

Special Double Issue!
OG's Speculative Fiction
Issue #18



Stories by Paula Stiles
Greg Schwartz
Ben Farthing
Bruce Golden
Adrian Simmons
Diane Gallant

Poetry by G.O. Clark
Suzanne Sykora

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May

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Cover Art: *Jump* by Mike Fisher

Mike Fisher's small graphics studio—Goofa Man Productions—specializes in animations, cartoons and illustrations of the science fiction, science fantasy variety.

Mike has been a cartoon contributor to Starlog magazine for over 20 years. Also, for several years, he has provided full-color, full page cartoons to Animation Magazine featuring his character 3-D Pete.

For about eight years now Mike has also been creating independent short animations that have won awards at film festivals across the country. Several of Mike's shorts have shown at the San Diego Comic-Con Film Festival, including Invisible Master and Electronic Things of the Future.

Mike's real job is as a news graphics artist and animator for the San Antonio Express-News newspaper and web site. He lives in San Antonio with his wife Margi and their three kids, Joel, Andrew, and Faith.

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Editor's Letter

This marks the end of our third year. Wow! Three years of great writing. That's quite an accomplishment in this day and age of transitory endeavors. For the second year in a row we are celebrating with a special double issue that we hope you enjoy.

It was interesting as we put this issue together how much the theme of change kept coming back to us. Each story and each poem deals with change. In some cases, a change is coming for the characters and they must prepare. In others, change occurs and the characters have to respond. In some, the characters try to spur change.

This is life. Life changes. People change. Those things that don't, wither away and die. Change is inevitable, and one of the most interesting human struggles is how we deal with change.

When we think about our magazine, we keep this theme in mind. We have been promising change for a long time, and that change has been slow in coming. We have realized that when you make a change with the intent of growth, you have to have the ability to sustain that growth. That is the step we are on now. We are preparing now for that growth, so that when we do make positive changes, we can sustain them.

I have also been experiencing change in my life. For a few years, I have felt like I wasn't advancing in life at all. I felt like I was in a holding pattern for what would come next. I wanted that next stage, but I don't believe I was ready. But I didn't waste the past three and a half years. I prepared, so that when change did come, I was ready.

And it has come for me. For the past five months I have been praying for big things. I have been asking big. I didn't know what those things would be, but I asked for desire for them anyway. And now some of those big asks, those big changes have come. I can't even begin to tell you how excited I am. And I believe there are more changes to come.

But I am just as excited to bring you this double issue. I am sure you will enjoy it.

-SC

Transcend

by Ben Farthing

*Ben Farthing is an English major at the College of William and Mary. His previous work has appeared in *Candlelight: An Anthology of the Supernatural*, and in *Bards and Sages*. In this story, two brothers test the limits of the mind.*

I have to tell you something. There should be enough time for me to finish (as if Time is a real concept for me any more) before I slip into a state of mind that will require a white jacket. But who knows, Jill slipped yesterday. It could come every moment now. Any moment now. Don't worry; I've been making that mistake for days. I should still have plenty of time. What's it like, though? Letting go of sanity, and becoming something less than human?

No. I have to stay on topic. I need to tell this story.

My average, blue-collar parents never expected a child like me, let alone a child like Sam. My father worked on Hondas from the day he finished high school until last night when he locked himself in the garage with one and waited for the fumes to put him to sleep. My mother was a career counselor for high school students when she wasn't home trying to keep up with her children. She held onto sanity nearly 24 hours longer than Jill.

Like I said, neither of them expected to have a child like me. I was reading novels before I finished kindergarten. High school was over for me before I got my driver's license—I graduated four years early. I had my first master's by the time I was eighteen, and my doctorate at twenty. Then I joined the university that I had spent so much time with and became an ethics professor.

Sam was a different story. There are several people born every year that lead a life like mine. Sam was the first person to ever lead a life like his. For the first few years, doctors said he had autism. He cried all the time. When he was two and I was seven, our parents took us to Disney World for my birthday. Sam cried from the moment we went through the gate to the moment we got back into the car. It was too much for him. My parents decided he just needed to be left to himself.

But that wasn't it. I think they knew that, but I'm not sure. Sam cried a lot no matter what we did. A flock of birds flew by once and he took one

look and started bawling. He would look at a map and tears would start to flow. There was no telling what would set him off.

That went on until he was three, and we were playing hide-and-seek with our mother—one of the “safe” games the psychologist said it was okay for Sam to play. Mom found me first, and then we set off to find Sam. An hour passed.

“Sam,” we called, “come out now.”

But he didn’t.

“Okay,” said my mother, breathing deeply, “We’ll look five more minutes, and then call the police.”

I ran from room to room, frantically checking all the places I had checked before, calling Sam. “You win, Sam. Come out now, Sam. You win.”

This time he did. He crawled out from beneath of pile of clothes in my parents’ closet, smelling like old clothes. A grin stretched across his face. No child was ever happier. “I did it,” he said.

“That’s right, Sam,” I said, hugging him. “You win.”

His bright blue eyes gleamed as his smile grew bigger. He nodded his head, wanting me to understand. “I did it. No more crying.”

“Okay, Sam.” I wiped the tears from my eyes just as our mother rushed into the room and swept Sam into her arms, scolding him and telling him how much she loved him.

He was right. After spending an hour in that closet, there were no more tears. I can’t remember him ever crying after that. Sam change a lot after that. The doctors said his autism went into remission. That was bullshit, though. They just didn’t know what happened. All of a sudden Sam didn’t mind crowds. He didn’t mind being outside. In fact, he loved it. He would skip around our mother at the mall, taking in every detail of his surroundings and loving it all.

As he got older, every day events became more remarkable.

Shit, this is like trying to crunch a Victorian novel into a pamphlet. There’s so much I want to say, but I might be running out of time. I just saw Sam walk by my office window. I could be slipping. Or maybe he isn’t dead yet. It could be either one. Anyway, I’ll attempt to give you the highlights of what should be a three volume work.

Sam was always borrowing my things, and I was always going into his room to get them back. I got home from school one day, I think he was eight — though I can’t be sure, and found my stereo missing. I groaned and walked to Sam’s room, knocked, and entered.

I had to step over a mind-numbingly complex model train track, full of bridges, track switches, and even a jump that Sam had constructed himself.

There were always several trains going at once, always set up to barely miss running into each other.

“Sam,” I said, “Give me back my stereo.”

“I’m using it,” he said, not looking up from his desk.

He was using it. It was playing an audio version of a Vonnegut novel, or maybe it was the latest Oasis album. Or the NPR news. He had all of them playing, each on different radios. I don’t remember which one was playing which.

“Sam,” I said, “stop taking my things.” I walked over to his desk, nearly tripping over a dozen open books, all arranged around a single spot, as if he had been sitting there reading all of them. His television was on, showing a rerun of Cops.

Sam sat at his desk, his left hand operating his computer, switching between several instant messaging programs and several internet browsers. His right hand scratched a stick of charcoal against a canvas. As I first looked at the canvas I saw dozens of formulas, notations and numbers, symbols that I still wouldn’t be able to identify. But then I realized I was wrong, and he was sketching a train moving down a track. The train only had a single window in front, without any windows or doors on the sides.

“What are you doing?” I scolded. “You can’t possibly be paying attention to all of this.”

He scowled up at me. “Yeah, you’re right. That show’s boring.” He grabbed the remote and switched off the television.

I walked out angry, but even then I knew I was wrong. He was taking in everything in that room. Somehow he could do it. I just didn’t realize the magnitude of what that meant.

As Sam progressed through school, he began to be tormented by the other students. Our father said he just didn’t fit the mold. But Sam did more than not fit the mold. Sam burst from the mold, leaving every other mold warped and torn in his wake. And the other students could not stand it.

Not that Sam discouraged them from disliking him. He simply did not give a damn, and had no problem responding to their jests with comments twice as sharp. Every year in school was accompanied by several fights, none of which he ever initiated. The word was he could whip even the aggressors that were twice his size—although being twice his size was hardly an accomplishment.

The only time I ever saw him fight, he lost.

Badly.

I happened to look through my bedroom window just as Sam was shoved by the leader of a local group of seven or eight teenagers that wandered our

street. Sam responded to the shove by grabbing the boy's right arm and yanking it towards himself, and thrusting his shoulder into the boy's face. Even from thirty yards away I could see the blood and tell that he had broken his nose.

The other boys descended on Sam. In less than a second he lashed out with his right hand, jabbed with his left elbow, and thrust his right knee forward. Three members of the gang fell backwards, joining their leader in rolling around in pain. The remaining five overcame Sam, bringing him to the ground.

I sprinted outside, but by the time I got there they had already left Sam on the ground. Only the wounded boys were still in sight, limping down the street as quickly as they could.

"Sam!" I yelled as I approached his crumpled form. "Are you all right?"

My little brother looked up at me through his swollen cheek, blackening eyes, bleeding nose, and split lip, and spoke to me as if he hadn't heard me correctly. "I just got my ass kicked." He tried to smile but winced with the pain. "I could have taken them."

"Of course you could," I said, reaching to help my brother off the ground.

He jerked back. "No," he said sternly, "I should have been able to. I could see everything I needed to do. I just couldn't—" He clenched his fists and bit his lip, trying not to cry.

At first I thought it was the pain making it so difficult for him to not cry, but as I looked back on it, I realized that the pain didn't bother him. The only thing that almost brought tears was not being capable when he thought that he was.

The only thing I could ever compare it to was when he learned to walk. He would hang onto a chair smiling at our mother as she called for him. His arms stretched towards her, he would take several steps and fall. Every time he fell he would burst into tears. It didn't matter if he fell onto cement or a pillow, he sobbed. Once or twice it seemed like he was trying to get back up. Trying to get up and walk to his mother even though he couldn't stand on his own without something to hold on to.

Frustrated. That's the word for it. Frustrated. When he felt he should be capable, if he wasn't he could not stand it. It didn't matter what it was. If he thought he could, and he couldn't, then he would get frustrated.

Shit. There I go rambling again.

I've begun to fear doing that. The more I ramble, the more it seems like I might be losing my grip. But sane people ramble, right? Even before what

happened, sometimes I would get stuck on a single idea and just go on and on about it, and just beat the same idea to death, over and over—

Shit. I wonder how much time.

Frustrated. Right. Sam was frustrated. All the way through his education, right into his research career at the same university as me.

Just two (days, months, years?) weeks ago, Sam was in his lab in the next building over from mine. I was supposed to eat dinner with him and his wife, so I walked over to talk to him.

His lab was something out of a cheap horror flick. Tubes connected beakers of bubbling liquid. Bunsen burners heated solutions on multiple counters. Several metal cylinders vibrated, I assumed mixing solutions to be used. There were charts on three separate walls, each half full of measurements and figures. Sam hurried between all of this, adjusting dials, stirring liquids, adding to solutions, writing and erasing from the charts; his white lab coat flowing behind him, encouraging the B-movie horror image already in my head.

A beaker began to overflow and Sam muttered and ran to attend to it.

“You look like Dad,” I half-shouted. “Remember how when he’d make breakfast, he’d try to cook everything at once and always end up burning half of it?”

Sam had apparently already noticed me, and responded without looking up from his duties. “He always said he needed it to wait for him.”

“Are you having trouble with all this? Do you need it to wait for you?”

After fixing the current mishap, he turned to me. “No, I don’t need it to wait. I need to catch up.” He bit his lip and clenched his fists, then shook his head and dove back into his work. “I’ll be with you in five minutes.”

As we drove to his house Sam’s mind was still in a completely different place.

“You seem distracted,” I pointed out. “Are things going all right?”

“Oh,” he waved his hand, “You know.”

“No, I don’t. That’s why I’m asking.”

Sam just shrugged.

I would have pressed further, but before I could, we pulled into his driveway.

