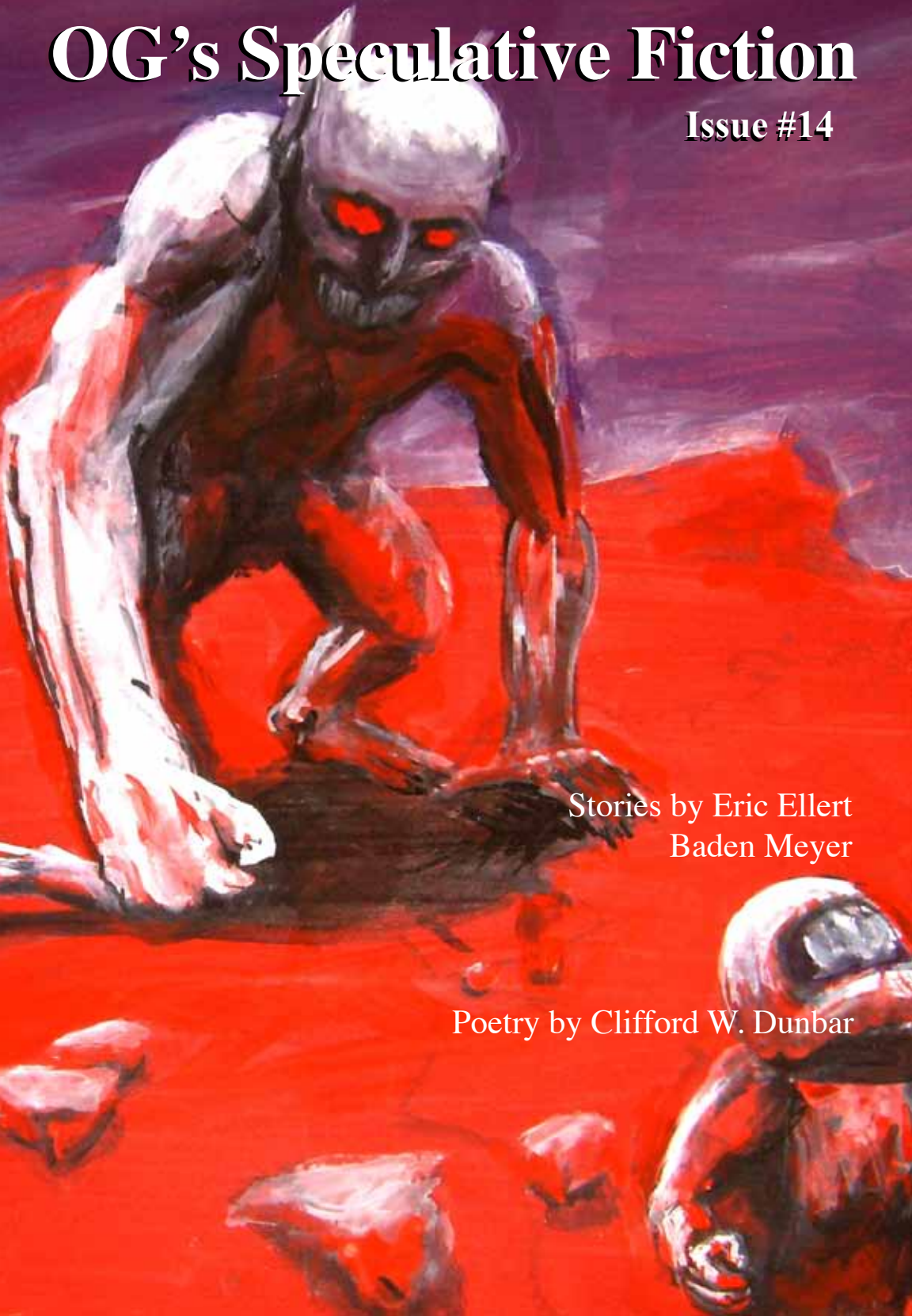


OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #14



Stories by Eric Ellert
Baden Meyer

Poetry by Clifford W. Dunbar

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September

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Cover Art: *Ape Scene* by Scott Gray

Scott Gray is just beginning his career as an illustrator. He has done covers for Scifaikuest, Membre Disjencta, Mung Being, and Murky Depth.

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Editor's Letter

Beneath the border of France and Switzerland is twenty-seven miles of concrete tunnel. The tunnel is the Large Hadron Collider, man's most recent attempt to delve into the unknown and possibly destroy the world (yes, I am exaggerating here, but only a bit). Simply, the machine collides beams of protons. One result of such collisions is a possible micro black hole, the same things that suck up everything in outer space and have a gravitational pull so strong that light cannot escape.

All dreams of creating portals to unknown galaxies aside, this could be a dangerous experiment. I am just conjecturing here, but what if they did create a black hole and not so micro as they imagined it would be. It could start sucking up everything, and grow like a hungry little baby...until you and I were sucked in and everything else we love. I would be pretty angry if somebody else did that. They could at least ask before they start throwing around protons like they were baseballs.

Still, scientists have never really asked before they started experimenting. The urge to experiment, the urge to find answers is just too strong. These particular scientists are also hoping the collider will allow them to reproduce the conditions after the "Big Bang."

Since the beginning of time, man has struggled to understand the world around him. In the early years, much had to be taken on faith. They had to trust that the sun would rise. Trust that rain would come. Trust that their babies would be born safely and healthy. Man's fear of the unknown and the uncertain turned him toward the heavens, to God and gods, to ancestors and spirits. Anything they thought had control of or could affect the world around them. They sacrificed. They worshipped. They prayed.

