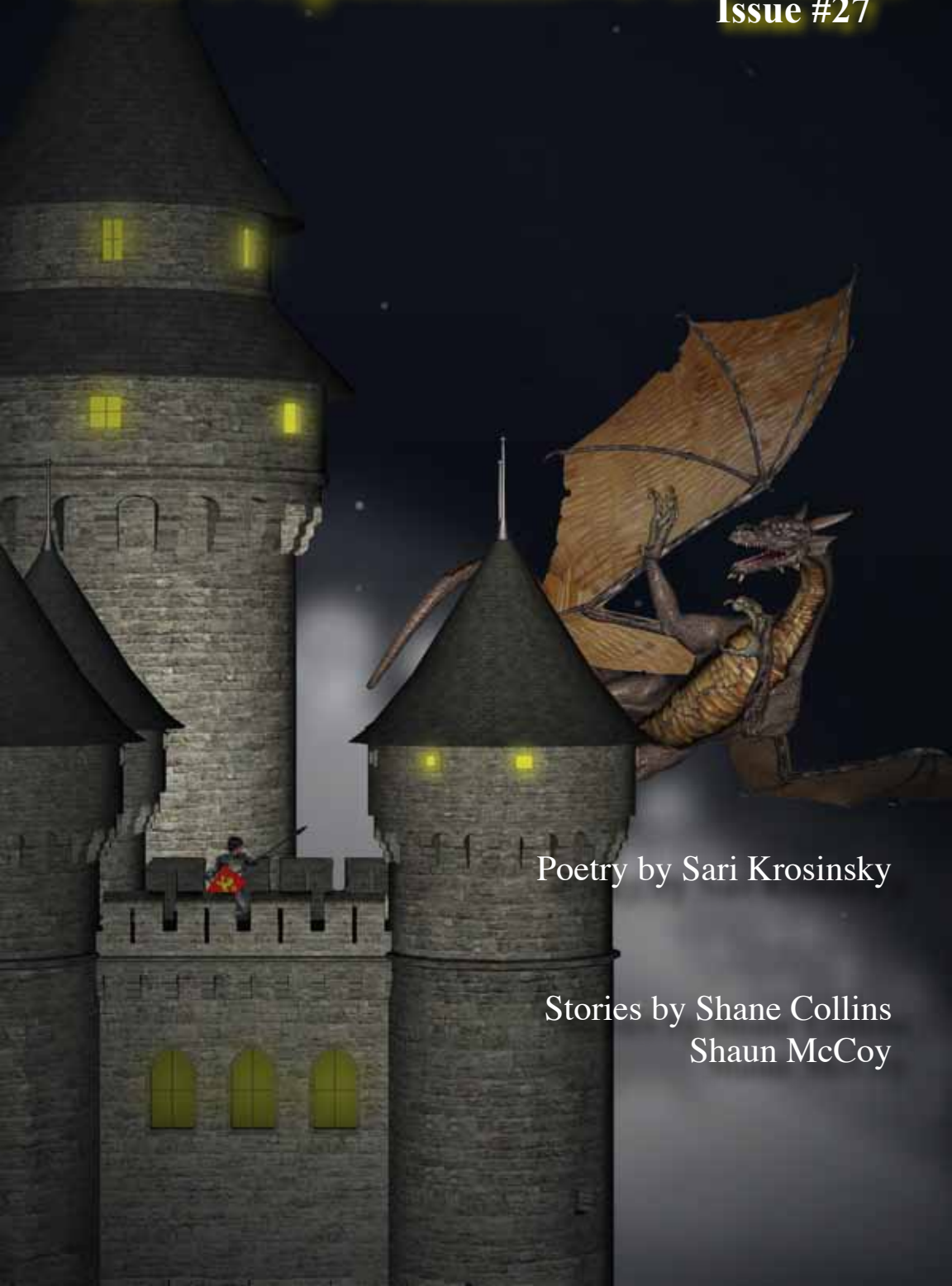


OG's Speculative Fiction

Issue #27



Poetry by Sari Krosinsky

Stories by Shane Collins
Shaun McCoy

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November

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Cover Art: *Night Attack* by Seth Crossman

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Editor's Letter

Over the years since we have started this magazine, we have had some incredible covers. Some were beautiful, some were thought provoking, some inspired us to fantasize, and a few made us wish some things were possible.