Sam looked at his watch. “We’re late. Jill probably already has dinner ready.”

I nodded, slightly offended that he wouldn’t share his problems with me.

Jill and Sam met at a conference on the Undiscovered Properties and Functions of the Neurotransmitter Serotonin. Funny how I remember that,

but still couldn't begin to tell you what the Neurotransmitter Serotonin is, let alone what its Undiscovered Properties and Functions are. But Sam knew enough about it to give a lecture, and Jill cared enough about it to be sitting in the front row, that they decided to discuss their common interest over dinner. They realized that their common interests extended far beyond brain chemicals, and a year later they were married.

Not only had Jill already prepared dinner, but she had already eaten dinner, and had gone back to her work. Sam and I ate in silence. I wondered about what was bothering Sam, while he wondered about probably dozens of issues. Our after-dinner conversation, however, suggested that he had only been thinking about the same issue I had been.

"Bill," he said, staring up at the sky, "I could use some advice."

I believe that was the first time those words came across his lips.

"Of course," I replied.

"I've discovered something." He spoke slowly, examining each word before letting it slip out of his mouth.

I said nothing, but waited for him to continue.

"I've discovered something about the brain."

"You've discovered many things about the brain." Sam's work had been published dozens of times.

"'Brain' is probably the wrong word. Maybe 'mind.'"

"I'm not sure I follow."

"I think I've found the place in the mind that affects consciousness."

"Hasn't that already been done? I thought they could put people to sleep just by poking the right spot inside their head."

Sam chuckled. "They have done that," His voice dropped to a whisper, "but that's not what I mean. I'm talking about consciousness. Our knowledge of ourselves. Who we are, what we are, and—most importantly—when we are."

"Sam, that would be a major breakthrough. If you've pinpointed that, well, you've labeled the soul."

"No, no, no. You're still thinking about the brain. I'm talking about the mind."

"The mind..."

"The mind. Bill, do you remember how I used to cry? All the time, over everything?"

"Well, yeah, but what does that have to—"

"I couldn't stand to be in crowded places. There was so much going on, and I could focus on so little. I wanted to take everything in, but there was a limit to what I could pay attention to."

I was confused. Of course there was a limit. There was always a limit.

“And do you remember that time we played hide-and-seek, and I was in the closet forever, and then I came out and never cried again?”

But there hadn't been a limit for Sam, I realized. He could focus on everything around him.

“I fixed my mind. I went inside my mind, found what it was that was making me hate public places, and I adjusted it.”

“How can you adjust your mind?”

I realized he wasn't responding to my questions. He was just telling his story. I stopped trying to ask anything, and just listened.

“It took me several years to realize that not everyone can step into their mind like me. I don't know why I can. It's just something I've always been able to do. It sure made tests easy,” he laughed. “But after that day in the closet. Oh wow, that was amazing. All of a sudden I could take in everything. Everything. I didn't just not hate going outside—I loved it. There was no limit to what I could do. That's why none of the other boys could take me. I could focus on every part of their body, and every facial expression. I knew what they were going to do before they did. And remember that time I was playing tennis, and then ran home and typed that paper?”

I did remember. Sam had creamed the best player from our rival high school, and then written an award-winning essay. “I composed that paper in my head while I was playing. There was nothing like it.”

Sam was beaming, genuinely happy as he reminisced.

“But then I discovered limits. There were things I couldn't do. That time that group of kids jumped me,” he looked at me for confirmation, and then continued, “I was not afraid at all. I could tell exactly what was about to happen. I knew who was going to attack first and how to deal with him. But they came too quickly. In my mind I could see what I needed to do, but I just didn't have enough limbs to strike with.”

Another pause.

“It doesn't matter how much I can focus on if all I'm limited to is this body.”

The sun had dipped far closer to the horizon by the time I thought that he might be done with his story.

“That's a lot to swallow.” I said, trying not to offend.

“I know. But think about it. Everything I said fits with every memory you have of me.”

(Oh, to be sure of my memories! That would be divine.)

He was right. After the explanation, it just wasn't possible to see it any other way. He had to be telling the truth, simply because it was the only

explanation.

“Okay. But why do you need my advice?”

“I need to know if I should continue my research.”

“Well, if you feel that your research has the slightest chance of the betterment of man, then it is your duty to do that research.”

Sam laughed. “Is that what you tell your grad students? I need advice, not a lecture.”

“Then I need to know more. What are you thinking of doing?”

He looked down at his feet. “It’s complicated.”

“Sam. I can’t help you if you don’t tell me.”

“I’ve found another place inside my mind to adjust. I think it will help me work more effectively.”

“You’re planning on, how did you say it, ‘adjusting your consciousness’ again?”

“Yes.”

“Then go for it. You’ve obviously been frustrated lately. If this will fix that, and quicken your research, then go for it.”

Sam grinned, thrilled that my advice aligned with what he wanted to do.

I should have asked more questions. I should have made him explain to me what he was going to do. Instead, the one time Sam recognized his limits, I pushed him past them.

All it took was a single day for me to realize something weird was going on. As I sat grading papers in my office, Sam knocked and came in. He looked as he always does, professional and busy, but the stubble on his face showed he hadn’t shaved for days.

“Could I borrow some paper? My printer ran out.”

“Sure,” I handed him a few dozens sheets of paper. “Are you all right?”

“Golden,” he said, his mind already elsewhere.

He shut the door behind him, and then promptly entered again.

“Bill, my printer is out of paper, could I borrow some?”

I looked up, confused. The stubble on his face was suddenly closer to a beard. His jacket was dingy—was it like that before?

“Sam, I just gave you paper. Are you sure you’re all right?”

“You did?” he paused, searching his memories. “What’s today?”

“The third.”

“Of what?”

“May.”

“You’re right. I did. Sorry about that. But I could really use some paper.”

“Yeah, sure,” I handed him another few dozen sheets of paper. “You know what, hold on.” I reached into my desk and pulled out a ream of paper. “Just take this.”

“Thanks, Bill.” He walked out, his mind once again gone in an instant.

This time there was a full ten seconds before he reentered the room.

“Do you need some paper, Sam?”

Sam furled his brow, reminding me of our father. “Yes. How did you know?”

“This is the third time you’ve asked in two minutes.”

“Really? What’s the date?”

“May third.”

“2008?”

“2006. Sam, maybe you should head home. It looks like you need some rest.”

“That can’t be it. I just got here. I slept fine all night.”

“Sam—” but before I could continue my protest I realized that he looked like he had just slept fine all night. His face was shaven, and his jacket was clean.

“I could really use some paper, Bill.”

I handed him another ream, and then watched him walk out of my office. This time, he didn’t return.

After another five minutes of reading poorly written term papers, I stretched and raised my head.

A folded piece of paper sat on the otherwise empty end table next to the door. I was certain that was not there when Sam left. I walked over and opened it. It was written in Sam’s semi-legible scrawl, and it appeared that he had gone over it twice.

Bill, check in on Jill.

Why did he need me to check in? If he was over in his office, why didn’t he just do it?

I checked his office, and his lab. He was in neither of them. I decided to do what he asked. The drive to their house went quickly, and I was sweating by the time I arrived, although it was more anxiousness to know what was going on than it was fear.

I knocked, but when no one answered I let myself in.

The house carried an empty, silent feeling. Not silent. Someone was talking. I followed the sound to Sam’s and Jill’s bedroom. I could hear her now, babbling incessantly.

“Neurotransmitter, neurotransmitter, serotonin, would you like to have dinner? I’m free this evening and the only possible assumption is that there is a major inhibitor involved in the reuptake of a great seafood place nearby.”

“Jill?” her voice was coming from under the bed. I knelt down and peered into the shadows. She was curled up, rocking from side to side.

“Bill, how nice of you to come. I was just thinking about you and the time Sam introduced us. Do you remember that? He just turned away from his lab work long enough to say Bill this is Jill, Jill this Bill, and I think I should be able to decrease the flow of electrons and I giggled because it rhymed just like this.” She giggled.

She was wrong. Sam had introduced us at a university dinner, and Jill definitely did not giggle. Jill laughed once in a while, but I had never before heard her giggle.

“Bill? Bill, what’s wrong? You don’t seem happy, Bill. Do you remember the first time, Bill? The first time was amazing. Sam laid me down on our wedding bed and whispered ‘three volts should do it, and then I just need to figure out how to slow the reaction.’ It was so romantic, Bill, don’t you remember? I remember it. I remember it several times over.”

As she continued to babble I reached for her hand and guided her out from under the bed. She came willingly, and then sat cross-legged on the floor. I called the hospital, and listened to her tell me about her life with Sam intertwined with randomness until an ambulance came and she climbed in, telling the workers everything she was thinking about.

I stood on the porch as the ambulance drove away. I remember it several times over. What had Sam done?

The phone rang inside. I rushed in and answered it.

“Sam?”

“Sam this is your father, we need to talk.”

“Dad?”

“Bill? What are you doing over there?”

“Dad, there’s something wrong with Jill. And I can’t find Sam. Is he with you?”

“No he’s not with me. But your mother won’t quit talking about him. She keeps spouting nonsense, too. I think there might be something wrong.”

I dropped the phone and raced to my parents’ house. I pulled in next to the ambulance parked in the driveway. My mother was walking out to the ambulance as I stepped out of the car.

“Oh, Bill, there you are. I was just telling these superb gentlemen about the time you fell and scraped your knee and Sam saw it just as he was get-

ting home from work and he mixed up some medicine and all you had to do was swallow it and your knee was better right away. Wasn't that just the most amazing thing, Bill?"

I nodded and watched and she climbed into the ambulance and rode away.

My father stood on the porch, his eyes welling with tears.

"What's going on, Bill?"

"I don't know."

"She just started muttering in her sleep last night. It got worse and worse until I had to call the hospital. She told me about Sam and things that never happened. I don't know what's going on."

For the first time in my life, I saw my father cry.

"Bill," he said through his tears, "I'm starting to remember."

"Remember what?" I whispered.

"Things that didn't happen. Things I know never happened, things that don't make sense. But I'm starting to remember them. Go find Sam. I need to talk to him."

He turned around and walked inside.

I was stunned for a moment, and then decided to do what my father said. I drove back to the university. I ran from the parking lot to Sam's building, but was stopped halfway there by, Charlie, Sam's department head.

"Bill!"

I stopped. "I'm kind of in a hurry. What do you need, Charlie?"

"Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what, is Sam all right?"

"Sam, well I assume so, I haven't heard anything about Sam."

"What's going on, Charlie?"

"Seven or eight people have just lost it. Four of them in my department, two of them grad students. They started rambling on about old memories that didn't make any sense. We don't know what's happening, Bill."

I turned and sprinted the rest of the way to Sam's lab. The door was locked so I threw a chair through the window and opened it from the inside.

Sam stood at a counter, and had turned around at my disturbance.

"Bill." His manner was perfectly composed, but his appearance was completely disheveled. His jacket was dingy and faded. His beard had returned, and his hair was several inches longer. Gray hairs accented his normally black hair, and I swear he could have passed for ten years older than he was.

"Sam, whatever you've done, you need to reverse it."

“Reverse it? Bill, even if I knew how to do that, why would I? I’ve never been able to accomplish so much.”

“Jill’s gone insane, Sam. So has Mom, and I think Dad is headed that way. Charlie says several people around here have done the same.”

“What’s that got to do with me?”

“They’re all talking about you. Talking about things that never happened.”

“Bill, you don’t seem to understand. I’ve transcended. There are no barriers. I can accomplish everything. And I will. Nothing will hold me back from that.”

“What about what you’re doing to other people? You’re wife, Sam. You’ve sent your wife to the madhouse.”

“Is it jealousy, Bill? Do you simply want what I have?”

“Sam, don’t be ridiculous.”

“Because I can teach you. Not yet, but soon. I will be able to teach you to enter your mind, and adjust whatever needs to be adjusted.”

