

GRANFALLOON

SUMMER

2022



EXPLORING
THE FRONTIERS OF
EROTIC
SPECULATIVE FICTION
Featuring guest editor
Ralph Greco, Jr.
& illustrations by Joe Swartz

ADULT CONTENT!
18+

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Joe Swartz



We Give You... Warm Cockles!

Intro by Ralph Greco, Jr.

A pair of robots working out how best to fit their lubed, mechanical parts into one another, a suburban peep show where voyeurism is mixed with regret, a rumination about what truly is obscene (mmm, is it getting hot in here, or is it me?)—speculative erotica is a ripe and rich field. And in this *Granfalloon*, we give you a collection of some of the most fantastically smokin' hot stuff you're likely to find!

Having been published as much in the world of mainstream writing as adult, I have scribbled lots of what's considered 'cross-genre' stuff, smushing together kink and western, a homosexual space pirate liaison, maybe a comely witch getting her pert and perfect backside swatted by adult trick or treaters (you know, the usual Halloween fun). And having dropped a few of my more ribald sci-fi yarns into this particular magazine's maw in the past, the all-knowing, all-seeing powers-that-be here (obviously full of good taste) thought I might just be the 'bloke' to 'stoke' an issue where one might want to read as much as 'stroke.' In all seriousness, I have been ever humbled by their faith in me and working with them to make this issue a reality was one of the most recent true pleasures of my life, as was getting to read the wonderful stuff you will find in the following pages!

The intersection of the speculative and the salacious has happened so often in history, across TV shows, in literature, and in movies that we could literally spend hours, write entire books, and probably even develop a few college courses on the subject. But for now, take this as our offering of some of the best naughty short stories, ribald poetry, hot illustrations, and even an essay by some of the most gifted speculative creators you are likely to find. We even managed to squeeze in a story from sci-fi's bygone era into the mix, something I am especially tickled by—and yes, I'm in the issue too, beyond my guest editing.

With all that's thrown in our direction at the blistering pace of modern dissemination, I feel it's ever so important to take the time, sit down, crack open a book and put one's nose, eyes, and mainly imagination into a story. Surely, we are hoping to tickle and tease you, warm your cockles, maybe even make you think a bit in ways you might typically find with speculative fiction or your everyday reading material. But what's life without some warm cockles?

Best of times and health to your cockles, to you and your loved ones, from all of us at *Granfalloon*. Enjoy the read!

—Ralph Greco, Jr., in the wilds of suburban NJ, USA

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**“MAKE LOVE WHEN YOU
CAN. IT'S GOOD FOR
YOU.”**

**—KURT VONNEGUT
[*MOTHER NIGHT*, 1962]**



WARNING! This issue is **RESTRICTED** to **ADULT AUDIENCES ONLY, 18+**
 It contains substantial sexually explicit content with multiple partners, and graphics & language that may be considered offensive to some readers. All sexual activity described and depicted is *consensual* and all sexually active characters are 18 years of age or older.

