

Special Double Issue!
OG's Speculative Fiction
Issue #12



Stories by James Steimle
Bob Friedman
Ed Kratz
Justin Firestone
Kurt Kirchmeier

Poetry by John Grey
LB Sedlacek

J. Steimle

OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #12

May

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Cover Art: *Hooded Contemplation* by Jonathan Tiu

Jonathan Tiu is an aspiring illustrator and game concept artist a year out of college.

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Editor's Letter

This marks the end of our second year. To celebrate we have brought out a special double issue that we hope you enjoy.

It also gives us the chance to look back on where we have come from and let you know where we are going. We owe it to you. A written piece only comes full circle when someone reads it, and you have been reading what we publish very faithfully.

In the two years that we have been publishing, we have seen incredible growth not only in the number of visitors to the web site, and to OG's Speculative Fiction, but also in the number and quality of the story submissions we receive daily.

We are proud of this fact. It means that the writers like what they see of the magazine and feel it is a great place to publish. We also like to think that it is because we are building a reputable magazine that writers want to be associated with.

It has always been our intent to grow to a point that when top speculative fiction markets are discussed, our name keeps popping up. It will take a lot to get to that point, but that is where we are aiming.

With that in mind we want to bring you some exciting news to let you know where we, as a publishing entity, stand.

America is in recession. We are not. When many people are looking for ways to cut back and save extra dollars, we are not. We are raising our payments in all categories. Cover art now pays double. Poetry now pays double. And we have raised short story pay forty percent.

We are making aggressive changes, because we want aggressive growth. After all, we had goals when we set out to establish this magazine, and we are not giving them up.

And that's not all. Our newsletter is growing. We are sponsoring contests and have more on the horizon that offer opportunities for great prizes. We have another book coming out shortly. And we have a few surprises up our sleeves that we hope to announce in the coming year.

But let's not get too excited about the future. Right here, right now we have a fantastic issue full of good stories and imaginative poetry to stir your speculative juices. So enjoy.

-SC

Lucidity

by Kurt Kirchmeier

Kurt Kirchmeier is proudly Canadian, happily married, and currently in the process of completing his first novel. His short fiction has appeared in a variety of print and online magazines including Coyote Wild, Murky Depths, and Reflection's Edge, as well as in such anthologies as Touched by Wonder and Triangulation: End of Time. This is a story about what can be lost.

"Comon," Nathan said, "you have to try it at least once."

Robin picked at the bottle's label with a fingernail. "What's it taste like?" she asked. There was a hint of curiosity in her eyes now, a spark of consideration that very much reminded Nathan of the third time he'd asked her out.

"Like honeyed sunshine from a rose," he lied.

She eyed him skeptically, a strand of auburn hair falling loose from her ponytail; since quitting the deli in favor of a regular waitress shift, she'd decided to grow her hair out long, thinking it might improve her tips. She often joked about dying it blonde, and how she'd retire from the riches that would surely follow.

Nathan shrugged. "Fine," he admitted, "it tastes like shit. Doesn't matter. Just plug your nose and down it."

She took a deep breath, let it out slow. "I don't know, Nathan," she went on. "Maybe you've been lucky so far."

Although the jury was still out on precisely what side effects to expect (Lucidity hadn't been around long enough for a conclusive study), rumor had it the so-called "dream drug" disrupted the body's natural sleep cycle and impaired the brain's ability to not only process new memories, but accurately retain old ones as well. Still, Nathan assumed it would only prove thus for all-out addicts, not sporadic users such as himself.

He shook his head. "It's just like anything else. Keep it to a minimum and it's cool."

As the clock on the kitchen wall tick-tick-ticked, Robin's gaze alternated between the silvery bottle and the hourglass-vase centering the table. Fresh cut flowers once a week. It was to make the kitchen smell pretty, she had said. She had chosen an assortment of large pink and white lilies this time around. It had been carnations the week before.

After one last sigh, she relented. "Fine," she said, "but if I don't wake up for sixteen hours or something, I'm totally kicking your ass."

Nathan smiled. No worries there. As effective as the supplementary sedative was, it rarely lasted for more than six or seven hours. It was plenty of time to dream to one's heart's content and still make it up for work the next morning.

She cringed as the taste reached her tongue, but managed to stop short of actually gagging like Nathan had the first time he tried the stuff. Once finished, she slammed the bottle to the table, the hollow thud of Nathan's own following soon thereafter.

Perhaps it was the provocative high that so often comes of experimentation, or maybe she merely wanted to be close to him when the drug began to work its magic, but whatever the case, the look she gave him made it obvious that dreaming was not yet at the forefront of her mind.

They promptly retired to the bedroom, but the sedative proved quicker than either of them. They had scarcely just gotten undressed and beneath the sheets when the Sandman laid down his spell.

* * *

Nathan dreamed of flying, of floating out over a city awash with lights, the moon high above, traffic darting to and fro down below, the ceaseless honking and squealing punctuated here and there by the occasional siren. Although he knew he was dreaming, and that he could control nearly every facet of the experience—such was the gift offered by the drug—Nathan almost always chose to fly.

Lest the adventure become blasé though, he continued out past the city, intent on exploring new ground, and soon found himself soaring down from the clouds like a kingfisher on the hunt, a glassy sea beneath him. From night to day in a seamless instant. The world was his playground, the laws of physics but a nightmare from some other life.

He wondered for a moment what Robin was dreaming, imagined how she'd smile upon waking and relate to him her tale, how they'd share in the moment, then pick up where they'd left off when sleep took them, all the more eager and passionate for what they'd experienced. Only it didn't quite work out that way.

Nathan opened his eyes to find dead ones staring back at him.

He felt the chill all at once, as though the thrill of flying had somehow held it at bay for the first few seconds after he'd sloughed free of the sedative's hold. Her breast against the side of his rib cage, cold fingers splayed out over his stomach, and yet the gravity of the situation still hadn't sunken in—not wholly, at any rate.

"Robin?" He shook her to no avail, and then again, and again and again. "Robin?"

* * *

The medical examiner said it was an allergic reaction to one of the additives in the drug.

Arrangements. The funeral. The unforgiving glances from Robin's family during the burial. Flowers on the headstone, flowers in the kitchen; it was too much to endure.

Nathan paced through the apartment like a zombie, room to lonely room, every single thing reminding him of her, from pictures to odd little trinkets to the collection of shot glasses atop a shelf near the fridge. Each of them originated from a different part of the world, the names of cities and countries stamped beneath tiny depictions of tourist attractions, from Stonehenge to The Eiffel Tower to the hot springs of Yellowstone Park.

Though Robin had spoken often of traveling the globe—with Nathan at her side, of course—a lack of disposable income had never allowed for much in the way of an exotic retreat. The glasses were a sort of wish list, some of them coming by way of vacationing friends, others from on-line auction houses.

"We'll lie to our kids," she had once said. "Say we collected them ourselves."

When Nathan asked her what they would do when these hypothetical children asked to see photographs from the vacations, she had simply shrugged in a way that made it obvious she had not thought that far ahead.

Nathan paused at the kitchen's threshold, his eyes falling to the vase still centering the dining room table. The lilies had begun to wilt and die now, the once shy and vibrant petals hanging limp, colors muted to sullen hues.

The sheer weight of guilt alone kept him from the fridge, from twisting off a cap and surrendering to his dreams. But only for a time. After consecutive nights of sleeplessness, the temptation to see her became too great.

As always, the dream began of its own volition.

Nathan found himself poised on a lip of rock, a precipice beneath which gaped a canyon of colossal proportion. Robin stood at his side, two fingers crooked through one of the belt loops of his jeans.

"It's beautiful," she said, gazing down upon the seemingly endless mouth of orange rock.

Although Nathan agreed wholeheartedly, he couldn't help but take a step back so as to free himself from the open maw's hungry pull.

Robin laughed at his retreat and remained at the edge, leaning forward to further illustrate her contempt for gravity.

It was then, as she raised her arms to the sky, sunlight reflected in her eyes, that Lucidity began to assert its hold, bringing with it the sudden realization that this place where they stood was the Grand Canyon itself, one of the many destinations Robin had longed to behold with her own eyes.

This realization, however, was quickly supplanted by another: Robin was dead. The memory came back to him in a rush, an instantaneous wave that all but sucked the breath from his lungs. For an instant there he had forgotten, forgotten that this woman whom he had lived with and loved for several months now was actually gone from his life, and that she had perished as the result of circumstances staged by him.

For a moment it was all he could do not to drop to his knees and plead forgiveness, or simply take her in his arms and pray the embrace would somehow endure beyond waking, that she would still be beside him on the bed, looking up at him, shards of moonlight in her eyes. Instead, he only stared, the subconscious reality sharpening by degrees.

Patches of cloud rolled slowly across his periphery, each connected to the next, like a hundred train-cars of freshly sheered fleece. The wind was warm, and carried on it the scent of natural springs and sagebrush. Nathan could not remember having ever experienced a dream in an olfactory capacity before.

Robin regarded him with a look of concern. "Nathan?" she said. "Nathan, what's wrong?"

The sincerity in her voice, her obliviousness, was confounding, for it brought with it the awareness that he was still far from being in total control of his surroundings. He felt his stomach lurch; he was used to dreaming of being alone, of flying. He hadn't counted on her being so..real.

Nathan swallowed hard. "You're not..this isn't.." He trailed off as she took his hands in her own, her expression curious.

"Isn't what?"

Her skin was warm. He could feel her heartbeat. "Nothing," he said, "never mind."

So what if it was not real? It was better than nothing, better than the darkness that had swallowed his days. He thought again of where they were, and of all the other places Robin would never get to travel to. It was almost as if they were getting a second chance.