“That’s what it was, wasn’t it? What did you do? What did you adjust?”

“Haven’t you figured it out, big brother? I’ve transcended. I’ve risen above time. Instead of only controlling myself for one moment at a time, I have control of hundreds of different points in my consciousness, and I gain more every second.”

“You gain more every second? Can’t you control it?”

“Of course I can control it! I just need to work on harnessing it a little more.”

“It’s not worth it. Think of what you’re doing. It’s not worth it.”

“History will decide that. Unless you have something else to say, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

I left his lab, came straight to my office, and spent the night. Then, this morning, Charlie came in and told me. Sam was found dead three hours ago. His hair was down to his shoulders, a scraggly grayish white. His skin had become wrinkled and leathery. The coroner reported that he must have had some new bone disease, because his bones were as brittle as a man five times his age – if such a man existed. But the most amazing part was the stack of papers on his desk. “A century of research,” Charlie had called it. Somehow Sam had managed to do a century’s worth of research in a single day and night. He cured countless brain ailments and designed dozens of new surgery techniques. He even left his field and worked on countless other projects. There were breakthroughs in fields from architecture to zoology.

History will decide, Sam had said. I think he was right. But that research won’t change the people he destroyed.

I just got a call from the police. Dad locked himself in the garage with his car and waited for the fumes to put him to sleep. He must have been afraid of the memories. Afraid of the memories that start appearing where they have no right to appear.

I've started. I've started remembering things that I know didn't happen. I think they didn't happen. I remember knowing they didn't happen, but now, maybe they did. Maybe the first memories were wrong.

I don't think I have much time left at all.

Unless.

Five minutes ago (I think it was five minutes, it could have been a few weeks) Sam walked in and placed a stack of papers on my desk. I read the top page.

*ThTehyey ooveveerlralapp. EvvErerytyhtnnging ooveveerlralsapps.
Bubtut II ccnaan tateahcech yyuouu.*

He stretched too far. He gained control of too much, and everything overlapped. "But I can teach you." Sam had done it. He had discovered how to teach me how to adjust my mind.

I'm slipping fast, but I could step into my mind and save myself. But how long would it be before I did something as dangerous as what Sam had done? All I had to do was turn over one page and I would learn.

I've never been so afraid of something in my life.

I'll always be afraid.

Waiting For Grim

by Bruce Golden

After more than 20 years as a journalist—magazine writer/editor, radio reporter, and television producer—Bruce Golden decided to concentrate all his efforts on his first love—writing speculative fiction. His new science fiction novel Evergreen is due out any day now. Bruce has also published more than 50 short stories across seven countries. His previous novel, Better Than Chocolate, was described by Asimov’s Science Fiction magazine: “If Mickey Spillane had collaborated with both Frederik Pohl and Philip K. Dick, he might have produced Bruce Golden’s Better Than Chocolate.” To learn more, go to <http://goldentales.tripod.com>.

One sat cross-legged, the other two propped against an outcropping of granite. A trio of horses stirred restlessly nearby, tethered to a dying sycamore. The half-eaten remains of a jackrabbit hung from a spit over the withering fire. Overhead a lone buzzard circled, undeterred by the menacing swarm of nimbi looming in the western sky.

“Come on, it’s your turn,” urged the first one, scratching a septic rash on his arm.

Ignoring the nag, his heavily-scarred companion grouched, “When’s he going to get here? I’m tired of waiting.”

“Yeah, I’m getting hungry,” said the scarecrow-thin third fellow.

“You’re always hungry,” complained Scar. “Eat some more rabbit.”

“It tastes like rat.”

“You would know.”

The expressive but rheumy eyes of the first fellow said he’d heard it all before. He scratched some more and coughed. Spitting, he said, “He’ll get here when he gets here. Make your play already.”

“Alright, alright. Hold your pus. Here.”

Scar tossed aside his scarlet cloak, leaned over the four-sided board situated between them, and placed his inscribed chips just so.

Rheumy turned his head sideways to read, “Strife.”

“You always use that one,” mocked Scarecrow.

“I can’t help it if I always draw those letters.”

“A couple of triple letter scores, two, three . . . that’s 11 points,” tallied Rheumy.

“Eleven,” chuckled Scarecrow derisively.

Scar raised his gauntlet-covered fist as if to backhand Scarecrow’s cracked lips, but restrained himself. “Let’s see what you can do, scrawny.”

Scarecrow fingered his chips contemplatively, but withheld his move. “Did you see the latest M. Night Shamaylan movie? I laughed so hard I nearly cracked a rib. It was a hoot.”

“A hoot? Who talks like that? What in the seven fiery torments of Hades is a hoot?”

“Damn you’re cranky today,” said Rheumy. “That’s what happens when you sleep with your sword.”

Scarecrow sniggered. “He woke up on the wrong side of his sword. Get it?”

Scar shot Scarecrow a look that would melt the armor off a panzer.

“It’s a joke,” said Rheumy as if tired of playing conciliator, “just a joke.”

Scar sheathed his gaze and mumbled, “Yeah, you guys are funnier than a barrelful of fuming nitric acid.”

Quicker than Scarecrow could riposte, Rheumy farted explosively and all three burst out laughing.

“Okay, here we go,” said Scarecrow, his bony fingers placing five chips to intersect the “r” of the last word. “Read it and weep, boys. Drought. Triple word score. That’s 39 big points.”

Scar made a noise signifying he could care less and stood up to scan the horizon.

“Where the hell is he? He’s always late. We’re always waiting on him.”

Rheumy didn’t bother to answer. Instead, he studied his own chips.

“You guys want to catch a flick later?” asked Scarecrow. “I can already taste that butter-drenched theater popcorn.”

“Films are irrelevant,” responded Rheumy. “Give me a good poetry reading anytime.”

Scar snorted, startling the horses.

Rheumy went on. “Celluloid, videotape, laser discs, they’ll melt. Books will burn. An entire book can’t be memorized—with apologies to Ray Bradbury—but a poem can be. Poetry is truly eternal.” He spread out his chips on the board. “Scourge. That’s 20 for me.”

Scarecrow nudged Scar. “Who do you think would win in a fight between Adolf Hitler and Charles Manson?”

“Manson,” Scar replied assuredly. “He’s one crazy bastard. He’d crush Hitler.”

“I don’t know, Hitler was awfully wiry.”

“They say Manson had twice the strength of a normal man when he went berserk,” added Rheumy.

“Who’s they?” groused Scar. “Everyone’s always saying they say this and they say that. Who are they?”

“Well,” began Rheumy, “nominally ‘they’ refers informally to people in general, or those regarded collectively as being in authority, or in-the-know.”

“What the blazes does—”

His retort was interrupted by the approach of pounding hooves. Scar stood immediately, his hand reaching for the ruby hilt of his sword.

“It’s about time,” he said, recognizing the incoming rider. “I’m ready to kick some ass.”

The rider approached, slowing his ebony horse to an unwilling trot. Skeletal-like fingers gripped the long-handled scythe resting across his saddle. His grim face was shadowed by the hood of his coal black cloak, but his eyes were white hot. He yanked on the reins. His horse reared.

“Mount up.” His voice echoed as if from a tomb.

The trio complied.

Scarecrow yanked his pitchfork from where he’d planted it.

Rheumy pick up his bow and quiver, leaving a trail of maggots in the dust.

Scar strode across their unfinished game, scattering the inscribed chips, and pulled himself atop his anxious, red-eyed sorrel. “Where to?” he asked.

“Somewhere gluttonous I hope,” responded Scarecrow.

“I prefer a healthy clime,” replied Rheumy, barely getting the words out before he began to cough. He covered his mouth with a gangrenous hand, but not before his pale horse stamped and whinnied.

They followed Grim, guiding their steeds to the edge of the spectral mesa where they’d camped. Their leader took hold of his scythe and gestured with it through the void towards a blue sphere in the distance.

“Them again?” Scar said, shaking his head.

“You’d think they’d learn,” replied Scarecrow from atop his malnourished beast.

“It’s their nature,” said Rheumy. “They’ll never learn.”

Scar drew his sword, the blade shrieking from its scabbard. “Let’s get to work.”

Grim turned in his saddle and flashed a murderous gaze at his comrades.

“Actually,” he said, his jagged teeth showing through a malevolent grin,

“I was thinking of blowing off work today and going bowling. Who’s with me? I say we go knock some pins to hell and back again.”

His black horse reared high into the air and then, as one, the four horsemen spurred their mounts and galloped into the void.

Sundown

by Suzanne Sykora

Suzanne Sykora has been writing poetry since she was five. She has over seventy poems in publication in places like Think Magazine, the Harrow, Goblin Fruit, Abyss & Apex, Talebones, Tales of the Talisman, and Aoife's Kiss. She has also placed thirty-six stories and her first novel is currently being considered for publication of which an excerpt will appear later this year in Rosebud.

Sundown

Not a big bang, but a whimpering sun:
Its glimmering pulse a shrinking fire
Thinner each morning when I rise;
And the sky's a darker blue each day.

I'd rather be lopped like a leaning tree
Than blighted by this relentless cold,
Which has devoured our library,
Dust at the end, dear friends.

Three of you, so kind and true,
Remain upon the ransacked shelves;
I'll carry a **Christmas Carol** to the hearth,
To warm my heart for a minute or two,

After another, leather crust.
My, how the flames ripple and leap,
Chatter and roar above this chill;
Spinning the pages shiver into dust.

In dust, in dust the people trust;
Our politicians lied;
The only time they told the truth
Was when the bastards died.

I'm saving **Anthony and Cleopatra**
For tomorrow, if it dawns;
Passion's colossus on its pyre
A tingle of heat in this shipwrecked shack.

The last of the books to spend on my fire
Will be **Crusoe**, who recreated humans;
Wrecked on an island he made up
Our civilization once again.

Ah, he had the sun.

Who Will Ride the Spirit Horse

by Adrian Simmons

Adrian Simmons lives in Oklahoma, where he writes, works, hikes, and teaches Tae Kwon do. His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in places like IROSF, RevolutionSF, Strange Horizons, and Raygun Revival. In this story, two brothers try to decide who gets to ride the spirit horse to the Otherworld.

The Clathan brothers caught a spirit horse from the Otherworld after the last of the big summer storms. They came upon it in the wooded area, down by where the old stone wall that marked the end of their property ran into Uske beck. They came upon it while the beck flowed swollen from the rains and the horse's mane stood on end with tiny bolts of lightning snapping out of it.

A spirit horse hadn't been seen in these parts—the wide valley Uskedale was two days ride to any of the more important towns in the land—for nearly three generations. Word had filtered into Uskedale and its few tiny villages that most of the rest of the Kingdom even doubted the Otherworld existed.

The brothers captured it without really thinking much about what they might do with the creature once they had it. Of course, the only thing a spirit horse was good for was to ride in a heavy storm into the thunderclouds and back into the Otherworld. Some of the greatest heroes had done just that. Some of the greatest tales centered around such a journey.

“What should we do with it, then?” Dulnal asked his elder brother, after they had tied it in the barn.

“Spose we should wait for the next big storm,” Onnul said. “Then, one of us rides it. Like in the old tales.”

It was later, after their hair had settled back down and the excitement had worn off and the day's chores were done, that Dulnal brought up, “Which one of us? The beast's back is a bit small and bony. Mostly mane and tale and spite. How do we choose?”

Both brothers were full-grown men, used to the slow and deliberate life of farmers. Onnul, older and broader, drummed his fingers on the table. There were still hints of light streaming through the windows, and the lanterns were lit, bathing their small house in mellow dusty light.

Onnul finally shrugged. “Been thinking of that myself. I could go, but Marjin and I are ‘sposed to be married next spring. And we’ve had two good years of harvest, and the wolves have left the sheep alone and...”

