had recently prescribed him reading glasses, but he was sure that he would have noticed something like that. {PRIVATE }

When he had walked to work this morning there had been a disused shop at the corner, the boarded up windows covered with To Let posters. But now there was a fake cowboy saloon.

Derek marvelled at the speed with which the building had been renovated. It must have taken an extremely large and dedicated work force to complete the task in such a short time. They hadn't even started work when he had passed by this morning.

As Derek drew nearer he noticed there wasn't a sign sporting the name of the pub. Surely there should have been a board hanging from the roof with something like *The Duke* emblazoned beneath a bad portrait of John Wayne.

It seemed strange that there should have been such an obvious oversight when such sterling work had been done on the rest of the pub. The walls were cleverly designed to look like they were made from real timber. Even the pavement in front of the pub had been painted to give the appearance of a wooden porch. It actually looked like a real saloon.

Derek wondered if the interior was as impressive. Perhaps he should take a look. It would delay him having to tell Maureen what had happened at work today. He could even have a drink, give himself some Dutch courage. Might as well make the most of the one advantage of having to walk to work while his car was being repaired. Pushing open the swing doors Derek entered the saloon.

It was like walking into another world. The air between the tables was filled with acrid tobacco smoke and the merry tinkling of a piano. Can-can dancers were up on a stage at the far end of the saloon showing off their flexibility and their frilly pantaloons. A card game, it had to be poker, was going on at one of the tables. Revolvers and derringers lay amongst the cards and coins.

Everyone in the place was dressed in some kind of Wild West outfit and talked with American accents. Looking round Derek realised that he was the only one wearing normal clothes. He was the only real customer in the place.

Shaking his head at the money that must have gone into decorating the pub Derek made his way to the bar.

'What'll it be, stranger?' asked the bartender. He was decked out in waistcoat and apron, a handle-bar moustache and oiled black hair parted down the middle. Derek pitied him, it must be really embarrassing having to wear that outfit.

'I'll have a whisky, please,' said Derek.

The bartender nodded curtly and pulled a bottle from beneath the bar. He poured a shot into a glass then sent the drink sliding down the bar towards Derek in typical Western bartender fashion. Caught off-guard Derek lunged clumsily for the glass, spilling some of the spirit onto his hand. A couple of cowboys laughed openly at his mishap and an embarrassed flush singed Derek's cheeks. After the day he had suffered at work he really didn't need anything else to sour his mood.

Derek was about to take a sip when he realised that the glass was absolutely filthy. 'Er, excuse me, do you think I could have a clean glass?'

A long moment passed as the bartender stared at him impassively. Then he picked up another glass, spat into it, wiped it with a cloth and proffered it to Derek.

'On second thought I'll stick with this one.' Derek debated whether to report the bartender to the manager. But he had never liked complaining, he never felt comfortable making a fuss. Derek decided to let it go.

'How much do I owe you?' he asked.

Before the bartender could answer the doors swung open and two cowboys staggered in. Derek noticed that both men wore tin stars on their shirts. The older of the two clutched at his chest as his young companion helped support him.

The music stopped playing and everyone gaped at the two men.

'Black Bart's shot the sheriff!' cried the younger man.

A horrified buzz ran through the onlookers. The sheriff slumped to the ground, his hand falling from his chest to reveal a patch of blood. One of the dancers fainted.

Derek took a sip of whisky. They were certainly laying on the entertainment tonight. He wondered how many of the performers were regular staff and how many were actors hired especially for the occasion. This had to be a one-off show, an opening night extravaganza. It would be too expensive to stage this sort of thing every night.

Everyone crowded round as the young deputy tried for an Oscar. 'Don't you die on me, Jed,' he said as he cradled the sheriff in his arms. 'Don't die, y'hear?'

'Don't fret now, son,' the older man told him. 'Ain't no use cryin'.'

'I ain't cryin',' protested the deputy as tears poured down his face.

The sheriff wiped one of the tears that had fallen onto his cheek and smiled weakly. 'You ain't tellin' me that Caleb went an' got this hole fixed up with that newfangled runnin' water.'

Derek waited for a pun on the Indian chief's name but none came.

'You promise me somethin' now, Daniel,' said Jed, clasping the deputy's hand. 'You promise me that you find Black Bart an' you stop him from hurtin' any more decent folk.'

'I promise,' said Daniel through his tears.

'Good boy.' Jed pressed his sheriff's star into Daniel's hand. 'I want you to have this. I won't be needin' it no more.' The sheriff's eyes closed and he slumped in Daniel's arms.

There was a respectful silence then an undertaker came running in wearing a black top hat and quickly measured Jed's body before carting him off in a wheelbarrow. Derek fought to hold back his laughter.

Daniel addressed the assembled onlookers. 'You all heard what he said. He wants me to track down Black Bart an' bring him to justice.'

'That ain't what he said,' said a decrepit old man in ragged clothes and a grey bush of a beard. 'He told you to find Bart an' put a bullet in him.'

Daniel glared at the man. 'I ain't gonna kill Black Bart 'less he gives me a reason. That's the law. That's the way Jed wanted it.'

The old timer laughed sarcastically as he filled his clay pipe with baccy.

'Why d'ya think he gave me his star?' demanded Daniel.

'Cos it's a handy thing to hide behind after you murder someone.'

'What?' Daniel was appalled.

'Course maybe you won't shoot Bart in the back. Maybe you'll go at him head on, *mano a mano*.' The old man took a puff of his pipe. 'Course if you do you're a damn fool.'

Derek watched as Daniel took off his deputy badge and threw it on the floor. He pinned on the sheriff's star. 'I ain't sayin' it again. I ain't shootin' Bart 'less he gives me reason.' He turned and walked from the saloon.

The crowd stood aimlessly for a moment then someone picked up the deputy badge. 'Anybody want this?'

There were murmurs of refusal. The man's eyes fell on Derek. 'How 'bout you, stranger? You want the job?'

Derek shook his head. He had never been keen on audience participation. 'No thanks.'

The man shrugged and placed the badge on an empty table.

Slowly everyone went back to their business. The gamblers went back to their game. The piano player struck up a tune but it was less jaunty than the one he had been playing before. The dancers got back on stage and began a half-hearted routine.

Derek had to admit that the staff had put on quite a show. Even though he had been the only customer they had still given their all. Even now he could hear the various actors carrying on conversations about the ramifications of Jed's death.

'I'm tellin' ya, Daniel won't be able to take Bart,' said one of the cowboys at a nearby table. 'We need a real sheriff like Bruce Grant over at Dead Rock. You ever hear the tale 'bout him roundin' up the Jones gang?'

His companion shook his head. 'Uh-uh.'

The first cowboy leaned forward conspiratorially. 'Way I heard it the Jones boys busted up the Dead Rock bank. Shot all the tellers, just for the hell of it. Grant finds out what happened, he don't wait for no posse or nothin',

he's after those sons of bitches.

'Had to ride for a day an' a night 'fore he caught 'em. Tethers his horse an' walks straight into the middle of their camp, right up to their fire. The six Jones boys they're all sleeping. Grant, he stands there an' looks at them an' he gets to thinkin' 'bout all the pain an' misery that those boys have caused. He takes out his Colt, that big ol' Peacemaker o' his, an' cocks the hammer.

'He fires a shot into the air. Wakes up the whole damn gang.

'They see him standin' in front of that fire, righteous anger in his eye an' retribution in his hand, an' they know that they're dead. It's a fact, all they got to do is lie down, stop breathin' an' accept it. But still they draw on him.'

The cowboy paused and took a swig of his drink. Derek nearly ran over and shook him by the shoulders to tell him what happened next.

'Fast as each one drew Grant put a bullet in 'em.'

Derek breathed a mental sigh of relief. But the story contained a problem of simple arithmetic.

'Grant was gonna have to reload to finish the last Jones boy, Frank. As Frank draws Grant just stands there, breaks open his pistol an' spills the spent shells on the ground. He's startin' to reload when Frank gets a bead on him.

'That's when Grant starts talkin' to him.'

Talking to him? thought Derek. What did he say, "I'm sorry I shot your brothers, please don't kill me"?

'Grant looks Frank straight in the eye an' says "You better kill me quick, boy. 'Cos every shot you miss is a body part I shoot off your scrawny carcass."

'Frank fires.

'He misses.

""That's your kneecap, boy."

'Frank misses again. That'll be the other kneecap. An' again. That'll be a bullet through the hand. Fourth miss, that's the other hand. Grant is still reloading. Another miss. Grant tells him that he'll never be able to have children. Frank's last shot goes wide as well.

""The hell with it," says Grant as he finishes reloading. "Why don't I just blow your goddamn brains out?"

'An' he did.'

The cowboy who had been listening to the story shook his head in admiration. 'That Grant is one fearless hombre.'

'Got that right.'

'Wasn't right of him goin' back on his word though, killin' Frank outright like that.'

'Don't think Frank was plannin' on holdin' him to it.'

'Guess not.'

They carried on talking about how great a man Grant was and Derek stopped listening. Although he had enjoyed the story he didn't really want to hear the cowboys' opinion of what made a man a man.

That cartoon macho version of bravery was entertaining but it had little to do with real life. Derek knew that acts of courage were often more a question of circumstance than choice. When that rush of fear strikes no-one can predict how they will react. Fight or flight, it was a delicate balance. The man that was a hero one day could be a coward the next.