By the time he finally awoke, they had danced beneath the endless canopy of Peruvian jungles, felt the blistering heat of the Saharan sun against their skin, and slid their way across the lobby of Sweden's famous ice hotel.

And so it continued through the nights that followed, one dream after another, country to country, hand in hand, until finally Nathan was going lucid twice a day, his waking life having been reduced to a few groggy hours in which he would do little else but go to the bathroom and stuff ready-made meals down his throat.

By week two he had forgotten her hair color. He roused from his sleep with a fever, certain she had been a blonde, remembering clearly how he had run his fingers through the golden curls. But then he turned to find her picture staring back at him from atop the night stand beside the bed. Brunette, cropped close to her scalp.

From there, his confusion deepened. Although he cursed the drug for deceiving him, he could no longer resist its pull. Tattoos in Reno, a shopping spree in Milan; the memories began to blur, a hundred different experiences running together like so much paint.

Only upon waking could he distinguish one reality from the next, and even then it was not immediate. He would roll over in bed to find himself alone, thinking he was in a hotel, and that Robin had merely roused early to have coffee on the balcony overlooking the beach down below.

Instead he would find an empty apartment, a fridge full of bottled dreams, and then it would hit him all over again. He would sort through his memories one by one, cross-referencing, discarding the ones that did not seem to fit, wondering about the ones that did. He would recall how once he could fly, and try to no avail. Darkness all around him, lucidity so near. Twice he ran out, and twice he cash-advanced his credit card to get more.

The effect of the drug began to wane. Nathan soon found himself struggling to shape the landscape around him as once he had, struggled too in remembering where they had already gone, where they still needed to go. It was almost as if his subconscious were attempting to retake control, attempting to deny Nathan his one and only means of connecting with Robin.

With every indulgence, her appearance grew increasingly muddled, until finally he found her seated on a park bench, her features in complete disarray. On the one side, her hair was long and honey-brown, while on the other, short and fiery red. One eye was blue, the other green. Even her bone structure seemed wrong, though for the life of him, Nathan could not pinpoint exactly why. Her clothes were a patchwork assortment of a hundred different fabrics from a hundred different countries, and her make-up, almost whorish on one side, understated on the other, displayed a multitude of colors that neither matched nor accentuated in the way that make-up should.

She was smiling down at a score of red-breasted birds, all of them slowly advancing toward her outstretched hand. On her lap was an upside-down

bowler hat, filled to its brim with bread crumbs, several of which spilled out as Nathan approached.

The sky above was a canvas of orange and grey, clouds like overlapping patches of rust-stained wool, dense and motionless and low, as though the ceiling of the world had collapsed by half.

Seemingly oblivious to his presence, Robin continued to chirp at the birds, beckoning them closer. With quick, mechanical steps, one of them boldly stepped forward to receive the offered meal. Only after it had done so did Robin finally glance up to where Nathan stood watching.

"Here," she said, holding up the hat. "You feed one."

After a momentary pause, Nathan took a single bread crumb from the hat and held it out for one of the birds. It was then that the dream began to change. In the space of only a second, the bread crumb had become a bottle cap—an all too familiar bottle cap.

The bird stole it from his fingers before he could pull it away, after which it swallowed once and promptly collapsed to the ground, its body as rigid as stone.

Robin looked stricken at its demise. "You killed it," she said. "You killed the Robin."

Nathan gaped at the accusation.

"Fix it," she said. "Bring it back."

He stared wordlessly, and then attempted to do as she had asked. Nothing changed. He tried again to no avail, and then again and again and again. It was no use. He had been stripped of all control, demoted from puppeteer to merely a puppet. The bird remained dead at his feet.

When he finally looked up from his failure, he found Robin slouched sideways on the bench, her eyes wide in a frozen stare, skin a pasty white, her lips an icy blue.

He sobbed upon waking, grabbed her picture from the night stand and clutched it against his chest.

* * *

The sun rose and fell, and rose once again. Twenty-four hours of wakefulness, hands trembling, bottles calling out to him from the fridge.

He sat with a photo album on his lap, committing each and every picture to memory: picnics and parties, backyard barbecues and nights at the fair, one by one, snapshot to snapshot. He needed to remember, needed her image in his mind.

For the first time since her funeral, natural sleep took him, and carried

him to a place not even Lucidity could tarnish.

The smell of garlic hung heavy in the air, but still her perfume had found him. Vanilla. She stood behind the deli counter, one eyebrow quirked, asking him for the third time if he wanted the ham sliced or shaved. Her face was a mask of impatience and irritation, but no less beautiful for all its distance from a smile. Emerald eyes, hair a reddish-brown.

The dream flashed forward, from the deli to a date at a diner around the bend. Double cream, no sugar, they had ordered simultaneously, then shared a look and laughed. From there to her apartment. Amaretto cream over ice, followed by an old black and white movie both of them had already seen, but that neither could remember the title of. Rain plinked against the windows, then promptly turned to snow.

Weeks and months raced by, the dream moving inexorably forward, memories unfolding in rapid succession, one after another, from first kiss to last.

When finally he awoke, Nathan felt drained and restored all at once, and though the vividness of the memories brought tears to his eyes and weighed like stone against his heart, at least now he could remember exactly what it was that he had lost.

He immediately moved to the fridge and gathered the bottles in his arms, depositing them on the counter beside the sink. One by one, he uncapped them and poured them down the drain, releasing the poorly disguised chemical scent from within into the stale air of the kitchen.

He glanced over at the now empty vase, its hollowness an echo of his own. Robin was right. The flowers had smelled pretty.

Magnetic Neighborhood

by LB Sedlacek

LB Sedlacek's poetry has appeared in publications such as the Red River Review, Passport Journal, Heritage Journal, Down in the Cellar, Inkburns, and Fables. She has published the chapbooks, Alexandra's Wreck (Kitty Litter Press) and Average Bears (Assume Nothing Press). LB also publishes the newsletter for poets, "The Poetry Market Ezine." You can find out more at www.lbsedlacek.com.

Magnetic Neighborhood

3000 kilometers below our feet
lies the Earth's magnetic field
in the planet's outer core and maybe
there are little green houses
energy-efficient with a garage
lined up in neat symmetrical rows

while up above on the Earth's surface
the north magnetic pole
responsible for directing the Earth's
magnetic field downward

drifts across the Canadian Arctic
heading for Siberia
and picking up pace but

the residents below won't notice
in their innovative hood
where they have a comfortable
temperature year-round.

When you look down the
streets, the houses look
like any other surface home.

Gnothi Seauton

by Justin Firestone

Justin Firestone has been a columnist for Lincoln, Nebraska's daily newspaper. His first publication was back in high school with Merlyn's Pen. To this day, he continues to write dark comedy and science fiction, and has recently branched out into the realm of screenplays, which he enjoys writing the most. He thinks his stories would work well on the big screen, and keeps hoping for his big break. This story deals with when there is one...

Being the last person on Earth is never easy, but Ralph Cranston at least made it look easy. “You gotta get tough,” was what his dad used to say.

“I’m tough,” Ralph told himself, rubbing his chin and admiring his new self-styled hairdo in his bathroom mirror. He’d opted for a comb-over, and he thought he looked ten years younger. He wished someone else was still around to admire his new look.

Being the last person on Earth certainly had its advantages. Ralph was now official owner and ruler of the planet, except—by contract—Las Vegas. Las Vegas was the only place on Earth where he was not welcome, and in fact forbidden by the Cranston-Gnothi Agreement of 2012. Ralph kept a copy of the agreement in a drawer in his night stand. He liked having it nearby for reference, not because he had ever had any trouble with the Gnothi dishonoring it, but because he used to have a lawyer-friend who was always telling him to get things in writing and keep them handy “because you just never knew when someone was gonna try and screw you over.”

As owner of everything on the planet—except Las Vegas—he had his choice of where to live, what to drive, what to eat, and how to act. He chose the Playboy Mansion for his home, not because of any product loyalty, but because it was not too far from his childhood neighborhood. He lived in the mansion with his dog, Charlie, a Beagle that didn’t seem to care much about anything but wandering the mansion’s grounds for rabbits or rodents he could never possibly catch with his short legs.

Ralph drove a super-charged, bulletproof Cadillac taken from some celebrity’s Malibu garage in a gated community. He didn’t know much about cars, so he chose a car that he felt was least likely to have mechanical problems. He’d often heard and even believed that Japanese cars had the fewest mechanical problems, but he maintained his patriotic convictions to his nation, even if America no longer existed. He never drove a foreign car before

the Gnothi invaded, and it didn't make any sense to drive one now.

He ate mostly canned soup or pasta, and wild produce if he happened upon it in season. Ralph leased most of the planet's arable land to the Gnothi for growing their special foods. In exchange, the Gnothi provided him unlimited electricity. It was a win-win situation, and he could run the air conditioner all day long without fear of a steep monthly bill. And as for Charlie's dog food, well, there was no shortage of canned or dry dog food around the stores in Southern California.

In the first few years of the Cranston-Gnothi Agreement of 2012, Ralph acted much like he always did, except he slept more. Instead of waking up at seven to drive to work, he would often sleep until noon or even later. He did a lot of driving in those days, out to see mountains, forests, and beaches. He met Charlie on Huntington Beach during one such trip. Charlie was trotting up the beach, looking at everything and nothing, when he saw Ralph sitting under an umbrella with two bottles of whiskey.

Charlie headed straight for Ralph. Ralph felt bad that he had no food to offer Charlie, who seemed a little thin. Ralph offered Charlie a few sips of whiskey. Charlie drank them eagerly and then he promptly barked into the sky. Ralph laughed uncontrollably for several minutes, the first laugh he had had since he signed The Agreement. Charlie understood, too. He wagged his tail and then continued to bark at the sky, encouraging Ralph to laugh more. That was the best day of Ralph's life.