Dulnal nodded. Wondering for a moment if he should say it, but then said it anyway: “And things have been pretty good since Pa died.”

Onnul’s drumming started then he stopped and he nodded. “Yeah. Things been pretty good.”

The older brother looked over at his sibling, “Dulnal, I’m not... I’m not saying you should take it ‘cause I want to be rid of you. Things gonna be a lot harder here without you. Have to hire some lads from Inilmon and the place won’t be the same.”

“Have to hire some lads from Inilmon anyway,” Dulnal said, “we got so much hay to stack. And I’ve been thinking of the old tales. Otherworld’s a dangerous place. Not that I’m afraid or anything.”

He held up a hand, “Stacks of hay and healthy sheep on the one hand,” then he held up the other, “one-eyed giants and riddle contests on t’ other.”

“Could take the musket,” Onnul said. They had one, their father’s from the war they were both lucky enough to have missed.

“Could,” Dulnal agreed, trying to remember if there were any stories where people had taken muskets to the Otherworld. Not recalling any, he shrugged, “Don’t know how much good it would do. Giants. And that iron-feathered flock of magpies.”

And that was the crux of it. Neither brother was a hero, in the classical sense. They were farmers, and of recent times, fairly successful ones, and with a little more luck soon to be very successful. The house was big, big enough for both brothers, and Onnul’s new wife, and lads from the village. And Dulnal wasn’t without prospects himself, when it came to the lasses. But his heart didn’t run roots so deep as his older brother’s did, and he just hadn’t asked anyone yet. Maybe after the next harvest.

* * *

After three days, the Clathan brothers decided that neither of them really wanted to light off to the Otherworld and likely end up eaten by a griffon, or be permanently disfigured in a goblin nose-breaking-contest.

In fact, by now they were grumbling no small amount about the spirit horse. They would have traded it for another good stretch of wolf-free time, or continued peace between the lands of Urronas and Soltania, or even maybe a decent crop of sweet-red onions—the secret of growing them had departed this world with their dear mother and they had no luck with them.

They started at the Black Bear Inn. The interior was blacker than any bear could hope to be, dark wood stained darker with smoke and time. But the Bear was one of the best places to go if you wanted to talk business. They tried, none-too-smoothly, to transition the conversation from broken harnesses and splitting-hoof disease to: “Found a spirit horse. Thinking about selling it. Or trading.”

Their neighbors, good solid farmers cut from the same timber as themselves, were rightfully dubious:

“How many pints have you had, Dulnal?”

“Hitting the fire-water, Onnul?”

“You boys need to get out more.”

“Horseshit.”

But when Onnul took a few strands of the horse’s mane, rubbed it between his hands, and set it on the table to writhe and spark, the room got powerful quiet and the farmers drank deep from their flagons, watching and thinking and trying to remember how many of the old stories ended well.

Big Alunn pushed his way to their table, nodding to both brothers. “You found a spirit horse? Why don’t you ride it into the Otherworld yourselves?”

“Crops are good and the sheep are—” Onnul began.

“I’d RIDE that damn thing out of Uske valley at the first storm,” Alunn said, grinning and showing his big square teeth. “Otherworld wouldn’t know what hit it, if it were me.”

“You want to trade for—”

“Yessir. Giants, goblins, the Five Spectres, I’d outwit and outfight them all. Take my three pistols. That’s what I’d do, alright.”

Little Ronnal, who was never far from Big Alunn, pulled up a bench and sat at the table. “Don’t listen to his fool-talk. You boys should trade that horse to a real man. Why, I’d go and harvest the elder wheat and get me one of those Otherworld maidens for a wife. Maybe two, if there was a lot of elder wheat.”

“One of those Otherworld maidens would eat you for breakfast,” Big Alunn said. “And I’d cross the basilisk fields and get me some of that First Kingdom gold. Come back here and buy me three wives.”

Dulnal interrupted. “Best offer, lads.”

“You really have one?” Little Ronnal asked, looking back at the now-still horsehairs on the table. “You have one and you’re not going to ride it yourselves?”

“That’s what we said,” Onnul answered.

“You can come to the house,” Dulnal added. “See it for yourself.”

And although Big Alunn and Little Ronnal talked long into the night of the great things they'd do in the Otherworld, and from there back to this world, they never walked the three miles to the Clathan brothers' farm to look at the spirit horse, much less haggle on it.

* * *

Unfortunately, many other people DID come by the Clathan brother's farm to look at the spirit horse, arriving sweaty and thirsty. The brothers were busy, as were all farmers during the summer months, but they dutifully showed the animal to the curious. It was smaller than most people thought, and feistier, and sure enough, when it got riled up, its hair would stand on end and the air would smell light and strange and little sparks would arc between the animal's hooves and the ground.

People looked, and some asked questions, but mostly nobody wanted to make an offer.

* * *

"I'll give you my six black goats for your spirit horse, Dulnal," Osmunnd said. "The long-haired curly ones, too. Make no mistake. It's a good offer."

Their meeting was, like most meetings, most serious meetings between farmers that didn't happen at the Black Bear, held at a drystone wall.

Dulnal leaned against the wall, regarding his neighbor. The field behind Osmunnd turned to a tiny strip of woods and then Red Talon Fell rose up behind them. The late day sun seemed to shine straight into the fell's sides. Goats, regular white and black ones, were out on the hill, as were the dogs that kept an eye on them.

It was a nice offer, but not a good offer.

"Those goats are a lot of trouble. Catch the split-hoof all the time. And they're all males. I'd have to trade something to Old Smithal, who has the only female."

"He'd give a good price for them," Osmunnd said, "he's made me fair prices for them in the past."

Old Smithal was clever, shrewd even. And any price he offered for anything, and especially from someone like Osmunnd, was only just-barely fair.

Still, Osmunnd was making an offer, and willing to haggle, so Dulnal leaned on one side of the wall, Osmunnd on the other, and they haggled a

bit.

Finally, Dulnal's curiosity got the better of him. "What are you going to do in the Otherworld, Osmunnd?"

Osmunnd, thin and pointy, looked surprised. "Make my fortune, of course. What else are you going to do there? Get me some of that pale gold, harvest some of that elder wheat, like Invil the Great did."

Dulnal nodded. Invil was, in addition to being lucky and strong, very clever. Osmunnd was not very clever. Which is why men like Old Smithal fleeced him constantly.

"I know all the old tales," Osmunnd said. "All the old tricks. Nothing in the Otherworld that I can't handle. I can watch the clouds when I pass through the valley of the basilisk, and silver scythes don't seem that hard to come by in those parts, so the elder wheat shouldn't be that much of a problem. I know all the riddles, and how to blind a cyclops."

"Invil the Great sacrificed an eye in an eye-gouging contest to blind the cyclops. You willing to gouge out your own eye?"

Osmunnd rolled his eyes. "You're getting it wrong. He stabbed the cyclops with a dagger."

Dulnal nodded. Yes, of course. Good old rock-stupid Osmunnd. What was it about a dumb man that made him talk to everyone else like they had just fallen off a turnip wagon?

"Well," Dulnal said, backing away from the wall. "I've got to get on to the turnips. I'll talk to my brother about your offer."

* * *

"Might as well give him a rope to hang himself with," Onnul said. "He'd be dead within a week—"

"Or turned to stone—"

"Or smothered in the living bog—"

"Or pantsed by the goblins within a day."

"And lord knows that we don't want the denizens of the Otherworld to think we're all as dumb as Osmunnd." Onnul shrugged, dug his spoon into his stew. "I guess he got tired of waiting for another war to start, had to seek his fortune another way."

It was a long, late day. Lights from the lanterns lit up the tiny kitchen, mixing with the orange blaze of the fire spilling from the main room's fireplace.

Dulnal was already thinking past their idiot neighbor. "So far, we've had braggarts who've not even showed up to make an offer, and now a fool with

a bad offer. How many fools are we going to listen to?"

* * *

The next fool was named Runnyan. Onnul had always disliked Runnyan, but not because he was a fool. Not in the same way that Osmunnd was a fool. Runnyan was a fool because he hated the town of Inilmon and he let everybody know it, and then wasn't smart enough to leave.

He'd get drunk at the pub, then complain about life in Uskedale. About the monotony of it, about settling for something and someplace so petty and mundane. But, unlike Osmunnd, who was just dumb enough to be waiting for something to happen to make his fortune, Runnyan never left, never planned to leave, and as near as anybody could tell, seemed happiest when deriding his neighbors for living in peace and quiet.

"I'll give you twenty gold crowns for the spirit horse."

Onnul took a long drink of his mug. People were watching, the small crowd at the Robin and Rat—Runnyan tended to get in fights at the Black Bear. The onlookers would talk, and how Onnul hated the talk. About his "new friend" Runnyan—things like that. Things that he did if anybody talked to Runnyan too long at the pub.

"Where'd you get twenty?"

Runnyan's gray eyes darted about. "Been saving. Been working on the harvest and the planting, for five years. Can sell that little house of mine."

"It isn't yours. Doesn't your cousin live there?"

"I can talk him into selling it."

"You can't talk anybody except Osmunnd into leaving Uskedale. Maybe you and he should buy some normal horses and ride off to somewhere with more opportunities."

"Listen, Onnul, I've wanted out of Uskedale my whole life. But I'm not going to leave here just to end up in another farm village the next valley over, or penniless in one of the towns."

"Gold crowns are gold crowns, if they're here or in the court at Red Havens," Onnul said. "And even if you did have twenty, I still wouldn't sell it to you."

* * *

The brothers stewed about it while they boiled that night's stew. One offer from someone who would fail, one from someone they wished would fail. And twenty crowns was a lot. And they doubted that Runnyan could

talk his cousin into selling the house and that he had any more than three or four gold crowns in his possession now. They kept their heads down. There could be more offers.

* * *

“Dulnal,” Imilsk asked one early fall day as he was harnessing up the horse, “do you still have that spirit horse?”

Dulnal could tell she was serious because she whispered it.

“Yep. We still got it.”

“I’d like to make an offer on it.”

Imilsk was married to Harrond, a very successful farmer, further south in the valley. With three more good years, he and his brother might be almost as well established as he was. And Harrond was shrewd; he never moved unless he saw an opportunity for profit.

“What does Harrond want with it? Bored with being a successful farmer?”

Imilsk snorted, a very un-lady-like sound. “He doesn’t want it, I do.”

Her voice barely rose above the wind. “By all the gods, that man! You know he’s never made a mistake, don’t you? Of course you do. Everybody does. Not once, not one that he’d admit. Ugh, and his mother is the same way, and she’s got her hooks into my children and they’re turning out the same way. They all take turns telling me how smart they are, and talking to me like I just fell off a passing tinker’s cart, and I’ve had enough. More than enough! She doesn’t like my mothering, she can raise them herself! He doesn’t like my cooking, let his mother cook, let him sleep with his mother. Miserable, arrogant bastard!”

Dulnal secured the harness, double-checked it and bit his tongue to keep from bellowing with laughter. It was good to know that he wasn’t the only one that Harrond wore slick with his ceaseless talk. “What’s your offer?”

“I’ve got some silver knives that came to me from my grandmother, and three gold crowns, and six silver prongs.” She leaned over the old horse and whispered, just for Dulnal’s ear, “And my two white thighs, and the look on Harrond face when he wakes up and finds me and his double-barreled musket gone.”

“Imilsk!” he protested. “I’ll have you know that I have no designs on your honor or reputation. And... and my brother—”

“Oh fine, him too then.”

“No. I mean, I’ll have to talk to him about it. The price,” and he tipped his hat, “has to be agreeable to both of us.”

She glanced up and down the road. “You won’t tell him why I want the horse, will you? Just that I do, and what I’m willing to pay?”

“He’s got no reason to know—”

“Promise me that you won’t tell him, you won’t tell anybody. If this gets back to Harrond... or if people know...”