Even being able to deal with one type of fear didn't necessarily mean an ability to cope with another sort. Derek remembered an ex-Para he had known who died when his home burned down because he had been frozen with fear, unable to leave the blazing building.

Life had no set rules, it was constant give and take. The small victories and everyday heroics stacked against the defeats and humiliations. The delight of closing that big deal versus the sour backing down to your tyrannical boss so that you could keep your job.

Derek wished that he was a movie cowboy. Able to stand tall and go his own way, to blaze with what anyone else thought. Maybe then he wouldn't feel so bad about confronting Maureen about what had happened at work.

Being passed over for promotion wasn't so bad. That was just one of the little kicks in the teeth that he had come to expect from life. Even the fact they had given the position to some smart aleck whizz-kid was something that he would eventually have got over. But having to tell Maureen that he wasn't going to receive the pay rise that she had been looking forward to spending, that was an experience that he would gladly avoid if possible.

He wouldn't call Maureen a dragon, at least not to her face, but she had very firm ideas about what her position in life was supposed to be. And God help Derek if he didn't help her live up to them.

Finishing his whisky Derek wondered what was the best way to go about telling Maureen about the promo-

tion. Right at that moment he favoured getting drunk but he knew that would only give her extra ammunition. A little regretfully he placed his empty glass on the counter.

'Good drink?' asked the bartender.

'Yes, thanks.'

'Good enough to pay for?'

With a shock Derek realised that he had forgotten to pay for his drink. He reached for his wallet. 'Sorry, how much was it?'

'Two bits.'

Derek smiled politely at the bartender's adherence to his Wild West persona. 'No, really, how much?'

'Two bits,' repeated the bartender.

Derek gave up. He put a fiver on the counter. 'Well, just take it out of that.'

The bartender picked up the note and examined it dubiously. 'The hell is this?'

'Money,' said Derek, puzzled.

'Not here it ain't,' growled the bartender, pushing the note back towards him.

Flustered, Derek searched through his wallet. He had no more notes and there was only a handful of coppers in his pocket. 'Do you take credit cards?'

'You tellin' me you can't pay?'

As Derek shrugged apologetically the bartender came round to the other side of the bar and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. Derek protested as the bartender propelled him towards the door but to no avail. He was shoved through the doors and out into the street.

Derek was about to go back in and complain to the manager when he caught sight of his surroundings and stopped dead.

Pine Street had been replaced by a Western town. There was a grocery store, a hardware store, a set of stables and a hotel. Dust blew down the street and tumbleweed rolled between the buildings.

Derek reeled in confusion. That whisky must have been a lot stronger than he had realised. As he stared about him in confusion passers-by looked at him strangely, puzzled by his unusual clothes and bewildered demeanour.

Derek tried to get his thoughts into some kind of order. This couldn't be a real Western town. It was the wrong time, the wrong country. Besides, everyone was too healthy. They didn't have modern medicine yet and their teeth should be falling out whilst they waited for striped toothpaste to be invented. Derek searched for other inconsistencies. Jed had mentioned running water but surely indoor plumbing wouldn't even have been heard of in a place like this. And had two bits been the right price for his drink? Derek wished that he knew more about American history so that he could piece the clues together.

As Derek tried to understand his situation he saw a lone rider coming down the street. At his approach the townfolk stared in horror then quickly ducked inside, slamming doors shut behind them.

The rider drew closer. He was wearing black. A black hat, black shirt, black trousers, black boots. Even the horse that he rode was black.

Derek took a wild guess that this was Black Bart.

Staring in disbelief Derek watched as Bart dismounted outside the saloon and tethered his horse. The gunslinger surveyed the town as he brushed the prairie dust from his clothes. His eyes flicked to his right at the sound of someone calling his name from up the street.

Daniel stood outside the sheriff's office, his face grim. 'Been waitin' for you, Bart.'

Bart frowned as if he wasn't sure he recognised Daniel but as the sheriff started walking towards him the gunslinger smiled.

Realising that the street probably wasn't the safest place to be right then Derek ran back inside the saloon. Everyone was crowded at the windows to watch the action. Dazedly Derek joined them.

Daniel stopped walking ten yards short of Bart. 'I'm takin' you in, Bart.' Daniel's hand hovered above the Colt that hung on his hip. 'You gonna come peacefully?'

Bart regarded him scornfully then spat onto the street. 'Hell do you think?'

Watching from the window Derek saw that Daniel had barely begun his draw before there was a crack of thunder and the sheriff lay dead in the street. Gunsmoke curled up from the barrel of Bart's six-shooter.

'You see that?' breathed the cowboy standing next to Derek. 'He shot him right through his sheriff's star!'

Bart holstered his pistol and walked towards the saloon. The swing doors opened with an ominous creak as he entered. His footsteps were slow and deliberate, the spurs jangling with each step. People shrank away, trying not to look at him but he drew glances like a car wreck.

As he made his way to the bar Bart glanced from side to side, studying the saloon's patrons, looking for any

form of insult, intentional or otherwise. Each person that Bart passed looked visibly relieved that they had not been singled out.

Then Bart saw Derek and stopped.

The chances of Derek suffering a coronary increased tenfold.

Derek wanted to look away from the outlaw's cold stare but couldn't, like a rabbit transfixed by oncoming headlights. Bart cast an appraising eye over Derek's suit then slowly returned his gaze to his face, staring at him for a long moment before speaking. 'Nice outfit.'

Derek tried an appreciative smile at the compliment but all his lips could manage was a nervous twitch.

'Where'd ya get it?'

'Marks and Spenc- um, Britain.'

'You a Brit?'

'Y-yes.'

Bart nodded thoughtfully. 'A Brit shot my great-granddaddy in 1776.'

'I, er, I'm sorry about that.'

'Don't be. From what I hear he was a worthless son of a bitch. 'Sides I ain't one to hold a grudge.'

'You're not?'

Bart eyed him suspiciously. 'You don't believe me?'

'Oh no, I do, I do.'

'I'll prove my forgivin' nature. Have a drink with me.'

'That's very kind of you but I'm afraid I have to be going.'

Bart's eyes narrowed. 'I don't recall givin' you a choice.'

At Bart's request the bartender placed a bottle of scotch and two glasses on the bar. Bart poured generous shots and, passing one to Derek, drained the other in a single gulp.

Derek sipped his drink tentatively.

'You better drink faster'n that,' Bart told him as he poured himself another shot. 'I aim to drink this place dry.' He downed the glass. 'Hope you got enough money to cover that.'

'What?' Derek started.

'You are payin', ain't ya?'

'Ah, well, you see there's a slight problem there -'

'He ain't got no money,' said the bartender sullenly.

'That a fact?' said Bart. He shook his head in disbelief. 'I done some low down things in my time, committed more sins than God could come up with Commandments, but I ain't *never* tried to get away with not payin' for my drinks.'

A dozen thoughts went through Derek's mind, all fighting for control of his voice box. He opened his mouth but all it did was catch a bead of cold sweat that rolled off his upper lip.

Bart turned to face him. 'You tryin' to besmirch my good name?'

'No, I wouldn't dream of it -'

'Don't think you're bein' entirely honest with me.' Bart flexed his shooting hand. 'Guess I'm gonna have to teach you some manners.'

Adrenaline exploded in Derek's stomach and his heart became a jackhammer. 'But I don't have a gun!'

A surprised expression passed over Bart's face only to be replaced with a smile. 'That kinda puts the odds in my favour, don't it?'

Derek looked desperately at the other people in the saloon, searching for aid. They all just watched, waiting for the inevitable.

'You can't just shoot me in cold blood!' he pleaded.

Bart stroked the butt of his Remington six-shooter. 'Beg to differ with you.'

This was it, decided Derek. The moment of truth. He could either die or try something incredibly stupid. 'Wait!' he said. 'I just remembered, I've got some money!' He reached in his pocket.

'Don't make no difference,' said Bart. 'Still gonna kill ya.'

'But why?'

Bart started to reply and Derek threw a handful of coins in his face. As the gunslinger flinched Derek snatched up the whisky bottle and smashed it against Bart's head. Fragments of glass embedded themselves in Bart's face. He staggered back and Derek hit him again, slicing open his cheek.

Blood spurting from the ruined ribbons of his face, Bart fell to the floor. Derek stamped on his head. Once. Twice. Bart lay still.

Panting from the exertion and shocked by the brutality of what he had just done Derek stared frantically about him. His wild eyes found the bartender who took a nervous step back, hands raised in a placatory gesture. 'Okay, the drinks are on the house.'

Looking down at Bart's unconscious form Derek nearly threw up. He managed to hold it in. Barely. He threw the broken bottle away from him in disgust.

Suddenly everyone was round him, slapping him on the back, congratulating him. He had beaten Black Bart. He was a hero.

Derek didn't feel like a hero. He had just been lucky. If Bart hadn't been so overconfident he could easily have shot Derek before he had a chance to throw the coins. But here was everyone praising his bravery. No-one called it what it had really been; savagery backed by desperation.

Pushing his way through his crowd of new-found admirers Derek walked over to the swing doors. He needed to clear his head to figure out what he was going to do next.

Derek stepped out of the saloon into the Western town but it wasn't there any more. It had been replaced by the more familiar surroundings of Pine Street. He spun round in surprise to look at the saloon but it had gone too. The old disused shop stood there the way that it always used to.