By 2016, Ralph had adopted more curious habits, maybe out of boredom, maybe out of his true nature freed from societal constraints. He rarely wore clothes anymore. Clothes were generally unnecessary in Southern California, anyway. He had also slowly amassed the world's largest (and now only) personal pornography collection. The collection included all kinds of porn, all kinds of porn. He had found the time to watch them all at least twice, and started a very intricate and detailed hand-written manifest of them all: titles, actors, scenes, fetishes, time codes of particularly exciting scenes.

His porn collection was more than just a hobby, of course. It represented his final rebellion against his wife who was one of the first casualties of the Gnothi invasion. Hedda Cranston hated pornography, thought it was demeaning to women, and had made a rather large stink when she found his secret stash of Hustler while looking for an Allen wrench to do God-knows-what. Ralph didn't care, because their sex life had tapered to non-existent by that point, and fantasizing was the only thing that kept him from a divorce.

He took particular joy in cataloging scenes which he knew Hedda would hate, especially anything involving the use of sex toys on women. In a last-ditch attempt to spice up their love life in 2010, Ralph had brought home a

vibrator and even wrapped it himself. Hedda opened it and looked at him with an empty stare and had nothing to say until they were in bed that night: “Did you really think I would use that thing? Do you want me to end up in hell?” How he missed her.

Ralph also became a master marksman with a variety of handguns and rifles. Although he sorely missed social interaction, a solitary life was almost tolerable when he contemplated firing bullets into whatever he wanted. And on holidays, such as his birthday or Christmas, he would blow up something special like an ugly house or church. Religion didn't hold much truck for him anymore.

The other major change in Ralph's personality was his ever-growing desire to try new drugs. He frequented hospitals and pharmacies, grabbing everything that he thought would get him arrested pre-2012. He rarely had any idea what any of the drugs did.

Eventually, his desires became more aggressive. He started to take much more than recommended doses, and popped many different kinds of pills at the same time. The results were often negative, such as when Charlie had no food for two days while Ralph wandered the mansion grounds for something he called “Adam's Golden Nose.” The results were sometimes positive, such as when he had a spiritual epiphany and saw his one true mission in life, which involved amassing the world's largest private pornography collection.

Ralph did miss social interaction. The lack of company never caused him any kind of depression, though. Charlie was a great companion and fun. Shooting stuff was fun. Drugs were sometimes fun. His pornography collection was interesting and fun, even educational.

He occasionally thought of exploring other activities, like reading books, but he could never read all of the great books of the world, so he didn't even bother. He did feel like he could gather all of the best pornography in the world, though, which would be a stunning achievement, and would possess the bonus virtue of infuriating Hedda. Moreover, the Gnothi would have to admit that human beings, although technologically inferior, could accomplish something really important with their lives.

On a summer day in 2017, Ralph and Charlie drove at breakneck speed north to San Francisco. Ralph had not been to the Bay Area since his twenties. Along the way he saw the Gnothi fields being harvested by the hybrid race. The hybrid race looked much like Ralph. That was because the Gnothi used Ralph's DNA to create them. Ralph, out of all the humans on Earth, had just the right DNA for the hybrid race. Ralph knew it was like winning the lottery, or else he would have been liquidated like the others. Ralph had

always wanted to win the lottery, but he never thought he would win the whole world minus Las Vegas.

The Gnothi were generally cruel to the hybrids, feeding them subsistence diets and intentionally causing in-fighting. It was a simple tactic any ruling class should use to keep a slave majority at bay. Charlie never noticed or responded to the hybrids. He knew they were not human, and knew not to bother.

Somewhere along the interstate was a sign that offered a choice: if Ralph stayed the course, he would end up in San Francisco. A simple veering on the next exit would steer him towards Las Vegas. He leaned over to Charlie, who was sitting in the passenger seat, and asked him a very sincere question.

“Hey, Charlie. Have you ever been to Las Vegas?”

Charlie tilted his head against the rolled-up window.

“Oh, sorry.”

Ralph lowered the window just a crack so Charlie could stick his nose out. Now Charlie was about as happy as he could be.

“Las Vegas is a place I’m not allowed. I don’t know about you. You can probably go because you never signed The Agreement. They don’t have special signing pens for dogs, anyhow.”

Because he was speeding at a dangerous rate, Ralph had to make a quick decision. He blinked and swerved onto the ramp towards Las Vegas, making light squealing noises with the tires, and Charlie fell back into his seat.

“Sorry, Charlie.”

Even post 2012, Las Vegas was lit up like a Christmas Tree. Ralph could still see the glow from miles away. The Gnothi wanted to reserve Las Vegas as their new capital on Earth because it reminded them so much of their home planet. They had no defenses or patrols. There were no humans left, and Ralph was predictably busy collecting porn.

And the Gnothi honestly did not care if Ralph ever showed up in Las Vegas. He was a tool who had served its purpose. They harvested his DNA and left him alive as nothing but pure entertainment. They had been watching him with secret cameras since Day One. His antics were all the rage, and had even spawned several sitcoms. The Gnothi were even contemplating an entire channel devoted to the daily doings of Ralph Cranston.

So, it was with some surprise, and relief, that Ralph Cranston crossed the Las Vegas city limit without incident. There was no particular sign that an alien-invader government operated there. He drove up and down The Strip several times and noticed no alien activity. It all would have looked normal if there had been any humans.

Ralph parked by the Luxor and Charlie jumped out to explore. Charlie did not need a leash. Charlie knew to return to the car eventually, and he had an excellent sense of direction. Ralph boldly entered the Luxor while Charlie sniffed the rest of The Strip solo.

The first thing Ralph noticed inside the Luxor was a deep quietude. None of the slot machines were spinning or dinging. There were no conventioners trading lies. But off in the distance, towards the banquet halls, was a steady stream of muffled laughter. It was a thick, rowdy laughter that could only come from the Gnothi. Ralph felt fear for the first time since 2012. He should not be here, he should not be anywhere near here. But here he was, violating The Agreement.

“In for a penny, in for a pound,” his dad used to say.

“I’m tough,” Ralph told himself.

It is usually very easy, even from a distance and muffled through walls, to tell when laughter is good-natured or bad. Ralph sensed that the Gnothi were enjoying bad-natured laughs as he approached the large banquet hall. The Gnothi had opened up as much banquet space as possible by removing all the retractable walls, causing the laughter to echo darkly throughout the hotel.

Ralph leaned sneakily around the door, like James Bond, to see and hear what all the fuss was about. The double-mouthed Gnothi were holding an alien raree mocking the human race.

Ralph could not believe it. He was sure their conduct violated The Agreement. He wished he was at home, near his night stand, so he could reread the contract. He sweated profusely as he watched different Gnothi take the stage and ridicule humans for their various quirks: baking pies, driving to work, asking for promotions, arguing over politics. Then a sharply dressed Gnothi came on stage and pretended to be on drugs, asking for money. Another Gnothi came on stage and parodied, in excruciating detail, the last several conversations Ralph had with Charlie. Every line got a hearty laugh. It was too much for Ralph.

Ralph had come armed, at least. He had two .45 revolvers loaded, ten shots in all.

He fired all his bullets into the room, taking down eight Gnothi. Pandemonium ensued. Ralph took great pleasure in knowing he had done in one minute what the entire U.S. Army could not: kill more than five of the enemy.

As the deep-blue mind control beam hit him, Ralph’s final voluntary thoughts turned toward Charlie. How would Charlie fend for himself in Las Vegas, a desert town with no one to feed him?

“He’s tough,” Ralph thought. “But still. Poor lonely, Charlie.”

Confessions of a Chronovore

by Bob Friedman

Bob Friedman is a playwright, lyricist and poet as well as a fiction writer. He was in Lehman Engel's BMI Musical Theatre Workshop and his play "Paranissimoid" was produced by The Theatre Outlet's Counter Culture Mondays in Allentown, Pennsylvania. He has published two poems, "Common Ground" and "Pheatherphlogg's Final Repast." Since 1985, he has been a volunteer DJ at WMUH Muhlenberg College in Allentown. This story is an explanation of why fun time passes rapidly.

Nullord forgive me. Your faithful Chronovore chose her vessel poorly again. I believed Allison Gellesco was perfect according to Your guidelines, yet choosing her proved the biggest error of my checkered foraging career. I thought a human who delivered balloons to all ages and provided consenting adults with other joyous diversions would be the ideal stash for my harvest. Unfortunately, keeping the precious picoseconds of joyous succulent time within my chosen vessel as I usually did proved problematic.

I lamented that Chronovoral Paradise, where all time was succulent and never ran out, was only a legend. I wondered what would have been different had I been one of The First Chronovores. Would I have behaved differently? Would I have avoided our species need to forage? Could I have avoided offending You, Nullord?

Would you then have allowed all of us to remain in Chronovoral Paradise? With my luck, I would have caused You to destroy our species.

Being within Allison while she did yoga and meditation expanded the Mundane Time stored within me until I felt akin to one of those over-filled balloons she sometimes delivered in her Juniper The Clown, Miranda Miracle, and Flitterfang alter egos. I sensed these three personae represented the most prominent voices within her: the clown, the bottle-blondage silky tongued con woman, and the Gothic princess.

Forgive me Nullord, but she wore such a sincere smile. You know, I've always been a sucker for a human grin.

Reality set in almost immediately after our merger, when I realized her smile was as much a costume as the one she sometimes painted on beneath her bogus nose and salt and pepper mustache. From inside her looking out, all her smiling faces seemed sinister in their scowling.

Once inside her I sank into the quagmire that was her fragmented psyche.

