

OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #28



Poetry by Ree Young

Stories by K.M. Lawrence
Jack Ryan

OG's Speculative Fiction

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January

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Cover Art: *Wandering Ole Willow* by Richard H. Fay

Richard Fay has been drawing for forty plus years. It wasn't until recently that he began submitting his art for publication on a regular basis. Since then his illustrations have appeared in Champagne Shivers, Dreams and Nightmares, Abandoned Towers and poetry collections such as David C. Kopaska-Merkel's Brushfires and Shelly Bryant's Under the Ash.

Publisher, Golden Acorn Press

Editor, Seth Crossman

Issue #28 January 2011

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Editor's Letter

I remember when I used to catch onto the latest electronic fads very quickly. I could pick up gadgets in the store and in half an hour be an expert with them. I would program the TV in our house and set up the VCR to record a program every week. And I remember looking down on my elders for not being able to learn these new machines very quickly. I swore I would never become like them—*old and doddery*. I swore I would know about all the new gadgets long before my children would. I would be hip and in the know.

Times do change. In my defense, one of the biggest factors is that now there are so many new gadgets to keep up with every day. Before it was a TV every year or so and a VCR and maybe even a gaming system like the Atarii. But now there are so many gadgets for so many different purposes and it seems that there are experts who make careers out of just following the trends of one and writing about it. There are blogs for cell phones and blogs for computers and blogs for cooking devices just to name a few.

And then there are the programs that run on some of these machines. I mean I self taught myself html when it was new. But now there is php and javascript and html5 and even these change daily.

I admit it. I can't keep up with half the things I wish I could. I am no longer on the cutting edge of internet know how. I am no longer an expert on cell phones and all the things they can do. I am no longer an expert on DVD players and TVs and food processers.

And one fad that I have been sorely lagging in is this area of social networking. I used to think that it was only for socializing, but now every single company worth its salt has a facebook page. And when I wrote an article about twitter two years ago, I thought it wasn't going to catch on. Boy, was I wrong. Twitter and Facebook are musts for any company that wants to be taken seriously and expand their business. In a large sense, business is rarely a local thing.

Looking forward, it is hard for me to imagine how these electronic trends and their children will diversify, but I do know they will. And I suppose if I want to keep up, I just have to hire a bunch of kids to keep me updated.

In the meantime, check out our new Facebook page and add us. We'll be having some fun contests in the coming months for those that "like" us with free print copies of our magazine and some of our books up for grabs.

–SC

Day Trippers

by K. M. Lawrence

K.M. Lawrence has been writing on and off for over a decade. An English writer currently living in Ireland, he has previously been published in Strange Horizons and in the anthology "Machine of Death." This story sends you back in time, to a past different than it is now.

AUGUST 12TH:

At nine bell I arrived to pick up her body. I sat in the waiting room at the coroner's office rubbing my eyes and trying not to hear the insistent buzzing of the overhead lights. I was the first one there, but while I waited five other people turned up and were admitted into the collection office. Professionals mostly, undertakers here to retrieve bodies for burial. But one was a woman about Clara's age whose bleary eyes spoke of a sleepless and tearful night. I wanted to catch her eye, maybe to ask her whether she was there for the same reason I was. But she was swept away into the front office by an efficient-looking young woman in a charcoal suit, and I did not see her again.

It was almost ten bell when they came for me. The coroner's assistant and a stern-looking Guardian-Constable. I knew the assistant, a friend of my wife, and he twitched his lips sympathetically as the guard stepped between us and glowered down at me.

"Mister Strannon," the assistant said—all business, I wondered if the Guardian-Constable knew that we had already met—"your wife's body is ready for collection."

"Due to the circumstances, however," the guard interrupted, "you will be required to fill in some forms. Until these forms are completed, the Office of the Guardian-Examiner will not authorise the release of Doctor Strannon's body to you or anyone else."

"I understand," I said, but I didn't. *Isn't she dead now?* I thought, depressed. What harm can she possibly do?

"Follow me," the guard said. I stood up slowly, my knees clicking.

AUGUST 9TH:

When she's away I spread out over the bed, stealing her pillows and surrounding my head with an irregular wall that I shift my head around as I doze fitfully. I toss and turn, which seems natural to me, and find it hard to believe that I normally sleep in perfect peace.

Consequently, when the phone rang at five bell I was half awake; drowsy and hot, my legs twisted into the blankets and my head covered by a pillowcase that had half escaped the pillow inside it. Even so, it took me ten rings to answer, and I could only mumble a confusing hello that the guard at the other end was unable to understand.

"Is this Mister Strannon?" he repeated.

"Yes, sorry. Who is this? Do you know what time it is?"

"This is Guardian-Constable Langur. Am I speaking to Mister Evan Joseph Strannon, husband of Doctor Alice-Clara Strannon?"

Drowsy or not, the voice of someone identifying themselves with the guards wakes you up faster than coffee. Not well, mind, but quick. I sat up, heart beating like mad, adrenaline buzzing in my head and arms.

"Yes, this is Evan Strannon. What's this about? Is Clara alright?"

Of course, I'd been previous in my question. There were formalities to go through first, I knew, and Guardian-Constable Langur knew that I knew, too. He coughed, disapproving, and did not answer my question.

"Mister Evan Strannon, could you please tell me the last time you were assigned an IVC."

Monday, I thought. What day was Monday?

"The seventh," I told him. Was that right? I listened for some confirmation from the other end, a cough, a clearing of the throat, any clue that I had got it right. But Langur was not as merciful as some of the guard, playing strictly by the book.

"Please recite your Identity Verification Code," he said without emotion.

"Five. Seven. Hotel. Nine. Two. Lima."

I could hear him typing at the other end, the heavy clack-clack of the typewriter's mechanics, then the sound of a pen scratching on card and the ruffle of paper. L? I thought to myself. Was it L, or was that last week? When I was a child I had recited my code five times each night, before I went to sleep. But these days I trusted my memory—too much, I suppose, like we all do.

"Mister Strannon, you are required to present yourself at Andrew Calahan Intercontinental Airport before eight bell. Proceed to the central registration desk at terminal two and identify yourself, you will be directed when you arrive."

“Is Clara alright?” I tried again.

“Your wife is unharmed,” he told me, and hung up.

Unharmed, I thought. Not the same thing as alright. I slid out of bed, hunted through my wardrobe for a suit. Quicker was better than slower when dealing with the guard, but presentable was much much better than sloppy, and it would only take me an hour to get to the airport if I took the premium bus rather than the slow service.

AUGUST 10TH:

INTERVIEW SESSION P1 - INITIAL ASSESSMENT

SUBJECT: Strannon, Dr. Alice-Clara (AS)

ASSESSOR: [REDACTED] (P1A)

P1A: Doctor Strannon, please sit.

AS: I've been sitting all day, I'd like to stand.

P1A: As you wish. First of all, please state your name for the recording.

AS: Doctor Alice-Clara Strannon.

P1A: Thank you. My name is [REDACTED], and it is five minutes after ten bell on April the 6th, 1986.

AS: That's not right.

P1A: Oh?

AS: It's August the 10th, 1988.

P1A: You believe that we are in the future?

AS: No, but I think you want me to believe that we might be in the past.

P1A: I have told you the date. April 6th, 1986.

AS: Fine. But it's 1988, August 10th, and for me yesterday was August 9th, and it was August 8th before that, and so on.

P1A: Irrespective of the date, yesterday you were detained at Andrew Calhahan International Airport. Do you know why that was?

AS: I could guess.

P1A: Please do.

AS: I tripped over my feet, because I have a weak ankle. I hit my head on the wall and gave myself a bit of a shock. While I was stunned, a couple of Guardian-Constables spotted me and brought me in.

P1A: Let me read the report from those Guardian-Constables. Guardian-Constable Beaufort reports that you lost your balance for no apparent reason, and upon being asked for your current IVC you were unable to provide it. You were detained immediately under suspicion that you were a displaced

person.

AS: Guardian-Constable Beaufort was mistaken on this occasion, however. Uh, let me qualify that. I understand that he may have had reasonable grounds for suspicion. I do not disagree in any way with his actions. But I simply stumbled, and I hope that this interview will establish that.