Derek fumbled in his pocket, his handful of change was still missing but that was hardly conclusive proof of what had just happened. He scratched his head, this had been one hell of an evening.

And it wasn't over yet Derek realised with a sinking feeling. He still had to tell Maureen that he hadn't got the promotion. As Derek started the walk home he steeled himself for the forthcoming confrontation. But maybe it wouldn't be so bad. He had already faced stark terror once this evening, perhaps he could do it again.

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# ***THE COINCIDENCE PRINCIPLE***

by

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**University of Gateshead**

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## Question

By examining the lives and works of Albert Zweimugs and Randolph Merdkopf, show how space travel and exploration were revolutionised in the 21st century. (Fully reference all sources).

## Answer

By coincidence, although of course Merdkopf was not involved at that stage, the story began on the day of his birth, October 19th 2041. By that year mineral mining was already in full swing on the moon, on Mars, and on two of the satellites of Jupiter. But though each of these locations had mining and scientific colonies, life was hard and there was no real prospect of residential colonies ever succeeding.

Space travel had improved drastically in the early years of the century, but in relative terms it remained so ponderously slow that journeys to the stars were still the stuff of fiction. So, even allowing for the benefits it had brought, space travel had failed in one of its prime aims - that of finding somewhere to take the overflow from a teeming, problem ridden Earth. With a population of twelve and a half billion, and an average life expectancy across the globe of 86, (World Census - 2040) the planet's troubles were becoming acute.

In 2041, however, a shy and somewhat serious minded young post-graduate student named Albert Zweimugs discovered a new sub-atomic particle which came to be called the aletron.

The aletron is a particle with no measurable mass and no electrical charge, which cannot be detected in collision with other particles, and which is unaffected by gravity (at least the non-specific kind). That it had not been discovered earlier is no surprise as it is an apparently aimless and invisible wanderer. To call it innocuous is not enough; this is a particle that makes the neutrino look like a busybody.

The aletron does, however, have two strange properties. The first is that when many of them are collected and concentrated into a small space and then bombarded with a stream of accelerated electrons, a temporary disturbance in the fabric of space is caused which opens up a gateway to travel anywhere in the galaxy.

But how does one collect and concentrate such an elusive and undetectable particle? That is where the aletron's second strange property, and Albert Zweimugs, come into the picture.

Zweimugs wasn't looking for a new particle, but was doing research into why Newcastle Brown Ale was undoubtedly the finest bottled beer in the world. It was during this work that he decided, for reasons he never adequately explained, to fire a stream of electrons, using the accelerator at the University of Gateshead, into a bottle of Brown. And thus, by this most amazing stroke of serendipity, the aletron's second strange property was discovered: although it passes unhindered and unnoticed through the sub-atomic spaces in most matter, when it hits Newcastle Brown Ale it sticks. Each bottle is actually an aletron reservoir (many now claim it is the aletrons that give the brew its distinct qualities), and the particle had remained undiscovered simply because no-one before had thought to fire electrons at beer. But on that autumn day in 2041 Zweimugs, from his position behind a glass screen, witnessed what he later described in the following manner - 'I saw...a point of darkness that grew swiftly, shimmering at its margins, until it was a circle fully two metres in diameter. It was a darkness, a blackness so utter and so complete, that I believed I was looking at infinity itself.' (*Discovering the Aletron* - A. Zweimugs - Gateshead University Press - 2044)

The event lasted for four and a half seconds, and when it was over the bottle of beer, the table on which it

had been standing, and several of the laboratory's fixtures and fittings had simply winked out of this world to end up who knew where.

This was the first instance of the aletronic void which even now, almost a century later, enables our interstellar spacecraft to travel.

The university appointed an international team of scientists to work under Zweimugs to investigate the mysterious occurrence. Within three months they had inferred the existence of the new particle. The aletron's potential as a provider of easy and probably instantaneous transport to other areas of the galaxy was quickly realised, and the European government took the production of Newcastle Brown Ale into state ownership, promptly banning its sale to the general populace. Over the whole of northern Europe there were 374 fatalities in the riots that followed that decision, and the politicians were forced to agree that enough of the beer could be brewed to power spacecraft *and* satisfy public demand.

It was in March of the following year, 2042, that the space cruiser Exhibition, in high lunar orbit, discharged a container of Newcastle Brown Ale from its nose, and then activated the recently developed space-saving, double-wound, helical electron accelerator, producing almost instantaneously a void in space some thirty metres in diameter.

The first part of the plan was for Captain Burke to nudge his ship forward into the void and be transported to another point in the galaxy. This phase of the operation went perfectly and the Exhibition vanished, to the cheers of mission controllers on the moon.

The second part of the plan was for the captain and his two person crew to plot their new position, and then to rotate through exactly 180 degrees and repeat the aletron procedure in order to return from whence they had come. As the ship didn't come back, this phase of the plan was deemed a failure.

The experiment was repeated with a second craft and the result was exactly the same. Volunteers for the third crew were hard to come by, but the problem was solved by making an unrefusable offer to three murderers on death row. Actually things didn't go quite so badly for this mission. In the instant that the cruiser St. Jude vanished from lunar orbit it appeared in orbit round Ganymede. There was much jubilation about this, as some people thought they were finally getting the hang of things.

It was conjectured that the reason the other two ships had not come back was because they had realigned themselves inaccurately before the return jump. Because the St. Jude was so close to home, however, mission control was able to line up the ship with such accuracy that *LunaNet*, which at that time was the most sophisticated neural network in existence, said that the percentage of error was so small it was incalculable. The ship discharged its container of aletrons, bombarded it with electrons, entered the void, and vanished completely from the solar system.

This was not the last that was heard of these three unfortunate ships, but I will return to their fate later.

It was obvious from the experience of the St. Jude that ships entering the aletronic void were not simply being destroyed, but were actually going somewhere. It was equally obvious, however, that no matter which direction the ship was facing, or how fast it was travelling, its destination was decided entirely at random. As a bitterly disappointed Zweimugs said at the time, 'Man may decide on the ante, but God still shuffles the deck.' (Interview - *The Independent Guardian* - October 12th 2042).

Despite years of effort by scientists (using unmanned drones) to develop controls for ships entering the aletronic void, the problem seemed insoluble. And though Zweimugs' discovery of the new particle won him a Nobel prize and an honorary directorship of Scottish and Newcastle Breweries, the only use the void could be put to was that of a waste disposal chute. Once a month a huge purpose built freighter was filled with rubbish and sent on its way to pollute some far corner of the galaxy. It also became fashionable among the rich to have their earthly remains aletronically disposed of after death. And so things remained for nearly forty years, until the year 2080.

By that time, 39 year old Randolph Merdkopf was a very wealthy man. He had started out in London in his early twenties, running a shop that sold neckties. This venture ticked over reasonably well for a couple of years, but the ever ambitious Merdkopf wanted more.

With almost 50% of all goods being purchased electronically through *VirtuMart*, traditional retailers were feeling the squeeze, but Merdkopf, intelligent, imaginative and confident to the point of arrogance, resolved to turn back the tide.

He decided to exploit a human instinct that was as old as commerce itself, the greed motive. He altered the programming in his shop's debit terminal so that it would err in favour of the customer in every transaction. Most people would be credited with only a few Ecuents (which loss had been offset by a surreptitious hike in prices a week before he introduced the service), but about one person in 500 would benefit by so much that they would effectively receive their purchase free. He changed the name of his emporium from the some-

what uninspiring *The Tie Shop* to *Take Your Tie*, spent more than he could afford advertising his new shopping concept, and waited to see what would happen.

It turned out to have been a brilliant marketing coup. People flocked to his shop. The necktie, which had become something of an anachronism, suddenly became high fashion. Within five years Merdkopf had over 250 shops in Europe, and 50 more in other parts of the world, and still the business continued to expand.

So years later, in July 2080, when Merdkopf had the second inspirational idea in his life, he had the wherewithal to act on it.

Merdkopf had first noticed the power of coincidence at the age of eight. He had been learning geography on *NetSchool*, and the lecturer had been talking about contours. This was the first time he had come across the word, and so he was amazed when that very evening on *AdNet* he saw a commercial for a 3-D contour jigsaw puzzle. It struck him as very odd that a word he had never heard before he should hear twice in a few hours. He never forgot this incident, and as he grew was constantly on the lookout for coincidence, which always fascinated him when he found it, as he seemed to do quite often.

The things he noticed weren't very different from what has happened to most people. For instance, thinking of somebody you haven't seen for ages, and then getting an unexpected call from them. Or the case where each of the events in a sequence always happens in the same way, but as soon as you notice this and comment, 'I wonder why it always happens like that', it happens differently the very next time.

There was coincidence at play when Merdkopf met his wife. He first saw Amanda Caffrey while on a managerial inspection of the Dublin branch of *Take Your Tie*. He spotted her as she paid for a tie, possibly for herself as they had become fashionable for women, and he fell hopelessly in love with the mere sight of her. She exactly fitted his mental image of the perfect woman. However, as often happens in situations like this, he allowed her to walk out of his shop, and apparently out of his life. Yet so smitten was he by this woman that for weeks he couldn't concentrate properly on anything. Finally he decided that a complete break was the only way to get his feet back on the ground, so he booked a week on *Helsat*, the luxurious, zero-g, orbiting health and leisure complex. After all, he could afford it. One person who could certainly not afford it was Amanda Caffrey, but by a stunning coincidence she had won a week at the complex in a competition, and Merdkopf found himself seated next to her on the shuttle. Needless to say he did not allow her to get away again and within seven months they were married.