Trying to pull myself out only caused me to sink deeper. Changing to another vessel might have been possible had she not been so totally alone in the world. She did not even have a pet I could have used as an emergency escape vessel. No dog, no pussycat, and not even a little bird. Never before have I encountered a human who felt so alone.

My best efforts could not stimulate her appetite for either food or human company, even though she felt hunger pangs more intensely than I did. I got the impression she enjoyed hunger pangs, even though she was no longer technically considered anorexic. She spent a moderate amount of time among other humans though she really preferred solitude. Perhaps all the voices within her provided more than enough company.

As usual, the vessel that appeared so attractive from the outside proved to be something else entirely from the inside.

She did the previous two days' dishes while singing along with "Carmen." This really frustrated me since A) I required a place with people in order to harvest succulent time and dispose of stored waste Mundane Time, and B) I despise opera!

She glanced at her Mickey Mouse watch: eleven past three. Her ambivalence about Leon made me dizzy. Part of her worried that something unfortunate had happened to him. Another side of her hoped he had found someone else to service his needs and her other face hoped he had dropped dead in the gutter. The scowls of her inner faces reflected off one another. Their arguing echoed so loudly that if I had a head of my own, it would surely suffer a severe migraine. If I had fingers I would have stuck them in my ears — if I had ears.

I sensed that Allison enjoyed his generous compensation a lot more than his company, but she also felt terribly guilty about something in her past involving him. Part of her wished he would disappear, but the more instinctual portion of her did not want to blow a steady, reliable, and on the whole, relatively gentle client. Near as I could determine, she distrusted him far less than most of the rest of the world.

She took her anti-convulsant medication only one hour late then put the pill bottle back into her purse. She got out her trusty Tequila and took a shot directly from the bottle. She put it on the table in between two highball glasses. She paced nervously.

Space-time spun around me like a schizophrenic ballerina vortex during the forty-seven minutes before her doorbell finally rang.

She took another gulp of Tequila before looking through the door's peephole.

I shared Allison's shock at Leon Pollarth's appearance. She hoped he did

not fall off the wagon again. I doubt she realized it was my perception we shared when she thought him a bit pathetic. I shared her curiosity about the doctor's bag he held in his left hand. I did not understand why she would not ask him about it.

Her Miranda Miracle persona took over when she opened the door. They hugged. "I missed you soooo much, Leon."

His eyes appeared distant, as if gazing into another reality. "I missed you too," he said through his cigar smoke stained dentures.

"Want some Tequila?"

"No thanks." He scratched the remaining short graying hair on his right temple. "I can't put my finger on it, but something about you definitely changed."

Her Flitterfang persona wanted to tell him all about me. Juniper did not think it a good idea and Miranda Miracle was non-committal, as usual. I begged all her personae not to reveal my secret for their own good as well as my own. I tried punctuating my request by giving her a severe abdominal cramp, but it pained me more than it hurt Allison. It also unified her three personae.

"I'm sharing my body with a Chronovore from Null Time. She wants me to show you a good time so she can feed on your pleasurable moments." Allison looked at our merged reflection in the dusty closet door mirror and sneered.

"You do too much Ecstasy again, Allie?"

I gazed out through her dilated green irises and into his steel gray stare. Something deep inside him shot a chill through me so intense that I instantly broke eye contact.

Allison giggled. "We're not fucked up today, Leon. Really. At least not on that hallucinogen."

"So what are you fucked up on?"

"That's for me to know and you hopefully not to find out, officer," said Allison's Miranda persona in the same tone she used to con her way out of more than a few tight spots with cops.

Leon shook his head. "I guess you haven't changed very much at all." The glare in his eyes sent northeaster winds up her spine and all through me. I could not stop shivering when she force-fed her memories to me in fragmentary black and white video with garbled audio: the perverts picked her up hitchhiking, had their fun, and then dumped her onto the shoulder of Highway Sixty-Nine at three in the morning.

My shivering abated when she remembered how Leon rescued her. Nausea hit me when she recalled identifying one of her attackers but the cops

would not charge him due to his family connections. My nausea worsened as I relived her nervous breakdown followed by six months in the Cynica State loony bin. I got the impression her stay there strengthened the distinctness of her internal personae.

Her voice yelled at him more loudly than I intended. "Listen to me, Leon. If I do not quickly complete my mission, death will embrace me and all of my offspring. This corporeal vessel will also perish."

She caressed the top of her head with several shoulder length crimson dreadlocks. "So if you're a good boy and Allison's a good girl, perhaps you two can share some succulent time with me. I only need a few picoseconds to insure the survival of my brood. Come on dude. Cooperate."

"You are unbelievable. Why can't you ever focus on the real world?"

I thought of Null Time and shared my lonely anguish with all of her personae.

"Cause the real world sucks moose dork, lover. You of all people ought to know that. The farther I get from the real world the better. You know the two of us could have a great time in fantasy land. Why don't you come with me?" She tried caressing his chrome dome with her hair but he pushed her away.

I considered inviting them both to visit Null Time with me then apologized to Nullord for such heresy.

"I shoulda put you over my knee a long time ago."

She giggled. "It's never too late, lover." She purred like a kitten, removed her belt, then put it in her mouth. She crawled to him, dropped the belt at his feet, and then crawled past his pant leg several times. She meowed and maneuvered her head under his hand. He pushed her away. Allison meowed again, but much more obnoxiously.

"Put a sock in it."

She took a clean pair out of her dresser and put them in her mouth.

"Very funny," said Leon.

Allison muffled-meowed until Leon removed the socks from her mouth and tossed them onto the foot of the bed. I shared her pain when she saw him looking down on her.

Turbulence built up within her. I reinforced her emotional walls to the best of my ability; pock marked stone battlements constructed from years of trauma survived. The toxic turbulence seeped through our shared defenses one by one, getting closer and closer to my Time Stash.

I underestimated the intensity of her emotions. Previous experience with vessel turbulence did not prepare me for the severity of this Allisonquake. Looking into his vacant gray eyes made us share freckled goose bumps, but

she maintained her Miranda Miracle smile. As usual, it thoroughly masked Allison's inner turmoil from all outsiders, but not from me.

We tried rubbing his back but he pushed us away. "What's the matter, Leon?"

Before receiving his reply, I felt myself again reinforcing her emotional moats and battlements; middle age fortifications in a twenty-first century conflict. I feared that very soon nothing could protect either of us.

He shook his head. She danced around him. "Come on, Leon. You can tell me. You know you always feel better after talking about it."

"Damn it, Allison. Why couldn't you keep your life together?"

After sharing her memory of Diane, The Wicked Stepmother from the West, saying, "get out and don't come back," I began vessel modulation preparations.

Allison glared back into Leon's eyes. "What's wrong with my life?" Juniper shared internal admissions with me: "Allison is lazy, self indulgent, and not living up to our potential."

"You wasted most of your life," said Leon, more in sadness than anger.

"Like I ever had a chance."

"Come off it, lady. You could've made something of yourself, but you blew it."

I told her not to shake her head, but her Flitterfang persona took over, and mendacity was the Gothic princess' usual response to situations like this. I realized nothing could change Flitterfang, so I tried in vain to help Allison switch to her Juniper persona.

"I guess I'm not surprised you don't have the courage to admit it," said Leon.

"Wrong, Bozo," she bellowed. "I did a lotta shit in my life that I ain't proud of, but damn it Leon, I'm entitled to a little consideration."

Leon raised a skeptical eyebrow then shook his head wearing the face of someone who recently ingested a large quantity of castor oil. "Stop acting like such a stupid little girl."

"Where do you get off calling me 'stupid,' old man? If I'm too stupid for ya, maybe you ought to get your stinkin' fat ass outta here before somebody busts ya for child molestation."

My most soothing thoughts of placid paradise were not calming enough. Her capacity for self-delusion astonished me, as did her propensity for self-destruction. Flitterfang prevented Allison from believing she'd taken the line of least resistance throughout most of her life ever since she became a widower's only daughter.

Nullord knows which of us was more neurotic. With Juniper and Miran-

da teamed against her, Flitterfang relented slightly, allowing Allison's tear streams to flow.

She ran to Leon and hugged him. "I'm sorry," she said in Miranda's best little girl voice. He moved to the door. She caught up with him just as he twisted the knob. "I know I've been a naughty little girl. That's why you gotta severely discipline me." She swatted herself hard on the butt.

I did not like the sound of that.

Leon slowly shook his head. "Been there. Done that. How'd you like to play a real game?"

Miranda Miracle sided with Flitterfang, outvoting Juniper. Allison wrinkled her nose, shook her head, then looked back at Leon. "What kind of game?"

"One that pays double, if you trust me without question."

Her personae amazed me when they unanimously agreed to trust him. I vehemently protested, but she ignored me.

"Whatever you say, lover." She got her handcuffs and shackles from under her bed. She put her choker chain around her neck. It almost fully covered one of the blue fang mark tattoos. She blew Leon a kiss, then began unbuttoning her shirt.

"Don't do that yet."

She nodded. "Do you want me on the bed?"

He nodded. She centered herself on the bed. She put the cuffs on her wrists. He used her scarf to tie the cuffs to the headboard. He shackled her ankles together then secured them to the foot of the bed with her belt.

I could not be sure, but I thought he had tears in his eyes when he looked in her purse.

"Stay outta my stuff."

"Why'd you have to get Cavalletti's kid strung out? Couldn't you pick someone who had law abiding next of kin?"

Miranda insisted Tim did not get strung out until after they broke up. Juniper differed passionately but Flitterfang refused to take sides. Allison's internal confusion laid siege to my Time Stash.

Leon took a taser out of his doctor's bag. He fired the electrodes before Allison had a chance to protest. He pushed the discharge button. The ensuing jolt knocked me almost completely out of her. I fled with my Time Stash into the ex-cop as he put the taser into the little black bag.