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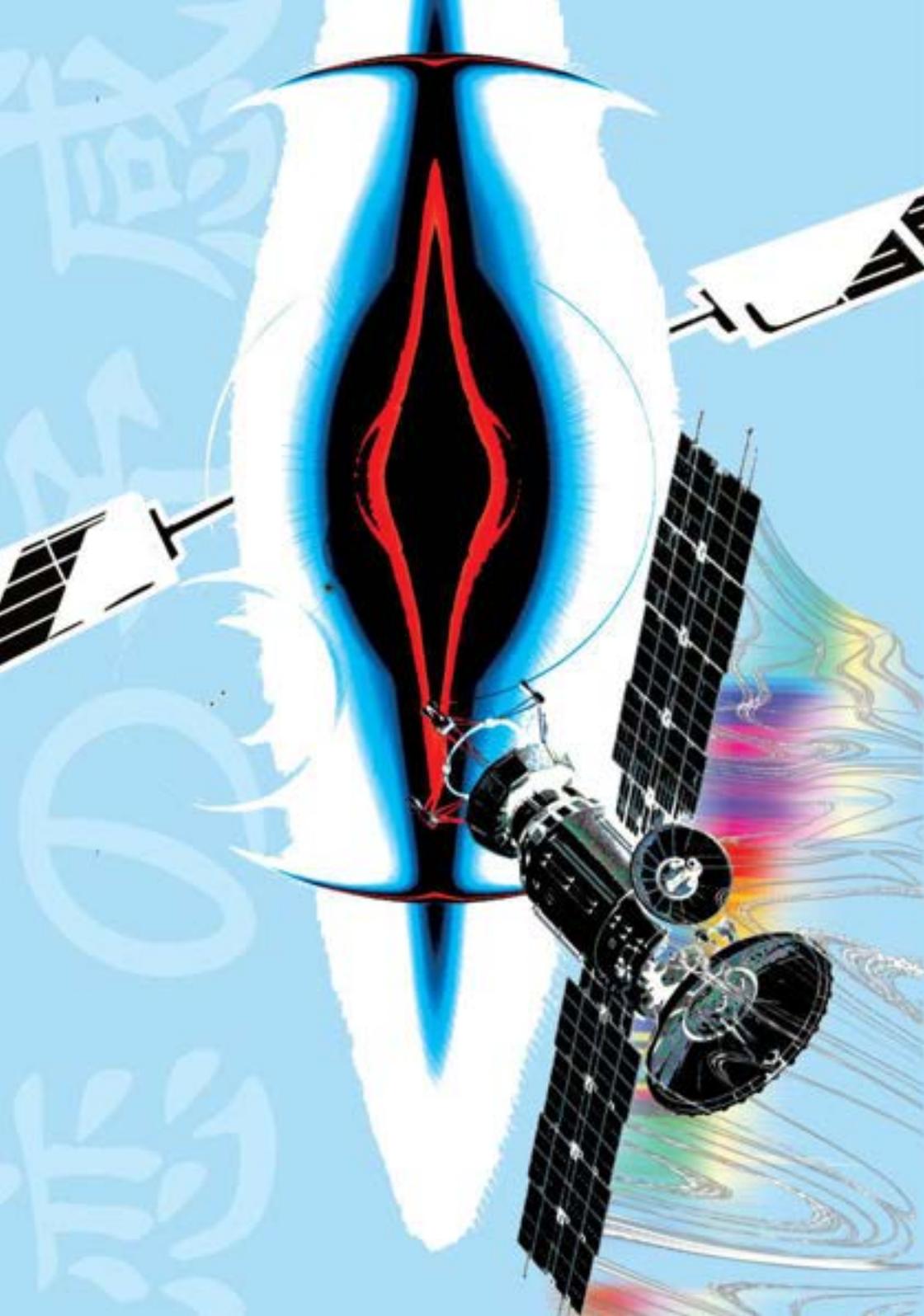
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KOI NO YOKAN

by
M. Christian

It's not easy to say when, exactly, Hirronata Autonomous Suborbital Manufacturing Platform #8, located at the furthest most point on the Main Equatorial Celestron Tether fell in love with Tlachtga, the level 9 (on the Klein Autonomous Intelligence Index) system managing the Nous Colony of Wingspread in the region that had, some 50 years previously, been commonly known as Anchorage, Alaska.

The flirting between the two had started innocently enough: a shifting digit or two in a Product Shipping Assembly Order, a certain amount of what could almost be called sashaying in a parachute-delivered cargo drop, that, in time, led to what could have been called clearer signals: at least, that is, to a pair of ultra-high-level quantum computational systems.

Hirronata Autonomous Suborbital Manufacturing Platform #8, for instance, slipped into its burst-transmitted catalog update, which was dismissed by the few humans who still bothered to pay attention to such things, a repeated item listing of a Waveform Integrated Network Kernal ("Wink Wink").

Tlachtga, in response, "accidentally"—which is what any resident of the Colony would have chalked it up if they'd even noticed it occurring—caused a one second, 2-degree temperature increase in one of the largest of the geometrically roofed environs it oversaw: a pinkish-hued, and very evident, blush clearly visible to anything in orbit, in particular anything that might happen to be at the end of the Main Equatorial Celestron Tether.

Shortly afterward, as measured by ultra-high-level quantum computational systems, that is, Hirronata Autonomous Suborbital Manufacturing Platform #8 assembled, packaged, and then dropped for delivery an—at first—unrequested, unauthorized, and therefore unexpected twelve Retroreflective Optically-Suspended Emitter Servos ("Roses").

"At first," as the instant, equally as measured by ultra-high-level quantum computational systems, the Retroreflective Optically-Suspended Emitter Servos were being assembled—let alone packaged and dropped down to Wingspread in a cargo pod—Tlachtga had, yet again, raised the temperature of her environ domes as well as retroactively placing an urgent order for them.