When I walk through a bookstore, I pick up books with covers that are compelling. It doesn't matter what section of the bookstore I am in. If a cover is compelling in the cooking section, I pick it up. If there is a fantastic cover in the romance section(a department I normally pass through to get to the restroom), I will often make sure no one is looking before I pick it up. I look at the cover art, then the title, then read the back. It's just the way I am. I am more likely to buy a random book I wasn't looking for if the cover makes me pick it up.

Now, men, at least, are very visual creatures. We respond to visual stimulus. That's why a TV commercial with a mouth watering steak can be enough to make us want to go to Texas Roadhouse even though it is the middle of the ball game. That is why we turn our head when a beautiful woman wearing a loose v-neck walks by.

A good visual stimulus entices us. That's why I pick up half the books I read.

Unfortunately, I most certainly do judge books by their covers. Because covers sell, whether you are talking about food, cars, people, or books.

And that is what we want in a cover: appeal. Over the past year, my job responsibilities have forced me to work quite a bit with graphics. At first, it was difficult. I had trouble meeting the demand for excellence my boss demanded. I went back to the drawing board several times on each project just to come up with something that worked for him. But hopefully, my skill has grown and you find this cover enticing. We went with a cover of mine for a variety of reasons, but mostly because we thought it suited the look we were hoping to achieve with this issue. Let us know if we succeeded. And most importantly, keep your submissions coming, especially for cover art. We want to have compelling covers that make you want to read our magazine.

As for you writers out there, take this to heart, because, good beginnings to stories work the same way as covers.

-SC

Simon's Folly

by Shaun McCoy

This is Shaun's debut story. Born in San Diego, Shaun is 2-0 in cage style mixed martial arts contests, has traveled to the far away continent of Antarctica, and has survived a coma. He currently resides in South Carolina where he enjoys writing, practicing the piano, and beating up anyone who makes fun of his Dungeons and Dragons habit. This story deals with how much a decision can weigh.

Michelle seldom traveled so deep.

Her elevator panel turned yellow as she entered the low agricultural zone. She was passing now through levels of cultured carrots and potatoes. Most crops struggled in this high gravity environment, but roots grew well here. She watched the fields pass by with professional disinterest. She had seen these levels twice before. Once when her father had been committed for psychiatric evaluation, and once again when he had died. She had kept the funeral as quiet as possible since her family hadn't wanted the embarrassment.

The elevator panel turned red as she entered the punitive and maintenance sections. Shortly thereafter a chime announced Michelle's arrival to level 77c and the elevator doors slid open. There were lower levels on the station, but they were primarily used for industrial metal work. As far as Michelle was concerned, this was rock bottom.

She felt her shoulders bending under the 1.4 standard gravities. At the comfort zone she weighed 120 lbs. Here she weighed 168. Her knees almost buckled as she took her first few steps out of the elevator. Her hair fell straighter now over her face and her bangs found their way into her eyes.

"Doctor Mansfield?"

The room seemed a little dim, and she had trouble seeing the outline of the man who had spoken to her. He appeared to be behind a desk.

Michelle nodded.

"You look a little pale, Doctor, do you need to sit down?"

She nodded again, and felt the man's hands guide her to a seat. She decided that she was not designed for heavy gravity.

* * *

“Are you feeling better, Doctor Mansfield?”

“Yes, quite, what was in that drink?”

“Just caffeine. But it should help keep the blood flowing. If you’re not used to such weight it can give you some trouble. They say that here, in the bowels of the station, you can feel the weight of men’s sins. All those people living above us, squandering their wealth on pointless luxury, lending their carelessness to the gravity beneath them.”