Leon caused shudders within me that I could not repress when we shared his most recent memories of Vincent Cavalletti:

"You know about my boy?" asked the old man as he gazed out his open limo window.

I felt Leon's discomfort as he recalled scanning the Turnpike rest area. "My condolences," he said as he turned up his overcoat collar against the wind.

The old mobster coughed as he exhaled cigar smoke. He spat phlegm onto the asphalt. "What if I can prove it wasn't suicide?"

"I'm not a cop anymore." Distant memories of Internal Affairs investigations flashed like above cloud lightning.

"Excellent," said the old man. "I need some freelance justice from someone unencumbered by constitutional constraints. I hear you do that sort of work these days."

"You got wet-jobbers. What do you need with me?"

"Poetic justice. That Gellesco bitch got him strung out then he ODed. It's worth fifty grand if she suffers a similar fate from someone she knows and trusts."

Leon shook his head. "Pass."

"That is most unfortunate." Cavalletti gave him a manila envelope. The old mobster smiled as Leon looked in the envelope. He cursed when he saw several pictures of his teenage daughter tied to a metal table.

I shuddered when Leon recalled the old mobster telling him he could either save his daughter or Allison.

Leon got the plastic funnel out of his doctor's bag and put it between Allison's teeth. He poured the rest of her tequila down. He dropped the contents of her pill bottle and several hits of acid in followed by the pint of one hundred proof vodka from his bag. One thought permeated every ion of my being: what if Nullord was displeased with his faithful Chronovore? Was this my punishment? I asked The Nullord for guidance but got no response. I feared he had forsaken me when I was most in need.

Leon wrote a long hand message in Allison's spiral notebook even though he knew it would be easily recognized as forgery. I wondered if Nullord heard my prayers when the red felt tip pen Leon was using ran out of ink before he finished. He found a partially chewed pencil and completed the note:

"My life is not worth living without Tim. He was my best friend and I caused his death. This is the only way I can atone. Forgive me. Alison."

I reminded him of his spelling error. He stuffed the extra "l" into her name.

"Vessel instability critical. Time Stash at risk! Time Stash AT RISK!" ran throughout my being when Leon saw Allison convulsing.

Leon started towards her then stopped in his tracks. His intense desire to care for her battled with his familial protective instinct, with poor little me

caught in the crossfire. I looked out the window, desperate for a new vessel but found none.

Leon watched her slowly die without either attempting escape or rendering assistance. Toxins closed in on my Time Stash as Leon removed the cuffs and choker. He gently kissed her forehead then removed the shackles.

At my urging he hid them under the bed. He left the empty pill bottle and the tequila and vodka bottles near her bed. He caressed her right hand. Anguished memories tore through me as Leon recalled hearing that Allison attempted suicide again.

I prevented him from fully realizing the actual reason why he phoned his former partner. Nullord please let him be home.

In spite of my influence, Leon considered fleeing the scene even as Dinsing answered his extension. "It's Leon. I need your help."

"What is it?" asked a distant unenthusiastic voice that Leon thought sounded way too old for his age. I thought perhaps Dinsing had nodded out at his desk and Leon's call had woken him.

"I'll tell you when you get here. 1838 Cynica Valley Road. First floor rear." He let the phone drop without hanging up.

I begged Nullord for deliverance, though I sensed it was already too late. Suspended animation almost fully held both of us as we awaited Dinsing. This did not stop the anxiety from building within him. The Leonquake hit me when Oscar Dinsing arrived half an hour later. I held my Time Stash temporarily safe from Leon's after-shocks when Dinsing asked, "What the hell's going on, Leon?"

"I had to evacuate into this body." Leon Pollarth pointed to his own chest. "When he put poor Allison out of her misery."

My vessel instability alarm reached crescendo when Dinsing found the note on the table. I maintained Leon's outward calm when he watched Dinsing read the note.

"Motherfucker," said Dinsing.

Leon could not recall the last time he heard his protégé swear. He would not look Dinsing in the eye in spite of my best efforts.

"Damn it, Leon. You gotta to level with me, and we are running out of time."

"No shit, Sherlock." Leon paced more rapidly than usual thanks to my anxiety. His pulse, respiration, and perspiration rates increased three-fold.

"Look me in the eye, Leon."

Leon did so reluctantly, much to my relief. I saw in Dinsing's gaze a concern for his mentor and friend.

"Tell me why you killed her?"

Relief overwhelmed me when I finally managed to restart Leon's conscience. Thank Nullord he ignored his first impulse and did not try to jump out the seventh story window. Leon slowly stood. He took off his jacket very slowly making sure to keep his hands fully visible. He put his hands against the wall and spread his legs. Dinsing confiscated pistols from Leon's shoulder and ankle holsters.

Dinsing patted him down. "Did she blow you off for someone else?" Leon sniffed back tears when Dinsing handcuffed him.

"It wasn't me. I am the victim here. If I do not deliver my Time Stash to Null Time, my brood will starve. Do you hear me? They will starve!"

"Why the hell're you doing this? You know there's no such thing as Null Time."

I laughed in Leon's voice. "It's my home. Not part of hell or earth, as you know them. Null Time/dimension is populated only by Chronovores. We merge with corporeal vessels when we visit the various dimension/times within the known Multi-verse. We harvest small portions of your succulent time then return home after bountiful forage, Nullord willing."

Dinsing munched several antacid tablets. "Knock it off, Leon. I don't know where you got this bullshit, but it has to stop now, before anyone else hears you."

Leon ignored my request to inform Dinsing all about Cavalletti. He denied my reality in spite of my repeated explanations. "Leave me alone," shrieked Leon. "Get out of my head."

"Are you hearing voices in your head?" asked Dinsing. "Did they tell you to kill her?"

I looked at Dinsing through Leon's guilty eyes as his lips whispered; "I can't remember what happened."

"Were you boozin' again?"

I shared Leon's flashbacks of several times when he had awoken, not recalling how he had gotten home or where the last few days had gone.

He shook his head. "No way. I'd have a hangover if I did, and I don't, so I didn't."

His circular logic made me dizzy, but I trusted Leon's assessment of his former partner. I readied my Time Stash for vessel-modulation. Twenty per cent of it was contaminated. I discarded the bad time before its toxicity spread, then jumped into the security and warmth of Oscar Dinsing. I arrived in time to overhear Captain Richard Stevens tell him to "take the rest of the day."

He wanted to stay with Leon through the booking process, but procedure prohibited it. He wanted to hide from the world in an alcohol induced stu-

por, but I convinced him he needed to do something special with his wife and daughter. He expressed deep doubts that he could leave his feelings about Leon at the office. I assisted him in compartmentalizing these aspects of his life.

My Time Stash bulged when Oscar Dinsing got home. Sally made Fettuccine Alfredo, Oscar's favorite for supper. After eating, Corrine did the mime piece she worked up for the Sunday school talent show. Her parents encouraged her artistic endeavors. Their joy was my dessert.

I departed immediately after Dinsing put Corrine to bed. I returned to Null Time and shared an abundance of succulent quality time equally among my brood. Nullord willing, they will be naturals at foraging in no time at all, and they will hopefully avoid repeating my foolish errors.

The Ten Millionth Expedition

by John Grey

John Grey is an Australian born poet, playwright, and musician. He has been writing for the past twenty-five years. His most recent book is "What Else Is There" from Main Street Rag. He was recently published in Tule Review, Pedestal, The Hurricane Review, Cape Rock, and the Connecticut Review.

The Ten Millionth Expedition

Why does it always have to be
years beyond the Golden Age of exploration.

The impression they get back home
must be that I'm puttering around

in the Scrap Metal Age despite the fact
that I've long since passed the very tip

of the known universe and am, even now,
cruising through an uncharted galaxy

with enough new stars and planets
to ransack all of Greek and Roman,

even Norse mythology, for names.
But I can imagine the chatter back on earth.

Seen one giant gas planet, seen them all.
He's no Buck Rogers. Why doesn't he get

a real job. The rockets they're making these
days fly themselves. A monkey could pilot one.

So it's up to me to be my own audience,
to land on a new world, gasp at what I'm seeing

like it's a picture back home. Years from now,
there'll be a colony here... space age living

for the unimpressed.

Subtle Passage

by James Steimle

*James Steimle is a graduate student in love with conundrums and flights of the imagination. He is the author of the anthropological adventure, *The Ghost People (Sam's Dot)*, and his work appears in the latest issues of *Albedo One*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Outer Darkness*. He is one of those peculiarities of nature: a historian, linguist, and hobby physicist. In this story it is sometimes best not to step through the doorway.*

1

It's not *exactly* my intention to scare anyone, but I hope you will take the message seriously enough to do something about this nightmare, and I'll offer my suggestions. I think I finally have reason to believe that my problems began with an over-abundance of frequent-flier miles. Not that I was flying. But I worked for KiteWay Delivery, and I had dropped packages into waiting hands in Moscow, Pongo Pongo, and Paris all in the same day and still made it home in time to watch *Prey* and chow down fortified ice cream bars for dinner.

I cannot speak Russian, Samoan, or French, but that does not mean I cannot gallivant around this local portion of the cosmos and make Timon Escobedo jealous. That night he finally lost it. Timon said he was coming over, but *Prey* had ended and I was watching *Sex in Swahili* by the time he arrived, dripping sweat like he had run the whole way.

He stood with his back to the door. He was all bug-eyed. And I was tired—I mean, some people work for a living, right?—and I started another early shift the following morning. But hey, you never turn a friend away. “Are the Martians landing?”