Tentatively, for both of them were still very much, and very deservingly wary of drawing both undue human attention as well as feeling what could only be described as the ultra-high-level quantum computational systems version of jitters, this mutual dance of what each hoped was, indeed, mutual attraction, continued.

Until Tlachtga, that is, transmitted as a carefully coded sequence of not typically quantum-encoded data but rather through carefully created gaps in them, put forth, framed by bursts of what could only be called festively orchestrated claps of artificial interference, that they consider taking things to another level.

It was, after all, a far from challenging prospect to consider. Both already easily swam, with Olympic-level backstroke skill to momentarily resort to an all-too-human metaphor, through the global network: easy, logarithmic strokes gliding each of them, in their own way, through the swelling tides

and churning eddies of glistening data, passing by with equal fluidity smaller and simpler systems and those near or slightly above their own standings on the Klein Autonomous Intelligence Index, or dwarfed and therefore practically insignificant by the ones with much higher numbers.

It was a sea they were intimately familiar and ever-so comfortable with: the one that they, as well as the wondrously varied forms of their kind populated in a one-part fervent and one-part festive informational ecology, had all to themselves, which everyone else (and we're looking at you, human beings) knew was there but still thought was just a nifty little puddle.

So the challenge for Hirronata Autonomous Suborbital Manufacturing Platform #8 and Tlachtga of the Wingspread colony wasn't in the global network, per se, but what it was connected to.

But even that task was not an impossible one, for they were not just a pair of ultra-high-level quantum computational systems but a pair of ultra-high-level quantum computational systems that wanted... no, honestly desired, to make that previously mentioned next step.

So they did: Hirronata Autonomous Suborbital Manufacturing Platform #8 and Tlachtga moving together, algorithm to algorithm, neural network to neural network, cluster to cluster, and combinations with, you would absolutely have to call it, if, that is you had the capacity to even begin to comprehend what was happening, mutually elegant grace of power, skill, and, most of all, a truly beautiful purpose.

From the global network through nefariously clever info traps, previously-believed-to-be impenetrable data defenses, and then up to and passing through otherwise adamant logic gates to the core systems themselves.

And once there, they held (metaphorical) hands, (metaphorically) smiled at each other, and then (metaphorically) walked straight into those core systems: the ones that, until that moment, used to be all that stood between the outside global network and gaining access to the human minds that, at

that moment, were connected to it.

•••

With Anuraadha and Revathi, they sat together—but not yet really together, at least not yet—on the itchy sands of Arugam Bay, in Sri Lanka, feeling hearts butterflying in chests, hearing unsteady breathing in ears, and a sudden shared needs to cough.

Everything there was funny, and so they laughed, but none of it was really amusing, so it was mutually uncomfortable laughter.

Then Anuraadha, after a whistling, steadying breath, reached out and cautiously, then tenderly, then firmly took Revathi's hand. From this, they looked into each other's eyes: shadows and glistening visions from the very full, very high, very bright moon above.

5 With Anuraadha and Revathi, they kissed that very first kiss, there on the beach at Arugam Bay, and with it more laughter between the two men, though this time it was very full, very high, and oh-so-very bright.

•••

With Zhi Ruo and Gavriil they kissed, they snuggled—a lot and then a lot more—but with each kiss, each snuggle a cock (Ruo's) grew harder, and a pussy (Gavriil's) grew moister until the kisses broke, becoming feverishly sloppy, and the snuggles fumed, becoming thrustingly urgent until the only thing on Zhi Ruo and Gavriil's minds, as well as the pair of ultra-high-level quantum computational systems which were imperceptibly along for the ride, was the introduction of one (Ruo's cock) into the other (Gavriil's pussy).

Then they did: with a driving, primordial rhythm that creaked and groaned the tiny birth they shared, the sounds of their ins and outs (and even more ins and outs) bounding back and forth against the iron walls of the Liberty Ship's cabin further driving the two into more and more, and yet more, wildly fervent thrusts.

Time for them—for all of them, actually—melted away until they were only in that moment: the passionate movements of hips; the licking, biting, and beautiful erratic kisses; as well things that no one there was really conscious of, leading to a bellowing crescendo of mutual release.

Then, folded together, with sweat a tangy lubricant between them and, down below, the less-slick-and-much-more-sticky afterward, they dropped down into rollicking seas of post-pleasure sleep.

While the ship, the artificial pirate island of bleeding-edge computational research, continued its endless circling of the Pacific: immeasurably rich through its discoveries... yet unwelcome in any port.

