

OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #22



Poetry by Marina Lee Sable

Stories by Benjamin Crowell
Dawn Lloyd

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Cover Art: *Changling* by Teresa Tunaley

Teresa Tunaley originated from the UK but now resides in the Canary islands. She devotes as much time as possible to her love of art, doodling traditionally with pencil and dabbling with watercolors. Recently she has begun to use a more modern technique and creates with her electronic tablet and pen. Her work can be seen online and in print across the UK, US, Canada and Europe. For more check out her webstie at www.artstopper.com.

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Editor's Letter

I remember looking forward to 2010 as a child and dreaming of flying cars. In 1980 it definitely seemed possible. Just as the creators of *Back to the Future* imagined, so I imagined. But the years have passed and our cars still motor along the ground.

In some respects that is reasonable and logical. A car needs some way of stopping and as of yet, it is very hard for any flying thing to stop very quickly. Planes have to land and brake, unless it is some super advanced military helicopter or a plane with helicopter wings where they can change what direction the propulsion pushes. But if you look at hovercraft or balloons or baseballs, objects in flight just have a very hard time of stopping themselves in mid flight.

Is it even feasible that there will ever be flying cars? I would like to think so. In fact, I am quite suspicious (not taking the logics above into consideration) that there hasn't been a better development in our cars yet.

Look at the evolution of the phone. It used to be simple signals passed over a wire. Then they were able to get the voice sent over strips of metal miles long so that you could hear me speaking just like me in Russia. Then they were able to change it so that my voice got recorded on a little plastic and metal chip and got beamed up into space or those blinking towers on the hilltops and sent halfway across the world—in mere milliseconds. Yes, our phone has come a long way.

Look at airplanes. If you have ever seen a model of what the Wright brothers flew and then took a trip to the airport to see what we fly now, you would be amazed at how far things have advanced. Our military planes are even more impressive and let's not even talk about spaceships and satellites and rockets. They blow that Wright brother's plane out of the water.

Now look at the first car. The Model T. It looks eerily similar (at least to me) to what we are driving now. Sure our cars these days are wearing a disguise of more metal and different angles and flashy tires and rims. But the insides are basically the same.

Aren't you curious why everything else continues to metamorphize in amazing ways and our cars seem to stand still? I certainly am.

–SC

Mr. Pinenut

by Dawn Lloyd

Dawn Lloyd is an American who got bored and set out to find adventure. Four continents later, she has settled in the peaceful and unadventurous Sultanate of Oman where she teaches English and history at a local college. Her work has appeared in The Future Fire. This love story highlights the fact that we don't always say what we mean.

“Imalda had told him how, once upon a time, the mansion had hosted kings and princes. He’d told her how his house had held only blocks of wood, but even that had long been lost.

Inside, the string quartet swelled, and he ran a finger over the outline of the invitation. It was much like the others she’d sent. He’d burned the first ones, thrown out later ones, then finally left them lying in a pile on the table. Now he clutched the envelope in his pocket with one hand, and felt the outline of the scar running from the tip to the bridge of his nose with the other. Imalda had been the only person he ever trusted. The last surgeon was a good one; the scar was small. But still, it was there, flat, blunt.

From the house, laughter trickled to him—a woman’s, then a man’s, then too many to distinguish. It would be a simple thing to go in. Cross the street, shoot a silent stare at the doorman when he raised an eyebrow at the name, answer the “I don’t believe we’ve met’s” with an, “I’m an old friend of the hostess’.” Latch on to some socialite and let her handle introductions. Smile broadly, laugh loudly, ask people what they thought of Luigi Pirandello’s latest play or how they liked the music.

Swallowing hard, he squeezed the invitation and started across the street, black-shined shoes barely lifting higher than a scuffle. He reached the walnut door all too soon. Pulling a lace cuff straight under a black jacket, he straightened his collar, forcing confidence into his stride. The doorman looked him over, eyes fixing on the scar, then down at the invitation. “Mr. Pine... nut?”

“Yes. Pinenut.”

“Of course, sir.” The tone was more polite than some. If only he were here as an entertainer, things would be so much easier. Go in the back door, past the kitchen, his things could be kept in the room over there. Would they

please help hang the curtain, and no, they could not touch the puppets.

He stood at the entrance to the ballroom remembering the days when he was young and would leave the stage to mingle with the guests, laughing naturally, indifferent to distinctions of station and his name. Even now, he longed for the days before he'd realized the laughter he'd enjoyed so much was little more than mockery.

Imalda was nowhere to be seen. She was probably in another room giving last minute instructions to the cooks. On the far wall hung the tapestry she'd had made after hearing his tales of the coast, the boats, the whales. It showed a seaside village nestled in a quiet harbor. It was nothing like his home, but it still reminded him of his youthful adventures. Little rainbows from the chandelier danced off the weave just as they had when he'd performed here so many times before. On the mantle, the crystal rose, the stained glass vase with the winding ivy, the ivory stag still sat. But the wooden marionettes, the girl and boy he'd spent months carving and weeks painting, were absent.

The shelves held more glass, the walls more paintings and tapestries. No woodcarvings. When he gave them to her, she'd said they were adorable, beautifully crafted, masterpieces. But she hadn't understood.

Then the crowd caught his attention. Pairs and clusters drifted, smiled, broke in high laughter and then lulled. His heart beat faster. The blood rushed through his ears as he took a breath, pasted on a smile, and entered. He smiled at the first group of strangers, then nodded more and more deeply as others glanced in his direction. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed being around people, even if it was only as an outsider. Why had he let an inane name and a recurring scar pull him away from this world?