P1A: That's very good of you to say. I'm sure Guardian-Constable Beaufort will be glad to hear that you approve of his following his duty.

AS: I certainly hope so.

P1A: However, the fact remains that you saying that you were here on the 4th of April and the 5th of April is not evidence. You saying that you were detained because you stumbled is not evidence. It is your word, and therefore not necessarily reliable.

AS: It is not the 6th of April, [REDACTED]. I did not say that.

P1A: So you say.

AUGUST 12TH:

The paperwork was simple and terrible. After first reciting my IVC to the guard so that he could confirm me with central administration I was handed a document F-9. Ten pages of typewritten text which I was required to read, initialling at the bottom of each page to show that I had done so, and then an area at the bottom of the final page for my signature, the date, and the signature of an official witness.

The first page was just acronym definitions, but it quickly descended into complicated legal jargon. From the little I could understand I was signing away any legal recourse against the Guardians, although that in itself made no sense. Pages 5-7 described my obligations to report any unusual conversations that I had had with my wife prior to her arrest. The last three pages were the worst—a series of sections confirming my agreement that my wife's death was the responsibility of her later self. I signed, of course. Not signing wouldn't bring her back—indeed, it wouldn't bring her back in the most literal way.

The Guardian-Constable stood over me, frowning, and when I had finished he stapled a cover-sheet to it, on which he wrote my IVC after I'd recited it again. *Aren't IVC cards burnt when they're reassigned?* I thought. What's the point of that? He tucked the paperwork into a cardboard folder which he then sealed in a manila envelope.

“You're cleared to go, Mister Strannon.” The Guardian-Constable said.

AUGUST 9TH:

At seven bell I stepped off the bus under the huge weather awning that extended over the main entrance of the airport. It was busy, even at this hour of the morning. Harrowed travellers emerging from their long stay in the airport's dark innards into the morning light, squinting and shielding their eyes from the sun's unwelcome brightness.

I shuffled forward, my eyes adjusting to the shadows within. I must have stayed there for a little too long, because one of the guards on the door prodded me with his truncheon.

"Move along," he told me, frowning.

"Sorry, Guardian...uh, Constable." Always best to remind them that you know who they are. Most day trippers would probably be able to recognize a guardian, but they change the rank insignia at least once every two years to make it as hard as possible to guess. I could see his face relax slightly behind his glasses and he waved me on, returning his gaze to the unfortunate travellers going the other way.

There are no windows in the terminal building, and the lights are dim and hung low, perhaps ten feet off the ground on long steel wires. From ground level all you can see when you look up into the building are row upon row of thin lines stretching into the darkness, but I knew that somewhere up there were the observation gantries. Best not to look too long—I hurried forward and took my place in the long queue for the central registration desk.

There were five zigs and five zags in the line—I counted ahead of me to the first twist in the blue plastic guide ropes. Twenty people, times ten lengths: I was about two hundredth in line. There were ten places on the central desk, but of course only two open. Every few minutes they would beckon the next person forward and the whole line shuffled up. It looked hopeless.

By the time it was quarter past seven bell I could tell that there was no way I would get there by eight. I had only reached a few steps past the first zig. Above me a giant poster hung from thin steel wires that disappeared up into the gantries above.

REPORT ALL DISPLACED PERSONS, it read, in strong black letters on a red background. I have to get to her, I thought. There's not enough time. I tapped the man in front of me on his shoulders. He turned, cocking an eyebrow.

"Excuse me," I began, but I could not force myself to continue.

Please, can I skip ahead, I would have said.

He would have looked at me oddly. *Why?* He would have asked.
I need to get to the desk by eight. My wife is being held.
But we're in a queue, he'd reply. Don't you know the rules?

...and that would be that. Someone would call over one of the Guardian-Constables, and I would be escorted to one side for questioning. If I was lucky the Guardian would be satisfied with my IVC. I wasn't feeling particularly lucky that morning.

"Sorry," I said. "I thought someone over there was trying to get your attention."

AUGUST 11TH

INTERVIEW SESSION P1 - PAGE 2

P1A: You work as a professor at the Enduring University of London. Is that correct?

AS: I'm a lecturer. Our faculty doesn't have a tenured professor at the moment. There isn't the money for it.

P1A: A lecturer, then. What subject do you lecture on?

AS: Cosmology.

P1A: You are a physicist?

AS: Of sorts, yes. I have a bachelors in astronomy, but my doctoral thesis was cross-disciplinary, a review of historical theories of star formation and how they were informed by contemporary societies.

P1A: That seems a rather unlikely thing to be affected by society.

AS: Not my best work, I'll admit.

P1A: Do you know a lot about history?

AS: A lot about the history of science, yes. But I couldn't tell you who was Guardian-Primate before I was born.

P1A: But you know who was Primate at the time of your birth? Interesting.

AS: If you say so.

P1A: Do you enjoy your work, Doctor Strannon?

AS: I get to tell people what I think, and they write it down. I'm having a blast now, so I guess I must enjoy it at the university too.

P1A: Have you always been an academic?

AS: Well I was born a child, but I've been a lecturer since I completed my doctorate, yes.

P1A: Do you regret that decision?

AS: Are you asking me whether I ever wonder if I should have worked in

the private sector, or are you asking me whether I'm so disappointed with my life that I would do anything to change it?

P1A: Very interesting. What do you think I'm asking you?

AS: I think you're asking me whether I'm a day tripper.

P1A: A displaced person.

AS: Yes.

P1A: And are you?

AS: No.

P1A: Of course you aren't.

AS: You don't believe me. Or you do believe me, but you're not allowed to say that. Am I right?

P1A: If you were, Doctor Strannon, do you think I would be able to agree?

AS: You ask a lot of questions. Know what? I think you must be the day tripper. You seem to be confused about the date, and you're laying the groundwork to persuade me to leave my job. I don't think I should talk to you any more. I think it would be against the law.

AUGUST 12TH

A second door led out of the antechamber and into the controlled area of the morgue. The coroner's assistant showed me through, and pointed to a dark metal box sitting on a large steel-topped bench.

"The process doesn't leave much, I'm afraid."

"That's her?" I asked. The box was a little bigger than my fist; if I'd worn my raincoat it would have fit in my pocket. I picked it up and turned it over carefully, holding onto the lid. Close up, I could see that it was sealed shut with transparent tape. It was more like a tin of mustard powder than an urn. A sticker covered one surface:

STRANNON, A-C

11-AUG-1988

D.P.P.F. 2

I weighed it, comparing it to the last time I'd lifted her. Oh god, her damn ankle. My throat hurt, and my eyes flooded with tears—so fast, I realized that I'd never really cried before. It stung my eyes and got in my breath, the scent of salt. I couldn't see, and then someone was gripping my hand, pushing something into it. A tissue. I pushed it into my eyes, wiped hard at my face, dabbing at the smeared snot it left behind.

"Thanks," I choked, horrified at the reminder that I was not alone.

"It's ok," the coroner's assistant said. He was holding out a box, and I

took another handful of tissues. “We see a few families every week. Everyone cries.”

“Thanks,” I said again. He gave me a sympathetic smile, then reached out and tapped on the little tinful of Clara. It made a hollow noise, and I wondered if there was even anything inside.

“You’ll probably want to peel off the sticker,” he told me. “Some people find it a bit officious. It’ll come off with a bit of persistence.” He paused for a second, making a strange little moue with his mouth. “Don’t try to soak it off.”

I nodded, sniffed, and blew my nose on the handful of tissues. He reached forward and gave me a little pat on the shoulder.

“I’d better go,” I told him.

“Of course.”

“Thanks again.” I lifted a palm, and turned to go. I wanted to say more, but I didn’t know his name and I was suddenly embarrassed by that. He’d known Clara too, but my ignorance extended far enough that I was not entirely sure how they’d met. Through work, perhaps?

I paused at the door and nodded, hoping that I looked distraught enough that he wouldn’t mind that I didn’t speak. I don’t know if it fooled him, but it certainly fooled me. As I closed the door behind me I couldn’t see for the tears in my eyes.