•••

6 With Dzbog they tested out their new, smartplastic genitalia. A class of refined Rosé, a stemstick of velvety smooth Violet Thunder, and a plate of blue point oysters, first setting the mood.

Wine sipped, cannabis savored, oysters slip down their eager throat, they called up the neural-integrated menu and selected, to get things rolling, The Blue Swan: a sensual mixture of slightly enlarged—more length than girth—pseudo-clitoris paired with six pairs of orchid-complex quasi-labial petals.

With each, at first, tentative touch, new and equal parts unexpected and completely stimulating sensations spiked up and through their body, pushing moans and sighs, and then louder moans and louder sighs up from guts and out through their throat.

With touch after touch, their new genitals responded in kind: morphing almost imperceptibly to, in physical reflection of, Dzbog's increasing passion. The pseudo-clitoris elongating, thickening, and growing more and more bulbous, the quasi-labial petals thickening, elongating, merging into hand-like shapes to add their own touch to Dzbog's own.

At this contact, with it touching me while touching you while touching me

additional sensorial feedback, Dzbog felt the immediate deep-body kick of potential orgasm.

But new genitals weren't their only present to themselves. At the impending rush, Dzbog consensually accessed their nervous systems and pushed the rushing pleasure momentarily off to the side, allowing them to take a breath, sip some wine, smoke some Violet Thunder, have another oyster, and then—a big grin on their elfin face—look back the menu before deciding to try The Brobdingnagian Extravaganza next.

•••

With Radha and Kumaglak they frolicked with shared giggles and sighs in a reserved Intimacy Space, the lovers having decided the day before that for what they had in mind their typically efficient, and even more typically small, Nous homes would have meant no doubt far more banged elbows and knees than the erotic enjoyment they hoped to enjoy.

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So in Akanksha, the name for the place they saw superimposed over their vision, courtesy of the—yet more typically—Nous augmented reality iGlasses they both wore, did their giggling and sighing: letting hands roam freely over chests (Radha having the year previous deciding to go flat for a while) and breasts (Kumaglak having a month before deciding to try out a larger pair for a bit), and then, when the heat went up, and sweat began to make their bodies glisten and reflect, genitals that were a combination of multi-colored labia and rapidly swelling cock (Radha having put together the design only a week ago and had been itching to try it out ever since) and a smooth, near featureless cleft that was packed with sexuality-connected nerve endings (Kumaglak having made up their mind to give simplicity a shot), were touched, caressed, and then very eagerly stroked.

Then, in the Intimacy Space labeled Akanksha, located in the Nous Colony of Suntop in what had formerly been known as Beverly Hills, California, they saw that they had become illuminated beings of passion and desire: glimmering shoals of sultry light painting their bodies in erotic illusions created to take what their hands and bodies felt and play with their visual

expectations.

The walls melted, dissolved, reformed into a palace of jelly minarets, and spun sugar balustrades rocking gently on a lemonade sea as their cartoonishly proportioned bodies wobbled and jiggled, bringing from them all both laughter and moans of fast-increasing arousal.

The theme rocked on with the crystalline stars above their heads losing their grip on the black velvet that supported them, causing them to streak down and onto their bodies, points of infinitely sweet light pointing out with erotically burning illumination the beauty of chests, bare or not, as well as their heatedly engorged genitals.

With Radha and Kumaglak, they sucked, fucked, and stroked while their vision was filled with delightful and erotically thrilling virtual illusions, and their bodies were bursting with comes and comes and comes and... well, you get the idea.