With time, man's perspective changed. Man developed and passed discoveries down, building a framework from which future discoveries could be made. Man no longer needed faith to get rain. He needed to borrow his neighbor's shovel to dig an irrigation ditch. He could rely on the old woman in the village to make sure his baby was born healthy and that his wife survived. Gradually, man has begun to believe he can find answers to everything if he thinks hard enough, digs deep enough, researches at the right time and place. He no longer needs faith in forces outside his control.

There are still unanswered questions though. What happens when we die? How did this universe, its laws, and the life in it come about? Was there an intelligent designer? Is there other life out there?

In man's search, his quest for knowledge, it has become difficult to accept a God that cannot be comprehended or fully realized. But that makes

sense if you think about it. With finite minds and understanding, why do we expect that we would understand the majesty and depth of a divine being?

And yet, when tragedy occurs, when death knocks, when sickness invades, we go running back. I do not want to be critical here, I am pointing out that little part of us that keeps going back to faith when things do get out of our control. As one friend has said, science is a few thousand years younger than faith. And faith is there when answers are not.

Science and faith will always be at war. One knows the answer, one seeks an answer. And some men will always seek concrete answers that they can wrap their heads around.

-SC

Instant Connections

Baden Meyer

Baden Meyer is a student writer currently working on his first novel. Although he is pursuing a degree in biology, his passion will always involve words, pens, and pages.

It was the largest party that Block F7 had ever seen. In Sean's opinion, anyway.

Five DJs sat behind massive turntables, spinning electro-rock, funk, and jump-metal: pick your fave. Multicolored foam shot from the ceiling. Seizure-inducing lighting flared from the sides. Fifteen (*Fifteen!*) different Halluc stations, on the dance floor and off. Fire-breathers and electro-blast jugglers and body-twisters performed on pedestals throughout the crowd.

And best of all: all the people. So many of them. He had never seen a gathering like this. They danced topless; they ran in giggling pursuit of swiped clothes; they hugged friends, new and old; they fell over backwards, their mouths fixed in that evanescent half-smile of Halluc use; they tripped over chairs and tables and ignored their scraped knees; they shook their torsos and arms to dances they did not care to know; they wept tears of joy; they sang along to old favorites, subbing in dirty lyrics as they pleased; they beckoned him onwards.

Sean walked over to a group, talked, laughed, kissed, embraced. The tall one was Karl. Sean roared along at his story about this talking squirrel he had seen on the Vid the other day. Then they bounced into the center of the dancers and the bass shook the floor and feet stomped the ground and Sean lifted his arms to the sky, pumped them into the air, and then threw them open, as if pulling the world into an all-encompassing hug.

And then he saw her, standing three feet away, moving her body in ways—

“Sean!” She screamed in delight, ran over to him, pulled him, pulled him close in those tiny, delicate arms of hers. A red light caught her face, and even behind the sweat and the running makeup, Sean's

throat seized. The raven hair that fell past her shoulders. The lake-blue eyes. The fragile-as-glass smile. *She's beautiful*, he thought. Just like last time. Just like every time.

“Vivia!”

“SeanSeanSean! It is *sooo* good to see you! Come here you have to meet my friends, Anita and George and Cindy! HEY EVERYONE! LOOK! IT'S SEAN! SEAN GALLAGHER, THE GUY I WAS TELLING YOU ABOUT, THE ONE WITH THE FIREWORKS AND THE CAT AND THE—”

Sean licked his lips, flashed his infamous lady-killing smile, and enjoyed one of the best nights of his life.

He woke up the next day in a four-poster with a leggy blonde nestled under his arm.

“Hey, missy, what's your name?”

“June.” It was husky, deep. Sensual.

“That's a beautiful name,” he said, and kissed her, hard and deep.

“What's yours?”

“Sean.”

She hugged him close. “Want to go to a party in a half-hour? My friend, Jordan, he—”

“I'll go anywhere you want to take me, babe.” Sean winked, picked up his shirt, fished around the breast-pocket for his toothbrush, did not find it, shrugged and stood up. June had already entered the walk-in closet, the lights within casting grotesque shadows back into the bedroom.

“Whose bed is this, love?”

“It's my friend's. George's.” Her voice echoed. *Must be huge in there*, he thought.

Sean remembered the name, remembered the face, remembered the laughs and the hugs and the stupid, wonderful jokes.

“Vivia introduced us last night. Great guy.”

“Isn't he?”

“Not as good as me, I hope. I think I lost my stuff. Can I borrow a Pill, before we head out?”

“Sure,” she said. “I think this one’s pretty eye-catching, don’t you?” She sashayed back into the room. Her dress shone: silver, with a bold, red diagonal stripe down the center.

“That’s an incredible dress.”

June blushed. “It’s the latest fashion! All the Parisian models are wearing it. I just bought it, cost me seven hundred!”

“You’re lucky, then, to have a dress that looks so good on the most beautiful body I’ve ever seen.” And she was kissing him again.

In a half-hour, they called for a Taxi-Bus. He and June stepped inside and were greeted with loud shouts of welcome. Sean quieted them all with a wave of his right hand and a fierce eye. Everyone in the cab stared, jaws and hands quivering in excitement at this newcomer, until:

“I’m Sean, and you’re all awesome.”

And now answering roars of welcome and celebration burst over him, and Sean laughed along with them all. By the end of the trip, he had met three tennis-dates, five (conflicting) party invites for next week, and two job offers from aging fifty-somethings.