“That’s silly, Warden,” Michelle told him, “The weight is caused by centrifugal force. The further from the center of the station, the heavier you are.”

“Of course, of course,” the Warden laughed. “Are you sure you are in good enough shape to speak with him?”

“Yes, but they say I won’t have to be. Apparently I look similar to his ex-wife and his mother, and that’s supposed to almost ensure his cooperation. Besides, if I look physically weak he’s bound to underestimate me.”

The Warden nodded.

“It has been six hundred years since anyone has escaped from punitive care. But if anyone were to manage it, I assume it would be him. Be careful when you speak to him, he has the devil’s wit, and no morals to hold it back.”

“I’m well trained, Warden,” she reminded him. “Has he given you much trouble?”

“He’s given a few of the guards nightmares. He told me one time that it was no trouble at all to make someone go crazy. He said all you had to do was show them what the universe was really like, and they’d go mad all on their own.”

“You didn’t listen to him, did you? Being sane is the most normal thing you can do.”

The Warden laughed again.

“Alright, I’ll take you to him. If you feel tired just call me in. I’ll bring you another coffee if you need it.”

Michelle could feel pain in her right shoulder, and her fingers were tingling as if they’d fallen asleep. The extra weight, she assumed, had partially cut off the blood supply to those extremities.

She balled her hand into a fist to restore feeling in her fingers while she followed along behind the Warden. He took her to the prisoner’s hallway. Like all of the corridors this deep in the station, the lighting did not switch on until they entered through the security doors. The lighting was dim and red so as to waste as little energy as possible. The temperature control was also kept to an absolute minimum. As a result the area was warm with the

radiant heat of the industrial metal foundries which lay beneath them. Michelle could understand why someone could mistake this prison block for a place of damnation.

Her shoes felt tight, and it hurt to walk in them. She could tell that her feet were swelling. She hadn't expected to have so much trouble with the extra weight.

The Warden stopped at one of the doors.

"He has not been marked as physically violent, but I'll still advise you to let me restrain him."

"That shouldn't be necessary," Michelle said, brushing her hair out of her eyes.

She would be happy indeed to leave this place.

The Warden nodded and let her in.

* * *

The man responsible for the wanton destruction of an entire planet, an incalculable amount of property damage and the deaths of over 30 billion human beings, was kept in a sparse and claustrophobic cell. He owned a bed, a desk with two chairs, an antique computer, pens and sheaves of used notebook paper. His face was calm in the glow of the red hall light. He did not seem surprised at her presence. She knew this was an act. Prisoners of the scientific variety often pretended powers of omniscience. Arrogant and stubborn as they were, they would usually become cooperative if one only acknowledged their greatness. Michelle had seen the type before. He was no different than those scientists who broke Oppenheimer's Oath or committed some other small crime in regards to safety violations or animal testing. It was just a matter of circumstance that this one's research had resulted in the complete destruction of a planet.

The door closed behind her. The light of his cell was orange and grim, and did not cast him in such a devilish light.

"How are you today, Simon?" she asked, taking a seat in the chair across from his desk.

"Pensive."

"And why is that?" her hair found its way into her eyes again.

"My visitors seem to make me defensive. They revile me, or categorize me to make me more palatable. I do not like their characterizations. They make me feel despicable."

"That seems fair. I'll not categorize you," she brushed her hair aside.

"Good, though I don't believe you. Just try to think of me as a man, ba-

sically good in soul, who despite the greatest of intentions made a horrible, horrible, mistake.”

“I will.”

“So, are you here to rehabilitate me, or to write a news article about me? A Biography?”

“No. Nothing like that at all,” she noticed she was sweating horribly, and rubbed her palms together.

He leaned forward, like a hungry man waiting for his dinner to be served, and she looked up from her hands to meet his eyes.