As the years went by Merdkopf became more and more obsessed with coincidence. He convinced himself that, by some means as yet unknown, apparently unrelated events could influence one another. He began consciously to try to make coincidences happen.

His early efforts consisted of trying to imitate coincidences he had experienced. He deliberately thought of people he had not seen for years and waited for them to call. This never worked once. In fact it was such a failure that he began to believe that it could not fail so comprehensively by coincidence, and that some mechanism must be at work.

He gradually discovered that the more consciously, the more fervently he wished for something, the less likely it was to happen. He developed a technique that he called 'idly supposing', whereby he would try to come up on an idea obliquely, attempting to fool his mind into thinking that no conscious effort was being made. This technique had more success, but even when coincidences occurred he could never be sure whether he was making them happen, or whether they were just happening by coincidence.

The catalyst that finally spurred him on to the discovery that would guarantee his place in history happened in his own home on July 15th 2080. He and his wife were having a friendly argument about who had been the last king of Italy. Why they were discussing this has never been explained, but failing to come to an agreement with her he let the matter drop and clicked into *NewsNet*. As was his regular habit he went straight to the crossword, but on that morning he could only stare in disbelief at 1 across which read, 'Umberto was the last king of which former European country? (5)'.

Most people would have shrugged off such a coincidence, but Merdkopf, precisely because he had paid so much attention to his subject, could not. An entry in his diary for the following day states, 'I knew that something was about to happen. I felt in my bones that I was about to make the discovery that would prove I had been right all along.' (*The Collected Letters and Diaries of Randolph Merdkopf* - Shooter & Goldman - 2078).

What actually happened was that his eye caught another article on the same page. The piece was be-moaning the fact that although it had been almost forty years since the discovery of the aletronic void, and although void technology had the potential to be humankind's biggest boon, it was still only used for waste disposal. His diary again; 'Suddenly I had it, I knew how the aletronic void could be controlled, and I knew that I could do it.' (*ibid.*).

He believed that all he had to do was to sit in a space cruiser, idly suppose where he wanted to go and, when he entered the void, by pure coincidence he would end up there.

So certain was he that he called the European Space Agency (ESA) to offer his services. He did not think of asking for money for his discovery; being one of the hundred richest men in the world he could afford altruism. However it is unlikely that bids would have rolled in at that stage as the Agency thought he was mad and told him to go away.

This setback did not deter him. He knew he was right, and if the agency would not help him, then neither could it prevent him from helping himself. He bought a space cruiser, had it fitted with the latest compact electron accelerator and, amid great publicity, piloted it alone into lunar orbit.

He had invited an audience of eminent scientists, politicians, and celebrities to observe him from Space Traffic Control on the moon. Albert Zweimugs himself had been asked, but by a strange coincidence he had died only a week before when a tie he had purchased from one of Merdkopf's shops had caught in a lift door and strangled him.

For his first jaunt, Merdkopf had decided to go no further than Mars. He sat in his cruiser and idly supposed himself to be orbiting the red planet. Then he fired a beam of accelerated electrons at the previously positioned container of ale, and gently nudged his ship into the resultant void.

History records his complete success. The space cruiser Desdemona appeared in Martian orbit and then, twelve minutes later and with no realignment, it returned to its point of departure. The Coincidence Principle, a term Merdkopf had coined a few years earlier, suddenly became the hottest thing in science.

The ESA was quick to admit the folly of doubting Merdkopf and began to conduct its own experiments. These worked very well to begin with, until the incident of the ill-fated Lysistrata. This cruiser was captained by Marilyn Mansfield, a woman of both great ability and great beauty. The ship was to jump to Pluto to do some survey work for a mining company. Unfortunately when it entered the aletronic void the Lysistrata did not disappear. Instead it imploded until its entire mass was concentrated into a space the exact shape and size of the unlucky Captain Mansfield.

The subsequent fatal accident investigation discovered that both of her male crew members had the hots for Ms Mansfield. The conclusion of the investigators (speculative though it had to be), was that while they were meant to be idly supposing themselves to Pluto, both men were actually entertaining thoughts of doing deliciously disgusting things to their captain's body. The Coincidence Principle, being no discriminator, promptly took the ship to the destination to which the majority of its occupants had supposed it.

The woman shaped artefact was designated a tomb for the three luckless pilots, and was left in orbit as a memorial. Several decades later, however, in 2118, it was recovered and now stands proudly in the lobby of the *Musée de l'Espace* in Paris.

After the Lysistrata incident all crews were given drugs which induced a light hypnotic trance and enabled them to keep extraneous thoughts at bay, and no similar accidents have ever occurred. In fact so well do the aletron and the Principle work alongside each other that the only other fatalities associated with this means of travel happened in the year 2043 to the crews of the three original experimental ships which had gone missing a year earlier.

On March 9th 2043, about 250 miles from the surface of Earth, a huge and apparently spontaneous explosion occurred. Debris from this blast destroyed two communications satellites and forced the temporary abandonment of the orbiting research station Hawking II. Six months of investigations proved the debris to be from the three missing ships, but how they had come to be there, and what had caused the explosion was not satisfactorily explained until the acceptance of the Coincidence Principle some four decades later. Scientists then theorised that the ships (which had been well stocked with brown ale), had probably made several aletronic jumps throughout the galaxy until the collective homesickness of the crews had invoked the Principle which had duly brought them back. By an unbelievable coincidence they had all arrived in exactly the same place at exactly the same time, with inevitable results.

In the decades since Merdkopf made his breakthrough we have discovered seven planets habitable by humans, and upwards of a billion and a half people have already been transported to these worlds. Coincidentally the birth rate on Earth has inexplicably plummeted to an unprecedentedly low level. So alarming is this that some scientists are already predicting that one day the planet may need repopulating from its own colony worlds.

In 2083 the Merdkopf Institute (later called the Randolph Merdkopf Memorial Institute) was opened in furtherance of the new science of Coincidentals. Up to the present day, however, intensive researches have proved no links, physical or otherwise, between diverse events which become coincidentally juxtaposed.

Although the discoveries of Zweimugs and Merdkopf are inextricably linked, the two men never actually met. It is debatable whether they would have gotten on if they had as they were two very different people. Zweimugs was a quiet, diligent man who lived for his work and never courted publicity; as a consequence little is known of his private life. Merdkopf on the other hand lived a high profile life, was a friend of the famous and influential, and left behind masses of information about himself. Chief among these are two sources;

his diaries (*op. cit.*), which he kept assiduously all his adult life, and his autobiography *By Coincidence - My Life in My Words* (Shooter & Goldman 2091). This book has to rank as the most complete autobiography in history, as Merdkopf only finished writing it on the evening of his death.

In the coda to this work he wrote, 'Writing an autobiography before the age of 50 seems almost a waste of effort. It being likely that I will live for the best part of another 50 years, I will only have to do the whole thing over again.' (*ibid.*).

Experience should have warned Merdkopf that making so bold a statement of his possible lifespan was tempting the negative forces of coincidence a little too far. And so it proved.

Having spent a long day putting the finishing touches to his script he decided, his wife being away visiting her parents, to wind down with a drink. He thought that it might be appropriate to celebrate by downing a few bottles of Newcastle Brown Ale, a drink closely associated with his fame, and yet one he had never before tasted, his own favourite tippie being champagne. He ordered a case of the beer from *VirtuMart*, and when it was delivered sat down to enjoy some.

By a tragic and odds-defying coincidence however, it turned out that Merdkopf was allergic to aletrons. His death after two bottles is to this day the only case of aletronic poisoning known to medical science.

One can look throughout history to find people whose work has had profound effects not only on their own time, but on all that came after them: for instance Marx and Darwin in the nineteenth century; Freud and Einstein in the twentieth. But towering above these illustrious names are Zweimugs and Merdkopf of the twenty-first century. Their discoveries changed not only humanity's perception of itself and its world, but of its place in the whole galaxy. It is no exaggeration to suggest that their work may even have saved the Earth from self-destruction. Their place in history is rightly assured.

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# LA BELLE

by

© T. Robertson

She came through the door of the carriage and slid into an empty seat across the passage. Others had joined the train at the same time, but she was the only one that those already in the compartment focused on with the covert glances of an uneasy reaction to someone 'different'.

The girl (or did she think of herself as a woman?) shrank into her loose-fitting shapeless pullover as if she sensed the other passengers' vague hostility. Now and again she tucked her chin into the grey wool of what had once been a polo-necked jumper, then, almost as if she wanted to break free from some restraint, she pushed her jaw upwards and forward against the fabric. It was evidently something she was in the habit of doing as the top of the jumper hung loose and frayed by the strain of repeated stretching. Her shoulder-length hair fell forward to hide her face when she lowered her head. Then as she raised her chin against the restraining wool, it straggled back to give a glimpse of a pale face turned towards the steamed-up windows.