“The women are the worst, though, man, when you see one of those wearing those tricky fashions that they’re clearly too old for, and you see the fat dribble out from all sides—”

Vivia laughed before he could finish the punch line. Like she always did. Like *everyone* always did.

“You saved their names, though? In your phone?”

They sat in what used to be a cafe, way back in the 2050’s. Markings of the post-war techno-jazz influence was everywhere: in the walls, floors, the hot-pink curly-backs on the seats (Vivia had made a joke about them awhile back, which was hilarious, of course, of *course*).

“You kidding? You save *names* in that thing? How do you keep them all straight?”

Vivia’s smile, the eternal smile, crinkled down at the edges. “Well, I just started doing it recently, you know, like a few days ago, I kind of thought I’d like to keep people straight—”

Sean laughed hard at that one. The arms of his designer shirt, a

real, honest-to goodness Jansen, wrinkled as he gestured emphatically. “Vivia, don’t you see, that’s one of the greatest parts of meeting so many new people everyday: we don’t have to remember stupid things like that! What’s a *name*, after all? You can just ask them. Not like people forget their own name.”

Vivia kept smiling. If Sean was not so excited and happy and spastic and joyful, he would probably have noticed the way her chest caught, how her arm muscles seized silently.

“What happened to the girl you brought with you?”

“Oh, uh...June! Yes June. Well, I lost her when we got here, you know how these things go...” his voice trailed off as he caught sight of an erotic holo on the wall. “Wonderful things, those holos are.”

Suddenly he snapped to attention, eyes in hers.

“Let’s do something, Vivia. Where has everyone gone?! GUYS! GUYS!!”

And then the whole party surrounded them, and they were joined together again with the whole bubbling, vibrant mass of humanity.

They ended up in Vivia’s house at the end of the night. Her bedroom was on the second floor; they were inside; he kissed her behind the ear just how she liked it, but something was wrong. Sean pulled away.

“I used to be able to make you squeal like a pre-teen with that kiss.”

“It was wonderful.”

“So why no squeal?! This is my validation as a human being, Vivia! Auditory signs of female pleasure!” He folded his arms around his chest and contorted his face into an exaggerated scowl.

She did not chuckle, did not even smile.

“It’s not...I mean...I’d rather not do any of this tonight, Sean. I want to just talk. We don’t do that enough.”

Sean laughed: loud, deep, and exaggerated.

“I see, my dear, playing a new game this time? Well, here’s the problem: I suck at new games. So how about we do an old one, the one that involves you and me, the bed, and two glasses of this *wonderful* drink called Merlot I’ve managed to bribe into my posses-

sion...

Nothing could have prepared him for what happened next. Viv-
ia's face fell; the fragile smile collapsed. She bowed her head like a
monk, folded her arms around, and shook with these little...sounds.
Pathetic ones.

"Are you in pain? Do I need to call an ambulance?" Sean pulled
out his phone and she slapped it away, but then she looked up and her
face was red. And there was water on her face; no, there were tears.

Tears.

Sean stood rail-rod straight, expression blank, shocked and un-
comprehending. He looked her over for some kind of deadly wound,
a bullet-hole, a broken arm, something. And then cold understanding
dawned as he realized she was not injured. He turned around, trying
to hide the disgust on his face. To *think*... For Vivia to do *that* in front
of him...

"Do you need a...uh...paper...a wipe?" His voice was stilted, with
forced politeness.

Some more crying behind him and then: "No, no, I have one, I'll
be fine."

"Is it ok to turn around yet?"

"Yes."

She'd dried her face on a lace handkerchief (*what a waste of a
good handkerchief, she can't wear that one anymore*), and stood at
him, staring deep. Sean was too full of conflicting emotions to react
in any way beyond a dumb nod to her plea of "Just—just listen."

"I went off the Pills three weeks ago, Sean."

Sean's eyes widened. "But that's ridiculous, Vivia, we've hung
out and partied together and, hell, we sang karaoke, Vivia, and you're
still the same, smiling happy Vivia I've always known."

Vivia blinked, and clasped her hands together, before responding
quietly: "That's because you're one of my closest friends, Sean. We
use the word interchangeably for people we meet fifteen minutes ago
and people we've seen everyday for three years, and now, I think, I
really understand the distinction. I know you; I trust you."

Sean smiled, nodded, replied with a questioning look, tanned
hands folded over muscular chest.

"So...the Pills...don't do anything?"

"I didn't say that."

“So...”

“I went to a few parties over these past three weeks, Sean. By myself. The only people there were people I’ve never meet before in my life, Sean, and you know...we do that all the time, but...it’s funny...I didn’t feel like talking to them, this time. Like I had a secret they wouldn’t understand, or something.”

Sean bit his lip and walked over to the windowsill. He thought for a few seconds, played with the leaves of one of Vivia’s plants (MeadowSilk, he recognized, expensive, high-class, fragile breed), before turning back to her.

“And?”

“Well, I talked with some of them for a bit, but then they started laughing and joking with each other, and...and I couldn’t join in, and...I felt like...I don’t....I can’t....I don’t think there’s a *word* for how I felt, anymore.”

Sean walked over to her, pulled her into a tight hug.

“You don’t have to feel that way. That’s why we have the Pills, after all.”

She broke the hug and raised her head, energetic now, pointing violently, her mouth opening to speak—

But Sean, good old reliable, iron-headed Sean, cut her off.

“You can’t seriously be suggesting to stay off the Pills, can you? To feel...that awful feeling you described, anymore?”