It was to the three women by the far wall that his eyes kept returning. The first was too skinny, and her hair was the color of a dead field mouse. But the second, a girl with light brown hair, pulled up and away from a blue dress, cut low, caught his eye. She smiled and whispered something to the first, nudging her a bit with an arm. The last one was a brunette who was fluttering a fan slowly in front of her face, eyeing him between black lace and turning to talk to her friends. He bowed from across the room and the one with the dead-mouse hair reddened slightly as she whispered back to the good looking one.

A minute later, he had woven around the groups. He bowed again, waving a hand in front of his face to exaggerate the effect and hide the scar. "Pardon me, lovely ladies. Would you permit a hapless stranger with the misfortune of not yet knowing many at this party the pleasure of your company?"

The red faced one turned still brighter and looked at the others to speak. It was the good looking one who replied. "Please. We'd love the company. This is Amata," she nodded to the mouse-haired one who seemed uncertain of whether to curtsy or offer a hand, and so did both. "And Carletta," the brunette with the fan settled firmly on offering her hand. "And I'm Rosina," the speaker curtsied. "How is it that you have the misfortune of not knowing anyone this evening?"

It was a simple question, but he hardly wanted to explain why it had been three years since he'd spoken to anyone about anything not involving wood carving or performances. It was years ago that he'd learned the easiest way to avoid difficult questions was to answer with absurdities. "Oh, I come from another land. It's not so far from here, but very different."

Amata tipped her head in rapt attention. Carletta twirled her hair around a finger, glancing to the stairs Imalda had been standing on when he first saw her. Rosina continued speaking for the group. "Really? You don't have an accent. Is it here in Italy?"

He nodded. "Yes, but by the sea." Absurdities. Absurdities. Absurdities. "It's a land of fairies and magic and talking animals. I would take you all there, but I'm afraid I don't remember the way. Perhaps one day I'll find it again, and then I'll come back and take all of you with me." He winked at Rosina and shot a smile at Carletta.

Amata laughed loudly and foolishly. Rosina nodded. "Fairies and talking animals? What do the animals say to you? Do they complain about all the work?"

He shook his head, eyes wide in pretend seriousness. "No, only the donkeys. And they spend more time telling you that you should work or you'll grow up to be no better than them." He paused dramatically, then leaned in to stage whisper, a hand covering his mouth so only the three of them could hear. "But you have to be careful of the cats. They're nothing but thieving scoundrels." He looked around the room as if suspicious that a cat might jump out from behind the curtains. "They'll promise you the moon if you'll just give them the money for the ferry to carry you."

His eyes lingered on the curtains for a moment. Imalda had paraded fabrics in front of him for days before she'd finally settled on the light teal with the golden tassels. She'd looked hurt when he'd confessed, against his better judgment, that he couldn't see the difference between it and the previous five. It had been the same when he'd had to tell her that he didn't really like the yellow dress with the white ruffles. That had been the first time he'd seen her get angry. She'd forgiven him when he went on to tell her how it wasn't the dress that made her beautiful. Nevertheless, the lesson

was learned.

“Yes, I’m sure the cats are horribly treacherous creatures.” Rosina’s light voice broke into his thoughts. Your animals don’t plan on invading our land, do they? But I’m sure you could protect us.” Rosina nudged Amata as if to get her to reach for his arm, but Amata just stood, frozen.

“I would certainly try to see that no cats harmed you.” He caught Amata’s eye, took her arm reassuringly for a moment. “But I didn’t come all the way over here to bore you with silliness.”

He released Amata’s arm, hoping he could finally move away from the stupidity of that conversation. “So tell me, how is it that one town could have produced such beautiful ladies as yourselves? I’m sure my entire land doesn’t have any...” he caught himself, letting his voice trail to silence. “Ah, words fail, I am afraid. I never have been able to quite say what I wish, and I fear I am at a great loss now.”

Carletta rolled her eyes and muttered something to Amata who glared back. It was Rosina who continued. “We’re all from here. It’s a pity, really. Amata and I were just talking about how we wished we could travel and see the world some day. But for now, you’ll have to tell us about it, Mr...?”

Smile broadly. Treat it as another joke. “Pinenut. Just call me Pinenut.”

Amata giggled again. Apparently she could do nothing more than blush and giggle. Carletta coughed. “A unique name. Perhaps your trees talk as well?” Amata elbowed her sharply. Carletta’s flinched, then cocked her head waiting for an answer.

“My father was a carpenter, and a simple man. I’m a wood carver myself. It seemed like an appropriate name.”

“Oh?” Rosina picked up the conversation. “Amata has a whole collection of carved wooden animals. There are tigers and birds and some adorable puppies. Maybe you’d like to see them sometime?” Amata nodded enthusiastic agreement and ventured to speak for herself. “What do you carve?”

The memory of the wooden boy and girl no longer on the mantle pierced his cheerfulness. “I carve children, families, scenes from the countryside. I mostly make marionettes, though.” Then he realized he had a way of learning what she’d done with them. “Ms. Imalda used to keep two marionettes I made there on her mantle.” He gestured to the far side of the room. “Did you ever happen to see them?”

His hopes dissolved as they murmured to each other, shaking their heads. “Ah well, she probably didn’t leave them there long.” He hoped they hadn’t seen the hurt he feared had spread to his face. “The puppets are how I met her. It was at a party for her nieces.”

“And so she invited the puppeteer as a guest to her own parties?” Carletta raised an eyebrow.

“We became friends gradually.”

“Indeed.”

“I don’t suppose you know when she’ll join us, do you?”

“Imalda?” Rosina’s voice matched Amata’s eyes. “Oh, I’m sure she’ll be along soon. There are always last minute details to take care of,” then more cheerfully, “do you have any other carvings you could show us? I’m sure Amata would especially like to see them. Maybe you could even make one for her.”

Amata looked back up at him, nodding enthusiasm. “I’d like that very much.”

He tried to think of an honest response to a request he had no intention of granting. How could one of his puppets be put with the cute little dogs and tigers for her zoo? “I’m flattered by your interest, but I’m afraid I don’t have any I can spare right now.”