“Then why are you here?” his expression was intense, but not more than would be expected for a man who spent year after year in solitary confinement.

“We’re at war. And we’re losing. The details of your research were destroyed after your trial. It was considered a power so great that no one had a right to possess it. We need to know how you built it.”

“Oh, is that all?” he leaned back into his chair, seemingly no longer interested.

“Yes.”

“I had thought that maybe this day would come,” he mused. “But I had forgotten about it through the centuries. Perhaps that is why they commuted my death sentence and granted me eternal life. The judge had said that 30 billion consecutive life sentences would be the only way I could comprehend the enormity of what I’d done, but now his motivations are finally transparent. They wanted me someplace where they could find me. Just in case.”

She shrugged noncommittally.

“I wasn’t born by the time of your trial. I cannot guess at the motivations of the judge.”

“I suppose not. It is curious, isn’t it, how danger makes us react?”

She nodded. He wasn’t hard to deal with at all. Soon he would make an over arching statement about the universe. She would pretend that what he said had given her some great epiphany, and then he would agree to cooperate. There might be a few more obstacles to be sure, but in the end the interaction should prove to be academic.

Her hair found its way back to her face, but she was too tired at the moment to brush it aside.

“Our race acts much like an individual,” he told her, “If you were ever to be put in danger... and I’m not talking about missing a pay day, or going on subsistence fare... but old danger, in the manner that beasts face danger, you would act out this scene in miniature.”

As he spoke, she struggled to keep her expression impassive. She hoped he wouldn't pick up any hint of the derision she felt towards his predictability.

"Somewhere, under that highly evolved brain of yours," he said, pointing to her head, "Lies that elder, primitive, animal brain. A representative of your cerebrum would crawl down there and beg it for advice. And somehow, some way, deep under that civilized mess, you really do know how to react. Your adrenaline would pump, your eyes would go wild, and those lessons evolution taught you so many years ago would jump right back into your mind. You'd handle the situation as if you'd lived your whole life in barbarity. Then you'd calm down. You'd get tired. And then you'd go right back on being civilized."

She nodded, her face in the act of epiphany. As if he had blown her mind. She could feel the criminal's ego swelling.

"And now that our race is in danger, it sends its representative to the not quite vestigial man. The criminal who eschews laws. You behave in a way that you never would before. And just like your lower brain would, I too will give you what you need. I'll give you that information, that knowledge too great to be held in the hands of any man. And you'll use it, too. Pretty soon you'll recover, maybe in a few generation's time, and then you'll go right back to being civilized."

Somewhere in the back of her mind, she sensed danger. Something wasn't quite right here. She searched his face for any hints.

"Of course, sometimes people who've been through trauma never recover. That's kind of your function isn't it? To help those people through their post trauma?"

"Yes," she managed to push the hair out of her eyes once more and this time the sweat made it stick.

"And I trust that a group of you will perform that same action for our beleaguered race, after it has unleashed the mother of all ills onto its enemies?"

"We shall certainly do our best," she told him.

He nodded, and handed over some papers.

"What's this?"

"I told you I thought this day might come. I was ready."

"It's all here?" she felt elated.

"Of course not, I didn't even have it all when I built the thing. I just disagreed with the scientific community at the time. They didn't believe iron could undergo fusion, and I did."

The scientific explanation didn't interest her. She had what she needed,

and she wanted out.

“But don’t worry,” he continued, “There’s enough there that you should be able to use the knowledge as a weapon in a year. Less if you work at it.”

She nodded.

“Thank you for your cooperation,” she said, standing up.

“Tell them they might as well kill me now,” he told her, and somehow, even through her agitation at the high gravity, his tone managed to pique her interest.

After all, she had expected a much harder fight than this. His willingness to concede the information would almost guarantee her a promotion.

“Sorry?” she humored him.

“Well I don’t really think that I can bring myself to be guilty anymore, now that my invention will save many more of our lives than it has cost. But you, I worry for you. After you have committed that ultimate sin, and through your own actions destroyed a planet, will you come down here for your punishment too?”