“Well, it wouldn’t be all the time...just sometimes...it might be unpleasant, but it’s *part* of being a human, don’t you see? We can’t go around cutting off emotions like this, Sean, and not knowing the full range of what *living* is, the good and the bad.” But she was unsure now, swaying, almost on his side. He could tell it in her voice. He could always tell it in her voice.

“‘Can’t cut off the bad’? *Can’t cut off the bad?*” Sean swept out his left arm, as if encompassing all of the world in a gesture, before continuing:

“We fight ‘the bad’ every time a scientist discovers a new anti-viral drug, every time we feed the homeless and lift someone from poverty. Or do you think having your mother die from cholera at age thirty-five is ‘knowing the full range of living?’

“That’s...that’s not what I...”

“Oh, but it is, Vivia, it is, can’t you see? Can’t you see?” His voice

was rising now, building to the fervor of a revivalist preacher:

“Do you know what the Pills have brought us? Peace, love, unity with all mankind. Happiness. I’ve read the Forbidden texts. I *know* how terrible we were without them. I don’t want to go back there. Do you?” And his voice dropped and he pulled her into a warm, warm hug again, and she was whimpering again (*no tears this time, thank God, can’t even imagine how terrible it’d be to have that running down a Jansen shirt*), and she was pressing her face into his solid body for comfort. And when he bent her down, over the bed, she knew it was going to be alright.

One month later found Vivia standing in front of a dance floor at Block D3’s party. She did not know how she got here, but she knew the people she was hugging and kissing (tall one was Brian, medium one was Ann, short one was Gryshkyl, so hard to keep those names straight) and she knew the song that was playing *BeepBEEPBEEP-beepBEEP* over the Vid-Stereo, and she was loving the night (had laughed uproariously when Sean had told everyone, an hour ago, the story of how she had actually cried in front of him, how he almost defecated in his pants *right there* to make her not feel as humiliated, look, it happens to me, too!), and she knew she would always find comfort in her dear friends’ arms (was it Gryshakal or Gryshekel?), and as the whirlwind of music and colors and smells flew, took her higher, exploded in glorious ecstasy...she smiled, happy to be alive. Right here. Right now.

The Anomaly

Clifford W. Dunbar

Clifford W. Dunbar lives in Miami, FL and holds degrees in speech, linguistics, and computers. He published a pedagogical article in TESOL Journal (back when he was a boring pedagogical Teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages), as well as fiction to Helix, Nanobison, and poetry in Kinships. He is currently working on his third novel.

The Anomaly

In physics class I learned a natural rule
This universe will entropy and decay
But you make thermodynamics look uncool
Because you're getting prettier every day

As planets' orbits fade through solar deeps
And molecules disintegrate and die
Your beauty grows in mighty quantum leaps
And no mere scientist can measure why.

Your supernova smile explodes into space
You're hotter than a star's atomic fires
A sexy event horizon with ardent embrace
A catalyst of passionate desires

Proportional responses to accelerating affinity
Our exponential equation stretches to infinity...

The Man From Yetti

Eric Ellert

Eric Ellert is a Brooklyn resident with one other publication, a short story in the pages of Portland Magazine. He is currently shopping his latest novel, A Certain Soldier's Daughter, the story of a woman guarding The Spear of Loginus.

Lieutenant Martin Porter came to lying in powdery snow in a forest clearing. His crew had dumped him wounded and unconscious out of his B-29, strapped to a stretcher, somewhere east of the Himalayas.

Branches in the tree line cracked. A foul-smelling Yeti crouched in a defensive position, then scurried over. It went through his pockets and bared its fighting canine teeth. "Bear ourselves to our duties."

Martin tried to speak but the Yeti placed its hairy hand over his mouth, pulled out a curved, stone knife and cut the parachute free. It poured alcohol onto the gash on his hand then took Martin's dog tags, his rations and his pistol. Martin wore warm weather shorts and a T-shirt and got a glimpse of the bone sticking out of his leg, sure that if he could not move, the cold would finish him soon.

He had eyes that appeared dark-gray or blue, depending on the light. People called them strange eyes. He was lean, with black hair slicked straight back with brilliantine.

A dog barked in the distance. A bell rang. The Yeti whined as if it was now a hunted deer. There was something human in its eyes. They were gray, like Martin's own.

It pointed the Webley at the barking and made a yipping sound like a toy dog, moved into the fog and disappeared.

Sherpas arrived and dragged Martin to a hut in a forgotten-looking town at the base of a sheer cliff.

One of his rescuers leaned over his bed and whispered. "Bear down and do your duty." There was fear in the voice, as if this was the law of the land.

A lean woman entered the room, dropping her parka to the floor. She tended his wounds with some expertise. She dosed him with

morphine and had the men set his leg, but she must not have liked the look of it, because her business like face put on a smile Martin supposed she reserved for the dying.

“Where am I?” Martin asked.

She did not answer at first, as if she was a person very careful with her words. She smiled graciously. “My name’s Katherine Karty. People call me Katie.”

“Martin Porter. Thanks by the way.”

Katie’s reddish-brown hair, though long, was slicked back with some kind of pomade. She wore no makeup, as if she was all business, but her regular features were delicate, her skin somehow pampered. “We have an infirmary up at the mission house. They’ll bring you up there in the morning.” She sang her words as if she had re-learned English in a finishing school.

It had to be the trauma and the morphine but Martin felt he had stared at that face many times before, and many times before it had stared back.