The tacit animosity was broken by, what seemed to be at the time, a very trivial incident. I moved slightly and kicked my toolbox against the seat support. The slight metallic chink was hardly audible against the background noise of the train - but she heard it. Her head whipped round, eyes wide, seeking the source of the sound of steel striking steel.

Now, for the first time, I saw her eyes. They seemed to absorb light without any reflecting gleam, like deep holes, their gloom accentuated by her pale face with its look of trapped desperation.

I don't remember exactly what happened after that. I don't think she said anything - but she didn't need to. Once a man, any man, had looked into those eyes there was no escape...

I don't remember arriving at Waverley Station, but I do remember walking up 'The Bridges'. I had my toolbox in one hand, while my other hand held hers. She looked young, but the taut firmness of her hand was that of a mature woman. I wondered about that as we walked in silence.

We had nearly reached the old 'Royal Mile' before she started to talk. I can't remember anything she said as we turned left and went down the hill towards Holyrood but the tones of her voice pealed and played like silver bells in my mind, as they do still, through the echoing gaps in my memory.

We went past the old Palace and on to the rising ground of Arthur's Seat. There were, for once, no ducks on St. Margaret's Loch. At first I couldn't think why that made me think of:

*"The sedge has withered from the lake,  
And no birds sing"*

until I realised that I couldn't hear, or see, a bird anywhere. It was odd, but that could be why lines from 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' had come to mind.

The girl led me off the road and stopped in a little dip in the hillside. Then she let go of my hand and sat down. By that time I was glad to have a rest. I'm well used to carrying my toolbox with its collection of special hammers but it gets heavy if I carry it for a long time without changing hands.

When I sat down beside her I saw that were well hidden by the fold in the ground. There was nobody on the steep slope behind us and the only other thing to be seen was the sky.

Now that she had let go of my hand, the strange control she had over me weakened and I began to realise that I had been brought up here, to a secluded place on Arthur's Seat, by a girl I knew nothing about. I didn't like the implications. For all I knew, she could be planning to get me into trouble. Anyway, I had never had anything to do with under-age tarts and wasn't going to start now. I grabbed my toolbox and started to scramble to my feet.

But then she started to sing.

At first it was a low flute-like sound that stilled all movement so that the faint melody could be heard. The sound of her voice then rose and changed into a golden trumpet calling triumphantly over still, moonlight waters. There were words in the song. I couldn't understand them, but they had the haunting cadence of an incantation that could dissolve reality and open up another world.

The music seemed to make the hillside melt away until the grassy slope had no more substance than a green mist. As her song swirled and eddied, I imagined we walked, hand-in-hand into the misty hillside curtain and on through insubstantial wraiths of black rock until we reached a great cavern, blazing with light, deep in the heart of the mountain.

Then the song ended.

I knew that I could only have imagined walking into the solid side of the long extinct volcano but the immense cave seemed real.

I was no longer standing on grass. The cavern floor was inlaid with swirling patterns of cut and polished stones that shone like gems in the bright light that filled the vast space from no apparent source. I couldn't see any flowers, but I could smell them. The air was scented with honey and dew-fresh plants. Somewhere in the distance, a cascade of bells played a tinkling lullaby.

In my imagined walk through the mountain the girl had been with me, and somehow she was with me now, just where the dream-music had carried her. I could feel her hand in mine, but when I let go and turned to look at her, the dowdy girl in the shapeless torn pullover was no longer there. Instead there was a woman in a shimmering grey dress with golden hair cascading to her shoulders. Her face though, still had the same look of trapped despair. When she saw me staring at her, she instinctively lowered her chin as if she wanted to push off a wide golden collar that encircled her neck.

The movement attracted my attention to the collar. I didn't know where I was, how I had got there, or what was happening, but the one thing I was certain about, was that the heavy collar was not just golden coloured, it was real gold. Knowing about metals and how to shape them is, after all, my trade and I automatically look critically at any metal artefact.

Whoever had made that collar and the gold chains that went from it to bands round her wrists and ankles was a real craftsman. The intricate patterns engraved on the metal were superbly done. It seemed a strange piece of jewellery though: the chains made her look like a prisoner in shackles.

I wanted to ask her what was going on, but when I tried to speak, no sound came.

"Don't try to speak. Don't ever try to speak here," she said in her bell-like voice...

There is another gap in my memory about events after that. The next thing I remember was when we were both in a pillared hall. There were other, brilliantly clad people there as well but we stood in an empty area in front of steps leading up to an ornate chair. The man lounging on it was wearing a crown. He was obviously playing at being a king but something didn't seem right; the hard lines on his face indicated that he was not the type of person to indulge in make-believe games.

When he spoke, his harsh tone confirmed my first impression.

"Well look what we have here"

It might have been meant as a joke, but it didn't sound like one.

"In your one day's freedom in 70,000 you got yourself a champion, did you?"

The woman with me wilted as the man's sarcastic baying voice rang round the room like a hyena's laugh, but she said nothing.

"Your idiot looks strong enough but you know no mortal weapon can hurt me. Are you such a fool as to think that I haven't learned from what happened when your sister tried the same trick?"

I longed to ask what this was all about but couldn't utter a sound. Somehow the woman in chains had the power to stop me speaking.

"I know I had to free your sister when she brought back an armoured knight as her champion. This time though I'll be in armour as well and you'll rue this challenge in the dungeons for your next 70,000 days."

I began to get alarmed. The nutcase with the crown sounded absolutely in earnest and nobody was laughing. Some of the 'courtiers' even looked pityingly at the woman beside me. They ignored me completely. In this charade I apparently had the negligible status of being the prisoner of a prisoner...

My brief moment of fame came the next day. A circle had been marked off in the floor of the Great Cavern. The crowd jostled for places round it as a supercilious twit decked out in a herald's tabard pushed me into the ring and shoved my toolbox along the floor after me.

The whole thing seemed to me to be getting out of hand. Nobody had told me what was going to happen but it was pretty obvious from yesterday's incident that I was about to be mixed up in some sort of contest. I had never been in a fight in my life, apart from a few obligatory boxing lessons when I was at school. The Games Master had tried to get me interested in it by telling me that I had exceptionally good reflexes and anticipation, but I didn't like boxing and gave it up as soon as "Old Boxhead" would let me. His nickname came from his repeated refrain during boxing lessons.

"Use your head, box clever."

There was a stir in the crowd as someone, presumably the nutcase king fellow, pushed through on the other side of the circle. I say presumably, because in full armour with the visor down it could have been anybody. He had a shield in one hand and a drawn sword in the other. I needed weapons of some kind - and fast-but none seemed to be forthcoming.

"Use your head, box clever," my teacher had said.

So I thought, and remembered reading that, at Bosworth Field, Richard III had used a battle-hammer very effectively against other armoured knights.

There were hammers in my toolbox! I opened it, tipped everything out, and selected the long-handled one I used for reaching into confined spaces. The box was steel, of course - every panel beater makes his own toolbox. As a makeshift shield, it would be better than nothing.

There wasn't time for any more preparation. The armoured man was within striking distance and without any preamble, he took a swipe at me with the evident intention of cleaving-in my head with the first blow. The sparks flew as I blocked the blade with my toolbox. The sudden jolt must have jarred his arm and he backed off. This was no joke, but now that I was actually in a fight for my life the old adrenaline began to surge.

"Use your head, box clever."

The lesson had been drummed in, so I began to assess my opponent properly. When I thought of it, that first wild swipe had given a lot of information. The obvious and rather clumsy slash indicated that he was not an experienced fighter. He tried again, a thrust this time. That wasn't so easy to block with a toolbox but I managed to deflect it. As the sword glanced off though, its point ripped my sleeve and cut a gash in my left forearm. It wasn't serious but it hurt enough to make me really fighting mad.

"Use your head, box clever."

The silent advice from the past shut out the jeering yells of the crowd. The king confidently tried the same tactics again. This time I deflected the sword properly and swung my hammer in retaliation.

I remembered what he had said about mortal weapons not hurting him, so I went for his armour. Metal bashing is my trade so I slammed the hammer on to his knee-piece. The metal bent over just as I wanted and jammed against his thigh armour when he tried to straighten his leg. He had to shuffle back from his lunge with one leg half bent.

He might be unaffected by 'mortal weapons' but at least the metal of his armour was responding normally. The fellow didn't seem to realise that I had found his weakness and he came thrusting at me again, leading with the other leg; the one that would straighten. I made full use of the chance.

In other circumstances, the result might have been funny. he had to shuffle away like an arthritic frog with both knees half bent.

"Use your head, box clever."

You had to do that all the time, but especially once you started to think you could win.

He couldn't straighten his legs, but his sword was still deadly. I kept circling, to make him move his bent legs. Then, when I thought the strain on his thighs must be getting almost intolerable, I tempted him by pretending to come within sword range. Sure enough, he made a desperate swipe that was easily avoided. The weight of his armour and the extra strain that was put on his thigh muscles when his wildly arcing sword hit nothing but fresh air made him stumble and he had to use his sword as a prop in a desperate attempt to keep his feet. He didn't succeed though because I stepped in and rapped his sword arm, hard, on the elbow joint. The weapon flew out of his hand and he went down with a crash.

As I said, panel beating is my trade, and I went to work to re-shape that armour. A shame in some ways as I was spoiling good workmanship. The elbow joints only needed a few well-placed dents to lock them solid. The plates were thicker on the shoulders so it took longer to stiffen them up. Then I went to work on the helmet.