“You have my word, by the mother that bore me and the shadow that walks with me.”

True to his word, Dulnal waited for his brother to come home, and while he tended the fire to make dinner, told him about Imilsk’s offer without letting on why.

Onnul nodded, and told his brother that Kolln had cornered him outside the pie shop and made him an offer of six gold crowns and a wagon load of coal.

He kept it a secret, as he promised, that Kolln couldn’t bear to watch his son descend into madness anymore.

* * *

The brothers watched the sky, watched the weather, waiting for the harvest, waiting for the light to drape just-so in Uskedale to hint at another storm. And the offers kept coming, and the misery, the heavy secret burdens that came from feeling one thing and acting another. And the burdens became theirs, because nobody wanted to end up like Runnyan, because in the tiny villages of Uskedale the only thing worse than unhappiness was ever admitting to it.

Colnisk was unhappy because she was at the peak of her youthful beauty, and if she could just get out of here, she could attract a lord.

Munndal was miserable because he had done everything that a farmer could in his life, and was tired of it, and had no time or training for anything else.

Yeenisk was terrified that she’d die in childbirth, like her mother, and her aunt, and so there was no future for her here.

Donnlu, the sawbones, was haunted by every sick child that he couldn’t heal, and every limping farmer whose broken bones he hadn’t set right.

Lonnlud was terrified that his momentary success was just an illusion-- that the hundreds, thousands of variables of a farmer’s life would make a pauper out of him within a handful of years.

Bannilsk was old and her husband had trouble recognizing her, and sometimes seeing her at all, and she didn’t want to die not having ever left Uskedale.

* * *

“You love my brother, don’t you?” Dulnal asked.

Marjin shifted her basket of sloe berries and regarded Dulnal with outright suspicion. A handful of sloe trees grew against the drystone wall, two handfuls of hawthorns grew on the other side. A thousand leaf edges hinted at the colors to come as the weather grew colder.

“We’ve got a match, Dulnal—”

“That’s not what I asked.” He leaned in close, whispered so that she would take him seriously. “You have a match, yes. Yes, I know. Everybody knows. But do you like him? Do you want to wake up and look at him every morning? You don’t secretly love someone else and plan on trying to live a lie until your heart dies and—”

“You mean you?”

“No! Yes. Anyone.”

“What’s gotten into you?”

“You still haven’t answered. Do you even like him?”

“Of course I do! He’s a hard-worker, and a gentle nature, and is kind to animals—for a farmer at least.”

“But you wouldn’t trade all that in for someone wealthier, or luckier?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You won’t want to take the next spirit horse, will you?”

“Heavens no.”

* * *

“After the war I was glad to get home, glad to get back to Uskedale,” old man Siln said. “But you start to miss it, somehow.”

Onnul nodded, not sure what to say. He didn’t like the old man very much, one of the dwindling number who had fought in the wars up north. He gave fools like Osmund ideas, and expected a lot from people for what he did.

“Have you ever even been in a fight, Onnul?” Siln said, filling the gap.

“Sure.”

“Since you became a man?”

He hated the old man’s tone. No, he hadn’t been in a fight since he turned sixteen. Mostly because he was a big man, and fast, and could make his points with his voice before he used his fists. But that kind of thing never mattered to men like Siln. Just like it didn’t matter to—

“Your Pa would know. He went through it. It’s not like the stories; glory comes later. And you want to be back home, but then home isn’t the same. You’re not the same. The life of a farmer, the spring planting and the fall harvest and all the goes between, it leaves you lacking, it leaves you wanting something. It leaves you wanting to fight.”

“Always a war on somewhere,” Onnul said, with just a little edge. It was the middle of the day and he had a day’s worth of work to do in the light that remained.

Siln shook his grizzled head, “Too old for that now. That’s a pastime for younger men.” He gave Onnul a look, with just a little edge.

What was that supposed to mean? That the old fool expected him to leave his farm and life and go fight for a general he’d never heard of and a king he’d never see? An admonishment that he should have taken the spirit horse already and likely be turned into a tree by now?

“So, are you here to tell war stories, or do you want to make an offer on the spirit horse?”

Old man Siln’s eyes gleamed like embers in the dusty dying light inside the house. Onnul leaned back, his chair creaking. Let the old man fill up the silence again.

“Six gold crowns. And what little silver I can get from my worthless daughter and her worthless husband.”

“That’s not very much,” Onnul said, just like Pa used to.

“I saved your father’s life!” Siln snarled, slamming his palm onto the table.

“That was a long time ago, neighbor.”

“If he were alive, he’d—”

“Get out,” Onnul said, standing.

* * *

When the next storm broke, the Clathan brothers ran out to check on the spirit horse, to make sure it was still securely tied in the barn. The darkness between the house and the barn was lit blazing bright by flashes of lightning, bright enough to show the barn door open and swinging hard in the wind. Inside, the dull light of lantern revealed that the ropes that had held the spirit horse had been cut.

* * *

Once the November storm had finally blown over, it was easy enough

to figure out who took the spirit horse. Thorlinn Tathin was just another farmer's boy, taller than most, and otherwise nobody that you'd look twice at in Uskedale. Neither of his parents, or any of his family had made an offer on the spirit horse. Nobody claimed to know why he would have done such a thing, being as he was known to be neither particularly clever or daring. And no, no, NO he was perfectly happy, his father and mother insisted, never looking each other in the eye.

* * *

The years passed in Uskedale, and the Clathan brothers became the butt of many jokes at the Robin and Rat, for having lucked into such a remarkable thing as a spirit horse but not having sense or courage or foresight to use it. Onnul finally got good and drunk one night and broke both of Little Ronnal's thumbs over it. He started off to just break the one, but after he got started he went ahead and broke the other one, just to teach Big Allunn a lesson. But by then most of the people who had made an offer for the spirit horse avoided them anyway: overcome, the brothers supposed, by the shared shame of the knowledge of their misery and the fact they didn't have sense or courage or foresight to get out of it.

The brothers' life was good, but hard. They had two of the three good years they needed, then a bad one, then a decent one. Typical farmer's lives.

They finally sold their house and their farm and most of their livestock. Onnul and his wife Marjin moved two valleys over to Elnudale. Dulnal disappeared with Imilsk and nobody knew where they went, although Harrond swore up and down he knew where they were. Runnyan got good and drunk one night and broke Harrond's nose at the Black Bull.

Hungry

by Greg Schwartz

Greg Schwartz fixes copiers for a living in Baltimore. His stories have appeared in Black Petals, Writers' Journal, Theatre of Decay, and Dark Jest-ers. He is the staff cartoonist for SP Quill Magazine and is a member of the Horror Writers Association. Nominated this year for a Rhysling and Dwarf Star Award, his chapbook of horror poems, Bits and Pieces, is available at the Genre Mall. Deep space is the setting of this speculative thriller.

Joe carefully guided the Kayak through the fierce rain of sand down to the planet's surface. The small one-man craft was designed to race through the far reaches of space, not land during a sandstorm on an empty desert world. The steering shaft jerked awkwardly in his hand as the ship lurched from side to side, but he managed to set the Kayak down without incident.

He hoped his metal reader was right; this place looked desolate. The reader showed several concentrations of steel scattered across the tiny planet. The largest was half a mile from where Joe had landed. He'd have to hike through the sand dunes. He sighed and reached for his oxygen helmet and heavy coat.

Scouting for scrap metal wasn't a bad business, overall. Joe made decent money, and he didn't have a boss. His main gripe was that it left him precious little time to spend with his wife. Kailey had known his job required frequent travel when she married him, but over the past year he could see it taking its toll on her.

Thinking about his wife, he decided to leave her a quick message before he went exploring. He switched on the televideo monitor and called up Kailey's number. A blinking red dot appeared on the screen. Joe began speaking. "Hi honey, just wanted to let you know I found something big. I'm out in the Western Reaches right now, in the Orpheus system. Bunch of wrecks here. If the readings are accurate, it'll put us a lot closer to buying a baby. Love ya."

He suited up and stepped out of the Kayak. The door sealed shut behind him, and he began his trek through the desert.

The sandstorm attacked him like a giant swarm of bees. He was safe inside his thick wool jacket, but the sound of the sand relentlessly beating against his helmet soon gave him a sharp headache. It grew steadily as he

trudged on.

But he forgot all about the headache when he saw the abandoned ship.

It was obviously a transport vessel, based on its massive size and lack of weaponry. Each square foot of the ship registered in Joe's mind as cash. Its rear jutted out of the ground at a slight angle, suggesting a crash landing. Joe, who knew something about spaceships, didn't recognize this one. It looked fairly old, and the sections of the hull that weren't covered in sand were beginning to erode. He marveled at his good fortune that no one else had found it first.

As he approached the spaceship, the side door opened silently like a gaping mouth. Joe froze. He hadn't expected the ship to still have power. He'd explored hundreds of wrecks—many newer than this one—and every last one had been dead.

He debated entering for a moment. The ship hummed softly with electrical power, and obviously expected him to come aboard. Suddenly, as if it were trying to scare him, his mind conjured up an image of a blue whale drifting through the sea, giant mouth hanging open, swallowing anything in its path. Joe shook his head to banish the image. Then he squashed his doubts and walked toward the open door. If the ship had power, then the computers could be salvaged in addition to the metal. The dollar signs continued to add up.

He stepped inside the airlock, waited for the outer door to close and the inner door to open, and entered the ship.

Lights flickered on as the ship acknowledged his presence. He was in a narrow corridor stretching off in both directions. He headed toward the front of the ship. His plan was to scope it out, see how much of the ship could be salvaged, and then locate the other, smaller blips on his reader and see if any of them were worth logging.

He reached the bridge—a massive, open room with enormous screens that buzzed into life at his approach. Joe grew even more optimistic. Even as scrap, the ship would net him a nice profit, but if it could fly...

Thoughts of early retirement began to take shape in Joe's mind. He set off to explore the ship, whistling for the first time in years.

* * *

Millions of miles away, Kailey was also whistling. It was a beautiful summer day, the kind of day that shouldn't be spent inside. She strolled down the street to her neighbors' house. Rows of bright blue tulips flanked the lane like soldiers. Linda and Roger had invited her over for tea, and she

was excited to tell them the big news.

She had gotten Joe's message, and she couldn't stop smiling. For months, they had been talking about purchasing a baby, but babies were expensive. Now it looked as though their luck might change.

Babies were available year-round, but the summer months usually brought the best selection (and the best prices). They hadn't decided yet on a boy or a girl, but Kailey had no doubt she could talk Joe into a girl. She could be very persuasive when she wanted to be.

Linda and Roger lived at the end of the street, in a large three-level house overlooking the sea. Linda was outside watering her flowers when Kailey arrived, and she greeted her friend with a smile.

"Hi, Kailey!" she shouted, waving. Kailey hurried up the driveway and gave Linda a brief hug. They hadn't seen each other in almost two months. Roger was a retired general, but occasionally he did some traveling PR work for the military, and he always took Linda with him (on the government's dime, of course).

They went inside and Linda poured two cups of tea. Roger was in the kitchen, tinkering with the computer in the refrigerator. "Damn thing won't keep the temperature stable," he muttered in response to Kailey's inquiring glance.

The two women sat down at the kitchen table. Kailey opened her mouth to ask Linda how their trip had been, but instead the news about a possible baby in the cards burst forth uncontrollably. Linda's face lit up, and she shrieked with joy. Roger even looked up from the computer for a moment and smiled.

Linda demanded to know details, so Kailey told her about the message Joe had left her. "As soon as he gets home I'm making him take me down to the city to look." Kailey's face was radiant.

Linda refilled their tea cups. "So where is Joe now?" she asked.

Kailey frowned, trying to remember. It was hard to keep track of her husband's travels, and she had never been good at astronomy. "I think he said he's in the Orpheus system." She cocked her head. "Is there an Orpheus system?"