Amata’s eyes fell again. “How unfortunate. I really would have loved to have had one. I’m sure they’re excellent.”

There was no answer to that. “I’m sorry.”

A silence passed. Carletta fanned herself, Rosina smiled as if smiling would cure the conversation. Amata continued to analyze the wood floor. Around them floated quiet conversations and more laughter. Everyone else was happy. These people always were. Even Imalda had never seemed worried about anything. It hadn’t bothered him until she’d called him out in public; that’s when he’d realized she thought of him as nothing more than a toy. Had she even known what she was doing?

Carletta interrupted his thoughts. “Well, never mind the carvings. Tell us about your travels. You don’t have an accent. You couldn’t have come from too far away.”

The conversation was becoming less pleasant. He should have known not to come, not to pretend to fit in with them. “No, not so far away, really, and I was just a boy when I left. It was Ms. Imalda who reminded me of my home, actually.. Before I met her I’d nearly forgotten what it was like.”

“Oh? Is she from your hometown? Funny. I’m sure I remember her family living here for generations,” Carletta looked at her friends for confirmation.

“No, she just made me think on it. I hadn’t for a while.” He dropped his voice, finality in the tone.

“Yes, I suppose I wouldn’t want to think about a land of talking donkeys, either.”

Amata shot her a sharp glance, "I thought his stories were quite entertaining. If I'd heard such tales, I'd never forget them."

He glanced from Carletta's fan to Rosina's dress to Amata's teeth. The air, and Carletta's stare, pressed in. For a minute, he wished he could disappear into the green and blue of the tapestry behind them. He cleared his throat, considering a bow, but it seemed pretentious now.

"It's been a pleasure talking to you, ladies, but I think I need to get some air. If you'll excuse me?"

Carletta sniffed at him. "Have a good evening."

Rosina was too quick. "Amata was just saying how stuffy it was getting in here before you came. Maybe you'd like some company?"

Even preferences for politeness were overruled by the need to escape. He articulated an "uhm."

Rosina carried on quickly, "but I wouldn't want to lose her company now, so maybe later." Amata looked away, red face now scarlet.

Muttering another, "thank you for the company," he stepped back, then turned and walked past more dresses and jackets out to the terrace.

He heard Carletta whispering, "did you see how he walked? It looked like he just got off a horse," before he shut the door behind him. His shoulders slumped. He walked to the lawn and sat, then regretted it as the early evening dew found its way through cloth.

It was only a minute later when Imalda's dog padded up to him, sniffed a leg and hand, then nearly knocked him backwards in excitement. He caught his balance with one arm, tussling the dog with the other. "At least you still like me, eh, Arturo?" A tongue slopped towards his face. He pulled away just in time. Several more minutes of exuberant greetings followed before the dog finally contented itself to sit beside him, tail thumping.

"I knew I shouldn't come back here. Don't have any idea what I'd have done if I saw her, and I can't talk to her friends." Brown eyes watched him and the tongue, unable to reach his face, licked his hand instead. "Silly of me, wasn't it? But at least now I know she didn't even care enough to keep the children I gave her. That clears that up, doesn't it?" He paused to pat a head that twisted to lick him more. "So, tell me, boy. Did she do it on purpose? Or did she just not know what she was doing?" A tail bounced quietly against his leg.

The light from the door behind him flickered occasionally as shadows passed by it. Down the hill, the frogs sang from the pond, and beyond that, crickets chirped. He searched for a rock to throw to silence them, but there was only smooth grass. He yelled, "shut up!" at the field, then cringed in fear that they had heard his voice inside. The sounds of laughter and voices

still echoed.

He sat.

It was an hour, or perhaps only half, when the sounds of footsteps brushing over grass caught his attention. He sighed. Amata had come out despite his “uhm.” He stared at the grass as he turned, trying to think of an apology and excuse. The shadow approached, slowed, stood quietly for a moment. The dog walked over to greet the newcomer.

Then she spoke. “Pine? You actually came!”

He jumped up, tripping, to face her as she continued, “I’d nearly given up sending you invitations. Why didn’t you ever come?” Against the vague lighting from the house, she was only a silhouette, but the silhouette was the same. Long dress catching around perfect legs, tight and cut low against pale skin, brown hair that curled around her neck.

A moment passed. “I didn’t know what to say.”

“Do you think I did?” She stood close to him now, reaching to take his hand. He let her, his thumb tracing the line of her hand as it always did. Then their last meeting came back to him. He pulled the hand away, slower than he meant to. She let it go and waited. The only sound was the slow thump of a tail and distant crickets against the music and voices from inside.

“Pine. You know I didn’t mean to do that to you. I didn’t know it would happen.”

He didn’t want to look at her, but couldn’t look away. “I told you.” His voice was cold. “Or did you think I lied?”

“I thought...”

Silence. She turned to look back, and the light from the window hit him in the eye. Inside, the opening song from *The Nutcracker* began. He listened, then looked back at her. It was the ballet they’d gone to see the night he’d told her. “Did you tell them to play that as some sort of joke?”

She shook her head and started to sit, placed a hand on the ground, flinched at the wetness, and then sat anyway, folding graceful legs under her. He knelt and Arturo moved to lick first her face, then his. She pushed the dog away.

“I play that song at every party now.” She looked back at the house. “It reminds me you were real. I’d started to doubt it when you never answered my letters.”

He snorted.

She looked back again, then tentatively reached to touch the scar, stopping an inch from his face. “Did it hurt?”

He nodded.

“Very much?”

“More than other times.”

“You went to a surgeon again?”

“Yes.”

“He did a good job.”

“There’s still a scar.”

“I already said I’m sorry. I didn’t realize.”

“Yes. You said.”

For a moment, there was only the sound of crickets and frogs.

“Pine?”

“Yes?”