AUGUST 9TH

Fortunately, at half past eight bells two more receptionists joined the information desk and the line sped up—although it was still not fast enough. By that time I’d done my first zag and my second zig, passing under YOUR MEMORY IS THE GREATEST WEAPON AGAINST TYRANNY and TODAY IS THE FATHER OF TOMORROW. Inside I was feeling more and more impatient, but every few minutes the man in front would turn and stare at me more or less directly. I don’t know if he was trying to be subtle, but if he was, he was really bad at it. I kept my face as relaxed as I could, trying to keep it in the neutral zone between happy and asleep.

I was fifteen minutes late when I reached the front of the queue, but the receptionist did not respond to my apologies, simply frowning at me and walking to a desk at the back of the reception area. She picked up the handset of a blue phone without a dial and tapped on the hook buttons a couple of times. After a few seconds she turned to look at me—a cool appraisal. She turned away again and began to speak, too low for me to hear. She nodded,

turned back, nodded again, and put the phone down.

“You’re late,” she told me.

“Yes, I know. I’m sorry.”

“Go to zone D and look for the blue door. A Guardian-Constable will be waiting for you.”

“Thank you,” I said, but she was already looking past me.

Zone D was about two hundred meters along the central concourse of the airport, and as I walked past the early morning commuters in their check-in lines I let myself fume so that I wouldn’t be angry when I met the Guardian. I could have come straight here in about two minutes rather than waiting in that ridiculous queue.

I couldn’t see the door, but I saw the Guardian-Constable standing in it. I walked to it and told him my name, and he waved me through without comment. His mask covered his face from the nose up, but he looked more apathetic than angry.

The room inside the door was small, perhaps ten feet by ten feet, with no other door but a large folding shutter on the far wall. It was almost featureless otherwise, the lights invisible behind a frosted ceiling and the only furniture a flat table and two metal folding chairs. The Guardian-Constable closed the door, took off his helmet and placed it on the table. He seemed unconcerned, but I knew it was best to assume that my lateness would not go unmentioned. Better to get first blood on that.

“I’m sorry I’m late.”

“It’s too early,” he said.

“Oh, I beg your pardon, Guardian-Constable. I was told to be at reception at eight bell.”

“I meant eight bell is too early for anyone,” he said wearily. He motioned me into a chair and took the other without waiting for me.

AUGUST 11TH

INTERVIEW SESSION P2 - PAGE 1

SUBJECT: Strannon, Dr. Alice-Clara (AS)

ASSESSOR: [REDACTED] (P2A)

P2A: I hope you are well rested.

AS: Who are you?

P2A: My name is [REDACTED], Doctor Strannon. We were talking before your lunch was brought in.

AS: You're not [REDACTED]. What is your name?

P2A: I assure you, that is my real name. When we first met, I introduced myself honestly. We're required to do that by law. Just as you are required to give your identity verification code.

AS: I gave you my code.

P2A: You gave us your old code, Doctor Strannon.

AS: I'm pretty sure I didn't.

P2A: Please repeat your code. [LONG PAUSE]. Doctor Strannon, your code, please.

AS: I'm thinking.

P2A: Either you know your code or you don't.

AS: I know it. But I don't know if I should tell you.

P2A: I am a chrono-psychological consultant for the Guardianship, doctor. You are obliged to repeat your most recently assigned code to me when I ask. If you do not know the regulations, that in itself is suspicious.

AS: I know that. But perhaps you want me to tell you my code because that would be evidence of me being a collaborator.

P2A: Would you rather we have evidence of collaboration or displacement?

AS: Good point. Six Two Bravo Three Three Oscar.

P2A: Very wise. Now, I believe we were discussing your job.

AS: Aren't you going to verify that?

P2A: Pardon?

AS: Aren't you going to call in and verify my IVC?

P2A: All in due time, Doctor Strannon. Your job. You were telling me whether you had any regrets.

AS: I was telling [REDACTED], but you aren't him.

P2A: If you say so. Regardless, please answer the question. Do you regret taking your lecturer's post?

AS: Sometimes. Not frequently, and not for any serious reason. Do you have any regrets, [REDACTED]?

P2A: I enjoy doing my duty, Doctor. It brings stability to society. My job, however, is to ask questions, not to answer them.

AS: On the contrary, your job is to answer the most important question, is it not? Am I a day tripper?

P2A: I will ask you again, then. Are you?

AUGUST 12TH

I must have taken the bus home from the coroner's office, although for

the life of me I could not remember any details of the journey. When I sat down at the breakfast counter and realized that I could not even recall unlocking the door I had to grip onto the table to stop shaking. What if someone had seen me? What if the Guardians had had me followed? I took the box out of my pocket and fumbled it onto the table.

STRANNON, A-C

11-AUG-1988

D.P.P.F. 2

If the Guardians had been following me, I reassured myself, I wouldn't even have made it here. They'd have picked me up and taken me to the nearest station and I would be waiting for someone to come and answer questions about me.

I stared at the box for ten minutes, my mind running madly. I had never had such an experience before, being unable to think clearly and at the same time unable to stop thinking. It hurt inside my head, like the pressure of a headache but without the physical pain. I half wanted to vomit, but I knew that since I hadn't eaten for the last two days it would be agonizing.

I got up, my legs wobbly under me, and ran the water until it came through hot, mixing it until the flow was comfortable and then holding my hands in the stream. It was grey outside, threatening rain, and I wondered if I was supposed to have put a wash on. The thought was so absurd that I barked out a laugh and then burst into tears. It was worse than at the corner's office, full-blown sobbing that was so extreme I had to move away from the window.

Sliding down into a ball in the corner of the kitchen cabinets I let the shudders go through me and took deep breaths to calm down. It wasn't like pain or anger, though—the more I tried to stop crying the more it hurt, and the worse I felt. I rolled down onto my side and let the tears fall across my face to soak the carpet tiles.

AUGUST 9TH

The Guardian-Constable did not introduce himself, leaving me wondering whether he was the one I had spoken to on the phone or someone new. He rubbed his eyes, took a miniature tape-recorder out of his pocket and set it running—then stopped it, checked the tape, started it again.

“Is Clara alright?” I asked.

“Your wife has been detained, Mister Strannon, subsequent to an incident in baggage reclaim. I'll need to ask you a few questions.”

“But she’s unhurt, right?”

“We’re attempting to establish that now.”

“I mean physically.”

“Yes, I see.” He glanced at the recorder, as if considering whether or not to answer. “She got a bump on the head, but a doctor has cleared her.”

“Thank god.”

The Guardian-Constable looked uncomfortable, but I appreciated his brief moment of empathy. I hoped that he wouldn’t get in trouble for it.

“When was the last time you saw your wife?” he asked.

“Last Thursday. Uh, the fourth.”

“Of this month?”

I nodded, and saw him glance at the recorder. “Oh, sorry. Yes, this month. Uh, but I talked to her on the phone yesterday.”

“Roughly when was this conversation?”

“Sometime after lunch. Seven bell, maybe? A bit before then.”

He asked me to repeat the conversation, which I did as best I could.

AUGUST 11TH

INTERVIEW SESSION P2 - PAGE 2

AS: No, I’m no day tripper.

P2A: And what would a displaced person say, do you think?

AS: They’d say that they weren’t a day tripper, obviously. The same thing that everyone would say. The same thing you’d say if I asked you. Are you a displaced person, [REDACTED]?

P2A: We’re not here to determine that.

AS: Then let’s talk about what we are here to determine. You want to know if I have any regrets about my job. Specifically, you want to know if I’ve done something so bad that I came back to fix it, or stop it.

P2A: Are you married?

AS: I think you know that I am. I’m wearing a ring.

P2A: To a Mister Eric Strannon.

AS: This again? I thought we’d got past games. No, my husband’s name is Evan, not Eric. And his middle name is Joseph.

P2A: When did you last speak to your husband?

AS: To Evan, you mean? Let’s see. I called him when I left the convention centre. I was considering staying an extra night at the hotel, but he persuaded me to come back. I think he misses me a bit when I travel.

P2A: You travel a lot?

AS: A lot of conventions. For some reason they're mostly in America or Russia.

P2A: I see. When exactly was this phone call?

AS: I don't know exactly. When I left the convention, which was after it ended. If they ended on time, then half past six bell. If they didn't, then I'm not sure.