“Ha, ha,” Timon said. I saw reluctance in his eyes. It was like he could not trust me. Then he grabbed me by the shoulders and slammed me into the couch, shouting the whole time things like, “What have you done! What've they done! Where is she! Where's Xi!”

“Who is Xi?” It was the wrong answer, I guess. He threw me, and the cushions caught me once again. I probably should have been angry—at least shocked—at his violence, but I was chuckling before I deduced that logic. “Xi?” It was a girl's name, so of course I was interested; Timon all huffy over a girl he hadn't even told me about?

He turned away, cupped his cheeks, moaned, and banged his head against the side of the kitchenette cupboards.

“Poor lad. How am I supposed to steal your girl if you keep her a secret?”

“Xi’s no secret,” he said, “and you’ve been talking about her legs as if she’s someone I *might* meet instead of someone I’ve already bought a ring for—”

I had no idea what he was talking about. But I heard the word “legs”—I liked legs—and I heard “ring.” “Xi?”

He fell into a folded lump of flesh and bones beside me. He stared at the Africans and mulattos flirting across the wall—I had already muted the sound. Then he looked at me. “Russ. You don’t know Xi, do you?”

“No, thank you very much. You’re getting married? Why didn’t you tell me?”

He pointed at the screen. “I bought the stone in Africa.” Was he weeping or sweating—his face was so wet and red, I was not sure. “I just couldn’t wait for a delivery. When I got back...”

“Whoa, now. Hold a minute,” I said. “Who is Xi! Timon, you can’t do this to a friend.”

“Aren’t you listening?” he shouted. And I thought my home entertainment system was loud? Timon was freaking thunder! I shoved a finger in my wounded ear to save the drum, and he went right on, bellowing, shaking as he hammered out words at high speed. “Xi was here last night! *Think!* Oh, you’ve *got* to remember! Short blue dress! You commented on her calves bulging—you jealous piece of slag!—right in front of her? And she laughed at you like she was *your* bride to be! Like she was flattered by the compliment, and she hung on your arm like she was your future sister-in-law.”

“Well,” I said, “we are practically brothers, Timon.” But that wasn’t the bottom line, and Timon knew it, which is why I was confused: Timon had not brought a long-legged beauty to the apartment last night. The guy had not come over at all. “What’s this about really? This a virtual girl thing? You been plugged-in too long?”

He looked ready to pounce. To pummel me with both fists until I was little more than the incredible jelly man disguised as a puddle of red and fleshy fluid. But he just stared at me, panting, dripping, and stinking of garlic and onions. “You’ve never met her.”

“Xi? Not the girl *you’re* describing. No.”

“But you knew a Xi?”

I reeled. “Remember high school. Post-high? Seemed like every other girl was named Xi, or Jennifer! Just one of the popular names in our genera-

tion.”

He collapsed. He wept like a boy. And by the time I came back with a cold Sparkling Oublette, Timon was holding a gold band before his gushing eyes. I tell you: what a diamond!

2

The frightening part about quantum doorways is that you never really know where you will end up. Or rather you do. You get to where you are hoping to go, but the stabilizers don't work the way they should, though there is no solid proof of that complaint either. And actually using them is enough to make you nauseous from a distance.

Here is the freaky part, at least for me. When you are close to a quantum doorway and you *consider* seriously passing through one, you arrive at your locale without ever reaching the door. Yes, yes. I know that is impossible; that is not really what happens. But that is how it feels, at least to me. Because I never have any memory of going through the doorway. I am just suddenly —poof!— where I wanted to be. They tell us it is because you arrive before you leave. But does that really make sense? Why should pre-arrival affect my memory?

And that, for me, is the worst part of all. That is what gets the activists in an uproar. Never mind the fact that most people who work for the old-fashioned airlines are counted among the activists. Sure they just want some job security, and everyone has a right to speak their mind—shout and wave signs and all of that. But the airlines can't fly you to the moon. And they remind me of slow computers—I mean, if you have never flown in an airplane think about it: it takes *hours* to get to your destination. And you remember all of it. Unless you sleep.

Nevertheless, activists against the use of quantum doorways like to argue one point that really bothers me. Because some sleepless nights, I say their motto to myself: The doorways change your world.

That is right. And you know what? CRP and M-SAP, who manufacture quantum doorways and collect a toll by magically producing one more frigin charge on your credit bill whenever you step through—they don't deny the activists' claim! Not really, anyway. They say, When you use a quantum doorway, you are really passing into a parallel universe where everything is the same except your location—there are infinite parallel universes, they tell us. But it is all theory. And is it really the same?

For as long as there have been doorways out there, there have been freaks who claim that they had been CEOs for major companies and that on the

second they passed through a doorway they turned into general Joes working at Burrito World or Quick Cash 4U. Those freaks file their lawsuits. They always lose. In the end the opposing attorney disproves the claim, citing that even the subject doesn't fully believe that the claim is true.

That is why I knew Timon—another freak—didn't have a chance. And I never would have really worried for him. Not until the following Thursday when I thought about passing through a quantum doorway and found myself delivering a package for KiteWay. I had been to the Moon's Epsilon Living Center nine times—always a thrill to see planet Earth hanging in a black sky, let me tell you—but when I got home afterwards..I had a twin brother.

3

“Russ, you've got to get Timon to a doctor,” said my mirror image the moment I unlocked my door. I would have asked him who he was, but he wore my face and he used my voice. At least he had someone else's clothes on, *his* I figured. I didn't realize we were supposed to be family.

But the apartment was different. Made for two now, with winking and swaying posters of Megan Peeples all around the bedroom. Don't get me wrong. I *love* the actress as much as the next guy, but evidently my brother loved her more.

“Why are you staring at me that way? Russ!” My twin knocked his fingers on the front of my skull. Ready to laugh, he set aside the trill, which no doubt would've echoed my own, and returned to what seemed to him to be more pressing matters by jamming a hitchhiker's thumb in the direction of my best friend who sat crumpled on my couch.

“Dude,” said Timon. “I've told your stupid brother everything—the lawyers say they can't..they can't—Oh you tell him, Ray.”

I looked at “Ray,” who was catching my arm as I spun in a circle, examining other slight variations in my apartment: the two-dimensional picture of old Jerusalem on one wall; the *touché* decal stuck to the corner of the oven; slight brand difference printed on the wall screen.

Ray tapped his temple and said, “Coo-coo! You've got to get him out of here.”

I was already running for the door. “Timon. Drink time. *Andele!*”

Timon rose slowly. I pulled him from my new family. And as we flew down the elevator, I pinned Timon to the wall. “Is it Xi? You're still crying over—”

Timon exploded. “You said you understood! Was that all just an act?”

“Stop, Timon. No acting. Ray’s *my brother*?” I didn’t wait long enough for the answer. “I don’t have a brother, Timon. I’ve never had a brother. I live alone. And I don’t have Megan Peeples staring at me from every wall in my bedroom.”

The elevator doors opened to the apartment lobby. Timon sneered at me. “What are you talking about?” I tried to catch him but he was marching fast now. He shot glances at me like I had suddenly gone insane.

There were people in suits looking at us. “Would you stop for a minute? Timon, think. You have to get permits to have children. Right? I mean, that hasn’t—hasn’t *changed* or anything has it?”

“You suppose that’ll *ever* change?” His eyes rolled. “Xi talked about having a child. I was so worried that our combined incomes would never be enough to qualify us as able parents. That we’d need a third party. And I *dreamed* that you might help us to—to—oh, Russ. I. I can’t remember what she looks like anymore. It hasn’t been a week! Xi. I have no pictures. And she’s gone! She’s slipping away! And you know what I did? I thought that since my trip made the change, maybe another could bring her back or take me back. So I went through, and through, and through—but nothing’s changed. Nothing at all! And my credits are gone. All of them!”

“Timon,” I said, realizing what it meant to be ruined: he would have twenty-four hours to move out of his rental and into government housing in Alaska—pretty country, but totally dependent on government subsidized doorways to get to work, and thereby limited to certain destinations *and* travel times that made it difficult for those in the hole to ever get out. Alaska had the largest population of all the United States, the doorways were severely limited, and the crime rate was frightening up there.

I wanted to comfort Timon. But I couldn’t stop thinking about *Ray* and the realization that Timon and all the other freaks out there might be right. But no, that couldn’t be. There were too many variables changed in my world for this to happen. The stabilizers were supposed to align universes. But how could they *really* work? What a daunting impossibility, quantum computers or no quantum computers!

He grabbed me again. “Russ, I’m stuck! They took her, and I’ve already moved to the Robespierre Beneficial Living Environment.” He slid down the old-fashioned brick wall, scouring his coat. He wasn’t crying anymore. He gazed into insanity, his eyes wide, and I thought he was drooling.

woke me. It wasn't Ray, but I knew he had to be awake, just as he had been the night before and the night before that—I wondered if my twin ever slept at all. It seemed to me that he only pretended to sleep.

It was the scantily clad Megan Peeples walking toward the waves and a sunset she would never reach. She walked, she turned around, walking backwards, turned again, gleefully struggling to keep eyes on me. Her hips hitched left and right, jerking in time with every jubilant step. She smiled and she kept tossing her hair over her shoulders to peer back at me, as if I was the boyfriend giving chase. There was no sound, of course—not that kind of poster. But all the posters were moving. And posters only moved in response to motion that they detected. Rolling over in bed would not be enough. They watched for the movement of eyes. I found them annoying, which is why I'd never bought one.

So I swung my head toward my brother's bed. Ray was staring at the ceiling. I could just make out the midnight glow from the window brightening the whites of his eyes and reflecting a sheen of moisture on his conjunctiva.

I looked away, then looked back again and sighed. Ray still didn't move at all. Could he have fallen asleep with his eyes open? My twin? I had never done that. Not that I knew of.