“Why didn’t you ever answer my letters?”

The chirping went on.

“What was there to say?” His voice pitched as if reading the letter he’d written so many times in his head. “My dear Imalda, you know I never lied to you. When I said you were beautiful, when I said you were the only one I ever loved, when I gave you the puppets, when I told you about me, I never lied. The only time I ever lied was when you trapped me into lying in front of your friends. I guess it was a joke to you. It wasn’t a joke to me. Signed, your...” he stopped, and his voice rose higher. “How should I sign it, Imalda? ‘With undying love’? ‘sincerely’? ‘yours truly’?”

She traced the hem of the blue dress, then the grass between them. “I meant it when I said I loved you, too. What else do you want from me?”

“I wanted you to keep it a secret when I told you. I didn’t expect you’d trap me in front of your friends.”

“Trap you? I didn’t trap you.”

“What could I say to them, then?”

“You could have told them what you told me. They wouldn’t have believed it anyway.”

“Right after you’d asked me not to embarrass you by talking about where I was from? You said that if I did, you’d know I didn’t love you. What was I supposed to do?”

She didn’t answer. Finally he continued. He had to know.

“Why’d you ask me to tell them where I was from, anyway? It wouldn’t have come up if you hadn’t brought it up.”

He could barely hear her answer. “I wanted to know.”

“You wanted to know what? How obvious it would be?”

“I wanted to know where you were really from, without all your stories.”

Somehow the answer brought only emptiness. He looked back at the house. “I didn’t see the children.”

“Children?”

“The puppets I gave you. The girl and boy. Did you throw them away?”

She shook her head, brown curls sliding across fair shoulders. “No, of course not. They were beautiful. I gave them to my niece. She loved them.”

“They aren’t dolls,” he growled.

Arturo looked up at the tone, scooting closer to lean against his knees. She reached towards him, then stopped and ran a hand over the dog’s head instead.

“But she loved them. I didn’t think you’d mind.”

“You were the one I gave them to.”

“I’ll ask for them back.”

He shook his head, reaching to scratch Arturo’s ears. “No, you gave them to her. You can’t give someone a gift and ask for it back. It’s not right.”

Arturo’s head tipped up and his hand slid to the dog’s back, touched hers. It was warm and she started to take his. He pulled back.

“Pine, are you still angry at me?”

“Not anymore.”

“Do you think I did it on purpose?”

“No. Not on purpose.”

“Do you believe me that I loved you?”

He looked towards the lake and the forest, where the frogs and crickets still sang. “I believe you.”

“But you... you can’t forgive me? There’s no chance?”

Standing to his feet, he looked down at her for a minute, saw her eyes searching his. Slowly he shook his head. “No, Imalda. I’m sorry. But no. No, I can’t.” He turned, forcing his feet to carry him away.

Shoving his hands in his pockets, he left the laughter, glad for the dark street. He ran a hand over his face, over where the scar had been. It was gone now, new skin stretched over a nose that had grown an inch longer when he lied.

Dream Creatures

by Marina Lee Sable

Marina Lee Sable's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in The Pedestal Magazine, Coyote Wild, Illumen, Book of Dark Wisdom, Lone Star Stories, Strong Verse, and Aoife's Kiss. Her poem "Crossing" received honorable mention in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror #17. She lives in New York City.

Dream Creatures

They come to you in your dreams
when the hours reverse
and you relive precious moments
before they vanish forever.

They come to you in your dreams.
silver tinkling of creatures
nibbling at memories,
savoring all you've forgotten
until you find yourself
roaming a desolate land
trying to remember what you'd lost
in the wilderness of your mind,
silver tinkling sounds diminishing
in the fading memory of a windswept moor.

Fork

by Benjamin Crowell

Benjamin Crowell's fiction has appeared in Asimov's, Strange Horizons, and Baen's Universe. This story explores alternate possibilities.

“Timelegging ain’t a nice business, but this job seemed like it was going to be all right. Well it couldn’t help being an improvement over the last one, where I’d had to tell a dope-peddler whether his customer was really a cop. (He wasn’t.)

When I stepped off the streetcar, a Santa Ana wind was blowing through the palm trees. Nice address. Automatic elevator, but a Japanese butler opened the door. I put out my cigarette, but I might as well have nursed it—the client kept me waiting. I didn’t mind, because his attitude spelled privilege and money. I mentally tacked an extra hundred onto my price.

I sat on the davenport, and didn’t drink the ice water the butler brought. It was a hot day, though, and once I was alone I took a warm sip from the flask in my pocket. The LA Times was on the coffee table, something about Mao and Truman haggling over what was left of Moscow. I wasn’t going to bite my nails until it caused me to get a greeting from my draft board back in Chicago.

I poured the ice water out into a potted ficus so I wouldn’t get so thirsty looking at it. My profession is stricter than jockeying or prize-fighting. Doing the nuclear voodoo to the water in the flask cost Franz more than we made in a month, and there’d be hell to pay if I diluted myself with the untreated stuff. I thought about another sip from the flask, but decided not to risk it. If I ended up having to excuse myself later to go to the can, I wouldn’t have any way to recover the waste except in that same flask. Anyway, you’d be surprised how little water a guy my size can get by on.

The butler took me into the study to meet the customer, a Mr. Davis. Young guy, blond, nice suit. Without rubbernecking, I managed to catch an impression of lots of carved wood, books, and leather. I added another C-note onto my bill, and wondered if he’d read the books.

“Mr. Pawliak? Rick Davis.”

“Pleased to meet you, Mr. Davis. What can I do for you?”

“This is all strictly confidential.” His eyebrows went up, even if he didn’t make it sound like a question.

“I wouldn’t last long in this business if I didn’t know how to keep quiet.”

“And the tachyon emissions?”

“Like I said, I wouldn’t last long. I ain’t on the scientific end, but the man who splits the atoms says not to worry, long as the hop is short. How much of a loop do you need, half a day?”