They carried him up a staircase cut into the cliff. Stone buildings ran along the cliff top, arranged on either side of a path, like a misplaced main street. A tall, narrow-rimmed bell sat at the cliff’s edge. The path ended there, as if someone had removed a bridge.

Katie sat by his bedside. “As for your question, we did have a radio. Now we don’t.”

“There’s a war going on.”

Her smile was at once annoyed and amused at his gibe. “I heard about it, soldier.” She pronounced soldier as if it was a nickname. “People find you have a radio, they get to thinking you’re talking to people about their airplanes and such. They don’t like it. Get it in their heads to try to bomb you.” She slipped a bottle of brandy out of her pocket and handed it to him as if the boss might object, then laughed indulgently to let him know she was also the boss. “I wouldn’t like that, would you, Mr. Porter?”

“It’s Lt.”

“I’m sure it is.” She punched him playfully in the arm. “You rest and don’t worry. Once you’re better, we’ll have lots for you to do and

yes, you will get better.”

He would have pressed her about getting word to his unit, but just beneath the surface of her blue-gray eyes, was a kind of warning.

Weeks later, Martin was hopping around on a cane. He had been called to Katie’s office. She was reading a file on him. She pushed a box of cigars across the desk. “Take a few. They fall from the sky.”

“Thanks.” The tobacco tasted like turds, but its magical powers took away his cravings. “Name rank and serial number?”

“Pardon me? Oh, no, Lieutenant. You’re among friends.”

“You can’t possibly grow things here, or the powdered eggs and milk you serve. And yet when I ask to leave, you say—”

She touched his hand with a familiarity that did not register on her face. “I say it for your own good.”

“I can take it. Just tell me how it is. I’m missing my war.”

Her eyes became guarded, as if there was a duty spec sheet, whose rules Martin had just broken, and though she still held his hand, all the intimacy had fled.

She hid here like a gargoyle, in this absurd place, Martin thought. Had her peers been so lacking? They had made paint together, and had worked on the main building. They had worked in the machine shop together and had constructed brass hinges. All these things could be more easily delivered. It crossed his mind, that all the work had been busy work. But Katie had melted. He knew it, and now, before his eyes, she froze again like a lost egg lying in the snow.

“Something, Army about you.” Martin tapped his leg. “Now I’ll never play professional baseball.”

“Doubt you’ll fly either.”

“About that.”

“Sorry. You’d like to return to your unit; commendable but not possible, until spring.”

“How about guides?” Martin asked, “The Allies would pay?”

Katie gave him the gracious smile. “In Spring, certainly.”

Before he could ask, she placed a postcard with a narrow letterbox on the desk—the kind censors found easy to read. “Write home.”

“Will it get there?” Martin asked.

“Would it hurt you?”

Katie took a cigar herself, and shared a drink with him from the bottle in the bottom of her desk, again the cordial hostess, again, something more than friendship brewed between them, something of two people on each other’s side.

“I saw this thing out there,” Martin said, “Before you found me.

“The Abominable Snowman is the Leprechaun of these parts. Everybody knows somebody who’s seen it, but two people never see it together, at least sober.”

It was no stranger than dressed stone buildings built atop a cliff, which, as far as Martin was concerned, might have been on top of the world. “Yeah, but I saw it.”

“Did it bite?” Katie looked around, as if that harsher woman who was her inner boss was battling with her. She checked her watch, as if deciding it was after work. She swished her glass around and poured herself a double. “No.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

Her silence wore him down. He owed the Air Corps not a wit until he was whole.

He kissed her. She let him. Then her reserve melted and she leaned across the desk and put her head on his shoulder, as if she had been alone in this room forever. He knew better than to say anything, sure she would have to lie.

In time, the leg was strong enough to lose the crutches. But it had healed an inch shorter. Martin entered the office.

Katie was loading paper into a ticker tape machine. “You look like a fella who could use something to do.” She had lost all her reserve in the past few weeks. They might have been a vaudeville act, training it around the country, privy to each other’s secrets.

“You read my mind.”

“Katie Karty,” she said, shaking his hand, reintroducing herself, lighting a cigar she wanted no one to witness. “A bit cartoonish.”

“Better’n Betty Boop.”

She had a nervous habit of playing with the string of the key that hung around her neck. When she tired of playing with the key, she

forced it inside a short, blue jar as if it was a piggy bank, all the while her eyes on the ticker tape.

Martin leaned his forearm on her shoulder. They seemed to touch, no matter what they did, as if touching dispelled the shadows in the corner of the room. Sometimes he imagined they had met before when they stood like this, talking about anything, usually, nothing much at all. “One would think you a spy.”

“Bear to control we have captured Martin Porter, come in.”

The way she had said it had not been funny, but Martin made an effort to laugh.

The rhythm of the ticker tape seemed so modern in this forgotten place. “Know any good stocks?”

“I have superiors, duties. We all just can’t fall out of the sky and lay about in the sun.”

Martin was well enough to travel. “I like to read maps. Got any?”

“As I said, you look like a fella ‘could use something to do. But not that.” Her eyes grew far away, as if there was some family secret coming to light that would spoil everything. The green glasses made Katie look like a frozen statue sticking up out of the snow. “Put your coat on. I’ve got something to show you.”

Katie led him to a building at the edge of town that Martin had not yet entered.

They walked along tall hallways. Frescoes of blue warriors lined the chipped plaster. Birds rested in the rafters. A whistle blew. Local kids ran down the hall, free for the day.

When they got outside, they skidded like skaters on the icy road. They stopped at the bell. The clear, thin air distorted the distance and made the evergreen valley below seem closer than it was. The Himalayas stood in the distance as if holding up the roof of the world.