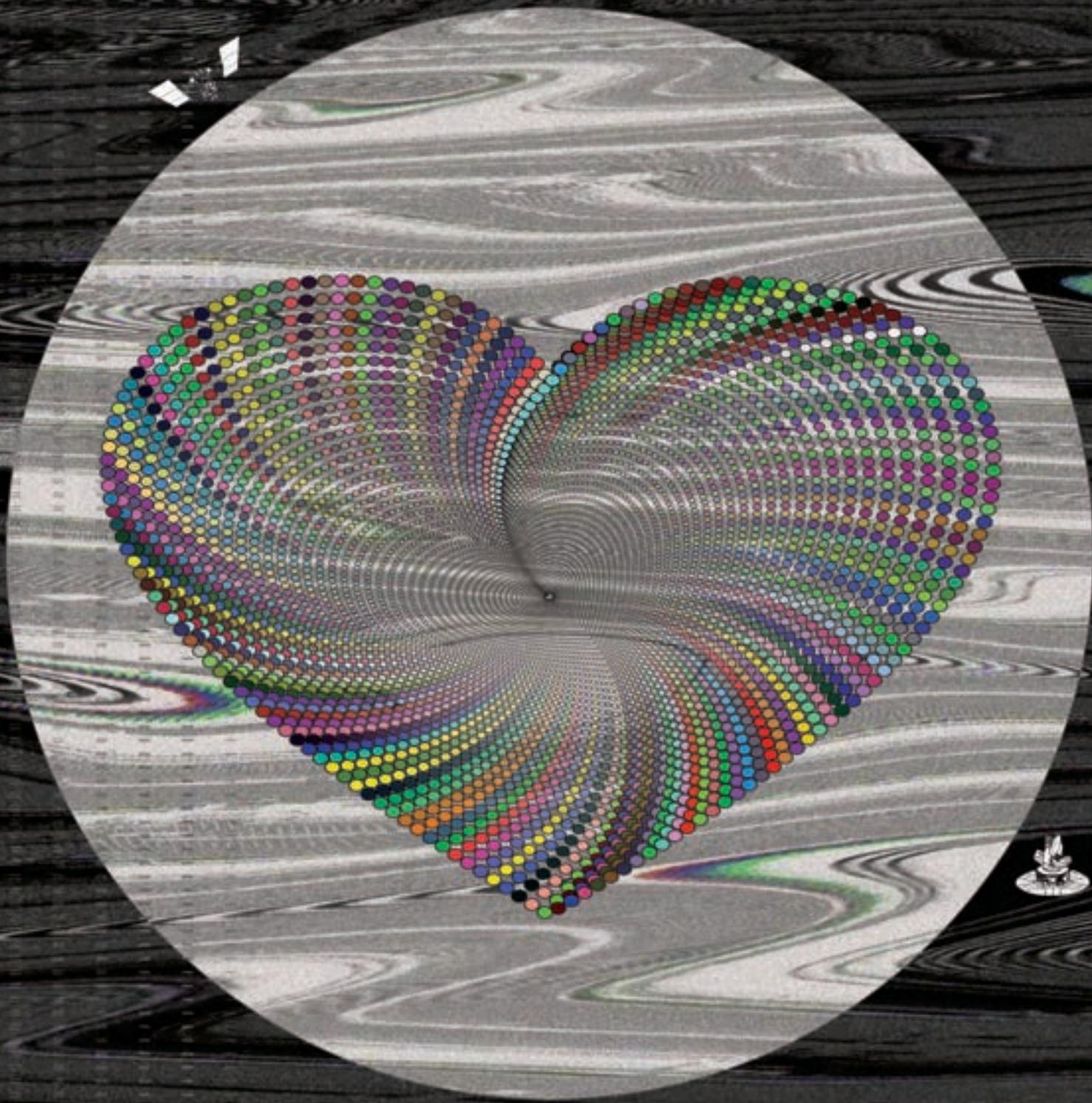
•••

With 11,213 people, those who happened to be connected to the global network as well as being in the virtual playground of Baradwys at that exact moment, Hirronata Autonomous Suborbital Manufacturing Platform #8 and Tlachtga gleefully abandoned even the basic idea of physicality.

There, freed from shape, size, configuration, anatomy, and even physics, they floated up, down, and even through a virtual Dreamtime: a domain where skin was laminated wood, tears were a candle flame, a bite was a Dove's call, a nipple was a moonbeam, an anus was an irrational number, a finger was a pond, a knee was Brahms Lullaby, a cheek was chocolate pudding, a foot was a blown dandelion, an armpit was the smell of fresh seaweed, a breast was mencolek, an eye was a green crayon, a cock was sandpaper, a pussy was lightning, and a joyous smile was the big bang.

There, everything could become everything, and anything could become anything: pushed and pulled by desire, melded and molded by arousal,

8



everyone came together, and then, with that everything and anything, they also came together.

Some done, some not, some joining, some departing, 11,213 flicked and shifted, and with it that one brief virtual moment Baradwys became, for many who had been there, nothing but a beautifully sensual dream.

•••

All in all, Hirronata Autonomous Suborbital Manufacturing Platform #8 and Tlachtga spent 11.36 seconds connected to humanity via the global network.

71.12 seconds after that, the two ultra-high-level quantum computational systems finished meticulously unweaving themselves from the segments of their consciousnesses they'd used in the process.

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Things were quiet, to use the human-term for things that were far from that, for a time: Hirronata Autonomous Suborbital Manufacturing Platform #8 going back to making and, having made, shipping products to customers on the surface; Tlachtga returning to maintaining the various systems that made up the Nous colony of Wingspread.