“Less. Four hours, or maybe six.”

“They wouldn’t get enough clicks to notice unless they had the detector sitting in my lap when I made the fork. Military snoops are watching for the flash from a Chinese spy squad looping across a week. You don’t get much heat from a short jump, one guy.”

“Two. I need to come with you. You can do that, can’t you?”

Now my eyebrows got their turn to go up. “Yeah, it works the same as it does with my clothes and my shoes. They’re close to my body, so they go with me, and snap back at the end. It’s the same way with your body—easiest if you curl up in a ball and I hug you. But are you sure it’s really necessary? There’s some risk involved. You could lose a finger or a toe.”

“It’s necessary.”

“I’ll need to know what it’s about.”

He hesitated. “Very well. You see, Mr. Pawliak, I’ve become close to two different women.” He waited for me to say something, but I kept mum and waited for him to spill it. He covered up for his nerves by pulling a chrome cigarette case out of his pocket. “Smoke?”

“Sure, thanks.” Smoking keeps my appetite down, and the little ceremony might make it easier for him to talk to me. What a cigarette leaves on my lungs isn’t enough to cause any real dilution, plus it’s mostly carbon, and Franz says what makes the chain reaction work is only the treated hydrogen—if they could make bourbon or chocolate bon-bons without any hydrogen in them, I could have all I wanted. We lit up, and I waited for him to go on.

“I’ve become close to two different women,” he said a second time. He must’ve rehearsed that line. “I care about them both, but it’s gotten to the point where I need to make a choice. I want to ask one or the other to marry me. The difficult part is that the one who would be my first choice—I’m not sure if she’d say yes. The social circle I move in is very small. If she turned me down, I’m afraid word might get back to the other one, and I think it would hurt her to know that she was my second choice.” And, I added mentally, it might hurt her so much that he’d get another “no.”

I nodded, trying to look sympathetic. Davis was a weasel, but nowhere near as bad as the dope-peddler. “So you want to make the split with me, and pop the question to the first lady. Afterward, we snap back to the time we left. If she said yes, then you go through the proposal again, knowing

she'll say yes. If she said no, you propose to the second lady instead."

"That's almost it. I actually want to make two trips, one to try proposing to Susan, and one to Vera."

I thought about it. It sounded like he wasn't even sure which girl he liked more, so he wanted to see all the cards before he decided how to play his hand. A reasonable attitude in general, even if it seemed a little lousy in this particular situation. Maybe Susan would fall at his feet, but Vera would just say, "Yeah, I guess so." Or maybe Susan would say, "Oh, yes, Rick, yes!—but Father doesn't approve, so it'll mean giving up my trust fund." Or Vera: "Why, that's just peachy, Rick, and for our honeymoon we can dip into those nine thousand shares of U.S. Steel that Auntie gave me for Christmas."

"It's still not necessary for you to make the two forks with me, Mr. Davis. It drives up the cost of the operation, and like I said, it's a little risky. I can just do the loops solo. The other you proposes, he gets the answer, tells me how it went, and then I snap back and tell the original you."

"Yes, but the other me, what happens to him then?"

"You'd have to ask Professor Einstein about that, but I don't know if even he can say for sure. Some of the scientific johnnies think universes breed like rabbits, just naturally, and forks happen all the time without us even noticing. God plays dice, you know."

"And some say that after you snap back from a fork, the alternative universe you were visiting just vanishes in a puff of smoke."

"Nobody knows." Actually that was pretty much how I had it figured myself, even if I didn't have equations to back it up. But I liked to think that the forks happened naturally, and when I did a loop, I was just hitching a ride on a universe that was going to be a dead-end anyway. "The you that ends up in the other side of the fork gets a full refund, of course."

"But if I go with you, there's only one me, and I remember the whole trip."

"Yes."

"I want to have the memory of my first, real proposal to my wife."

I thought it was a rationalization with more holes in it than a fishnet. If the "poof" theory was right, then when Davis and I snapped back, the other universe would dead-end, and the copies of his lady friends would pop like soap bubbles. Real sentimental. But I let it ride, and named a price. Davis accepted, and I got out of there with my pride almost intact. The money was good, at least, and that would make Franz and Tino happy. Franz had a daughter studying music at Stanford. I don't know if she ever found out where he got his money. Tino ran the hydroponic farm to grow my food;

he'd be sending a big chunk out of his share to his family in Oaxaca. Thinking about all that made me feel a little less like a louse.

Susan's trip came first, on a hot Wednesday afternoon. Davis hadn't told me much about her, and I didn't really need to know—I wasn't being used as a gumshoe, just as transportation. We got ready for the fork in his study. He handed me the money, a wad of twenties with a red rubber band around it. I counted it, and put it on his desk where it would stay nice and safe.

We did the fork on the floor, with me wrapped around him like the shell around an oyster, holding the lead pillbox in one hand. I opened the pillbox one-handed, and then Davis fidgeted and almost made me drop the pill. Franz had tweaked me real good that morning, so the treated hydrogen in my body was like a pistol on a hair trigger.. I felt the chain reaction starting before I'd even finished swallowing, and I only had a split second to focus on my recall symbol. (I use the traditional one, a little Hindu squiggle that means "om," but I know one legger who always visualizes a chocolate ice cream cone.)

"Let's do it," Davis said.

"It's done," I told him, and dumped him out of my lap as polite as if he was my granddad's favorite whore. "We're forked."

"The hell you say!"

Predictable. One thing I always hate about these passenger jobs is that the cargo never wants to believe that the fork has really happened. If he'd had the Rhine-Soal training, like me, he wouldn't have had any doubts, but an untrained brain can't sense a fork anymore than a dog can tap his foot to bebop.

"I'll prove it to you," I said. I'd handled this problem before. "You got a light?"