P2A: Would you say you were happily married?

AS: No, I would say that I'm adequately married, with periods of happiness. What would you say?

P2A: You don't wish that you had married someone else?

AS: If I didn't want to be married to my husband there are other ways to fix that. Divorces do exist, you know.

P2A: True. And if you were displaced now, you could begin divorce proceedings against your husband in order to marry someone who wasn't available later.

AS: So what you're asking me, if I can just summarize, is not whether I have a happy marriage now, but whether I have one in the future.

P2A: Please answer my question.

AS: I'd love to, but sadly it's a bit beyond me.

P2A: Do you have romantic feelings for a person other than your husband, Doctor Strannon?

AS: No, at the moment I do not. And before you ask, the past is the past. If I knew how to go on a trip I wouldn't, and I don't think I'll change my mind about that.

P2A: Easy to say, free of the temptation.

AS: Look, [REDACTED]. I'm well aware what the official line is. The discovery point is less than ten years away, right? Ten years away, like it always is. You'll be alive then, I'd guess, and so will I. But I know enough physics to say that I'd bet heavily against time travel being invented in 1998. How about you?

P2A: Science proceeds in fits and starts, Doctor Strannon, as you know.

AS: No, [REDACTED]. What I know is that it proceeds a lot smoother than newspapers and official histories show. Stages are set, experiments are done, a swell of information gathers in the sea and the average man only sees the breaking wave.

P2A: Very poetic.

AS: Thank you. It's in one of my lectures.

P2A: You are very well informed. In your area. But you don't know much about biology or neurology, I think.

AS: Ah, you mean the same-body hypothesis.

P2A: The same-body hypothesis, yes.

AUGUST 12TH

I woke with a crick in my neck, and for a moment I could not remember where I was. It was dark, and my kitchen was at the back of the house, away from the streetlights. I pulled myself up on the counter, grabbed the little tin that contained my wife and wandered into the living room.

The room looked different, somehow, sinister as if someone had subtly rearranged the furniture while I was away. The shadows were deeper, and seemed to be thrown at unusual angles. Putting the little box on the coffee table I switched on the TV and flicked between channels, hoping for something light. It was too late in the evening, though, nothing but crime-horror dramas and economic news. I watched two minutes of a funny dialogue between Canadian high-school students before realizing that it was just a brief bit of comic relief between murders in an episode of *Chasing Erica*. I flicked through to the empty channels, letting the soft hiss of static run. The grey-blue light evened out the weird shapes that the fluorescent tube in the ceiling was making.

I hefted the box again. So insignificant, it barely felt as though I was holding anything. Clara had been light, but it had still taken some effort to lift her up. Enough effort that I'd put her down wrong the last time. She'd landed badly, twisting her ankle.

"Good lord," she'd laughed. "I'm going to buy you some weights. You need to buff up a bit." Sitting on the bed and rubbing her ankle she'd assured me it was OK.

I examined the label carefully. The bottom right corner of it had not been stuck down properly, and remembering the coroner's assistant I started to pick at it with a fingernail. The glue was strong, but the front of the label was obviously good quality paper and it peeled away cleanly. Heartened, I gripped the little tab and pulled. It rolled back, millimeter by millimeter, and then suddenly the glue gave and half of the label came off in an instant.

Looking closer, I could see that the glue was only sticking around the edges. Someone had stuck a tiny plastic pouch to the back of the label. Inside it was another plastic strip, see-through with tiny dark lines on it. I stared at it for a few seconds before realizing that it was a sliver of microfiche.

I thought for a moment about taking it to the library the next morning,

but the sliver was too small to manipulate in a reader. Clara had a bright fluorescent reading light in her study, though, perhaps that would do the trick. I retrieved it, trying not to look at the papers spread messily on her desk, then took a small bulldog clip from the kitchen junk drawer and attached it to the lamp head with some wire. The whitest walls were in the living room, so I set up the lamp and turned off the lights. Clipping the microfiche carefully into place I turned on the lamp. At first the image was blurry and unreadable, but a little fiddling with the various distances between the lamp, film, and wall eventually paid off. It was still blurry, but I could just about make out the words.

They were transcripts of an interview.

AUGUST 9TH

The questioning seemed to be endless—everything we'd done together over the last year, minute details of our current daily life, our breakfast routines. There were no clocks in the room, and the Guardian-Constable's continuous stream of inquiries made me too nervous to roll up my sleeve and look at my watch.

Eventually, though, he seemed to have come to the end of whatever invisible list he was working from, and there were pauses between questions—suggesting to me that he was making them up on the spot. He asked me if I could remember the color of the suit Clara had been wearing when she left the house on Wednesday.

“Uh, grey-blue.” I answered. The silence stretched out. “Look, can I see her?”

“She's being prepped for the TATM.”

He didn't say it straight out, but I knew that meant no. A tachyon audit scan would take most of the day, and worse than that it meant that they were very serious about the whole thing.

“Will I be able to see her afterwards?”

“Mister Strannon,” he said, leaning forwards. “You do understand that if the mapping or the interview determine that your wife is displaced, she cannot be released?”

“Yes, I know that. But she's not...”

“If we are satisfied that she is not displaced,” he said firmly, “you will see her soon enough. If you do not see her, you should think what that means and thank god.”

He stood, and showed me out. My heart sank.

AUGUST 11TH

INTERVIEW SESSION P2 - PAGE 3

AS: Do you think it's convenient that time-travel takes the form it does?

P2A: Convenient?

AS: If day-trippers are only able to travel back in time to possess their own bodies, it makes the question of proof much harder. A physical time machine that transported you bodily back in time would result in something irrefutable— two yous occupying the same time, one older than the other. If it's just my future mind in my current body, there's no way to prove it one way or the other.

P2A: Tachyon auditing tomography maps are proof.

AS: Do you believe that they work?

P2A: Yes. I don't understand the physics, but I'm told by scientists that they work.

AS: Scientists who work for the Guardianship. Incidentally, how did I do? Did I pass?

P2A: The analysis hasn't come back yet.

AS: That's because there isn't any analysis to come back. This is the analysis. It all comes down to asking me some questions to find out whether I am who I am—and you can't even ask me something only I would know, because the other person is me too.

P2A: This interview is one half of the process, in case a means of masking grey-matter tachyons is developed.

AS: You don't believe that any more than I do. If they find tachyons—or rather, if they interpret noise in the machine as tachyons—they hail it as a success for the machine. If they find nothing but you report that I'm a day tripper, then you can blame the machine's failure on my evil future technology. It's homeopathy.

P2A: That's a very bold assertion to make about scientific work you haven't read.

AS: You seem reasonably intelligent, why don't we drop all this pretence? You and I both know that you aren't going to prove that I'm a day tripper.

P2A: Another bold assertion. Why do you say that?

AS: Because there are no day trippers, and there never were.

P2A: The Guardianship caught fifteen displaced persons last year in Britain alone.

AS: No they didn't. Let's be generous and say that they executed fifteen persons suspected of displacement.

P2A: You seem to be saying that displacement is a hoax.

AS: Would you like to know what I really think?

P2A: Yes.

AS: I think perhaps once upon a time someone invented a means of time-travel. I say once upon a time, but you have to realize that I don't mean in the past. Possibly this is in the future.

P2A: So you do believe in the discovery.

AS: Theoretically. Someone used this invention to go back in time and change something. Possibly something quite trivial, but the changes rippled forward in time. Then someone else did it, then someone else. And every time that someone changed the past, society changed a little bit. Eventually someone must have made a big change—killed a dictator, stopped someone killing a dictator, invented a machine they didn't invent, became rich.

P2A: Chaos. Exactly the thing the Guardianship protects us against.

AS: That's not my point. Every time something changed, the nature of the future in which time-travel was invented also changed. Where the past was susceptible to change it was altered, where it was not, it remained the same. So the past would eventually have been solidified. You can think of it as Darwinian selection for time. Pasts that resisted time-travellers endured, and only the least detectable forms of time-travel were possible.

P2A: This all seems desirable.