“Don’t be silly,” she chided.

“I wouldn’t dream of it. Good luck, Miss...”

“Mansfield, Doctor Mansfield.”

“Good luck, Doctor Mansfield. I’ve done my part, I’ve been the primitive brain. Make sure you do your duty and help our race recover from this trauma.”

She shook her head, her derision now unveiled from behind her professional mask.

“Don’t pretend to care. If you had cared, you wouldn’t have killed 30 billion people.”

“These are aliens you are fighting then?” he did not seem surprised by her suddenly revealed chagrin.

“No, don’t be silly.”

“Then how many people are you about to kill, Doctor?”

She didn’t answer. She moved her hand to brush away her stray lock of hair, but for once it wasn’t in her eyes.

“Morality is such a delicate thing, Doctor. Lose this war and you will be down here with me as a criminal. Win it and you will no doubt suffer no consequences for your actions at all. It will be as if you had never sinned.”

“Your tricks won’t work on me,” she told him, and again turned for the door.

“No? If I am indeed a murderer, who wishes destruction on man, you have enabled me to do it even from this damnation you’ve consigned me to.”

“Let me out,” she ordered calmly as she activated the intercom.

The door slid smoothly open although she had almost expected that it wouldn’t.

“I am Become Death,” Simon told her, “The Destroyer of Worlds.”

She shook her head at his folly and exited. The door closed behind her.

“Did you get what you needed?” the Warden asked.

“Of course,” she said, “A textbook case.”

The Warden stared at her in disbelief.

“He didn’t even rattle you?”

“Not one bit. It is only a matter of chance that he destroyed a world. He is merely a petty criminal.”

“Oh,” said the Warden.

“You must not build him up so. It is the myth of him that you build which gives him power.”

“Certainly.”

“This gravity is killing me. Would you mind escorting me straight to the lifts?”

* * *

“You’re prognosis?” Doctor Mansfield asked.

Michelle was pale and sickly. Her whole body shook and tingled from the weight. Her feet were swollen in her slippers.

“Psychosomatic,” Physician Benning told her.

“Impossible, I’m in perfect mental health.”

“Gravity does not follow you, Doctor. It doesn’t stick to you. Your body is functioning fine. You have no blood clots from Gravitational Thrombosis, nor symptoms of the Bens. Even if you had received either from the slow lift ride they would have subsided by now. The symptoms are self caused.”

“That’s crazy. I’m a psychiatrist. I’ve nothing to feel guilty about. Nothing I’ve hidden from myself. I’ve been through no trauma. These things are necessary for psychosomatic symptoms to occur. My condition is real!”

“The first step to solving the problem is admitting that you have it.”

She gave a tired groan and tossed her notebook to the side.

“Physicians!” she said, and threw her hands in the air. “You’re not a psychiatrist, ok, you’re a physician, leave the medicine of the mind to us.”

“That is my diagnosis, and it stands,” he said. “Are you sure you’ve been through no trauma? Done nothing you’ve had second thoughts about?”

“Of course not. I was just doing my job. I gave the information to the War Bureau as ordered. Why would I have anything to feel guilty about?”

He nodded.

“Look,” she said. “They won’t let me work again until you give me a proper diagnosis. Can you at least write out a script that says it’s a real disease? I’ve already been to three of you. I don’t want to have to get a fourth opinion.”

He shook his head sadly and hurried out of the room.

She sighed and wandered over to the mirror. She looked terribly thin. Her face was strained from bearing the weight of men’s sins for so long. Somewhere she would find a doctor who could help, she promised herself. One of them would finally admit that the gravity she’d felt in 77c had somehow stuck to her. Or that her veins had never recovered from the pressure. Or perhaps that clots had occurred. Or something. And they’d find a remedy. She’d take a pill and the weight would be lifted from off of her shoulders.