Linda giggled. Roger said, "Maybe he found the haunted ship."

A sudden chill ran up Kailey's spine. "What haunted ship?"

Roger pushed a button and the refrigerator motor hummed into life. He looked up from the screen, satisfied. "The *Torrance*. You never heard of it?" Kailey shook her head slowly. Roger looked at his wife, and she shook her head too. He sighed. "All right, I'll tell you the story, but it's probably just a bunch of half-baked rumors."

He lit a cigarette. “Eighty or ninety years ago, there was a man named Peter Whaley. He was the captain of the *Torrance*—a large cargo ship that hauled freight for the military. It was a civilian ship contracted by the government. Anyway, Captain Whaley had a son. The thing is, it was his *biological* son—he didn’t buy the kid. No one knows who the mother was, or how she was able to hide the pregnancy, but somehow the government found out when the kid was a couple of months old. They told Whaley he’d have to give his son up, but before they could confiscate the baby, Whaley and the boy took off on the *Torrance*. He kept the boy hidden from the crew and set a course for the Western Reaches. Back then that side of the galaxy was mostly uncharted territory, and the government wasn’t enthusiastic enough about capturing one unregistered baby to send any fighters out there. So Whaley escaped.”

Roger took a drag and continued. “Those are all facts. But the rest of the story is just heresy—one crew member’s wild tale, probably made up just for attention. As he told it, a few weeks after the ship left, Whaley sent the crew into suspended animation. It wasn’t unusual for a cargo ship—the onboard computers flew the ship anyway.

“Whaley had launched the ship in a hurry, and apparently the freezers hadn’t been fully replenished. Their food supply ran out quickly, and the captain, desperate to keep his baby alive, used the sleeping crew for food.”

Linda and Kailey gasped simultaneously. “That can’t be true!” Kailey said. “You mean he *fed* them to his son?”

Roger nodded. “Cooked them up and made soup, according to this guy’s story. Then the ship was hit by an asteroid, and the computer, like it was programmed to do, woke the crew from suspended animation. Only by that time there were only two crew members left—the ship’s doctor and one of the mechanics. Both men saw what had been going on—I’m sure the place looked like a slaughterhouse—and the doctor confronted Whaley about it. Whaley killed him. With a meat cleaver. The mechanic ran for the escape pod and got the hell out of there. No one knows for sure what happened to the ship.

“According to the rumors, the captain’s ghost still haunts it, searching for food for his dead son. And, to add fuel to the fire, quite a few trader vessels have been lost in that area since then.”

No one said anything for almost a minute, and then Roger added, “But that’s just a story. The ship probably crashed somewhere, and this guy ditched the rest of the crew and made up that bull story to explain why he was the only one who escaped.”

The refrigerator beeped, and Roger turned to look at it. He cursed and

picked up a screwdriver. Only his wife saw the terror written across Kailey's deathly pale face.

"I have to go call Joe," she said quietly.

* * *

Joe sat in the bridge, looking over his notes. He'd only explored half the ship, but already he knew it would net him a nice sum. The ship was old, granted, but it was in great condition—no visible damage from the crash, the computers were fully functional, and from what he'd seen, it was spotlessly clean. The only evidence he'd found that the ship had ever been inhabited was a pile of yellowed bones in one of the storage closets. They were obviously the remains of the crew, but if so, who had put them in the closet? Joe had puzzled over that one for a while, then decided it didn't matter. They were all dead anyway.

The plan now was to rest for a couple of hours and then finish the tour, starting with the crew's quarters. He settled back in the captain's chair and closed his eyes.

A shrill voice roused him from his nap. "Joe? Joe? Are you there?" It was his wife's voice, calling him on his radio. He rubbed his eyes and pulled the small two-way out of his jacket pocket.

"Hi, honey, I'm here. Guess what? I—" But Kailey cut him off.

"What's the name of the spaceship you found?"

"The *Torrance*. Why?"

There was a moment of silence and then his wife spoke, softly but firmly. "Joe, you have to leave. Right now. Get out of there."

Joe frowned. "What's wrong, honey? This hunk of metal is gonna make us rich. It's in great con—"

"Please, Joe," Kailey said. She sounded close to tears. "The ship is—" A sudden burst of static drowned her out. The ship's electronics flashed off and then back on again.

Joe heard a distant noise in the wake of the static. It was rhythmic, rising and falling like an ocean wave. He could've sworn it sounded like a baby crying.

"Joe? Joe, answer me!" Joe stood up and cocked his head. "Joe!" Kailey sounded frantic now, but her husband was only half listening. It really *did* sound like crying.

"Joe—"

"Hang on, honey," Joe said. "I'll call you right back. I think there's someone alive here." He turned the radio off and listened intently.

The crying was more discernible in the silence. How was it possible that a live baby was on board? The ship had to be almost a hundred years old.

Joe pushed the question from his mind—it wasn't important right now. What was important was finding the kid.

Surely it had to be hungry.

Today's Planetary Weather Report

by G.O. Clark

G.O. Clark is the author of seven poetry collections, including 25 Cent Rocket Ship To the Stars, Mortician's Tea and Strange Vegetables. His writing has appeared in Asimov's Science Fiction, Talebones, Space & Time, Strange Horizons, Hollywood Spec, and Star Trek: The Poems, among others.

Today's Planetary Weather Report

Sunspot activity moderate today.

Localized lightening strikes on Venus, illuminating those nasty sulfur clouds.

Mercury calm as usual, with daytime highs in the 800's, nighttime, 300 below.

Sub-O temperatures and a few scattered dust storms on Mars.

The usual prevailing winds on Saturn, opposing directions, depending on locale,

and heads up, Cassini team, methane rain showers heavy at times on Titan.

Cyclone activity on Jupiter unchanged, more thunder and lightening in the forecast.

Uranus continues cloudy with little change, south pole region still locked in winter.

If there were airports on Neptune, they'd all be closed, winds pushing 900 mph.

Closer to home, Earth cycles between
total chaos and picnic perfect days, while
old neighbor moon remains unchanged.

Beanstalk

by Diane Gallant

A Native Pennsylvanian, Diane Gallant's stories have appeared in Leading Edge, Mirror Dance, Third Order, Mindflights, Dragons, Knights and Angels among other publications. In this story, Jack must decide how far he is willing to go to pursue his dreams.

Jack had never seen the sea, or a real seashell. What he knew of them he had learned from school, from virtual entertainment, and from listening to the conversations of people who had been to earth. But he knew enough so that, when he saw the girl's nails, painted as they were with swirls of peach and silvery pink, he knew they were like the insides of seashells. Her hands and her sandaled feet were tattooed with black swirls, like the bare branches of trees in winter—another thing Jack could plainly see although he had no first-hand knowledge of either trees or seasons.

Hands and feet were the only visible parts. Aside from her hands and her feet, the girl was entirely veiled in black. Even her face was concealed behind a rectangle of black mesh. Wrapped around her head like a crown was a circlet of black fringe from which dangled beads and tiny artificial coins.

“Come, come, Shula,” said a voice.

Jack tore his gaze from the girl to look at the speaker. Walking about ten paces before the girl was an elegantly dressed man with a graying beard. He wore the long coat of an aristocrat, and a scarf of soft brown wool hung over his shoulders. He had stopped and turned around to address the girl. “Come along quickly, daughter, or we shall be late,” he said, and he clapped his hands twice.

The girl did not change her pace or make any sign that she heard the command. She continued walking in a perfectly straight line, exactly as before. She brushed by Jack and his utility cart without the slightest indication that she noticed his presence, and she followed her father into the wide corridor that sloped gently down toward boarding sector number twenty-seven.

Only when she had disappeared from sight did Jack rouse himself from his stupor and begin to unload the tools from his cart. His job today was to run routine diagnostic tests on the ducts and conduits of the boarding sectors. He unfolded a spiked pole from his cart and climbed to the ceiling, where he unlocked a narrow conduit, pulled out variously colored cables, and checked them using a monitor on his cart before replacing them and

locking the conduit. Then he moved on to the next conduit, and the next, performing the same operation. And all the while, he thought of the girl.

If he had the means, he would leave Ilyra Station on the first open ship. He would go with the adventurers and wealthy travelers, who arrived at the station and left by the thousands, and he would build a life for himself on one of the far-flung colony worlds. He would grow his beard, and dress in fine, soft clothes. And he would acquire a wife from earth—a true-blood human wife, with trees tattooed on her hands and feet, and nails painted with the swirls of seashells.

But he did not have the means.

Jack lacked better prospects, and had lived his whole life on Ilyra Station. He was the son of level-one maintenance mechanics, a class of laborers whose lot it was to remain behind while others left, and oversee the running of the station. Jack was now part of the system crew, made up of humans and progs, that regulated and maintained the levels of oxygen and carbon dioxide within the various sectors of the station.

As a child, Jack had visited the cities and forests of other worlds on virtual trips programmed and controlled by teachers who—like Jack and his parents—had never been off-station. He thought then that he might one day leave the station, but he understood differently now. He calculated that he would have to work twenty lifetimes and save every credit just to afford passage on even the smallest of the colony ships.

It would be worth it, though—for a life built on the ground and a true-blood wife. But Jack did not have twenty lifetimes.

“Jack Owala. Hi, Jack Owala.” Jack looked down. A young boy stood near the utility cart, looking up at Jack. “Come down,” said the boy. “I have a message for Jack Owala.”

The boy was not true-blood—that was obvious. Jack was familiar with the features—eyes that were overly rounded, but only slightly, and facial expressions that were either too neutral or unnaturally exaggerated. The boy was a prog.

Jack climbed down and wiped his hands on a towel at his waist. “What’s your message?”

“Hi,” said the boy again. “Hilmin wants to see Jack Owala. Hilmin says go see him.”

Jack hid his surprise—mostly out of a sense of personal decorum, since the prog could not detect surprise anyway. “When?” he asked.

“When you’re done here, Jack. Go to Hilmin’s office, up the beanstalk. Bye, Jack Owala.” And then the boy hurried off. Of course, thought Jack, Hilmin would use progs for errand boys.

Jack turned back to work. He had just set a boot on the lowest spike of the pole when he heard another voice. “Jack?”

He turned again, this time to face his wife. “Zina. This is a restricted area. How did you get in here?”

“Hi, Jack,” she said. “I have clearance. Didn’t you know?”

Jack knew. Progs had clearance to go just about everywhere, though usually they were forbidden access to restricted areas. “What do you want?”

Zina smiled her mechanical smile, and held up a small aluminum container. “You forgot this, Jack. Your lunch. I thought you might be hungry, Jack. So I brought it.”

“You didn’t have to. They sell lunches to workers in the café.”

“Lunch costs four credits in the café, Jack.”

Jack took the container. “Go home, Zina,” he said. “And don’t wait for me. I’ll be late coming home tonight.”

* * *

The beanstalk was a vertical conduit two meters in diameter through which ran thick green cables. Jack entered the base of the beanstalk through the movable ceiling tiles in a storage closet, and began the long climb up the ladder to the top of the station. Jack felt that he was climbing forever and a day—but he knew the station, and he knew that the total distance was not more than fifteen stories from the bottom—where Jack labored most days—to the top—where Hilmin lived in the large and secret complex of rooms that made up his apartment.

Everyone who lived and worked on Ilyra Station knew of Hilmin, and of the immense power which he wielded with impunity. Residents of the station and administrators alike knew that Hilmin operated by the ancient law of favors, meaning that he could be contacted for a favor—or could make contact with anyone from whom a favor was due—through his vast, clandestine network of spies and operatives. And today, Jack knew, Hilmin was going to call on him for a favor.

At last Jack reached the top of the conduit. He climbed through a portal into a wide entrance hall with a marble-tiled floor and a ceiling with a window on the stars. Two of Hilmin’s guards met him there, questioned him on his business, and led him into Hilmin’s office.