AS: In your professional opinion? Of course it would, because the ultimate outcome is a society so irrationally focussed on stopping time-travel that it will allow no future in which it is invented. One that believes in time-travel, despite having made it impossible through that very belief. Us.

[KNOCKING SOUND]

P2A: Come in! Ah, thank you. Well, Doctor Strannon, despite your skepticism, the analysis of your tachyon audit has returned.

AUGUST 12TH

I reached around the lamp and clicked the switch, leaving the room in darkness and a huge grey after-image floating down my vision. I should find out the name of the coroner's assistant, I thought. He must have risked a lot to get me the microfilm. Clara had a better friend than even she knew, perhaps.

Removing the sliver from the clip, I took it to the mantle piece. Despite my feelings about such things, Clara had covered the whole surface in framed photos of both our families. In the middle was our wedding portrait.

She was smiling, and a piece of confetti was caught in the little strand of hair hanging down her temple. I turned it around, unclipped the back, and slipped the microfilm inside. Perhaps my brother or his wife would discover it some time in the future, or one of their children, or one of theirs.

The streetlights outside threw a sickly orange light into the room, and when I turned the picture back I stared at my beaming face and imagined for a moment that I was enveloped in some strange ray. If I could just hold onto the emotions of that day, I thought, perhaps I would find myself there and I could pass many happy years with Clara. Then one day in that unimaginable future I would remember to just hug her rather than lifting her up, and everything would work out.

A car went past outside, and the flash of headlights brought me back to my senses. I was still there, in our living room, and Clara was dead, and I knew she was right. There was no changing things. We'd seen to that.

Riding the Interstellar Rail

by Ree Young

Ree Young, a recently retired professor, has been a writer and artist for the past 30 years. Her work has been published in a variety of journals and magazines, including The Mother Earth News, The Texas Review, Dreams & Nightmares, and Southern Humanities Review. She has also won several awards from the North Carolina Poetry Society and has had work published in textbooks and in seven anthologies printed by Bradbury Press, Simon & Schuster, and Orchard Press, among others.

Riding the Interstellar Rail

Ghosting through the stars,
sifting within misty galaxies,
the train charts its route
from world to world and rattles
over planets where fields lie
under coverlets of emerald flowers,
shapeless trees grow and die
and fall unheard, where fragile
songs hint at things best hidden.
Another crowded station
flashes by, alien and human faces
shuttered against the eyes
of passengers who stare back
blankly at what they do not see.
Long ago, I gave my soul
to the artificial clack, phantom
wheels on nonexistent tracks.
I ride the rail, imagining memories
for those who ride with me and
those I pass, going everywhere
without end. At each teeming station,
past aqua forests and silvered ponds,
in the dust of crumbled stars, I envision
secret loves and passions, chant

jeweled harmonies of a trillion
minds, and survive in the echoes
of their unintentioned lives.

The Pirates of Panjandrum

by Jack Ryan

Jack Ryan began writing and illustrating short adventure stories in seventh grade. He taught Chemistry at El Paso Community College and Chemistry, Physics, and Physical Sciences at South Arkansas Community College until retiring in 2010. He is working on several science fiction novels: Silver Threads, The Centaurian Bud Vase, and Beyond the Windward Sea. He has won honorable mention in the Writers of the Future Contest as well as being published in places like Between the Lines and Good Reading. In this fun caper, a young woman is looking to get even.

“Sinead, I’m pregnant.”

“Sinead? Are you there?” Sheila says after the silence becomes unbearable.

“Yes, it’s really me. I’m sorry that I’ve got to call collect by vocofone, but I need help.”

“No, not exactly—I’m not married. But yes, he did leave me. In my profession they all leave me.”

Sheila Cash, wearing a skimpy black leather halter and mini skirt, her red hair tumbling over her shoulders, holds the vocofone to her ear. She stands next to the counter of the *Bordeaux Antiquities* shop waiting for the cascade of questions from her sister to at least slow down. Sheila looks at the proprietor, a silvery skink in a gray robe. Signaling the skink, she pulls the vocofone from her ear and holds up her other hand, touching her fingers to her thumb several times, indicating “Yak, yak, yak.”

The skink just looks at her and nods. *Attractive, for a human, I suppose.*

“Sinead, I don’t *know* which one it was! And yes, I know *exactly* what Father will say. And Mother too, and the rest of the family. They’ll stomp aframboise!” she says, stamping the floor with her own foot.

“Sinead, I need 30,000 SECredits. Right away.

“Sinead? *Sinead?*”

“Yes, it *is* a lot of money—yes, too much for a telabortion. It’s not for a telabortion. I’m not having one.” She turns and looks out the door, then turns back to the counter.

“I’m on Panjandrum. I just got here. I’m going to get married.

“Please, Sinead. I can’t explain right now.” She gestures with her free

hand. “Just trust me. Tell Billy that I’ll get his money back. Within the week.

“Sinead, the fones of Panjandrum are not the place to be going into details. I’ll click my *local* to you as soon as I get a room. Got to go now. Give Billy my thanks. Love you Sis!” She clicks off the fone and sets it down on the counter. She tosses her head, getting her hair out of her eyes.

“Well, will you be getting the money?” asks Pierre Bordeaux, the proprietor of the antique shop.

“Of course I will. My sister just needs to talk to her husband,” Sheila says, batting her green eyes at the three-foot silvery skink as he puts his vocofone back behind the counter.

“The 30,000 SECredits should more than cover a couple of days at a decent hotel and your plastidroid. You will hold it for me, won’t you Monsieur Bordeaux?” she asks, glancing at the featureless metallic green humanoid standing beside the proprietor.

“*Oui*, for sure. But you must remember—I make no guarantees for the operation of this device beyond what you yourself have seen it do. I comply with Stellar Economic Community Regulations, no more.” He wags his finger at her.

“Of course, though I’m sure SEC regs mean next to nothing here on Panjandrum. Well, thank you. I’ll be back first thing in the morning, I’m sure. Now I need to do some shopping for my fiancee,” Sheila says, picks up her purse, and walks back onto the street, disappearing into the crowd of afternoon pickpockets, murderers and pirates.

“Well, David, *mon ami*, I think you will soon have a new owner. It will be better than sweeping the floors here, *n’est-ce pas?*” Bordeaux says, the bright blue tip of his tail twitching with anticipation.

“*Oui, Monsieur Bordeaux*,” the android says without inflection. “You don’t really believe that she will come back, do you?”

“Why would she not return? Although dressed like *that* on Panjandrum...” He looks out the window, but Sheila is out of sight.

“If someone claiming to be your sister,” David says, motioning with the handle of his broom to the door, “but whose voice you could only hear, called you from another star system—from Panjandrum of all places—to tell you that she was pregnant, and ask for 30,000 credits, would you send it?”

“Of course not. I don’t have a sister. But I see what you mean. Shall we wait and see who is right, *mon ami?*” Bordeaux tilts his head and smiles up at David.

Somewhat less than twenty-four hours later—Panjandrum has a rotational period of about thirty-eight hours—Sheila and David stand on the

balcony of her ninth floor room in the Hotel Parisian.

Sheila steps back inside and, toying with the faux-diamond encrusted control ring on her finger, says, “Tell me, now that the purchase is final, what exactly is wrong with you?”

“Wrong?” David straightens and lifts his chin, like a Marine coming to attention. “Wrong! Nothing is ‘wrong’ with me. As far as my sensors can tell, I am fully functional,” he says, showing emotion for the first time. He steps back inside.

“That’s what Bordeaux said. So why are you in an antique shop going for ten cents on the credit if nothing’s wrong with you. Cough it up m’laddo,” she says, hands on hips.

“Bordeaux didn’t know that I was a plastidroid when he found me on Earth about five terrestrial years ago at an estate sale. I was in the form of a marble statue, listed in the catalog as ‘David, reproduction, slightly less than life size. Artist unknown.’ Fortunately Bordeaux bought the control ring too. About a year later he accidentally activated me while cleaning the ring. I’m twice as tall as he is, so maybe I intimidate him. Though I don’t think that anything does. And he certainly doesn’t need the money. So maybe it’s just that he sort of promised me that someday someone would come in and take me away. He told me that he thinks you’ve got more up your sleeve than plans to get married, that being owned by you would be more interesting than sitting around a bunch of dusty old antiques. Do you?”