She wandered out of the physician’s office, her back bent under the weight of the 1.4 standard gravities she always seemed to feel these days. She stepped on the scale just to double check. Her weight was 105 lbs. She cursed. She felt like she weighed 168.

The Unreliable Narrator

by Sari Krosinsky

Sari Krosinsky's poems have recently appeared in Adobe Walls, Collective Fallout, Contemporary American Voices and The Main Street Rag. She edits Fickle Muses, an online journal of mythic poetry and fiction.

The Unreliable Narrator

Before I came to the Video King, I was alone
a long time. I drifted from city to
city, staying nowhere more than a few years.
Soon, it'll be time to leave New York.

I get jobs to fill the endless moments in the endless
universe. Sometimes, I wish myself
alone on the naked Earth
after they've destroyed it, mushroom clouds
blooming in every direction,
not even the sun for company.

I lied. I get jobs because I miss them.
People. I leave because if I don't see them die,
I can pretend they never will.

Buck's Roadhouse

by Shane Collins

Shane R. Collins graduated from the University of Massachusetts with a BA in English and a concentration in Creative Writing. His fiction has been accepted by a dozen publications including Aoife's Kiss, Residential Aliens, Golden Visions and The Copperfield Review. He will also appear in two upcoming anthologies: Caught by Darkness and 2013: The Aftermath. He was nominated to appear in the Dzanc Books' 2010 Best of the Web anthology. While in college, Shane took several writing workshops with notable authors such as John Hennessy, Alexander Chee, and Corrine Demas. He writes literary and speculative fiction, living on his boat in Mystic, Connecticut. In this futuristic roadhouse story, it's not as easy as riding off into the sunset.

I watched as the group of five people came through the Roadhouse's doors, said hello, and began looking around my wares. They looked through the racks, bins and shelves that displayed everything I had salvaged or traded for. I didn't like the looks of some of them and wondered which of the bastards was going to grab something and make a run for it. Someone always tried it. Only six months after the Blackout and everyone that came through my doors acted like they'd never seen a department store before.

Gunn was watching too and his hand twitched beside the revolver that hung at his hip. It had been months since we'd found tobacco that was any good so he put a wad of Nicorette into his mouth and spit into the spittoon on the floor. He had seen too many John Wayne movies I thought, as he tilted his black cowboy hat at one of the women as she walked by.

One of the men who was browsing put a half dozen cans of food into a shopping basket. He grabbed some salt, a rain poncho, and a compass. "Here," he said and held out his hand filled with twenty dollar bills.

I laughed. "What am I supposed to do with that, besides wipe my ass with it?" The man blushed and I pointed to the large white board on the wall behind me. "We'll accept any of those items as payment, or you can make me an offer."

The man squinted at the long list of items; gold jewelry, silver, ammunition, gasoline, liquor, batteries, tobacco, food and all the other necessities. "But I don't think I have any of those things," he said.

“Well you know what they say in Russia,” I said. “Tough shitski.” I grabbed his basket and put it behind the cash register.

The man lowered his head and left. Two others came over and asked about the day’s menu.

“Daisy,” I yelled. A few seconds went by and she poked her head out from the kitchen. “What’s for lunch, beautiful?”

“Cream of potato soup and grilled fish,” she said and winked at me. Her blond hair was in pig tails and her pink tube top didn’t leave many curves for the imagination.

The couple nodded and the man dug into a pouch and pulled out a gold wedding band. “Will this do?”

I nodded and took the ring. “Wait out on the patio,” I said. “Daisy will bring it out when it’s ready.”

As the couple walked to the picnic tables outside, another man nearly knocked the two over as he raced out the door. Gunn saw and was out the door like a dart. He didn’t even yell ‘stop’ before leveling his revolver at the man. He fired a shot and the man lurched forward and landed face down into the gravel and dirt. I ran out and checked to make sure he was dead. There weren’t too many ways to survive a half-dollar hole through the back but it pays to be sure.