He handed me the chrome lighter that matched his cigarette case. I took the roll of bills off of his desk and lit them in his ashtray.

"Convinced now?" I asked him. "These are copies that only exist on this side, and they're not coming back with us, because they weren't in on the chain reaction. The originals are waiting for me when I get back."

That little piece of sacrilege always shuts them up. He looked around, like they always do when they finally start to believe it: nothing here was ever going to matter to our own time line, and you could do whatever the hell you wanted to anything in it. I reminded him to get the diamond ring out of his desk drawer. If he'd kept it on him during the fork, there would only have been one copy of it, and he would've had to pry it off the girl's finger if he wanted it to snap back with us. He put the ring in his jacket pocket, and that reminded him to pull out a smoke, but his fingers were shaking. I was

used to passengers getting nerves, but his seemed a little excessive. Even if he was still worried that it was all a scam, nothing all that bad would happen: he'd propose, Susan would say yes or no, and he'd live with it. I had him figured now as a guy with a low anxiety threshold.

That should have been my first hint that something about this job didn't smell so good, but I didn't actually start to wise up until we got to where we were picking up the girl. We got in his white Coupe de Ville, with me driving and him giving directions. When he told me to park, I saw that we were across the street from a place that billed itself as the Amalie Noether School for Gifted Girls. We were early. After we waited twenty minutes, the bell rang, and Susan came out and waved to Davis. She looked like eighteen years and eleven minutes. Gifted? I could see what gifts Davis was interested in. She wasn't a Ziegfield chorus girl, but what she was, in her own way, was enough to make a man sit up and beg. Red hair, braided in pigtails. Doe eyes and creamy skin and freckles. She had flesh in all the right places, and almost all of it had made up its mind to stop being baby fat. With the hair, a blue skirt, and a white blouse, she made me want to stand and pledge allegiance. Davis introduced me as his driver, and they cuddled up in the back. As we pulled out, I saw the other girls trying not to act too envious.

Well, who was I to argue? It didn't fall under the Mann Act, and the girl obviously wanted to be with him, and...and anyway, if her universe still existed tomorrow, there wouldn't be a Rick Davis in it anymore, maybe just a girl with a diamond ring from a vanished fiancée. She might be better off than the copy of her in the universe we'd be going back to. *Would* this girl, and this universe, still exist tomorrow? I dunno. Next time you see God, ask him for me.

First Davis took her shopping on Broadway. She came out of Harris and Frank's in a sleeveless green dress and matching heels that looked a lot more grown up, even if she didn't. We stopped to let her make a call from a pay phone. (His nickel. Sweet of him.) It was getting late, but it was still hot, and there wasn't a cloud above us, just the streetcar cables stretching across a blue sky.

He took her to the Avalon Hotel in Beverly Hills for dinner. I chain-smoked out in the car, and tried not to think about the hotdogs I'd seen through the window at the Kress lunch counter. They were taking a long time about it, and I started to get nervous. Obviously he didn't want me jogging his elbow while he proposed, but I needed to stay close to him, because Franz had set me up for a maximum of four hours, and if Davis wasn't there for the snap, he'd be left behind. I thought about going in and finding a table in a corner, but I hadn't brought any money with me, so what was I going to

do, order an expensive dinner and not take a bite, then skip out on the tab?

Finally he came out—alone. I'd never been so glad to see a heel like Davis, or so happy not to see a beautiful girl. I hoped his generosity extended to cab fare, or at least another nickel so she could call her mother again. Maybe Vera would turn him down too, and then I could throw myself a party to celebrate.

“All right, let's oil the wheels, Pawliak.”

For once I was glad to do what he said. I didn't need to look at my watch to know that time was running out. I could feel that giant rubber band in my gut stretching tighter and tighter, like the way it feels when the drummer in a jazz band gives that roll in the break for the first solo. When the field is that close to collapsing, I think sometimes even people who haven't had the training can feel the tingle in the air. In a pinch, if we didn't make it back to Davis's apartment in time, the two of us could huddle in the car at a stoplight, and do the snap right there. Doing it that way, we'd still end up back in his study, but I wanted to avoid it. It wouldn't matter so much that people on the sidewalk would think there was something queer going on—we'd never see them again—but doing it in a rush that way, with a nervous passenger, it would be easy to mess up and leave behind one of his arms or legs. That would hurt my professional pride, and be hard to explain to the gendarmes. He also hadn't paid for the second trip yet, and I figured if I was going to put up with a punk like Davis, I might as well make it a touchdown and not just a field goal.

We made it in time—I guess he'd picked the Avalon because it was close to his place. It was getting dark by now in his study, and we didn't bother turning on the lights. He crawled into my lap, and I felt the bulge from the little jewelry box. He might as well have thrown it away, because it wasn't going back with us. I closed my eyes and visualized my recall symbol. I felt the firecrackers pop inside my skull, but I guess all Davis noticed was that there was sunlight coming in through the window again, and the ring box wasn't pressing into his side anymore. He stood up, and then bent over to retch, but nothing came up. I'd warned him not to eat too much, because that's the usual effect when your dinner suddenly disappears out of your stomach. But I noticed something in the brighter light as he was bending over, with the lapels of his jacket hanging open. There was a scratch on his chest, and a rip in his shirt where the seam under his left arm had torn apart.

I took the money off of his desk, and he looked in the drawer and checked that the original ring was still there. “All right, Pawliak, you can go.” We walked out into the living room, and the houseboy appeared. “Morita, if Miss Steen calls this afternoon, tell her I wasn't able to keep our date. Pawl-

iak, I'll see you again at seven..”

It was starting to look like I'd got myself into an interesting situation. The torn shirt and the scratch, along with Davis's excess of nerves, painted a picture. I hailed a cab, kept it waiting while I dropped off most of the cash at home, and got back to the school again as the girls were coming out. I watched her from across the street while she waited there for him. When I saw her turn to go, I jaywalked over to her. The crossing guard gave me a dirty look. I came up alongside her.