Hilmin was easily the tallest man Jack had ever seen. He was bald and clean-shaven, and he wore the white buttoned-up suit of a businessman. He sat in his office behind a desk as wide as a king’s table. When he saw Jack, he threw his arms open in a wide, welcoming gesture. “Jack! It’s nice to see

you again.”

“I was told you wanted to see me.”

“You were told right,” said Hilmin, wagging a finger in the air. “Those progs of mine—you can always depend on them. Please sit.” Hilmin motioned Jack to take a seat on the opposite side of the wide desk, and then held out a large bowl filled to the brim with peppermints wrapped in shiny paper. “Care for one?”

Jack sat, but refused the candy.

“I bet you’re wondering why I wanted to see you, Jack. It’s because you and me, we’re both alike, we do important work here on the station. I knew how important your work was, oh, way back when you were just starting out. That’s why I helped you out, gave you a hand. Let me see. How long has it been, Jack?”

Jack shrugged. “Five years, maybe six.”

“That long already? Let’s see, what did I do for you five, six years ago? Do you remember, Jack?” Hilmin leaned back in his chair and began counting on his fingers. “I helped you attain a position, a maintenance position at ten thousand credits per cycle. That’s nothing to sneeze at.”

Jack nodded. “I know.”

“I got you into an apartment in the fifth sector. Everybody wants the fifth sector. It’s hard to get—I had to pull some strings, you know?”

Jack nodded again. He knew.

“Then there was your wife. Realistic-looking female, wouldn’t you say? One of my better pieces—I could have sold that one for a lot. But I saw that you were living alone, and I said to myself, it’s not good, he needs a companion. I wanted you to have her, Jack. She hasn’t caused you any grief yet, has she?”

Jack shook his head. “No.”

“You’re a man very much like myself, Jack. You work hard, you make valuable contributions, and you watch as it goes unappreciated. Believe me, I know. But you got yourself a good life, you’ve got to count your blessings. Am I right?”

Jack nodded.

“Jack, you know anything about Senator Quinius?”

“The Senator to the colonies?”

“That’s the one. Well, this Senator—he’s drafted some new laws regulating the manufacture of artificial interactive persons. Progs, as we call them on the station. He has a problem with progs, because we make them so they look like people.”

“Maybe the Senator feels confused. A lot of colonists coming through

here from earth are confused when they meet progs.”

“I know, Jack. Funny how that is—I guess they don’t have too many progs on earth. But to answer your concern, no—that’s not exactly the Senator’s problem. He’s not confused by what they are. He thinks that making the progs in the image of humankind is degrading.”

“How can a machine be degraded?”

“It’s not the machines he’s worried about. It’s us. He says we’re making a class of slaves in our own image, and he says we degrade ourselves by doing this. I know—it’s ridiculous, it doesn’t even make sense, but this Senator—he can cause problems for me. He’ll enforce his law, and you see how it will get in the way of my work.”

“A law can get in your way, I guess, but...”

“The Senator is leaving tonight on a colony ship. Jack, I want you to look at this.” Hilmin held up a small pouch made of black velvet, and slid it across the table toward Jack. “Look what’s in there.”

Jack took the pouch, untied the string, and emptied it into his hand. “What’s this?” he asked, looking at a single small bean in his palm. As he watched it, tiny appendages like legs emerged from each side of the bean, and it began to crawl in small circles in his palm.

“It’s a bean—a program. Listen, Jack. Here’s what you’ll do. You use your security clearance, you go right in the ship. Quinius’s ship—it launches tonight, you understand? You go in before the launch, you put the bean in a conduit containing any of the ship’s circuitry, and it makes its way into the control center. It instructs the engine core to melt down—which will happen after the launch, you see? And that destroys the ship in flight, without any warning—bam—just like that. And the best part, Jack—it’s not traceable. The investigation will show an accident.” Hilmin sat back in his chair and folded his hands over his midsection. “This may be the cleverest thing I ever made.”

Jack stared at Hilmin. “You want to destroy the ship? There’s a lot of people on that ship.”

Hilmin waved his hand dismissively. “Jack. You know I love people. That’s why I make the progs—to lessen people’s burdens, to relieve their loneliness. Think about how much I’ve given people, Jack. Now try and imagine a future without progs. Think what a set-back that would be.”

“There’s innocent people on that ship.”

“I know, I know. And it pains me. But there’s the greater good to think about. Sometimes you need to make hard choices.”

Jack looked at the object in his hand. The tiny legs had retracted, and it was just a bean again.

“Let me make it easier for you,” said Hilmin. “A million credits, and transport to any colony world on any open ship. For you and—what was the name?”

“Zina.”

“A new life, a new world. It’s everything you ever wanted, Jack.”

“But why me? Why not have one of your progs do it?”

“Progs prowling around in the boarding sector, that would arouse suspicion. But you, you’re like a little rat, on and off those ships—it’s like you belong there. No one will notice you. And no one will ever know, I promise.”

“Hilmin, this...”

Hilmin leaned forward, and this time when he spoke his words were full of menace. “I’ve given you everything you have. I know I can count on your cooperation.”

Jack looked at Hilmin. “You’re right,” he said. “Count on me.”

* * *

All the way down the beanstalk, with the small bean tied in its velvet pouch at his waist, Jack thought about the girl with the nails painted like swirled seashells. The girl was at that moment on board the same ship as Senator Quinius. But neither the girl nor her father, nor even the Senator, were in any real danger, since Jack did not intend to commit the deed asked of him.

Jack knew that noncompliance to Hilmin’s directive would have its consequences, and he reviewed these in his mind as he climbed down the ladder inside the conduit. He would never have a million credits. He would never leave Ilyra Station. He might lose all of the things Hilmin had obtained for him, and other things besides.

And of course, Hilmin could very easily have him killed.

These things did matter to him, of course. But even so, Jack would never commit this horrible act.

* * *

“A million credits! You have to do it, Jack!” Zina looked across the kitchen table at Jack with wide open eyes. If he hadn’t known better, Jack would have attributed this to excitement or surprise. But Zina was a prog, and her eyes were wide and a little too round because her designer was not skilled enough to draw human eyes accurately. But even so, Zina was

programmed to be loyal above all else, and so she was safe to talk to, and tonight Jack wanted to talk.

Between them, on the table, Hilmin's bean walked in wide circles.

"I can't do it," said Jack.

"Well, why not, Jack?"

"Why not? Because there's people on that ship, besides just the Senator..."

"It will be easy for you."

"...and even if it was just him—just the Senator—all alone on that ship, I still couldn't do it."

"A million credits, Jack. A million! That's enough to make your dreams come true. We could leave here, we could go and live on a real world."

"We are not going anywhere," said Jack. He stressed the word we, and he wondered if Zina was capable of interpreting this.

"But Jack, think about it. Nobody will ever know, and we'll be gone from here anyway."

Jack swept the bean from the table and put it back in its pouch. "This is ridiculous," he said. "I'm going to bed."

"This is your big chance, Jack."

Before leaving the kitchen, Jack turned and looked back. Zina was standing beside the table, watching him with her wide, round eyes.

* * *

It was on account of the bean—tied in its velvet pouch to a post near his head—that Jack could not sleep for a long while. And when he finally did sleep, his dreams were of bare, dark trees in winter, and a cold sea filled with shells and sunken ships.

* * *

Jack woke from his dreams early and, unable to sleep again, he decided to go into work before his usual hour. Jack drifted through his morning routine like a leaf blown from a tree. Every detail of the new day looked and felt wrong to him, as if his known and familiar life had just ended, and something utterly different was about to begin. Maybe it was because of the strange dreams, or the unusually early hour, or the fact that Senator Quinius and two thousand other colonists were at that moment en route to their new world, unaware that they were ever in danger. Or maybe it was the fact that Jack thought he might be killed today.

As he touched his hand to the security panel outside the door of the maintenance sector where he worked, two large men came up from behind and grabbed him on either side. Hilmin’s men, thought Jack. They’ve been waiting for me.

The men dragged Jack down one corridor, into another, and finally into a small, secure room that even Jack—for all his familiarity with the station—had never seen. The door slid into a locked position behind them. The two men released Jack, and took up positions on either side of the closed door.

The room was gray, and bare except for a table and two benches. At one side of the room stood commander Mira, the chief commanding officer of Ilyra Station and the highest-ranking of Jack’s bosses. She wore her commander’s cape over her shoulders, and a plain look of fury on her face. On the other side of the room from her, with his thick arms crossed over his chest, was Belzen, the station’s security supervisor. And next to him, sitting a bench with her hands in her lap, was Zina.

The commander put her hands on her hips. “This is your wife, is it not?”

Jack looked from the commander to Zina, and back to the commander. “What’s going on?”

“We apprehended her,” said the commander. “Two hours ago. She was attempting to enter one of the ships scheduled for launch.”

“Zina?” Jack looked in disbelief at his wife, who sat without moving. “That can’t be true.”

“We took this from her.” The commander held up one white-gloved hand. Between thumb and forefinger she held a small bean-shaped object. “She was reluctant to give this up—we almost had to disable her. Do you know what this is?”

Belzen shifted his weight on his feet, and said, “She won’t speak to us. She won’t answer any questions. We’re hoping that you will have the good sense to cooperate.”

“Your wife’s a prog,” said the commander. “The law does not regard her as a free actor. You know that we can hold you responsible for her actions—whatever it was she was trying to do.”

“Don’t blame Jack,” said Zina, speaking for the first time since her arrest. “I wasn’t acting on orders from Jack. I came here myself.”

All eyes turned to Zina.

“Why?” asked the commander, but Zina would not speak again. The commander looked at Jack. “How about you?” she said. “Do you know anything about this? Do you know what she was planning to do?”

Jack nodded without speaking, and glanced at the two large men who stood guard at the door.

The commander caught his meaning. “Guards,” she said. “Take the prog to Doctor Feric’s quarters. Tell him to disable her. And tell him that when I’m done here, I’ll see him personally, with further instructions.”

The guards took Zina’s arms, and escorted her from the room. When the door closed again, the commander said to Jack, “I know, I know. Spies are everywhere. Now, Officer Belzen and I would like to hear your story.”

Jack slumped down into one of the benches and put his head in his hands. “The ship—the one she tried to board—did it launch safely?”

The commander exchanged a quick glance with Belzen. “It didn’t launch at all,” she said. “We’ve detained it, pending our investigation. Why?”

“So it’s safe, then?” asked Jack.

The commander sat on the bench across from Jack, and for the first time during the interview she softened her voice. “Alright, Jack. What do you want to tell us?”

“From the beginning,” said Belzen. “And don’t leave anything out.”

“It started yesterday,” said Jack.

* * *

On the morning of the launch, Jack did not have time to gather his belongings, or his thoughts. He left the gray room and followed Commander Mira down through the boarding sector and toward the ship. On the way, walking and speaking quickly, the commander explained her plan.

She would issue a false report stating that the ship had been destroyed in a terrible accident, and that the Senator had been killed. This, she said, might just buy them the time they needed to launch the ship safely and secretly. And Jack would go with the ship—to a distant world, beyond Hilmin’s reach. Jack’s account would be credited, she said, almost as an afterthought. It was not a million credits, but it was fair payment for giving up one bean, and it was enough for Jack to begin wearing the clothes of an aristocratic gentleman.

At the dock, the ship was waiting for him, with its wide gate open. The commander bowed her head to Jack, wished him a good trip, and then she turned around and hurried back the way she came. But Senator Quinius was there. He had come to the gate to meet Jack, who only the day before had been hired to carry out his assassination. The Senator shook Jack’s hand, slapped him on the shoulder, and invited him to have a drink in the ship’s cafeteria.

“So they scrapped your wife, then?” said the Senator over his tall glass of pepper tea.

Jack swirled the tea in his own glass, then set it down without drinking it. “They disassembled her. Her program failed. She didn’t follow my wishes.”