I checked the man’s pockets and rolled him onto his back. There was a can of Vienna sausage in his hand and nothing in his pockets. “God damnit,” I said. “For once, why can’t someone with a backpack full of bourbon and Lucky Strikes try to rob me.”

“It’s a shit life,” Gunn muttered and kicked the dead man in the ribs.

“Grab his boots and his jacket. Maybe Daisy can sew up that hole,” I said. “And bring him around back to the fire pit before he starts to stink.”

“You got it boss.” Gunn was insane, I was sure of that. I’d never met anyone so excited to shoot another man, but at least he was polite and that was worth something. And he knew his way around an engine. Besides being a regular Sears and Roebuck, I also ran a small garage for anyone that still had a running car.

When Gunn and I were cleaning up the Roadhouse and putting away all our salvage and Daisy was roasting a chicken, there was a knock on the front door. I went to look and saw a man in a leather jacket with a half dozen attractive young women and muscular men behind him.

I opened the door and said, “Major, it’s good to see you.”

“Buck,” he said and smiled.

“You should have called ahead and I could have rolled out the red carpet,” I said. After the Blackout, the Major had captured a large food dis-

tribution center. From what I understood, his empire covered the entire coastline of North Carolina—what was left of it anyway. “Should I get the presidential suite ready?”

“I think we’ll have a few drinks first,” he said. “If you’re not already closed for the evening.”

“Major,” I said. “For you, we’re always open.”

He turned and nodded to the people behind him. The Major stood to the side as two men came in carrying gasoline. They placed four five-gallon containers on the floor and the last man brought in a solar panel on a dolly. “I hope this will be enough. You were looking for a solar panel like this last time, right?”

“Daisy,” I called. “Roast a few more chickens!”

I pulled the cover off the pool table and turned on the boombox. One of the speakers rattled but it was the only radio that hadn’t been fried by the EMP for a hundred miles. I opened a bottle of rum and poured the first round of shots as ACDC blasted from the corner. I got the Major and his entourage liquored up and Daisy came out of the kitchen carrying plates of food. One of the men gave her a low whistle and when she bent over to put the food on the table, he slapped her ass.

“How about after dinner, we go to my room and get to know each other a little better,” the man said.

“Sure thing, Darling,” she said. “But I’m not free. Go talk to big boss Buck.” Daisy smiled and winked at me.

After dinner, the man gave me a gold chain and went to one of the upstairs rooms with Daisy. They said prostitution was the oldest profession and I decided it would probably be the last one too. I sat with the Major at the bar and made sure his glass was never empty.

“You run a fine establishment here,” he said.

“I’m an entrepreneur in a brave new hell.”

He laughed and put a couple of gold rings on the bar. He went to bed and Gunn finally left for his cot in the other room. I grabbed the broom and began sweeping the floor, waiting until I was sure everyone else was asleep.

I wheeled the solar panel out back and put it into a wheelbarrow that was a makeshift trailer for a bicycle. I strapped it in securely with some bungee cords and pedaled down the road.

My hidden barn was not really hidden at all. There was a chain link fence with barbed wire around it and the barn itself was not impressive. It was dark brown and had not been painted in the last twenty years. The barn leaned to one side and the roof drooped down in the middle. From the outside, no one would think it worthwhile to explore.

I opened the lock that kept the fence closed and walked the bike over to the swinging door of the barn. Inside was my hideaway. It was not an organized hideaway, I thought as I lit a lantern and looked at the mess of wrenches, propane gas tanks, welding equipment and sheet metal that lay everywhere. In the middle was a partially assembled solar-powered buggy. It had a roll cage, a weapons rack with a shotgun and rifle, a fifty gallon drum of water complete with filtration system, and cup holders. I'd found the electric motors and first two solar panels one day when Gunn and I were scavenging in this abandoned manufacturing plant. They had been stored with some other equipment in a sealed storage closet marked 'Faraday Cage'.