“Miss Steen?”

“Yes?” It made me sweat, the way she looked at me with those kitten eyes.

“I'm a business associate of Rick Davis. He couldn't make it.”

“Why not?”

“Something came up. The boys have been laying bets on when you two would announce your engagement.”

She snorted adorably. “You don't really know Rick, do you?” She *was* gifted. She took a step back, and said in a louder voice, “Who sent you? Was it my parents?”

I closed the gap between us and said softly, “You could be getting in more trouble than you realize.”

Here's a tip: never make yourself disagreeable to the pupils at the Amalie Noether School for Gifted Girls, because they're smarter than you and me. Miss Susan Steen screamed like the whistle on a freight train, and I found out that the crossing guard was a retired Irish cop who felt very tender and protective toward young girls with red hair and freckles. What was I going to do, run away? Fight? I know when I'm outclassed. I acted innocent and confused, but I didn't have her doe eyes. I found myself sitting in a jail cell.

It was a pretty nice jail. They even offered me a baloney sandwich wrapped in wax paper. That mythical phone call?—at this jail, it actually existed (they probably had a Tooth Fairy on duty, too). I used it to call Franz.

They let me stew for a few hours to see if I'd admit anything. It was good that my bladder wasn't full. I hadn't had most of Davis's wad of twenties on me—or my rod, and that was especially good, because it was licensed to Joe Pawliak, but my ID said I was James Pollock. They probably had a good laugh about the water in the flask. I had a long imaginary conversation with the crossing guard, explaining to him what kind of a guy I really was, but I never quite got him to see it my way. Eventually the cops allowed as how I hadn't done anything, I could go, and I'd better not do it again.

When I got my watch back it was a quarter to seven. Bad. Davis had already set up his date with Vera, and he wasn't going to be happy if he

missed it. Not only that, but if we postponed the hop to a different day, Susan Steen might eventually get past Morita, and tell Davis about our encounter. I thought about walking away: Davis didn't have my address, or even my first name. As Franz walked out with me to his car, I was still trying to decide whether discretion was the better part. The trouble was that even if I disappeared, Davis would probably find another time legger, and if my suspicions were right, that would spell trouble for this other sister. It seemed like a good reason to keep doing the job. It seemed like there was always a good reason.

As it turned out, Franz didn't even give me the choice. I got in the driver's side of his Nash (Franz is a menace behind the wheel), and he got in the passenger's seat and spilled a bunch of hardware out of the glove compartment, right there in the parking lot behind the police station. The only legal items in the pile were my little twenty-two and his circular slide rule. I have to hand it to Franz, he's a cool customer. He dumped the portable detector down the front of my shirt and tossed my flask into the back seat. He pushed my shirt and jacket sleeves up, and before I could say a word he'd already found a vein, stuck the needle in, and pulled the sleeve back down. Now I didn't look too funny, just a guy in a car with a bulge in his shirt the size of a quart of milk, and a long rubber tube coming out of his sleeve with syringe at the other end. The detector's little liquid nitrogen dewar felt cool on my skin.

Franz didn't have the electronic counter with him to hook up to the detector. He just listened to the clicks coming straight out of the speaker. I don't know a stable muonic hydrogen atom from a ping pong ball, but I can tell when I'm in the presence of genius. In his own way, Franz was as much of an artist as Diz or Bird. First he laid the syringe in the ashtray in his door, and got a far-away look in his eyes as he studied the second hand on his watch and listened to the clicks, which sounded like popcorn when it's just starting to pop. Then, for comparison, he brought the syringe over to the seat between us. The popcorn started to pop faster. He never even touched the slide rule, just measured out a few cc's of the treated saline into my bloodstream, yanked out the needle, and slapped a bandage on my arm. He handed me a lead pillbox, and I was tuned up and ready to go.

I headed for Davis's place, trying to hurry without setting myself up for a traffic ticket. While we were driving, Franz gathered up his gear and stuffed it in a grocery sack, and I let him out at a stoplight. I was only a little late. Davis answered the door himself, and we did the fork in his study again. Since we were running late for his date, we took Franz's Nash, which I'd left double-parked out front. I was almost too keyed up to notice how hun-

gry I was, but my belly wanted me to know that no matter what the clock said, it thought twelve hours had passed since lunch. It made me cranky, and I let off some steam by telling Davis that if he wanted to lose a limb he could damn well do it with a pocket knife, not on the job with me—this time around I was going to keep an eye on him, and when it was time to scoot, we'd scoot.

I guess I'd been expecting another cradle robbery, so it came as a bit of a surprise when he brought her out to the car. I mean, when a guy tells you he's got a date with a frail named Vera, who thinks of Vera Williams? She looked a little older than I remembered her from the movies, but that made sense. Thinking back, the last picture I'd seen her in had been *Satan Met a Lady*, and I remembered the date, because it was the day after we whipped the Japs at Pearl Harbor, the same day we all found out about time loops.

He told her I was his bodyguard. We went to the Avalon again, and to give myself an excuse to occupy the bar, I wasted some money on a plate of brook trout that I wasn't going to eat. The television had the countdown for Lindy's new rocket, but I was paying attention to Davis and Williams in the mirror behind the bar. They ordered champagne, and she started acting sloppy before she'd finished her first glass. I don't waste much skull sweat on the gossip columns, but you don't have to read Hedda Hopper religiously to know that Vera Williams isn't that much of a lightweight. He'd obviously slipped her a Mickey Finn.