“A warlord kept his maidens in this compound,” Katie said. “We took it over, and restored it.”

Vapor trails from a B-29 passed overhead, so high the engines were silent. Martin took Katie’s hand and with the other tapped the long bell, and leaned his weight into it to give it a push.

“Do not do that.”

Martin leaned over the edge of the cliff, where the railing ended, testing her anger.

“Don’t do that either.”

The ground was covered with Marsden Matting, as if one might offload a truck here, at the end of the world.

He slipped. Katie rushed forward and grabbed him. She felt warm against his chest. Her perfume smelled of long evenings in cities. They had not made perfume like that since the war had begun. She had set her hair in Kirkman’s soap and beer, not so unusual at home; one might not think her isolated at all.

“Coney Island pilots,” Katie said pointing at the vapor trails.

“What do you know about—”

“Did you think I was born in these towers? My dad’s nickname was 88 keys, when my brother was born they called him 44.” She spoke shyly, as if one ought not to talk of oneself. “We started out in Brighton Beach, moved up to Seagate when things got better. Need a key to get in there. Some say you need a key to get out.”

His chest felt tight, wondering whether she had kept secrets or lies. He let her hand go and remembered the ticker tape. In a place with weather like this, they needed a landline, which would have required constant maintenance. Katie Kartie, Betty Boop, it was all too much of what he had wanted to hear.

She pulled her cloak open. Her chest was covered by a blue silk blouse. The collar was decorated with metallic stitching like a Napoleonic uniform and the English accent was gone. All the lies should make her the stranger, but she pressed herself close. Snow fell on their shoulders.

He was about to ask her to leave with him. Katie broke the spell and led him along the path, out of the hospital compound and through a tall, gated fence that led to another bit of town, built on this impossible, lonely cliff face.

The buildings were clean, but the plasterwork was cracked and the roofs sagged, as if held up by cardboard beams. Heavy snow fell.

“It falls like this, the snow. The clouds come fast then disappear. People like to say the mountains breathe them in and out.” She walked faster. “Have you seen our Greenhouse? It’s the best in the town.”

The greenhouse's panes had been smashed in by falling rocks. They tiptoed on the glass. Inside, gray stems clung to round, red pots decorated with designs of orange, running Yeti on a black background, like Spartan soldiers.

"We make these."

"Pots or the flowers?" Martin asked.

"No, that's your job. Thought you might put it back together. We sell some flowers down in the valley. It pays for bandages and such."

"I was walking last night. I met a Frenchman, an English flyer from the European campaign, two Koreans; how's this possible?"

"Martin, you must not go out there at night."

"Why not?"

"We are run on a military model. The order has rules. One could fall."

Martin lit a cigar. "Servicemen tend to fall for their nurses, thinking there's—"

"There's something, and then there are the rules."

It took weeks, but Martin replaced the missing greenhouse panes and started planting. He still limped, but he could put some weight on the leg. Katie, with her lack of bedside manner, had told him he always would.

It was a half-ass mission, too dull to put the bell up in a tower. There was always another roof to patch, always a flower to fatten up for slaughter, always a generator part to jury-rig. He wondered why they needed it. Katie usually sat with wind-whipped candles, too cheap to wear out a light bulb.

Martin had built a tiny receiver he had hidden in his cane. The clever work had kept his mind occupied, but the nasty mountains had given him only static in return.

However, there was Katie, not Katie of the ticker tape with the dull brown hair, who chewed her fingernails worrying over how long to reuse the coffee grinds. No, he liked the Katie of the evenings,

the one who sneaked a couple of whiskeys, who knew all the card games, who had a brassy laugh all that polish hid for ten or twelve hours a day. He liked that wilder Katie who had run down the cliff-side stairs with him, fog covering their feet, risking a missed step that could kill them. He liked the Katie who just might let him go, and who just might leave with him.

Martin hated to admit it, but he was comfortable here. People were friendly and nobody pried. There were rules but they were enforced gently enough. Still, being locked in at night, even gently made him wish to go out. He thought to sneak a tool back to his room and chip his way out through the roof.

His room was clean, large and austere, decorated in a lacquered, Asian kind of way. The entire wing had been emptied as guests had been transferred. They appeared to be dying, then, all of a sudden, they disappeared and he was told they were well.

His door shook with the pressure drop as the outside door was kicked in. Cold air crept under the doorjamb; that terrible stink of the Yeti filled the room.

It shook the door. Martin had never noticed before, but the room held no sharp objects. Even the furniture had rounded edges.

“It’s me, Hoppy. Help me.”

Sergeant ‘Hoppy’ Strunk had been one of his crewman. Martin had tried to forget that life. By the time he got the door opened, Hoppy was gone.

Hard boots ran down the hall after him. The bell rang, the sound reverberating endlessly as if the bell had been electrified.

Martin tried to force the outer door, but it was made of thick wood and iron straps, the hinges stamped with a rusty design. At first they looked like the blue warriors on the walls, then like Yetis in evening wear.

He went back to his room, smashed the vase Katie had given him and pulled the key from the shards. Everything Katie said had a message hidden in it.

When he got outside, the Sherpas were struggling with a Yeti. It broke away and ran on all fours down the cliff stairs, through the town and back towards its forest.

“Hoppy! Hoppy, where are you?” Martin looked for the best direction to run.

The bell tone grew louder.