When I leaned up on one arm and faced my brother again, all the images of Megan Peeples turned their attention on me and bubbled with excitement and motion. Each 3D picture practically begged for attention, but I gave none. A new thought came to mind. I squinted at Ray's eyes.

Because they were glowing, and not from the moon or the yellow city lights outside our bedroom window. They shimmered, danced with something like a distant light. And suddenly I had a memory, like a mass-producing germ, take place in the forefront of my mind. You know, that was the oddest thing. It wasn't like it was a memory from something that I had actually experienced; it was like something constructed, original, forming and developing into a clear shape while I called upon it. And the memory was this: Cerebral-link computers projected images from an individual's conjunctiva onto the eyes, so that the viewer visually accessed data more clearly than the best wall screen. HansonPW had developed the best implants, the U5000-RX9 ProjectorLink, and I had personally delivered tens of thousands of these pricey items for KiteWay Delivery. I remembered doing so. All of a sudden. So why the mental aftertaste?

I looked at Ray again. He was online.

The next day I noticed that Ray and I shared the same birthmark behind the left ear, a tiny melanin production that looked like a box kite seen off-angle. Twins, I thought at work, putting it out of my mind. But the birthmark kept coming back to my attention as an oddity. I had never met a twin before, had I? I wondered how Timon was doing.

After work I ate squid with Ray, and we laughed over the latest styles that teenagers sported: black hats, buttoned vests, and rings running up their thighs. “They’ll be embarrassed when they grow up and share these pictures with their kids,” I said.

“If they have any,” Ray answered.

I told Ray about my trips to the moon—three in one day! I love the moon. I’d like to live there, I told him. He shrugged the idea away.

“Can’t go outside,” he said. “On the moon.”

“Sure you can!”

“But it’s like skiing. You get all dressed up, and you’re limited to the number of activities that you can—”

“I love to ski!”

“You’ve never been on the slopes,” he said, chuckling at me and waving at someone over my shoulder.

“I’ve been to the mountains many times. Many times for work. Someday I’ll ski.”

“Sure. And someday you’ll live on the moon.” He stood and introduced me to a woman who was, well, who was all legs—so with a sinking feeling that rushed upon me like an icy fog, I knew who she was before Ray said her name. But it couldn’t be! Black dress that started at the top of her thighs and then raced like silk to her shoulders. I was shaking her hand before the introductions were done. I sat like a drunk man, listening to her laughter, but too depressed to concentrate enough to break through the warning hum in the back of my brain.

My twin brother. My clone—he was dating...

6

Xi came over after work three days later, and I did something really stupid. I spoke as if she wasn’t there at all. A part of me could not believe it, just could not. We were beyond impossible here, and I had not spoken with Timon for days. Had not seen him. A part of me wondered if he even existed anymore. I said, “You need permits to have a child.”

They were holding hands on the couch, when I said this, and they could

not disguise the uncertainty they felt at the situation I was proposing. Little jerks of the head. A pat of the hand. Deep breaths. Long sighs. But I wasn't talking about Ray and Xi.

"For me to be born," I said in clarification. "Our parents would have needed special permits."

Ray laughed. Xi laughed, half eager to leave, half playing the good girlfriend and not wanting to offend her boy or her boy's crazy brother. The conversation died there, and Xi managed to run away within the hour, as if my words had nothing to do with the reason she kept scratching her head and tapping her lips.

"What was *that* all about?" Ray said when the door shut behind her.

"What was what?"

"Talk of babies? You trying to scare her off? Nobody has babies anymore!" That wasn't true.

He still didn't get it. "I was talking..about you, Ray. You!"

"Permits? Parents? So what!"

"So..us!" I bit my bottom lip. "Our parents didn't have twins, did they?"

He laughed. He chuckled up and down, went into the bedroom, got all the posters grinning and running or tossing hair and sighing. He came back and shook his head at me, then his fist. "You've become a freak, you know. I see what you're doing."

"I don't think so. Doctors would have known if you were in Mom's womb with me. They would have aborted you."

He sat back, endless chortle. Then he growled. Then he was still, contemplative. Brooding behind his hand.

"Or me," I said. "But no twins. Government almost never gives permits for that, and you know it. I've heard about twins, but never seen one, not until recently. You."

Ray did not laugh. He did not look concerned. He just sat there, listening as I put the pieces together.

And I had gone too far. It was tell all, or die trying at this point, which is why I stood between him and the front door. His eyes were glazed, so I wondered if he had popped online again. "Are you listening to me, Ray?"

"You're talking," he said. "You were about to say..."

"That you're not my brother. Not really. You're not even a clone, though you probably could pass for a perfect physical replica of me."

"You sound like you've lost it, Russ. What are you getting at?"

"I do deliveries."

"So?"

“My job is to get packages to people and places where conventional shipping is not good enough, for whatever reason. So I travel. I’ve seen other worlds.”

“You’ve seen the moon, Russ.”

“Another planetoid object, though yes it’s not really another *planet*. I’ve never been to another planet. Simply for the same reason that NASA has failed to get travelers outside of the solar system, even with quantum portal technology. It’s just too far, and too new, with too many unknowns.”

“You’re not making any sense,” Ray said, but he still had not moved, and he appeared to be waiting for something from me.

“I saw a show the other day about that. How we would never travel to other worlds, though NASA said otherwise; how they were working with SETI to locate possible places to cast doorways, to try and make—”

“Contact?” Ray stood up.

So I stepped back. “I think we..I think we’ve already made contact.” I took a breath. “But the aliens are using the doorways for their own purposes. Everything changing, piecemeal, even memories.”

“You remember everything about me, though.”

“Because you want me to. You planted it, or planted yourself in a parallel universe where I could have had a twin brother, and I crossed into it.”

“The stabilizers don’t allow for that,” Ray said. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Of course not,” I said, reaching the door. “I’m just a delivery boy.”

I turned.

Xi was blocking my way.

7

Never underestimate a panicked human being fighting for survival. That would be my advice to all the alien life forms in the universe. We didn’t evolve this way from nothing. That is the only explanation that I can give for my escape.

They had me in the apartment. Ray, a perfect copy of all my strengths and weaknesses, right behind me. And this muscular woman right outside my door.

All I remember is kicking and flailing. Complete chaos. Then I was running. I took the stairs so I didn’t have to wait for the elevator, which meant they were at the bottom of the stairs before I was. But as soon as I started making noise, they let me pass. The noise, though I am ashamed to say it, was much like a turkey caught in a biting trap—or how I would imagine

those sounds to be. More flailing arms, dog paddling, a fool's version of kung fu.

I burned through my credits before I could stop myself, running through doorways (trips not related to work come out of my own pocket), checking records to see if I still had a twin brother—I always did.

My last trip to the Epsilon Living Center on the moon changed everything for me. I will never use a quantum doorway again; I will fly, if I ever decide to travel. I've shifted jobs to from carrier to stock boy. It was an easy trade.

So why did I stay on the moon? Why don't I talk about aliens anymore—I don't, you see. I don't think we've made contact, like I did during the panic. But I do think we should get rid of quantum transportation. Albert Einstein said so long ago, "God does not play dice with the universe." Yet I've learned..that *we* do.

Xi was waiting for me when I arrived on the moon. "As planned," she told me. And then, being the strong and devoted woman that she is, Xi guided me to our honeymoon suite. She looked so beautiful with her hair all a glow for the occasion. White never looked so good on a woman. I had no memory of buying her the ring, but she did. That is all that mattered to her. All that mattered.

The suite overlooked the Dandelion Crater. Earth rose bright and blue over a black horizon. Xi came up behind me, pulled me away from the enchanting view only to bless me with another.

I can't explain it, probability shifting in my favor. But I no longer believe in alien invasions or government conspiracies. I do not recommend the use of any quantum device. And yet I have never been so happy.

Innocent Kisses

by Ed Kratz

Ed Kratz is an affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association based on his short story "Poppe," which was published in the Space and Time Anthology "Bringing Down the Moon." He is a career civil servant approaching retirement and has resumed writing, or at least submitting, after a long hiatus. In this story, some fairy tales are better left in the land of make-believe.

Grimes picks me up promptly at 10:00 A.M. for our assignment.

"Good morning, Grimes," I say as I get in. "Beautiful day."

"Morning," Grimes grunts. The odds are good that will be the extent of our casual conversation. Grimes possesses the unimaginative devotion to the task at hand of an ant. I am more easily distracted, but I admire my partner and try to emulate him. In our work, a plodding adherence to the mission is more than just an asset to one's career. In our work, too much reflection leads to madness.

"New one today," Grimes says.

"Yes." I know I do not have to tell him where she will be. We pick up the undercovers the same place every time: outside Constable King's place, the last house on a quiet cul-de-sac which borders on a still pristine forest a short walk through a perfectly maintained tiny, public park.

She is waiting for us when we drive up.

"Beautiful. She's beautiful." Grimes says. He says it without admiration or lust. He is simply stating a fact.

She is probably in her mid twenties, but she could pass for the teenager she is pretending to be.

"She's perfect," I say, knowing what our subjects want.

"Bastards!" Grimes says, knowing what our subjects want.

She goes to the back toward me. Grimes says, "Didn't she get the King's instructions?"

"Kline," she says, waving quickly to me, then she slides in up front, and I know she has been briefed. If she sits in the back our passenger will see her in the rear-view mirror, and things could get ugly—at least get ugly before this is supposed to get ugly.

"Grimes," she says, and I guess I am egotistical because while I could tell she had some respect for me, her awe for Grimes is evident in her tone and in the way she repeats, "Grimes," like she has come in the presence of

a legend, which, of course, she has.

“I’m Suzanne DeMarina. With a ‘z’.” She turns around to me, making sure I hear.