“What you mean is, she didn’t follow your intent. But she certainly did follow your wishes.”

“Anyway,” said Jack. “It’s unpredictable behavior. Dangerous in a sophisticated machine.”

“I happen to agree on that point. Yet you counted her as your wife?”

Jack bristled. “You wouldn’t understand. You didn’t live on the station. That’s just how it is.”

“Oh, I know how it happened. There was an exodus of workers from the stations, and progs came in to fill the vacant positions. What I want to know is—why are they made to look so real?”

Jack scowled. They weren’t really real-seeming. “No one on Ilyra Station is confused by that,” he said.

“No? Men, women, children—an entire artificial species. What are they supposed to be, really?”

“I don’t... What?”

“Tell me something,” said the Senator. “You think you could marry a human woman? Honestly, now. You think you could relate?”

Jack disliked the Senator after that, and avoided his company.

* * *

Jack did not see the girl with the seashell nails among the ship’s travelers. He had not really expected to. It was enough for him that he was traveling on the same ship.

He spent hours each day now in the ship’s recreation chamber. He usually selected the simulated woods, and strolling under the dark canopy of trees, or else he chose to walk along a beach, picking up black seaweed and pieces of broken shells. And every day, the technician would intrude. She would appear before him on his path in the woods, or else she would simply walk out to him on an ocean pier, bringing with her warnings about the side-effects of prolonged virtual experience, and threatening to shut down the entire system around him. And every day, Jack would try to explain to her that, in the absence of an actual world, the programs served as his teachers.

Icebergs and Butterflies

by Paula Stiles

Paula R. Stiles has sold SF, fantasy and horror stories to Strange Horizons, Jim Baen's Universe, Futures, Permuted Press anthologies "History Is Dead" and "Robots Beyond", and other markets. She won third place in the Writers of the Future Contest and was a finalist in the 2008 Pagan Fiction Award. Her horror story, "The Gingerbread Man", was recommended for a Bram Stoker Award and her SF story, "Funny Money" was nominated for a British Science Fiction Award. She also has co-written a mystery/SF novel, "Fraterfamilias." She is Editor in Chief of the Innsmouth Free Press, a copy editor with the Internet Review of Science Fiction and co-moderator of the writing group Other Worlds Writers Workshop. It is hard staying warm in this story.

The camel winks up at me from the pack of smokes as I rip open the cellophane. Shivering, I tap out a cigarette and light it, careful not to smother the small fire. I suck down a mouthful of coffee fast, to avoid it congealing in my throat, holding the cup delicately at the top so I won't suck all the heat up through my fingers before I can finish the coffee. I feel like an iceberg in cold, green Arctic waters, just the tip of me sticking up for melting by the sun. Christ, I hate winter.

Puffing on the cigarette, I stare down the platform toward the patch of gray sky beyond the train station. I miss summer—the hot sun and the brush fires. I want to stand in the forest at the heart of the fire again, arms outstretched and head flung back. But with snow on the ground, I doubt I'll be feeling any real heat again for a good six months yet.

She paces up and down the platform, like a last summer butterfly waving her gilded wings slowly in the thin sun before it goes back behind the clouds. She's tallish with a blonde pageboy. Hot in bed, I bet. The type that dresses classy/trashy in a city-girl way, that thinks she's better looking than she is, that likes to think she's enigmatic. She looks young; she feels young. As I finish my cigarette, I catch her eye. She turns away into the ice-flecked wind. Either she's lost out here or faking it well. Straightening up off the wall, I pull my pack out from between my boots and shoulder it before I stroll over. "You all right? Can I help you with something?"

She shrugs and turns away, pulling her black, calf-length coat tight

around her. “I don’t talk to strangers,” she says. Especially not nondescript guys in jeans and leather jackets, she doesn’t say. She doesn’t have to.

“Okay.” I back up a step, shoving my hands into my pockets. “Just thought I’d ask. You looked a little lost, that’s all.” I back up another step, ready to withdraw and leave her the field. I’m just bored enough to want to be helpful; that’s all.

As I turn away, she makes a little sound of protest. Oh, so she *is* that kind. Yes means no and maybe means keep trying until she bleeds you white. “Wait, can you tell me when the next train heading east is?”

Did I mention I was bored? Yeah, well, that’s my excuse and I’m sticking to it. “Sure, it comes in about twenty minutes. This platform. I’m taking it, too.” I add that last part just for fun, gauging how hungry she is. Some of these young ones from the city, once they get out here, they’re pretty hungry. Not like there’s a whole lot besides woods and mountains and sky. And snow. Lots of that around.

She chews her lip and takes a step toward me, probably sizing me up as “good enough”. Yeah...young and hungry, too. I can’t seem to find any other kind. Usually, I try to steer clear of bloodsucking fiends, especially ones from the city, but I seem to attract them. “You’re going that way?”

“Yup.”

“Any reason?” What is she doing, playing with her food?

I light another cigarette. When I offer her one, she takes it. I light it for her, keeping at arm’s length so I won’t smother the flame by accident. That would be real hard to explain. “Got a job. You?”

She sighs. “Just traveling. I’m sure whatever you’re doing is more exciting than what I do.” Nice evasion there. I bet she’s running from something, or somebody. They usually are. It’s their nature.

I play along. “Depends on the season. I was just down in Yellowstone this past summer.”

Her eyes widen, kitten-like. Oh, she is good. “Really? What did you do for them?”

Defused that goddamned supervolcano that keeps trying to erupt there, I almost say, but she’d never believe me. “I’m a firefighter,” I say. Hey, it’s true, as far as it goes. “I guess you could call that ‘exciting’.” My winter job isn’t nearly as much fun, a maintenance job on the night shift in a power plant. Prosaic but warm and it’ll get me through the winter.

“Ooooh.” People are always impressed by the fire fighting and it gets them nicely off track. “That sounds dangerous.”

I shrug. “It can be, when the wind shifts. All part of the fun.”

And they always like risk. Yup, she’s definitely that kind. They’re such

chimeras of calculation and naiveté. She sidles closer. I can feel her body heat now through the frigid air. That coat must be pretty thin. “And in the winter?”

I laugh. Now’s the time to burst her bubble. “Odd jobs, nothing special. This winter, I’m a custodian. Last year, I worked in a kitchen washing dishes.” That worked out well. I kept the water in the sinks scalding and the cooks fed me, too. It was a boring job and hard work, but you gotta do what you gotta do to stay warm and fed.

She looks disappointed. For a moment, I think I’ve got her proclivities wrong, despite the heat, but then she takes another step closer, licking her lips. “That’s too bad. You should try for something better next year. Surely there must be some winter jobs that need a rough, tough guy like you.”

I rub my face to hide my smile. I recognize shameless flattery when I see it. It couldn’t be anything else, since I’ve studied a long time to look as ordinary as possible. “To be honest, I’d like nothing more than to crawl into a hole and hibernate for the winter. The cold makes me sleepy.” I could take a trip down to Mount St. Helens, but it doesn’t need another visit just yet and volcanoes always stretch my safety limits. I’m just looking for something a little more low-key to take off the edge.

She smirks, probably thinking she’s got me pegged now. “Funny, the way you sound I would have thought you were from around here.”

“If you mean, am I from the south, no. I was born way up north.” That’s why I’m so pale. It helps my skin absorb more heat. “North of 60, where it’s dark all winter and you can’t see your hand in front of your face.” Not quite that bad, but it’s dark enough. “Up there, we just go to ground for the duration. Down here, it’s not so easy. People expect you to do something with yourself during the winter months.”

Her smile broadens and she sidles closer, right up next to me. I let her, but keep my hands at my sides, passively enjoying her heat and glamour. She’s wearing this sexy perfume, something musky. “Don’t try to exculpate yourself,” she purrs. “I see right through you, you know. You’re a sun-lover.”

“Just cold.” The smile doesn’t change as she snuggles up to me. I didn’t expect it to. “What about you? Are you from around here?”

“I don’t want to talk about me. Let’s take a walk while we wait for the train. There’s less wind down here.” She takes my hand, her own abnormally warm. Hot-blooded and oh, so tempting. Just what I need on a cold afternoon—another good reason to keep my distance. Instead, I pick up my pack and shoulder it as she leads me around the side of the station to a small alcove that leads to a service door. I drop it when she pushes me back into

the alcove. Hey, whatever the lady wants. I get lonely, too, dammit. The heat from her body feels so good as she presses close. For a moment, as she nuzzles my hair and ear, I hope for something...normal.

A sharp pain in my neck blots out that wish. Someone grunts in pain; it must be me. Peace sweeps over me, making my knees weak, but it's a cold peace, not what I want or need. Blindly, I reach out for the warm being sucking me dry and drag her in close. Heat, blessed heat, flows into me, like the summer sun, like a raging forest fire, almost like a volcano. Oh, yes. Oh...yes...

The heat falters. Suddenly, my arms are full of waning fire yanking free. I let go and open my eyes. I have to catch myself against the wall with my hands as my knees buckle. Blinking into the fading heat shimmer, I see her on the ground, scrambling back out of the alcove. When I follow, still wobbly, she backs up further, bewitching eyes wide and dark. She's shivering. "What are you?!"

"Not what you thought, I bet." No, not prey. Not by a long shot. I could finish her and leave her frozen body in the alcove as if she were just sleeping. Nobody would discover her before I got on the train. But my head's clearing now and I don't want that. "I know what you are, though—vampire."

She gasps, fangs glimpsed even as she withdraws them into her gums. My blood still shines on her chin. "I don't—what are you talking about? Vampires don't exist. And they couldn't live in sunlight even if they did."

"Give me a break. You think I know about you because I saw a horror movie once upon a time? That I believe all those pretty myths your kind spread to keep undercover?" I reach up to my neck where she bit into me. My hand comes back bloody. "You all think you're so mysterious. You think you're the first bloodsucker I've ever met?" And killed, even though it was an accident. A vampire is no match for a guy who tames volcanoes for a living. "You think I couldn't tell your whole life story the second I saw you? What did you do that made you want to get out of town so fast? Chew on the wrong guy's neck?"

The shivering stops. I haven't done any permanent damage then, not to this one. She gets to her knees. Then she pushes herself to her feet, probably encouraged by the way I'm still leaning against the wall. "You feed on *us*?"

And they think they're so important, too. "I try not to, but your kind keep coming after me, and you're all so hot-blooded... You're a little hard to resist this late in the year, especially when you're trying to suck me dry."

My strength is coming back as her glamour fades. I take a step toward her. She backs away. "What do you want from me? Is that all you wanted,

to kill me?"

I sigh. "Actually, I was kinda hoping to get laid. Some human warmth, you know? Nothing nasty. I'm not a natural born killer." She looks incredulous. "I told you I was cold."

A long wail down the tracks signals the train. She starts. I reach down for my pack, staggering a little, and head back out onto the platform. "This is our train," I say over my shoulder. "You coming?" I'm not too surprised when she doesn't answer.

A guy comes up beside me swinging a big duffle bag. He glances at my neck as I board the train and gets a funny look on his face. "You okay, buddy?"

I touch my neck again. The blood is already drying. "Yeah. Cut myself shaving." The lie seems to satisfy him. I don't see her board the train so I don't see the need to raise an alarm. The passengers will be safe enough from her and I'm mostly harmless as long as I keep to myself.

I take a seat, finding one on a window by the platform, right over a heater. The compartment is nice and warm. A nap should cure me of any lingering effects and maybe the meal she got will distract her from her next kill for a while. I catch sight of her as the train moves out. She's crossing the parking lot in a broken run, in the opposite direction from the station and out of my life as fast as possible. She disappears from view behind a stand of trees.

Maybe I should have killed her after all. Her next victim probably won't be so lucky. But it's too late now. Anyway, I'm not that kind of guy.