Katie appeared from her office, still in her robe. She had big fur boots on her feet. The disappointed scowl on her face became an indulgent smile when she noticed Martin. "One of my handlers, I mean instructors, once told me that the best way to keep them in was to let them out." She smoothed his shirt collar, something of the jailer in her demeanor. "Come on, soldier."

Katie led Martin past the last building way out past the greenhouse. A flimsy gate blocked the path, beyond it, naked cherry trees grew with their bows touching.

Yards past the gate, the path fed into a wide-mouthed cave. The cave contained a classroom with old-fashioned school desks with inkwells in the corners. Behind each inkwell sat a Yeti.

A woman dressed like Kate in a blue silk uniform had them practice their French lesson again but not before they stood up and said, "Good evening, Mister Porter."

One offered him its seat. The odor made Martin feel as if he was being hunted. He took a few steps back, then ran from the room. They laughed like powerful children.

He made it out to the bell before Katie caught up to him. "Silly Martin, told you to stay put. Just so you know, the town is here to guard the mission, not the other way around."

A yellow ball of light appeared in the sky then moved fast over the forest below the cliff. It changed color, did a fast z pattern and disappeared over the horizon.

It did not phase Katie.

Martin ran down the cliff steps to the village. There was a war on and he had been living inside a dream, an enemy's dream. He still wore the glove-soft leather booties he had bailed out in, which were just slippers to pad around a heated B-29.

His feet were ripped up by the time he knocked on the first empty house. He pushed in a few other doors, nothing seemed lived in.

A light came on at a dilapidated, half-story barn set a few yards apart from the other buildings. He limped to it and pulled the door open. Warm air and the smell of strawberries and cigars came out.

Katie sat at a desk much like the one in her office. No, it was her office. Martin peeked out the door, which now faced the cliff bell.

He sat down and took a cigar without asking. The ticker tape

poured out news that ran across Katie's fingers and onto the floor. She barely acknowledged him as she pulled off certain phrases she needed and taped them into a binder.

"I should have guessed that a tickertape presupposed outside contact, not to mention everything else wrong with the place."

"I'm sorry. It's more than a hospital. It's a place for soldiers to rest. They are sent here wounded and sent out into the world to heal. Wounded also in their minds, you see."

"Nurse Doolittle talks to the animals and I'm crazy. I woulda' settled for an explanation of the talking monkeys."

"You, Captain Martin Porter, and don't correct me on the rank, were sent out into the world to rest, then recalled here."

There was something true in her words. "No, I'm Marty from Shelton Connecticut. I have two sisters. They help out at the USO. They're told not to wear tight sweaters when they go dancing with the lads. In summers, I used to lifeguard at the Fairfield beach. I have pictures. You got to know somebody to get to be a county lifeguard. See, I know people."

Katie gave her smile for the dying. "Why won't you heal?"

"The leg's good enough; you get me outta here. Don't you turn me into no flying monkey. You care about me."

A Pagonia sat on Katie's desk. She pressed a beat up, push-button light switch built into the edge of its flowerpot. The plant turned into a blue Gardenia. She pressed the switch again; it turned into a Tiger Lilly. "Will that suffice?" She pressed it once more; it withered and died, missing only a sigh.

Martin made it to the door.

"Please." She brushed her hand towards her chest.

Martin almost laughed, just thinking how monkey-like people were.

"Martin, you must trust me, and you must—"

"Bear our duties." He did not know why the phrase had occurred to him now, but it turned the world rotten.

They walked arm-in-arm towards the edge of the compound, staying in the shadows close to the buildings. Guards pushed the captured

Yeti to the edge of the cliff.

There had been nothing before it but empty space, then a hatch appeared; a room opened; mechanical noise poured out where there had just been silence.

Blue-gray Yeti in formal uniforms escorted it inside gently, though they seemed just on the edge of violence.

Martin backed against the bell. "I have to tell someone about this, about you." He touched Katie's shoulders. "Japs or Jerry's? I've seen Foo fighters before." Katie's dark-blue eyes, were too unusual to be true.

"I'm Betty Boop from Coney Island. I did spend time on their planet, being trained."

"Trained by these monsters, to conquer us?"

The scent of lye boiling in soap cauldrons drifted up from the empty village, in cruel illusion. Donkey carts brought cans of lardy gruel rations up the hill. If the Yeti had come from the stars, surely they could have found a better place to settle.

"No," Katie said. "This is a hospital. You'll understand. The therapy will bring you along."

"You'll never let me go."

"Spring comes in two weeks. I'll take you home myself."

"How did you know my name when we met?" How far could he get? He looked for a direction to run.

The craft lifted off and glowed. When it got a hundred yards out, it flew straight up into the clouds.

Martin had thought they had shared themselves over whiskey, and now, he realized, there had only been the ticker tape. "I'll never forgive you."

"For being what you are?" Katie tried to take his hand. He pulled away.

He went back to his room. No one came to lock the door. No one had too. He could run into the forest and in the forest he would freeze. He wondered if that acceptance was part of the process as well.

Spring came, though one could not call it a tender spring. They moved the hothouse flowers into the garden. Every inch of the

grounds had been planted, clipped and shaped. The grounds looked like an English mizmaze garden all bunched up.

Martin sat around some evenings drinking Kava Kava with the Yeti. He pressed them, but they did not care to talk of their war.

He had been cordial but cool to Katie, but with everything blooming, it seemed petty of him. She had those rough hands and that lonely face. She sometimes wore just a touch of blue lipstick, and since it was her only indulgence, it made her lips visible for miles.