The buggy also had two seats; the other one was for Daisy. She had been at the airport in Charlotte waiting for a flight back to her home in California when the EMP went off. "Better in the terminal than the airplane," she always joked. Going back home one day was all she talked about, and I was going to take her. The buggy was our exodus from this shithole. Only she didn't know it yet.

Daisy was pure, not in the physical sense—she was a prostitute after all. But she was a good woman, through and through. She was the only person I'd ever trusted and I couldn't wait to bring her to my hideaway and tell her I was going to bring her home.

I bolted the last solar panel into place and made a few final welds to the frame. I wiped the sweat off my brow and looked at the buggy with pride. Whenever someone brought in a car to be fixed, I watched as Gunn disassembled the engine or checked the breaks or changed some spark plugs. He was a magician with a tool belt and I owed most of my knowledge to him. Unfortunately, the buggy only had seating for two. I sometimes caught him looking at Daisy, but I knew she had more common sense than to go with some crazy son-of-a-bitch like him.

I blew out the lanterns, locked the gates and rode back to the Roadhouse. Gunn was standing outside, leaning against the side of the building with his arms crossed when I got back.

"Where'd you go?" he asked.

"Couldn't sleep," I said. "Went out for a little ride." I could feel Gunn's eyes on me as he chewed his gum.

The next day was much like the last except that for lunch we ate rice and beans and by noon Gunn hadn't shot anyone yet. The Major headed back after lunch. I waited with anticipation all day and closed the shop early. I laid in bed with my eyes open until midnight. Then I crept down to Daisy's room.

She was beautiful in her purple silk nightgown. I tapped her shoulder and she rolled over and looked at me sleepily. “What’s wrong Buck?”

“Come on,” I said. “I have something to show you.”

“Alright,” she said and yawned. “Where is it?”

“We’re going for a little bike ride.”

“Okay,” she said. She put on her slippers and grabbed her jacket. We walked outside and to the bicycles. She sat on the back and I pedaled down the road to my barn. Daisy was silent the whole ride and I wondered if she thought she was in a dream. I unlocked the chain link fence and swung the barn door open. Daisy gasped. “What is it?”

“It’s our ticket out of here,” I said. “Just you and me. A cross country trip back to California, just like you’ve always wanted.”

“Just the two of us?” she asked. “What about Gunn and the Roadhouse?”

“They’ll manage.”

“Oh, Buck, I don’t know.”

“But you’re always talking about going home.”

“This is my home now, with you and the Roadhouse. And Gunn.”

“Gunn?” I repeated with difficulty, as if someone had squeezed a lemon in my face mid-syllable. “Don’t tell me you like that barbarian.”

Daisy flinched at the word. “He’s a little rough around the edges,” she said. “But he’s a real man.”

I felt as if someone had hit me in the stomach with a shovel. “What the hell is this?” I turned and saw Gunn standing in the threshold of the barn. The black cowboy hat made the lanterns cast shadows over his face as he vigorously chewed his gum.

“I said, what the hell is this?” Gunn repeated. I couldn’t believe Daisy had picked Gunn. I felt betrayed. Gunn walked toward me. “You trying to take Daisy and leave me here?” I saw the look in Gunn’s eyes. It was the distant, watery look he got just before he killed someone who tried to steal from the Roadhouse. I put up my hands just as I saw the metallic flash of a knife. The stiletto caught me in the chest and seared through my flesh like icy fire. Daisy might have yelled but I couldn’t be sure. I stumbled backwards and landed on my back. I watched helplessly as Gunn took the lantern and tossed it at my solar buggy. The glass shattered and kerosene spilled across the floor.

“No one crosses Gunn,” he said. He spit a wad of minty saliva at my feet, grabbed Daisy by the arm and left the barn. I watched as all my hard work went up in flames. It figured, I thought. The first woman I had ever really trusted, who I wanted to call my own, and she stabbed me in the heart. I struggled to lift my head and saw the handle of the blade sticking out of my

chest. Well, maybe an inch to the left.