I had found out, the hard way, what these people could do when you looked into their eyes so the first job was to beat the edges of the eye-slit together. He was shouting, but what he was saying inside the helmet was inaudible above the noise that my hammer was making. Then I started on the business of jamming up the visor. It was good metal and I had to hit hard.

I'm used to the clatter of hammering but from the whimpering wails I gathered that the fellow inside the

helmet wasn't really enjoying the noise as I re-shaped it. Not surprising really, but as he had done his best to kill me I just carried on with the rhythmic wrist movement that I can keep up all day.

In the end, it was the herald-waistcoat twit who stopped me. He had his hands clamped over his ears but there was no mistaking his changed manner as he knelt almost abjectly in front of me while he shouted above the din.

When I stood up I saw that some things had changed while I had been otherwise engaged. The gold collar, with its chains still attached, lay on the floor in front of the woman in the shimmering grey dress and everyone else was kneeling as another, older, herald-waistcoat fellow solemnly put a gold crown on her head. She turned towards me and beckoned, her face radiant and her eyes alive and sparkling.

OK, OK, but first things first. I had to collect my scattered tools and put them into my box. It was rather battered and its lid would not shut.

She hadn't done much to help so far but appeared to approve of putting things into my box. While I was making my way through the kneeling crowd, she picked up the gold collar and then, when I got close, she dropped it through the half-open lid of my toolbox, chains-and-all.

"Thank you," she said and put her arms round my neck.

She was so beautiful now, I'll never be able to forget her, but for all that I didn't like the way she had used me so I replied with a sarcastic -

"For what?"

A look of horror came over her face when I spoke. Was it because the excitement had made her forget to maintain her control over my voice?

I was back on the slopes of Arthur's Seat. A faint wail seemed to echo in my ears, but it might have been the two-tone horn of a distant train. Children were feeding the ducks in the loch below. I felt tired and decided to sit still for a while to enjoy the peaceful normality of everything.

Nothing however is quite what it seems. Two policemen arrived, wanting to know why I was loitering, alone, up here watching children. Then, when they saw my arm, they wanted to know why it was bleeding. Quite decent about it they were though, and carted me to the "Edinbro' Royal" to have it stitched up. While that was being done they had evidently looked up records and, when the medics had finished with me, they had more questions to ask. I had, they said, been reported missing seven years ago: where had I been? They also wanted to know how all that gold had got into my toolbox.

In the end, I said that I would write out a statement. Now that I have, I think perhaps I should start again. There are many things I genuinely don't remember. It would be just as well perhaps to concentrate on those. The Police would be more likely to believe a statement claiming complete loss of memory.

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# EVALUATIONS

## THE GUARDIAN OF CHANCE by KEN BURKE{PRIVATE }

“It is the optimism that shines out of this story, that attracts me to it. I must admit it is a type of fantasy that does not normally appeal to me, but Ken’s sparing and direct style and positive approach have won me over completely. Like all good parables, it tells a simple tale, which conceals many levels of truth.”

Paul Marsh, St-MAURIN, FRANCE

“An excellent story, full of mores and morality, just as it was first time around when John Bunyan wrote it. Here, given a new treatment by Ken it works reasonable well if perhaps a trifle long.”

Greg Charles, WIMBORNE

“This was a long story with a lot crammed in, and given that Ken Burke’s style always guarantees an enjoyable read, I was surprised to end up feeling faintly dissatisfied. I think the overall plot worked but I had problems with characters: a man lugging a tree trunk (or wheel) around the jungle, without knowing where or to whom to take it, just because his erstwhile mentors/captors (which?) told him to; or the thief who, even with the advantages of surprise and a knife, failed to rob a man thus encumbered. I think there’s also a structural weakness in that there’s no real sense that the hero’s metamorphosis has had an adverse effect on the villains, the despots.”

Rod Slatter, READING

“I liked this a lot. The way the Fool develops, and eventually becomes what he is seeking, is impressive. A worthy competition winner. My one gripe really is the roulette wheel. It was interesting to wonder what the Fool was going to make with his piece of tree - at one point I thought it was going to be Arthur’s Round Table! - but the roulette wheel doesn’t really fit into the world of the story. It’s a clever idea, but the story as a whole has so much more depth.”

Cherith Baldry, REIGATE.

“Ken Burke continues to provide *XENOS* readers with stories of excellence; in this tale he weaves a rag-tag mob of characters into a fantastic (in the

*real* sense of the word) quilt which enfolds the seeking monk and eventually provides him with his answer. The message seems to be that ‘if you lose yourself, you shall find yourself’, so the monk/Fool abandons himself to the community he has gathered around him and agrees to serve them in which ever way he can - in this instance it seems, paradoxically, by introducing them to a game of chance; but it was only by playing the game of chance that the monk/Fool came to be Brother Ryan, the nothing-man, in the first place, for what greater chance does a man take than embarking upon a spiritual quest to which the ultimate answer must, by definition, lie beyond the grave? As with all good stories of this nature, Ken Burke asked the questions; he didn’t always give us the answers, but there’s the joy of reading - and re-reading - a story such as this.”

Peter Clark, CARDIFF

“A nice, unfolding ‘mission’ story with a satisfying ending. There were thoughtful resonances with the name Ryan (rien=nothing), the Fool being called ‘nothing’, and zero meaning undefined or infinite chance. The meeting with the thief and the thief’s subsequent development was very effective. The theme of the good leader being one who can show you the infinite possibilities you have in your own life, rather than be a tyrannical king, I liked. The Fool’s meeting with himself, though vivid and powerful, detracts from the final revelation that he and Brother Ryan are one and the same person. ‘All things are in the mind until they become real’ - an excellent advocacy of fiction (and the fantasy genre in particular) which can be best communicated in fiction.”

Eric Yaffey, KEIGHLEY

“Re-read it the following week to see if my ‘mood’ had changed, but still couldn’t like it. The language didn’t seem to fit the story in many places. Couldn’t warm to any of the characters. It all seemed too familiar and I knew who Brother Ryan was as soon as his name was mentioned.”

Tina Laurent, WIGFACH

“A life-quest based on the tarot isn’t exactly a startling innovation, but this one is well done and held my interest, giving a good account of the Fool’s dilemmas and solutions. I felt a little cheated, at the end, that all this mystical progress went to-

wards creating roulette - but maybe feeling cheated isn't such a bad reaction. My one real carp is the use of the name Ryan: it seems too modern a name for the setting, and feels as if it's there solely for the connection with *rien*."

Nyki Blatchley, ENFIELD

"A couple of years ago Ken commented that David Vickery's story *The Adoration of the Magi*, despite being one of three winners, had been the winner. This year I'd like to say the same about *The Guardian of Chance*; it was clearly the best of the competition winners. It carried significantly more weight than Ken's usual stories, greater depth and sophistication, and was all in all one of the best, if not the best story printed in *XENOS* in 1996. I was reminded at times of Rhys Hughes, who perfected the art of mixing mysterious, off-beat wisdom with quirky characters and excellent story-telling; Ken has shown that he too has a talent to enter this difficult field. Well done, mate!"

Jim Lawrence, CORSHAM

#### **IN THE CORNER OF YOUR EYE by DAVID PRICE**

"An excellent story which was very original. It extended and expanded the boundaries of my imagination and held my interest throughout. I particularly liked the last paragraph which wrapped it up well."

A D Sclater, LONDON

"A neat and simple tale told with compassion that engendered real sympathy for Gavin Knight. I felt the direct exposition adopted for the ending detracted from the mood of this otherwise moving story."

Michael Hicks, STAINES

"When I began to read this, I felt that it wasn't for me, but something kept me gripped and I was enchanted by the ending, could even hear tinkling music! When it came to the part where he crawled out of his cocoon, I had the feeling I had read something like it before. Later, when I recalled the book, it was only slightly similar with quite a different conclusion. I don't know whether it had anything to do with it, but since reading this I seem to keep seeing things out of the corner of my eye!"

Wendy Bowen, STRETTON

"At the start of the final page of this story, I thought it was an excellent piece, but left a number of queries and loose ends. By the end, every one of these had been effortlessly resolved. I think that

says it all. A beautiful story."

Nyki Blatchley, ENFIELD

"This was quite moving, if not a little grim. It was refreshing to see a man break down and cry, and to be comforted by a female friend, and you could really sense the loneliness and sadness as Gavin prepared in his own way to die on the boat. I loved the description of the balloon floating away. However, I wasn't too sure about the heaven described by David Price. His is a valid enough picture, but am I the only person who would find endless blue skies and green grass pretty boring? I know this is only a personal opinion, but I much prefer imperfection. Think of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, or flawed heroes from history, for example. I didn't buy the angelic vision, but I thought the last paragraph was very effective."

Stephen Green, PYMOOR

"This simple story glides gracefully like the reincarnated people who figure in it. There is a nice contrast between the depression and grief of the first part and the happiness and beauty at the end. The dialogue is very effective and makes a nice change from the 'blocky' narrative which has the quality of ethereality and 'other-wordliness' (confirmed at the end)."

Eric Yaffey, KEIGHLEY

"A competent story with an effective ending, and a strong, eerie atmosphere. There were, however, several things that jarred. I couldn't warm to the narrator, whose tone I found irritating throughout the first three quarters of the story, and there were too many questions unanswered early on: why was it Gavin, for instance, who had to arrange the funeral? Did Nikki have no family? A little judicious editing could have made it more convincing, but altogether a good debut from David Price."