Smudge pots burned near the bell, always being re-lit for the rain. The too heavy snow had become too heavy rain, patiently pulling the mission's foundations away, grain by grain, what had been so patiently hauled up here rock by rock. Chickens were always underfoot, trying to beat you into an open door. If there was anything more advanced than a tickertape machine here, Martin had not seen it in months.

Martin's room had a thick, soapy window. He often watched the light at Katie's office long into the night. If she could sleep, it would seem she chose not to.

He could, within the compound, go where he wished. He had just, until now, stuck to the places she had not been.

He had not knocked, hoping they could go back months in their minds, and start over again.

Katie's hands were bloody; her ticker-tape machine lay on the floor. Its glass bell had smashed. It spit out numbers still.

Martin wrapped Katie's hand in his shirt. She was trembling. He sensed that somebody had pushed the button on the bottom of her flowerpot, and she would wilt. "Schoolmarm lady, what's wrong?"

"It's nothing: just an accident."

"I was going to bring you flowers but you have that way with them. Guess you could make your own."

Katie smiled. Her canine teeth were overlong. She leaned her head on his chest. The loneliness poured through her into him, then into the cold slate floor.

"Schoolmarm like you would live in a house made of blackboards."

“I’m just over-busy.” She looked into his eyes, as if she had been the girl next door. When the frost in her eyes melted like that, Martin could almost bring himself to believe her.

“Do you know how it is?” she asked. “I was sitting on the top deck of a ferry, stuck in the fog, waiting to head into Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn. The top deck rolled. It takes talent to hold a cup of coffee steady when it does that. There was a glowing ball in the sky. It opened and they whisked me away. I was fourteen. And now I’m here. The ‘de-sickening’ of the wounded, that’s what I do here. I think it’s been fifteen years. It’s all I know. I’m just not so good at it.”

The truth floated in the air, like dust from a pillow. “I don’t mind staying here,” Martin said, “If leaving in spring will get you into trouble.”

“Did you pack two packs like I told you weeks ago. Did you hide ‘em in the town?”

“I did better, I built us a balloon.”

“I’m not kidding. Tomorrow, go into the forest where we first found you. There’s a clearing. Tomorrow night, no matter the weather, I’ll come for you, Martin.” She kissed him on the cheek, as if they might not meet again.

The bell rang, then squealed as if the sound was electrified.

“Prisoners, line up for inspection.”

Katie lost her breath. Her chest heaved. She fumbled in her desk drawer and popped two pills. “They work us to death in this place.”

She recovered and smiled as if embarrassed for her lapse. “Just a turn of phrase.” Even now she could not help straightening out her desk. “The Yeti in the forest will take us to the rail line. It’s fifteen, maybe twenty miles out, but it has been done.” She pulled out a pair of boots from her desk drawer and tossed them over. She poured them drinks. From the level of the bottle, she had not touched it since they had been close.

She handed Martin the Webley the Yeti had taken from him when he had landed. “They’re losing the war. They’re changing the rules.”

“Who’s war?” Martin asked.

“They’re going to kill you. They are so far from home. They can’t use you. They won’t waste the supplies on you. You’re not good enough to trade.”

“For what?”

“Marty, this is a POW hospital; you’re the enemy. I told you to take the classes, to get well, to regrow your fur, to change your aspect, to remember. When I showed you the flower, I wasn’t doing parlor tricks. It’s all part of a process.”

She opened her desk and pulled Martin’s photo from a file. The Yeti in the photo had his features. “Don’t you see? Didn’t you wonder how we make the flowers grow in this climate? How the Yeti accepted you as one of their own?”

“What do we do?” Martin asked.

“We run. We find your Connecticut and we forget.”

Katie led Martin down a staircase near the greenhouse. She said nothing, but the threat in the voice coming over the town’s hidden loudspeakers said it all—they’d kill her if they were caught.

By the time they made it to the nearest seaport the war had ended. They lost themselves in Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia.

Two happy years passed. Their red house sat near a cliff overlooking the Bay of Fundi. Fog came over the lawn, one had to be careful not to fall off. They had hung a ship’s bell they had bought at a local antique store at the edge of the cliff, near a break in the wooden railing.

America had won her war. Had the others? Martin could not say. He had grown a beard. Katie preferred it.

They nicknamed their kids 22 and 11 keys respectively.

There were sisters in Connecticut, but they did not know him and their Martin Porter was MIA in Europe.

Katie brought him a whiskey. She wore a red plaid kilt as the tourists did.

The view of the bay, might have stepped out of Martin’s dreams, the house out of one of his fantasies. Once in a great while, Martin brought up their topic. “Are you my wife or my nurse? Have we escaped or is this an annex of your infirmary?”

“You just have to believe me.”

“And if I told the Airforce about Foo?”

“About Foo and what he do?” Katie asked, “I wouldn’t advise

it.”

“You’d be perfect if you only had a sense of humor.”

They kissed, but there was some magic missing. The dentist had filed down her canines but her teeth had grown back Yeti thick, like dominos.

She put on the dark-green sunglasses she had worn when they had first met, which extended the distance between them. “Am I so abominable, Martin, that things between us can’t be fixed?”

He tapped the bell. “When the war between the Gray Yeti and the Red does end, there’s sure to be some scores to settle. You know, when I was on B-29’s, they discussed leaving our dog tags home in case you were shot down and captured. Even if the war ended and you made it, someone might come knocking on your door one day, if they had your name.”

“We have now.”

She had chosen her words too carefully. He put his arm around her as the fog covered their view of the rocky beach. Since they had gotten married, he did not care to talk overmuch.