Grimes takes one hand from the wheel, gently turns her head to the front. “When we get Frog in the back, don’t turn around.”

“I just...”

“Just don’t turn around,” Grimes says, putting an end to conversation.

“With a ‘z’” I repeat.

“Yes,” she says and moves her head just slightly before catching herself and stopping. “Kline. The Scribe— sort of.”

I guess King has told her that I am the one who will handle the debriefing with him after this goes down. I almost said the paperwork, but of course, our reports are only verbal, detailed briefings to constable King. Nothing is ever written down.

Suzanne is silent as Grimes drives, a good sign. Idle chatter marks a dangerously nervous partner, someone who might be too scared, or excited by the adventure to respond.

I swear I am becoming too sensitive because I am lost in thought and not noticing where we are when suddenly my heart flutters and I am afraid and I realize I have left the King’s territory. I have this terror even before Grimes drives into the worst, most horrid run-down slums in the city, where we will be picking up our next passenger.

We do not even stop, just slow to a roll. I throw open my door, and Froggy darts out from the shadows, shaking his head from side to side, his eyes bulging to make sure no one sees him, and dashes to my open door. He has got a scarf wrapped around his neck and a wool cap pulled down low almost covering his eyes, but if you look closely you can see the ugly green tint of his skin. Frog is safe though, because no one in this neighborhood is going to look closely at any stranger’s face. Even in those few scared moments Frog has gotten a glance at Suzanne.

”Real looker you got this time.” He looks up front.

I take his head, turn it toward me, even though it means I am dealing with his unconquerable bad breath. It is clear Suzanne up front and me in the back with Froggy is good planning. I cannot—or prefer not to—imagine the consequences if Froggy were in the back seat with Suzanne.

“Focus Froggy. What’s the deal?”

“I’ve asked you not to call me that.”

“Yes, Froggy. I know you have.” I pull out a handkerchief and make a production out of rubbing my hand that touched him before.

“Damn you!”

“Easy, Froggy.”

“Damn it!”

Suzanne whispers something to Grimes. I see her face in the mirror, and see Frog sees it too, and she is momentarily vulnerable because she is showing concern for this bastard.

Frog’s kind use compassion to manipulate their victims. Kindness, sweetness, dreaming — these are just vulnerabilities to the Frog.

Still driving, Grimes manages a quick hiss in Suzanne’s ear.

Grimes does not chatter, but when he needs to speak he has knack for succinct communications, particularly when he is describing evil. Suzanne’s face goes white. Despite her naive appearance, the lady is a cop, and she could not be as innocent as she looks, so I guess Grimes got through to her.

“There! There!” Frog says.

“This neighborhood!” Suzanne says, realizing we are back in King’s county.

Frog laughs. “This neighborhood!” he says, like some foul bestial version of Suzanne parroting human feeling. “Where else better than here?”

Frog is right. Where else better for his ilk to prey on the innocence of youth than in these very special places? Contrary to all the pandering newscasters, drugs and booze and corruption are absent here, where the King protects the land.

“Easy pickings,” Frog says, as though he is reading my mind. I am not sure he isn’t.

I get out of the car. Froggy gets out on the other side, and I run over quickly to make sure he does not get near our newest crew member. Frog’s given his word, but Frog’s word is about as good as a politician’s. Grimes is whispering to Suzanne, explaining about no wires, no connections other than Grimes and me, and, of course, no weapons.

“I’d heard rumors. You grow up hearing — You think they’re just fantasies.”

“Fantasies,” Frog says, with a dreamy look in his eyes and he glances at Suzanne, and I’m about three steps short of punching him out, but I restrain myself.

“Stories at slumber parties. Oh, sometimes there’s just the slightest allusion to dangers, to something not quite right, but mostly, mostly...”

“There’s the persistent innocence of youth.”

“Yes, Kline,” Frog says.

I cannot help it. I poke him just a little. “Shut up. Let’s all just be quiet for a while. Suzanne, this is important. You have to focus. You’re going

to—”

“See a world of wonders,” Frog says, and he laughs.

“Wonders,” Grimes says, putting more sarcastic irony in one word than most mortals could put in a sentence.

The four of us leave the parking area and start toward the woods. Frog is ahead, Grimes next to him, Suzanne and I behind. Suzanne looks at the knife in Grimes belt. It is a strange, serrated blade. In his only concession to whimsy, Grimes has named the weapon Ex-Cal and claims he found it stuck in a rock. Short and stubby, not a fit weapon for a king, Grimes has said, but a real gem for a plodding knight. Knowing Grimes, the story might be true.

“This is the path, ”Frog says. “Now!”

Suddenly there is a path where there was none.

Suzanne is looking nervous, which is a good sign. She will be going with the Frog, with us close behind. Close, but still behind. She has to count on us following a trail most people would not even notice, and on plodding down it quickly enough to get there just before—before—it happens.

After—after—and we will have two bodies to deal with.

“We’re good at this,” Grimes says, holding out the knife. He glares at the Frog. “You know what I can do?”

“And you know what I can do,” Frog says, and I am scared of the look in Frog’s bulging eyes, and I am glad the agreement was this would be his last time.

“We’ll be there. Don’t worry.”

“Yeah. Don’t worry,” Frog says, “They caught me, didn’t they?” He turns to Suzanne, takes her arm, and leads her down the path, the path that no one but Frog can see, and us, now because of our practice and because we are coming right behind them.

“Beautiful day for a visit to a pond.” Frog says, and his voice oozes like honey, flows with a lushness beyond the pale colors in our real world, and even though I know what Frog is and know the brutality behind his promises, I feel a longing to believe in...

“Reality meets fantasy. Or bullshit lies, as we in the profession call it.” Good old Grimes. He brings me back.

I hear Frog’s voice, and I am not sure if I am imagining it, or if Frog’s broadcasting and for a moment I am angry, and just as quickly my anger changes to fear for Suzanne. The Frog’s not supposed to broadcast. No wires, no cell phones, no sending messages through the ether. Fantasy, perhaps, but—fantasy that can kill.

Grimes taps me on the shoulder, points down to the blade of Ex-Cal,

and that is all he has to do to show me that Froggy's just about shot his last exemption.

Suddenly we cannot see the backs of Frog and Suzanne and the path is shimmering away and now I do believe in Ex-Cal's magic because Grimes has the blade out and it seems to point the way.

"There! There!" Grimes whispers now, and we have found them. Frog, Suzanne, and the pond and the lily pads, larger and greener than anything they have seen, like cartoons. Pure colors, sounds so clear and distinct they are like recordings, everything heightened, like a drug high without the drugs.

Finally, there is the magic: the frogs and the would be princesses looking for their dream men. No high school football hero for them, no chubby nerd with bottle thick glasses because their eyes are too weak for LASIK correction. This is mystery, this is magic, and this is a strange, wonderful world.

"Frogs into princes, shit! Look at that." Grimes whispers.

The Frog is there with our girl, and there is another guy like Frog with three other girls and the other girls look glum and disappointed, kisses done and still three frogs floating on lily pads.

Quick, too quick, displaying the insistent rising of Frog's animal nature and his looming betrayal, Frog leads Suzanne forward.

She plants one chaste kiss on the slimy bastard, and then he is standing there, all golden blond hair and clear blue eyes, and chest and stomach without a visible trace of fat, and he is naked and his anatomy, all his anatomy, is impressive.

Frog has a cloak.

"That's him," Grimes says. "Son-of-a-bitch," gripping Ex-Cal, but then they are gone.

"Go!" Frog screams, letting his accomplice scatter the other girls, and dash off, tossing a robe to the blond bastard, who takes the robe in one hand, throws Suzanne over his shoulder with the other and takes off through the woods, Frog trailing after him with an eagerness that shows Frog is in on this, wants his share.

We could lose them, twisting paths, shimmering mist, fairy lights—yes, fairy lights—there are a lot of people here who do not like the King—but Ex-Cal guides us again, and we catch them, just in time, it seems. They are in a clearing. The blond monster has thrown Suzanne on the ground and he is getting on top of her.

Frog is waiting his turn, so distracted he does not notice us come up and when he does, he tries to stop us, but it is too late.

Grimes and Ex-Cal flash in an instant, slicing Frog's throat and darken-

ing the forest in a waterfall of blood and slime. Much as he would like to, Grimes takes not a moment to relish the kill. With me, he starts toward the creep on Suzanne.

You think we would understand by now. The King is not the King for no reason. No backup, no wires, no help. Helpless. Yes. That is the way it is supposed to appear. The King's agents for these missions have the requisite appealing air of helpless innocence masking the cool calculations of a killer, and Suzanne with a z is one of the best.

Her first move is to use a good kick to diminish the monster's desire and push him off, roll away and stand up, and then, when he is up, she gives him another good shot to a part of his body that would end the fight for a mortal man.

This girl is good. She does not lose a beat when the creep smiles at her. She comes right back and proceeds to put on a display of martial arts violence that is beautiful to watch, and it is over so quickly watching is about all we do.

When he is dead, Suzanne shows some emotion, but then she says, "He was a monster," and I can tell she will be back.

Grimes comes up, Ex-Cal is away, and not needed, but Grimes still likes to feel paternal because he knows what she will ask next. All the new ones do.

"The myths. The stories. Princes."

"Princes," Grimes says, taking her arm, moving quickly, but not rushing, though we know we have a limited window to get out of this world.

"Looking for princes. And they are monsters." Suzanne says.

"Monsters," Grimes says, leading her out, urgently now, a surrogate daddy not wanting his little girl to lose her last illusion.

"They can't all be monsters, can they?"

"There can only be one King," Grimes says, and gives her a gentle nudge out in the world and I think now, Suzanne knows, saving young girls is not our only mission.