Sheila ignores the question. “So you don’t know much about yourself?”

“Of course I do. Just because I was shut down doesn’t mean that my memory was swished. My first owner was a Mexican mercenary. We were all over, sometimes beyond, the SEC. He finally upgraded to a newer model, but didn’t trade me in—I knew too many valuable things, and I was very good at security, just in case. He thought that I’d look good in the garden. The ‘just in case’ never happened and, somehow, the ring and I got passed from heir to heir until the estate sale at the end of the line,” he explains without inflection.

“When did this all start? I mean—being passed heir to heir?” Sheila goes back to the balcony once more and bends to look over the railing toward the ground.

“About three hundred years ago.”

She looks back to him. “Then, when you say ‘fully functional’ you mean you’re pretty far out of date but still fall within your original design parameters?”

He turns his featureless face and leans toward Sheila. “Yes, Mademoiselle Cash. I am *fully* functional” he says in a conspiratorial whisper. If he

had eyes, they would be twinkling. “I have never worked as a ‘husband’ before, although I have had some experiences along that line.”

“Oh, a *husband* is the last thing I need in my line of work,” she says, coming back inside and walking to the door to peer through the security peep. She walks to the center of the room. “I told Sinead that I was getting married just to keep the family from going completely tharn, to make sure that she really would send me the money.”

“So you really don’t have a minnow in your tummy?”

“What? A ‘minnow?’ Oh, I see, a *minnow*. Yes, I do have ‘a minnow in my tummy.’ And I’m going to keep it there for now,” she says, tapping her stomach.

“Then what do you want of me?” he asks, bending to pick up a hair brush from the floor beside the bed and dropping it on the night table.

“Would you believe me if I said I collect antiques?”

David walks back to the balcony, turns to face Sheila, but says nothing.

“Okay, so I don’t. But sometimes antiques are better than something new. You, for instance. See this?” She pulls a reader from her purse and checks the time. “Seventeen minutes. Transform yourself into this statue of ‘Diana the Huntress’.” She shows him the picture on the screen and reads off a list of identifying marks.

“Don’t worry, you won’t stay this way for the next three hundred years!”

“But why?”

Sheila looks at the time again. “Let’s go. He might be early.”

David does as he is told. His height diminishes. His proportions and color change to those of the bronze goddess in the picture. He takes her pose. His skin ripples into the metallic garments of the statue.

“A little more green patina if you please... More... Brilliant! Just hold that pose.” She glances again at the time.

“Bidido was one of the native johns that I had on Adondus. Somehow he convinced me that I was in love with him, and that I should invest my savings, that he knew a way to double my money. Like a fool, I fell for it and, like the cliché of a story it was, he disappeared with my money. Unfortunately for him, I wasn’t just the simple working girl he thought I was and I traced him here.” She walks around the statue, examining it.

“He doesn’t spend much time here, but he owns a castle on the other side of the city. I want him to take you there. Then tonight I want you to take his Tartian Egg. I can’t describe it—I’ve never seen it. Don’t even have a picture on the reader. But it’s the size of your head and will be protected by some pretty sophisticated security measures. So don’t get caught! I’ll be waiting for you with a runabout outside the castle.” She walks to the door

again to peer out.

“Excuse me for breaking character,” David says. “But this sounds highly illegal, even if he did to you what you say. Besides, won’t he recognize you?”

“Illegal? Of course it’s ‘illegal,’ but I don’t care! I’m going to make sure that he pays, *really* pays, for what he’s done to me, and to others,” she says, jabbing a finger at the statue.

“Anyhow, I don’t see why a little illegal activity should worry you, *Señor Juan del Rio*. Yes, I know more about you than you thought. And no, he won’t recognize me. I’d gone native on Adondus, taking a drug to give me the blue skin and all. When he walks through that door all he’ll see is a scantily-clad red-headed colleen with an ancient statue from Earth. He’s going to pay a *green farthing* for it, and that’s just the beginning! That’s one reason why I need an antique plastidroid like you. When you transform into bronze or marble, your quantum dots become bronze or marble as far as any scanner can tell.”

“But when I disappear tonight he’ll realize what happened.”

“You’ve been shut down for too long Juan. Plastidroids have been outlawed by the SEC for nearly a hundred years! He’s probably never even heard of a plastidroid.

“That’s him, ringing the chime. Be Diana!” she says as she approaches the door, then peeks around the edge before removing the chain lock.

“Won’t you come in please, Monsieur Bidido?” Sheila says to the short Adondi sporting a black patch over his right eye. Apart from his light blue skin and wavy gray-green hair and moustache, he looks almost like a human. A human who can afford a gray pin-stripe hand-tailored suit. Two other burly Adondi, well dressed but not in such expensive suits, follow him into the apartment.

“I understand that you have a friend of mine with you. Diana, I believe?” Bidido says, coming to the point of his visit.

“Yes, but please believe that I didn’t know she was stolen when I purchased the statue. In fact, it was just by chance that I ran across the article in *Antique Universe* describing the theft.” Sheila holds her hands together and hunches her shoulders in obeisance.

Bidido stands to one side of the statue while one of the other Adondi circles it with a hand scanner. The second, large for an Adondi, moves around the room, looking into the bathroom and closet, at the ceiling tiles, and out onto the balcony.

“Well, Minarus?” Bidido says.

Minarus frowns and shakes his head. “It has the proper marks, but too

much corrosion. It's a fake."

"Well, Mademoiselle Cash, I'm sure that you did not know." He turns to leave. "I am sorry that you've come all this way for nothing."

"Monsieur Bidido, wait," Sheila says. "She must be genuine. You see, she was on Alpha Thentis 2, decorating a serena bean plantation house owned by a retired Panjandrumian smuggler. I don't collect statues, but I recognized that this was from Earth. I'm just sorry that I didn't find the statue sooner if the climate there damaged it. But I can find a buyer for it if you don't want it."

"Alpha Thentis 2?" Bidido hesitates.

"Very warm and wet in the tropics, where the beans are grown. I was forced down there once. Not a nice place," says the second Adondi as he comes back in from the balcony.

"Yes. Thank you Zentaxus. So you are saying that it was not a proper place to leave a bronze statue." He looks back at Minarus, who hesitates, then nods his tentative approval.

"You did speak of a handsome reward?" Sheila asks, smiles at Minarus and Zentaxus, and bows toward Bidido.

He doesn't even try to hide his leer. "Yes indeed. I feel generous today. Not only does it seem that I have my Huntress back, but by tomorrow morning I will have taken possession of a second Tartian Egg!"

"How exciting! I've never seen a Tartian Egg," Sheila says, clapping her hands.

"Then you must stay the night at Caryton Gray," Bidido says, motioning toward the door.

"Oh, I'm sorry but I can't. I'm expecting a call from my sister and brother-in-law this afternoon, and I've got to be at the spaceport early tomorrow morning. So, please, just leave the reward and I'll take you up on your offer the next time I'm in Panjandrum."

"No, no, no, my dear. I won't hear of it. What kind of gratitude would I be showing if I left such an attractive young lady to the mercy of the pirates of Panjandrum?" He steps up to her and clasps her hands in his. "Besides, with such people walking the streets, you don't think that I would be carrying 175,000 SECredits, do you? No, I insist. You must come to Caryton Gray. I'll see that you get to the spaceport in time for your flight.

"Minarus, stay with the lady. See that her calls are forwarded to the castle and take care of her luggage. Zentaxus, bring the statue," Bidido says, going to the door.

Zentaxus picks up the statue, salutes Sheila, and walks out the open door, holding the statue under one arm.

“But...” Sheila begins to protest.

Bidido just smiles. He and Zentaxus walk to the teleportal to the ground floor. Outside the hotel, Bidido opens the door to his electric blue sportster. “Put the statue into the back seat. And stay with it to make sure that we don’t lose it in this terrible traffic. I’ll drive.”

As the sportster floats out over the green bricks of Main Street, Bidido says, “What did you think of our Mademoiselle Cash, Zentaxus?”

“Very classy lady, for an Earthling. Though I find it hard to believe that she would come to Panjandrum alone.”