Jim Lawrence, CORSHAM

"I felt little sympathy for these self-absorbed characters with coffee-table magazine names. Where were their families? Dialogue was sparse and short, but worked well enough with the first person narrative. The justification for the title was, I thought, clumsily repeated."

Richard Chatterjee, CROYDON

"This was beautifully written; soaked in melancholy right until the end when the optimism that *XENOS* has made one of its most distinguishing characteristics shines through."

Peter Clark, CARDIFF

"The horror of the plague was depicted all too

well. The crux of the story would seem to be the ending: were Gavin and Nikki actually beings from another planet, or perhaps another dimension? Or does David want us to believe that this is what death is really like? Now I have my own very definite ideas as to the nature of the afterlife, so I did not agree with him entirely. Beautiful, but inadequate, I felt.”

Mary Bray, FLITWICK

“A fine story about death. Interesting that David Price has effectively recreated Heaven for a secular age in the last two pages. A religion for the irreligious to believe in, perhaps? It’s a valid and effective ending, but I somehow felt it was almost a cop-out in some ways. Dying to meet a vanished lover is one thing, but living on without them is another - and far harder. Still, a fine story.”

Finn Clark, BLEWBURY

### **CAST ADRIFT by RICHARD SALISBURY**

“Now this one I really enjoyed, a near perfect rendering of the classic ‘twist’ ending. I was so engrossed in Kesner’s ingenious efforts to escape his cell that I didn’t see the end coming at all. The throwaway line early on about the masking technology of the IPS Charon meant that the ending was perfectly feasible; indeed, once I thought about it, it seemed the most sensible ending. An excellent story.”

Jim Lawrence, CORSHAM

“Isaac Asimov is alive and well and living inside Richard Salisbury’s head! This story was brilliant! A superbly written and well thought out piece of work. Every time I thought I’d found a flaw in the plot, Richard had it covered. This is the sort of sci-fi that I particularly relish and although I’d guessed that Argyle would turn out to be the inevitable rescuer of Kesner, I did not for one moment suspect that Kesner had never left the ship. As always one small - very small - gripe. I would have liked to have known what mistake Kesner had made to get caught in the first place (but, I suspect, so would he). That aside, this was sci-fi writing of the highest quality.”

Ron Bowes, FARNBOROUGH

“An enjoyable yarn, not too technical for scientific ignoramuses like me, but making ingenious use of believable future technology. We don’t really learn enough about Kesner to be sure whether we want him to escape - though we warm to him after his deflating joke about the captain’s flies - but perhaps this distancing is deliberate since in the end he fails. In this way our reaction is intellectual satis-

faction without the disappointment that emotional involvement would have entailed.”

Geoff Roberts, FRANCE

“Ah! Good SF. The best story so far. I could not help liking this outrageous man and feeling sorry when he failed. I enjoyed the touch ‘May you find... forgiveness under the eyes of the stars.’ I wanted to know more about the effect that being adrift in space for a long time might have on a person - his feelings could have been described in more detail, or perhaps he could have been shown recalling what he had heard about the experiences of others. At the end I was left wondering what improvements in security could be installed - a smaller disposal exit would seem obvious, also a welder who did not carry his tools in so accessible a manner...”

Mary Bray, FLITWICK

“I enjoyed the meticulous construction of Kesner’s plight, Kesner’s ingenuity i.e. Richard Salisbury’s), and the twist at the end. I think it’s best to take the superficial science fiction styling with a pinch of salt, and accept that this is really a set of circumstances contrived for the sake of spinning a yarn, pure and simple. It works fine for me on those terms, but doesn’t seem to provoke or invite much thought on the part of the reader.”

Rod Slatter, READING

“I didn’t really like Kesner, who came across as rather a smug git. I imagine that was deliberate. Even so, that made this admittedly well-crafted story rather less gripping than it might have been. I’ve read about brilliant escapes from escape-proof SF prisons before and was both pleased and surprised to see Captain Argyle again at the end.”

Finn Clark, BLEWBURY

“This was my favourite, imaginative and very well written. I liked the way all the questions were answered to give the tale a credible feeling of realism, and twist ending was excellent.”

Alan Frackleton, GREENFORD

“Neat and satisfying, especially as the reader, like Kesner, had the opportunity to take in the significance of the ‘chameleon hull’. My only, very minor, quibble, is that it is difficult to believe that a *Humanitarian* Council would regard permanent solitary imprisonment as acceptable - but perhaps that’s intentionally ironic?”

Alethea Amsden, NORWICH

“I enjoyed this, although I might have been more absorbed in Kesner’s attempted escape if he’d

been, say, an innocent man wrongly imprisoned. You knew from the start that he was doomed to be thwarted. Still, it was inventive and enjoyable. A good read.”

David Price, MORGANSTOWN

### **THE OLIVE TREE by LEIGH EDUARDO**

“I thought this was really effective. You really wanted to discover what lay at the summit of the mountain, and I had expected the American woman and her daughter to play a much larger part in the story instead of acting as a distraction to Manolis’ story telling. The encounter on the mountain top, when it came, was quite brilliant in that it managed to convey the sensuousness, the beautiful evil of the centaur. The final paragraph sent a real chill down my spine. Great stuff!”

Stephen Green, PYMOOR

“An enchanting story. I was totally absorbed by Vic’s desire to climb the mountain. I was with him every step of the way, feeling all his emotions, attraction and curiosity. The deep and detailed characterisation of Manolis and Vic, so held my attention that I had no thought of what the conclusion might be until it finally arrived and left me with a surprised and pleasantly uneasy feeling. To conclude, I found this story to be haunting, delightful and unforgettable. Like the Gods themselves it was difficult to resist. This was my favourite story of Issue 40.”

Patricia Perkins, BURNLEY

“Well written and very atmospheric, with a real sense of the combination of beauty and horror in the mythology of Ancient Greece. However, I felt that as Manolis knew all about what went on up the mountain he was being criminally negligent in not telling Vic all about it in the first place; his hints and half warnings don’t really work.”

Cherith Baldry, REIGATE

“A very good effort as it brought in a good theme and made it sound credible with the use of a modern day setting. It was interesting to have a story told about mythological figures in a modern setting. I particularly liked the way questions were posed and left unanswered at the end.”

A D Sclater, LONDON

“Nice to find *hubris* going unpunished for once! An interesting re-working of ancient legends, capturing the power of atavistic awe and fear.”

Alethea Amsden, NORWICH

“This is a good story, as a simple fantasy, but I found the classical references a little too twisted and manipulated. Certainly Dionysus (*not* Dionysius, which was a common given name, the ancestor of Dennis) had a presence at Delphi, but I think it would be an exaggeration to say he shared it with Apollo. And why not give ‘the mountain’ its name, Parnassus; it’s too well-known to be left anonymous. That said, I enjoyed the story, but I wish Leigh had either tightened up or ditched the classical background.”

Nyki Blatchley, ENFIELD

“Modern man meets a being of myth - not a new idea, and the ending fades off a bit, but Leigh creates an interesting atmosphere of mystery and superstition. Greek Mythology has always been favourite reading of mine, and I thought the Pan-like creature a fascinating throw-back to those stories, and particularly well evoked.”

Ken Burke, LUTON

### **IF VR MACHINES ARE ANYTHING LIKE PC’s by CHRISTINE LINDARS**

“Mundane, everyday life at the help desk. Loved the twist on Microsoft. Really enjoyed this, possibly because I support PC Software systems by phone and call outs. Deeper meanings hidden in here if you look for them. Short, well crafted, not a word out of place; a worthy prize winner.”

Liz Sinclair, CLONWILLIAM

“Great story, shame about the title (well, it is a bit naff, isn’t it?) Some fairly obvious, but still effective, satire on the present state of computers (HAL and Macrozoft - arggh) including the classic help desk solution (‘Is it plugged in properly?’). But that’s only a background to a deeper and intelligent examination of reality, asking the question whether it matters where our feelings and experiences come from. Is God a computer virus?”

Nyki Blatchley, ENFIELD

“Perfect! As far as I could say this is technically the best in Issue 40 and would have had my winning vote. A small gem depicting the cold, unlovely world of computers and those who work them. I should have been ready for the God virus that Jen encounters, but I wasn’t, I’m glad to say! I could sympathise very much with our modern-day, lonely Miss, but with Mozart’s Great Mass in her possession there’s hope for her yet.”

Tina Laurent, WIGFACH

“Fresh, plangent and convincing, with an ef-

fective, bitter-sweet ending, and not a word wasted. Best of the serious stories.”

Alethea Amsden, NORWICH

“Thank God for the ‘VR virus that gave the impression of being in a plummeting lift’. Because this is what *really* saved Jen from standing in a ‘horrificed silence’ for longer than was necessary! She didn’t have to really experience falling because she’d already realised that ‘her mystical experience might have been the fault’. If she hadn’t, she might have had a ‘crisis of faith’ and been unable to keep going. Luckily, her upbeat working environment included Estelle (whizz-kid) whom she respected and Rhys (Mr laid-back) whom she secretly admired. Their sniggering provided a believable response to Jen’s having been outwitted by an American nutter! Straight into it, very topical and humorous, but does require some prior experience of virtual reality. Very enjoyable and realistic.”