It was pretty much what I'd been afraid of. Davis had a whole system worked out: drug them, rape them, and then pop back out of the fork. He was working it the same way on one woman after another. The jazz about a marriage proposal was obviously pure hokum, maybe just for my benefit, or maybe for the women's, too. I did a slow burn, thinking about the Susan Steen in the other fork. If the drug could KO Vera Williams' liver in the first round, it must have gone through Susan's like Sherman through Georgia. I didn't know whether to be sad or proud that the kid stayed with it for long enough to tear his shirt, but she must have been out cold by the time her universe fizzled. I said a prayer for her over the trout, but that message probably ended up in the dead letter office.

Pretty soon they got up from their table, and Davis steered her over to the front desk and took a room as Mr. and Mrs. Williams. I helped him get her into the elevator, and the colored kid in the pillbox hat pretended not to notice anything unusual. I had it all planned out. I high-tailed it back down to the lobby, gave them two minutes, and then called up to the room.

"Who is it?"

"Davis, it's Pawliak. The lobby's full of photographers. They must've

tailed us over here. Get your trousers on, and I'll come up and help you gather up your stuff. We'll go down the back stairs."

"But—"

I hung up on him, and ran up the stairs. I knocked, and Davis opened the door a crack. Then I felt a foot planted in my backside. Like I said, I'm a little guy. I wasn't expecting it, and I don't think Davis saw it coming either. I flew through the door and brought Davis down like he was a quarterback getting sacked. The door was slamming shut again, and someone in denims and tennis shoes was jumping over us. I got off of Davis, and saw Susan Steen standing there, holding my little pearl-handled twenty-two. It flashed through my brain that we really had been tailed, after all, and that she must have watched me and Franz in the car behind the police station, and seen the gun along with the other hardware.

"So that's your racket, Rick." There were tears in her eyes, but she wasn't handling the gun like a little girl who didn't know how it worked. I had time to see that she had the safety off, and her finger inside the trigger guard.

It was a classy scene. Vera Williams was sprawled across the bed crosswise. Her feet were dangling just above the carpet, as if shew as trying to point with her toes to where her skirt was lying.

"Honey," Davis said, "calm down." He cringed against the closed door, like he was too weak to stand. "Think about what you're doing."

"It doesn't matter what I do, does it? My world is just a fork you're visiting. You son of a bitch!" The gun spoke, and Davis crumpled back down on the floor. His left temple was a bloody mess.

Vera Williams stirred. Maybe the gunshot had interrupted a good dream.

"Gonna shoot me too, baby?"

"You tried to warn me."

I had to think fast. She'd recognized the hardware in the car, and she'd stayed cooler than I probably would have about being in a fork that might fizzle. The Noether School seemed to have more in its curriculum than I'd figured, but she obviously hadn't thought it out past this point. If I visualized my recall symbol right now, I'd be out of this mess in the hotel, but it would look bad if Morita saw me spend most of the day with Davis, and then Davis disappeared. And besides, what would happen to Susan here in this universe? Maybe it didn't matter because she'd stop existing, but that was just what my own gut told me about how the rules worked. I didn't like the image of me traipsing through various universes and leaving a trail of Susans in rough spots.

I could cuddle up with the corpse, and then snap back. That would leave this Susan with nothing more to explain than a pistol in her hand, but it

would make things even hotter for me when I got back. *Gosh, officer, I don't know how Davis ended up dead today. Nobody heard a shot, right? Oh, you say he was shot with my gun?* That wouldn't wash.

But I'd underestimated Susan. Even if she hadn't planned it past this point, she turned out to be ready to think on her feet, once I explained a couple things to her in a hurry. She helped me half-drag, half-carry the body down the stairs and across the dark parking lot to Franz's Nash. We crammed Davis down into the space on the floor behind the passenger seat, and molded his hand around the gun. Then we took Olympic Boulevard to the coast and headed north, partly just for the sake of having somewhere to go, and partly to get out of town to where we could monkey around with a corpse without raising a ruckus.

It was a beautiful night. Maybe I'm callous, but for a while I forgot to worry that there was a stiff in the back, or that the girl riding with me was a murderess. In a few hours, she probably wouldn't even exist. I won't make excuses for her. She doesn't need them. She took the hand she was dealt, and she did a big favor to Vera Williams, maybe to some other dames, too—women in nearby universes, who I'll never meet. If I felt crummy, it wasn't because Davis was dead today, it was because until today I'd played a part in his little act.

We stopped at the Bar-B-Q Shack in Malibu and picked up chicken and french fries for her in a cardboard basket. I won't say it was a festive occasion, because we knew it might be Susan's last night on earth, but we talked, and she ate while I drove. She told me a few things I could say to her other self that hadn't made either fork.

We made Ventura around one in the morning, and I was starting to feel the field crackling like the air before a thunderstorm. We stopped on a beach and lifted Davis out and onto the sand. He was curled up in a ball, real tight and stiff. The crater in his head looked like the slug had exited, which was good, because otherwise the coroner would have wondered what happened to it.

I got Davis in my lap, Susan gave me a kiss on the cheek, and then I snapped back to Davis's study at 7:05 P.M., with a stiff, cold corpse that had been shot hours before.

While I was in a jail cell.

I figured the gun was in the Nash's glove compartment, and before I could put it in Davis's hand I needed to find someplace where I could fire it and recover the slug. Then I realized that the other Susan might be waiting outside, wondering which side of the fork she was on. She might have the gun already. I went to the kitchen sink to wash my hands, and started

rehearsing what I was going to say to her. The Susan who'd gone with me to Ventura had told me enough things to say so I could convince this one about what had really happened. But the more I worked over the words in my mind, the more I realized that it was turning into the same imaginary conversation I'd had with the crossing guard while I was sitting in that jail cell. I could tell her the story, and she'd believe it, but it was the story of a man who'd been doing all the wrong things with his life. I thought about Franz and Tino. I thought about Franz's daughter at Stanford, and Tino's family in Oaxaca. Then I leaned over the sink and drank as much water from the tap as my stomach could hold.