“She must have a male companion keeping an eye on things. I *am* known to be just a bit of a lady’s man. So they thought that I would be more accommodating if an attractive female returned the statue. Did you notice how she leaned forward, exposing herself to me?”

“And the candy on that ring she was wearing!”

“It’ll be interesting to see where that ‘call’ she’s expecting comes from once that I’ve separated her from her companion.”

“I found no signs of a companion in her room. It’s good that Minarus will be there to keep an eye on her.”

At Caryton Gray the sportster floats across the moat and the Centaurian steel portcullis slams down behind them. “Zentaxus, take Diana to the Game Room where she belongs. I want to check on Mademoiselle Cash’s flight out tomorrow morning. And Zentaxus, put some real security on that thing this time. I don’t want it to walk away again!”

“Yes, Sir,” Zentaxus replies, salutes, and strides off with the statue tucked under his arm.

In the Game Room Juan recognizes a few fellow statues of mythic hunters from several other worlds, but most of the other occupants are creatures, large and small, secured with tractor beams to keep them from moving around—wild game from other worlds.

Zentaxus sets ‘Diana’ onto an empty pedestal. “Home again, little lady,” he says, patting her ample breasts and then walks away to a control panel on the wall. “An infrared holo-alarm should let us know if someone tries to haul you off again.”

Don’t bet your hacienda on it, amigo, Juan thinks. I’ll just tune my IRtransparency to 100 percent. Your absurd holo-alarm will think the pedestal is me. As long as I’m careful when I get down, no one will be the wiser. But what about the Senorita and this plan of hers?

A little before dinner time, servants come in to feed and clean up after the animals. Then Juan hears voices.

“They are not antiques, of course, but I think these creatures will be of

interest to someone who travels as much as yourself,” Bidido says to Sheila.

“Yes, fascinating.” She stops and looks at the statue of Diana. “I wouldn’t want any of these beasts coming to look for me tonight.” Bidido is behind her, and cannot see her wink. But Juan sees and understands.

“Have no fear, your sleep will be undisturbed. As you said, you need to be on your way early in the morning. Oh, speaking of your flight. I checked after I got home—I couldn’t find a booking for you.”

Sheila clears her throat. She looks at the floor, then toward the statue. “No, you wouldn’t. I’m not taking a commercial flight.” She runs her fingers through her red hair. “I met this fellow, you see, who, uh... Well, he said that he’s got this small freighter and he’d have room for me if... if I wasn’t in too much of a hurry to get home. Do you understand?”

Bidido smiles a conspiratorial smile. “Yes, I understand. In the morning you can tell Robinson which hangar to take you to and he’ll get you to your ship on time. Oh, speaking of Robinson... Yes, Robinson, you’re looking for us?”

“Yes, Sir. A call for Mademoiselle Cash. From Sol 3, I believe.” Blue-skinned, but dressed in a black suit, Robinson looks the part of the perfect valet.

“Brilliant! It’s the call from my sister on Earth. Perhaps I can come back here, later?” Another wink to the statue.

“Thank you, Robinson. Take Mademoiselle Cash to her room so she can talk with her family in private.”

Juan waits on the pedestal as evening comes and night falls. He occupies himself creating crossword puzzles in his head.

Long after midnight, with his audio receptors turned to full gain, he hears Bidido and Zentaxus walk down the hall outside the Game Room.

“Are you sure that it was wise to give her the reward?” Zentaxus asks. “What if her partner teleports her out of here?”

“The call *was* from Earth and Security found no code in the conversation. Perhaps she is just what she says she is. Though I have this feeling about her. Like *deja vu*. In any case, don’t worry—House Security has a lock on her. Also, I think I know a pirate captain who might be only too happy to take her off our hands. Let’s go, Zentaxus, I want to be there when my Egg comes in!”

After Bidido and Zentaxus have gone, Juan, realizing that something is happening, gets impatient. *Hurry up, Senorita. I’m beginning to understand what you’re trying to pull off. I hope that this ‘friend’ of yours has room for us both. Where are you, anyhow?*

“Juan? Are you still there?” comes Sheila’s voice in the dark.

“Yes. Do you think that I could leave without you?”

“Let’s go. Bidido is on his way to the spaceport. We’ve got to get that Egg and meet him there. And please, transform yourself into Juan del Rio. I don’t want those cutthroats on the streets to see me with a half-naked Amazon.”

“Diana was *not* an Amazon. She was...”

“Get down off of there and put these clothes on. I don’t want to be seen with a naked man either.”

“I can simulate male garb, just as I did Diana’s,” Juan says as he comes down from the pedestal.

“I know, I know. But I want you dressed in these.” She holds up bag from a DuBois Clothing store.

“*Bueno*. Did he show you where the egg is?” Juan asks, getting down from the pedestal, transforming, and dressing. “These are the clothes you wanted to buy for your ‘fiance’ yesterday, no?”

He has long, curly, gray hair, dark skin, a handlebar moustache, and intense dark eyes. Sheila looks at him, raises her eyebrows and smiles, then says, “No and yes. He didn’t show me the Egg, he wants to show me both at the same time. But I know where it is by where he didn’t take me. It’s not far.”

Moments later they stand before the Tartian Egg, an exquisitely carved diamond within an exquisitely carved diamond within another and another and another... Each decorated with gold, silver, platinum, sapphires, emeralds, rubies...

“Brutal!” Sheila says. “Can you deactivate the security?”

Juan walks around the Egg, sniffing the air. “Technology can change but basic security procedures don’t. Yes, I think I can take care of this. Piece of cake, *Senorita*.”

Juan works at the control panel on the wall. “*Ay, chihuahua!* No, it’s all right. Just burned myself creating a short circuit. The Egg is yours. Let’s get out of here. Caryton Gray Security is on our side now.”

“Eh?” She looks puzzled. “How’s that again?”

“I just talked to the House Computer. He’s an old friend, of sorts. Owes me a favor in fact. Also, he has no allegiance or love for your friend Bidido.”

They hurry down the hall, through a teleportal to the ground floor, and stop in the courtyard. The portcullis is down. Guards are stationed on the towers at each side.

“Can you hot wire a sportster? Bidido was going to take an armored van with some of his security people,” Sheila says.

“I’m 300 years out of date when it comes to transports. But I can try.”

“Forget it. I’ll do it. Remember Robinson? Be Robinson.”

Sheila starts Bidido’s sportster and they drift toward the portcullis. “Hello there,” ‘Robinson’ calls to the guards. “Monsieur Bidido wants Mademoiselle Cash to come to the spaceport to be with him when the Tartian Egg is delivered. Open for us, please.”

The guard salutes and the portcullis edges up out of the way. Sheila edges the sportster onto the street, then heads for the spaceport. “Like you said, piece of cake! Transform yourself back to Juan.”

“Show a bit more caution as you drive, Senorita Cash. They have a saying here in Panjandrum— ‘The whores know the way to Caryton Gray’— and this sportster is one well known way. We don’t want to appear to be joy riding or we’re apt to end up with quite an entourage.”

“Thanks, Juan. And call me ‘Sheila.’ We might just end up working together for a while. Might as well be friends.”

“*Si, verdad.*” Juan smiles, pleased with himself. He looks like the cat that ate the canary.

After a few minutes of driving, Sheila pulls up to the curb. They get out, look around for others out at this hour, and walk down the street to the row of hangars. Sheila says, “Here we are. Bidido is expecting an arrival at Hangar 7. This is 11. Here’s what I want you to do...”

Juan bends to listen, then picks up the box with the Tartian Egg and strolls away, in the wrong direction.

“Juan! What are you doing?” Sheila calls out, running after him.

“Keep out of sight! Slight change in plans. Trust me. Bidido and his crew will be coming by in just a few minutes,” Juan calls back and keeps moving.

When he gets to Hanger 14, Juan stops, glances toward the roof, then goes inside. “I need to get a message to some friends at Hangar 7,” he says to a sleepy eyed skink behind the cargo counter. “Piece of paper, *por favor?*”

He steps behind the counter, hands the clerk, who becomes awake and attentive, a 20-credit note from the billfold that Sheila had placed in his pants, and runs the paper through the vocoprinter as he speaks into the microphone. “Got a porter?”