Eric Yaffey, KEIGHLEY

“I liked the characterisation, and smile-raisers like HAL Leisure Software, Macrosoft and the office banter. I also liked the rejection of sexual and racial stereotypes. But I feel as if I’ve missed something vital. If God was all in the mind, where did he go when the virus was ‘cured’? What is the meaning or function of the title? I read this story first and, as with Ken Burke’s (which I read second), I was a bit disappointed.”

Rod Slatter, READING

“This one and ‘Cast Adrift’ were my favourites. To justify its title, more could have been added, e.g. they could have been painfully trying to explain to a customer why it is that the instruction manual needs to be the size and weight of a complete Shakespeare; why it would appear to have been written in some foreign language and then badly translated; why it tells you six or seven times something that’s completely obvious while another really necessary piece of instruction is left for you to discover for yourself by trial and error; and why confusion is piled on confusion by there always being at least two different ways of performing the same operation.

“The idea of the religious experience gave me pause for thought. Presumably this was nothing more than some naughty virus which transmitted subliminal messages every so often, such as ‘I believe in God’ or, more probably, ‘God loves me’. Hmmm. The mighty power of the commercial...”

Mary Bray, FLITWICK

“An intriguing idea this, that God could be generated by a virus in a VR scenario. I’m not surprised that Christine Lindars came up with it; she

has made a significant contribution to *XENOS* over the last year or so and her stories have never been anything less than intelligent and well written; this runner up was no exception and I look forward to seeing a future winner from her.”

Jim Lawrence, CORSHAM

“I didn’t quite understand the title, but I thought ‘Oh no, no another Virtual Reality thing!’, but I soon realised that it was the old paradox again. How can you say you don’t believe in God if you believe God doesn’t exist. It has been apparent for some time that the standard of *Xenos* stories has been increasing, but does anyone agree with me that the quality of the **writing** is growing issue by issue? I know something about computer trouble shooting through a family connection so I appreciated the ‘faults’ that Christine listed, but I would have preferred to read that the inoculation disk itself was faulty.”

Greg Charles, WIMBORNE

### **RAFAELLO’S REVENGE by KEVIN JONES BACON**

“This very original story was great fun. Kevin Jones Bacon manages, with considerable skill and humour, to make the reader sympathetic to the basically unsympathetic character of Murray Martin. The scenes in the card shop are so real that you get the feeling that the author has been in that position himself. The dialogue is really sharp. I wasn’t so sure about naming the cherubs Mick and Frank, it just seemed a little incongruous to me, but this is a minor quibble. The whole tale had a sort of surreal logic to it, and I found the ending surprisingly disconcerting and this darkness lived in my head for several days afterwards.”

Stephen Green, PYMOOR

“A cynical tale without a single sympathetic character - ideal for a modern Christmas! Difficult to evaluate, because there was so much that was good, yet somehow it didn’t come together for me. Kevin’s writing style is excellent, as is the depiction of pseudo-intellectual snobbery embodied in Murray, quoting Marlowe to himself as he nurses his grievances against the bourgeoisie. But what have the unfolding events to do with any revenge on Raphael’s part? In particular, how does the Munch painting relate to either Raphael or the gangster cherubim? I realise it’s meant to be a squib, but humorous stories still need sound plots.”

David Vickery, CROYDON

“I thoroughly enjoyed the comical visual imagery conjured up by this highly entertaining and

humorous tale. Light-hearted, but extremely meaningful slant on the frustrations and distortions of modern day life. This story provided a pleasant complimentary contrast to all the other well written stories in Issue 40.”

Patricia Perkins, BURNLEY

“I loved the first two pages of this. The arrogant, cynical viewpoint-character was obviously heading for a fall, and this was eloquently put across. At this point, I thought the plot was heading in a certain direction, building on the subtle mood which had been created, perhaps developing the character of the woman who visits the shop. Hence my hopes were considerably dashed when the unlikely and unlikable pair of cherubs came on the scene; the rhetoric slowed the whole thing down and my credulity really hit a rocky patch. Sorry and all that, but I would really love to see how this piece might turn out without the cherubs – I honestly think they are a distraction from the real essence of this story, and without them there’s a much better tale waiting to be told.”

Ken Burke, LUTON

“As I read this I thought how wonderful to be so cleverly funny - the humour is great, as is the whole concept. But I felt the end disappoints. Maybe the story should stop after two paragraphs of the final section when Murray’s nose suddenly starts to bleed and his toe hurts excruciatingly...”

Pauline Rettie, LONDON

“A sparkling debut! With a finely tuned ear for words and masterful grasp of characterisation, Kevin presented his protagonist both sympathetically and with an easy familiarity that made him endearing despite that character’s arrogance. I have seen this kind of thing done elsewhere (Tom Holt has made a living out of it) but I have not seen it so successfully compressed into a few pages before. Kevin Jones Bacon has an economy of style which is admirably suited to *XENOS*’ requirements, and I hope this is not the last we have seen of his work. So, Kevin Jones Bacon, if you are reading this, then you shouldn’t be. You should be busy writing your next contribution to the pages of *XENOS*!”

Peter Clark, CARDIFF

“Sorry, but I didn’t like this story. I sympathise with the cards who couldn’t stomach Murray’s priggishness. I just couldn’t care about him, or even delight in his comeuppance. After all, it didn’t improve him.”

Paul Marsh, St-MAURIN, FRANCE

“This was one of those tricky tales, concerning a character that it was so easy to dislike; it was

funny, which helped, but at times I was willing those cherubs to teach Murray a lesson he would not forget. The hallucinatory images of Munch’s ‘The Scream’ were handled very well, but personally I would have preferred a less clear cut conclusion.”

Alan Frackleton, GREENFORD

“How could anyone resist a couple of Cherubs coming on like the Krays? Kevin has a wonderful sense of phrase, too: ‘closet genius’ and ‘dreams of sunshine and sugar puffs’ are two that stuck in my head. The pace and style sagged a little later in the story (especially during Mick’s long explanation) but overall my favourite of the issue.”

Nyki Blatchley, ENFIELD

### **THE ACQUIRED SKILL OF UNDOING BRAS by MARTIN SKETCHLEY**

“Strange, moralising tale of why you shouldn’t interfere with nature. The twist at the end was grotesque. Was this a cautionary tale about trying to change the destiny of the homosexual? I found it uncomfortable to read but it was excellently crafted nonetheless. An eerie lingering tale.”

Liz Sinclair, CLONWILLIAM

“An eye-catching title and a nice line in satire on the consumer society. The husband/wife exchanges are lifelike; it’s certainly an attractive idea to by-pass the parental agonies of adolescence but the doubts are convincingly presented too. There was obviously going to be a final twist but I for one hadn’t guessed what it would be. A pretty good example of the *XENOS* lighter touch final story, I’d say.”

Geoff Roberts, FRANCE

“A truly jaw-dropping story, simply in terms of the central conceit. A machine for abolishing adolescence - what a scary idea! Although thinking about the teenagers I have known certainly gives Martin’s Developer a definite appeal... The parents’ reactions were spot on, especially the laddishly immature Dad. And the twist at the end was perfect, if confusing. Was it a mistake or the only way of instilling maturity in teenage boys? I left this story with ideas whirling in my head.”

Finn Clark, BLEWBURY

“My suspension of disbelief was seriously stretched by the Developer, and its accompanying sales pitch (I mean, who in their right mind would want one?), but when it arrived I did like the ‘organics’ - barely visible tubes, sinews etc., the murky gel. I found Jen improbably feeble, but David was

well drawn as the father from Hell. Nice ending.”

Rod Slatter, READING

“A delightful read of the sins of the fathers being visited on the sons. And what a twist! Shortcuts don’t always lead where you expect.”

Richard Chatterjee, CROYDON

“What a grotesque idea, depriving a child of its childhood and adolescence to speed it on to adulthood! A world gone mad indeed. I may be unusual but I actually enjoyed those years immensely and would pay for the opposite experience. As I read this story, I had an increasing sense of horror; firmly disagreed with the father and wished the mother weren’t such a wimp. OK, in the grand tradition of free choice an adult should normally be allowed to modify his life as he sees fit; but a child! To be honest, it would probably sell like hot cakes - playing on some children’s insecure desire to grow up and enter the adult world.

“As a story it was engrossing and conveyed the idea very well. The final disaster at the end I thought was a bit out of place. The author needed some strange conclusion for all that build-up, but I felt it would be very unusual for the device to malfunction either through design flaw or the father’s incompetence. Then again, I was not displeased, as no doubt the impending law suite will put BIOFORGE out of business for good.”

Andrew Williamson, SOUTHAMPTON

“What a great opening line! It really grabs and pulls you into the story. Now, this was great fun, with wonderful, funny dialogue between husband and wife. The story never gets bogged down with any real scientific detail and is all the better for it as this is really more a type of morality fairy tale than the hard sci-fi it could have been. Didn’t see the twist coming either.”

Stephen Green, PYMOOR

“Clever idea, well-developed and with a lovely twist at the end. Not too much spelt-out, so that you cannot be sure at the end whether the machine was faulty or James was always due for a sex-change. An enjoyable ending to this highly-moral issue of *XENOS*.”

Alethea Amsden, NORWICH