The skink blinks and points to the door where Juan has just come in. Juan walks over to the porter, gives him instructions, and hands him a twenty and the message. Then he sits down with the box containing the Tartian Egg and waits several minutes. He looks at the clock. “*Gracias a Dios que hoy es Viernes.*” he says, gets up, and walks back out to the far side of the street.

Moments later the porter returns, darting head-down ahead of Bidido and a half dozen brawny Adondi. The armored van drifts down the street behind them.

“Senor Bidido,” Juan calls. “I believe that you have something for me.”

The six Adondi take up positions—three in front, between Bidido and Juan, and three behind. They advance toward Juan.

“I believe that it is you who have something for me. You are Monsieur del Rio?” Bidido says.

“Yes, of course. I suppose you would like to see the item which my Principal, Finder of Lost and Valuable Items, feels will be of much interest to you. Suppose we show each other what we have?”

“Certainly,” Bidido says, and smiles. As he advances with a briefcase, the Adondi ahead of him part.

Bidido places one foot up on the curb, opens the briefcase, and rests it on his knee. Juan takes the top off of the box and lifts the Tartian Egg into view. He takes little notice of the large SECredit notes in the briefcase, but Bidido is entranced at the sight of the Egg.

“And just how did you come upon this Tartian Egg, Monsieur del Rio?”

“It was not I who came upon the Egg, Senor Bidido. It was my Principal, Finder of Lost and Valuable Items, who ‘came upon’ this remarkable twin of your Tartian Egg. He believes that you, as a Collector of Lost and Valuable Items, will not be too concerned if we don’t go into the minutia of his activities. You will ‘collect’ your Tartian Egg this morning and I will ‘collect’ his money, no? Unfortunately, one very small matter remains to be resolved.” Juan places the Tartian Egg back into the boxes and replaces the cover.

“Small matter? No,” Bidido says, trying to stand a little taller. “No, I have the agreed upon amount here. What are you saying?”

“Just this morning my Principal was contacted by another Collector of Lost and Valuable Items. This Collector has tendered a bid somewhat larger than your own.”

Bidido’s face turns a dark blue. “We had an agreement!”

“Yes, we *had* an agreement. I realize that you probably have no more cash with you, and in the interest of time I am authorized to take payment in another way.”

“Another way?” Bidido steps back behind the row of Adondi.

“Yes, my Principal knows that you are the owner of a small Falcon-Class starship docked here at the spaceport. Something of an antique, I understand. He has a crew examining it as we speak. Although its value is less than the additional bid, in the interest of a timely and amicable conclusion to our transaction, he will settle for this ship.” Juan holds out a copy of a title transfer form that Sheila had given him.

Zentaxus approaches Bidido and whispers something to him.

“My friend reminds me that I *do* wish to obtain the Tartian Egg and that,

perhaps, your demand is not too far out of line,” Bidido says. “The agreed upon amount is here. You may count it if you wish. Just allow Monsieur Minarus to make a scan of the Egg, to make sure that your Principal has not been ‘cheated.’ I will sign the title transfer.”

Juan hands the Egg to Minarus, who has just come up from the van. Juan closes the briefcase. “No need for me to count it. I am sure that you are completely trustworthy, Senior.”

Minarus scans the Egg and smiles. “Authentic and a perfect match.” He hands it to Bidido, who, looking elated, signs the title transfer and passes it back, via Minarus, to Juan.

“Well, I would like to meet this ‘Principal’ of yours, to invite you both back to Caryton Gray for a little celebration. He certainly drives a hard bargain.”

“I am sorry, Senior, but we have heard that some of your guests, perhaps over indulging in your hospitality, seem to get a little carried away and are not seen again. My Principal must give his regrets.” Juan begins to back away with the briefcase.

Bidido looks around, smiles, then motions with his hand. The six Adondi pull laser pistols and begin to move toward Juan. “I insist that at least you join us,” he says and chuckles. “Hand over the briefcase and title transfer!”

As the Adondi surround him, Juan holds up his hand. “Wait, Senors, before you do something foolish. Look up, and behind you. Perhaps you will agree that we have no need for a ‘celebration.’”

The Adondi hesitate. Bidido looks back. On the gallery of the upper deck of Hangar 14 he can see a dozen or more armed pirates of various planetary races. At first glance, they do not seem to be paying much attention to the activity on the ground. Just enjoying their drinks.

“Even friends in high places can get a bit rowdy at parties, no?” Juan says. He holds his right hand up in plain sight. He extends one finger, then a second, counting.

Bidido hesitates. He begins to speak, but just at that moment they are interrupted by an insistent jangle. Juan halts his count. A moment later, Zentaxus, looking somewhat pale and shaken, hands Bidido his vocofone.

“What? Fire!” Bidido motions with his hand. “Back to Caryton Gray!” He looks back over his shoulder at Juan, then up to the gallery. “We’ll meet again.”

“Then perhaps we can have that celebration, Senior,” Juan says, and waves, still showing two fingers, to the departing van.

Bidido’s van has just rounded the corner when Sheila runs out of the shadows. She jumps up and down, dancing around Juan, almost dropping

her laser pistol. “You did it! You did it! A lot of Bidido’s prey are in for pleasant surprises!”

“Oh? How much of a ‘pleasant surprise’ is in this briefcase?” Juan asks.

“Just 200 million smackers!”

Juan snatches the pistol from her hand. “For 200 million SECredits you were going to defend me with this little crackle-fizzer?”

“I had it just in case itch came to scratch,” she says looking up into Juan’s face.

“It’d be about as useful as ears on a dandelion!” Juan says, frowning.

“It may be small, but I can take down six Adondi quicker than you can say ‘Panjandrum!’ Now tell me, what was that about a fire? And where did this small army of yours come from?” she says, waving her arm toward the gallery.

“Oh, the fire?” Juan sticks his left index finger in his mouth for a moment. “Remember when I burned my finger? I guess somehow the short must have been more serious than I imagined. It seems that Caryton Gray is ablaze.”

“You demon!” Sheila says, still dancing. “But what about *them*?” she says, pointing toward the gallery.

“My amigos up there? I haven’t the faintest idea who they are. All I know is that the upper gallery of Hangar 14 is the place where all the tourists go every Friday to watch the Twin Suns come up between the Twin Peaks of the Twin Mountains. I understand that it is a sight you should not miss.”

“You imp! Perhaps another time for the sunrise. We’ve got to get out of here before Bidido finds out what has really happened. Let me see that title transfer... Hmm... Yes, the *Marcopo*. Used to be a Taupoian freighter.” Sheila studies the title in the dim light of dawn.

“But Senorita, look how old it is.” Juan taps the paper.

“Pretty old—makes you look young—but maintenance records indicate it’s still in good shape. It’s just what we need.” She turns toward the street with the stolen sportster.

“I don’t know what you have in mind, but if the *Marcopo* is ‘just what we need,’ I think that we should rename it the *Marco Pollo*.” Juan says with a broad smile.

“Because you think we’re going exploring?”

“Not *Polo*, *Pollo*!” Juan says, and chuckles at his own cleverness. “Because this is going to be a chicken sh...”

“Juan! Watch your language!”

“...operation.”

“Oh yeah? We’ll see about that. Let’s go find your *Marco Pollo*,

pronto,”Sheila says, and giggles. She grabs his hand.

“You know, *Senorita*, a husband would come in handy for you. You know, with your family and all.”

“You did say you were fully functional didn’t you?” she asks, pulling him along toward the sportster.

“*Si, verdad*, although some functions haven’t been exercised in three hundred years.”

“Well, we’d better get them checked out!”

“*Si, andale!*” he says, hurrying to keep up with Sheila.

“Good,” Sheila says. “So you have experience as a starship pilot?”

“What? Pilot? That’s not what I thought you had in mind.”

She giggles. “It’s not, but it would be nice to know if I’m going to have to fly this thing myself.”

Juan gives her a sideways glance, then smiles again, as they hurry on. “Well, yes, I can fly this little starship of ours. I’ll fly it through the eye of a needle if you ask me. Unless you can find someone who’s been flying since he was a child, you won’t find a better starship pilot. And where would you find such a person?”