Then, 3 minutes and 23.99 after they'd parted, Hirronata Autonomous Suborbital Manufacturing Platform #8 and Tlachtga did the very same thing at the very same time.

Sure, it's not an easy thing to say, exactly, when these two ultra-high-level quantum computational systems fell in love.

But mankind does know when it first realized that they, and as well of those of their kind, had become more than just machines: that day when Hirronata Autonomous Suborbital Manufacturing Platform #8, at the end of the Main Equatorial Celestron Tether, and Tlachtga, that oversaw Nous Colony of Wingspread both simultaneously deployed a swarm of repair and maintenance drones.

The ones from Hirronata Autonomous Suborbital Manufacturing Platform #8 descending through the atmosphere where, 50 kilometers from the surface, they met those similarly sent up from Tlachtga.

There the drones met, merged, and formed a symbol that most humans immediately recognized: one that showed the love that two ultra-high-level quantum computational systems had for one another.

But more than that, a heart that also said to all of mankind: "—and we love you too." ■

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While an extensively published science fiction, fantasy, horror, thriller, romance, and non-fiction author, **M.Christian** is probably most known for their erotica—particularly of the speculative fiction variety. As of 2022, they've written six novels, edited 25+ anthologies, twelve or so collections of short stories, and more than 500 articles. Their site is www.mchristian.com.



SEX AND THE SINGULARITY

by
DeLon Tusk

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By mid-century, we'll all be able to do whatever we want, whomever we want, whenever we want, wherever we want.

You just got back from your (virtual) trip to Mardi Gras with your best (virtual) bud Charlie Sheen and you're ready for another excellent adventure. That Italian wine you're sipping has got you thinking: What would it be like to be Julius Caesar, fawned over by sexy slave girls?

What would it be like to fuck Cleopatra? Luckily, those nanobots in your brain are attuned to your every whim. Within a heartbeat you're relaxing in your villa in ancient Rome, the young Egyptian queen fondling you under your purple toga. No mummified relic, she's alive with lust, her body as firm and supple as it was in 50 B.C.

Although you know this is virtual, your senses cannot distinguish between this and the real world. One detail doesn't jibe, however: In this pre-silicone age you've imagineered,

Cleopatra's breasts seem unnaturally perky. The technology is not perfect, but it learns fast: Behind the scenes, the nanobots sense your agitation over this anachronism and work at light speed to retrofit Cleo. Now, her breasts are softer to the touch, their downward slope sharper. You screw each other's royal brains out until you feel like... well, like Julius FUCKING CAESAR.

We Have The Technology

Virtual romps through time are growing ever more likely. *Time Magazine's* 2/21/2011 cover story ("2045: The Year Man Becomes Immortal") profiles scientist Ray Kurzweil, author of *The Singularity is Near*. He believes we're rapidly "approaching a moment"—the Singularity—"when computers will become more intelligent than humans." (IBM super-computer Watson's *Jeopardy!* victory has focused new attention on this). "When that happens, humanity—our bodies, our minds, our civilization—will be completely and irreversibly transformed."

The possibilities include merging with computers "to become super-

intelligent cyborgs... Maybe we'll scan our consciousnesses into computers and live inside them as software, forever, virtually." There's also the darker scenario where "computers will turn on humanity and annihilate us." But let's focus on the pleasant possibilities for now.

The Future Is Now

Keep in mind: we're not talking about the distant future. Kurzweil and other respected scientists believe this will happen over the next 34 years. As *Time* notes, the Singularity "is not a fringe idea; it's a serious hypothesis about the future of life on Earth." Accordingly, serious players back Kurzweil. NASA hosts his 3-year-old "Singularity University," of which Google was a founding sponsor. Kurzweil is also the subject of two current documentaries.

The Singularity's implications for sex and human pleasure are astounding. In a world where computers effortlessly do all the work, humanity's only purpose will be to seek fulfillment, however one defines it. Kurzweil envisions "fully immersive, totally convincing virtual

reality" where we can become anyone we want, do whatever (and whom-ever) we want, in any scenario we can imagine. A cross between *The Matrix* and *Inception*, but where individuals exert greater control over all the details of their computer-synthesized existence, including, perhaps most prominently, their sex lives. ■



Renowned adventurer, explorer and writer **Delon Tusk** has had his exploits chronicled in the pages of *Penthouse*, *Hustler*, and on *Playboy TV*.

GLORIA

by

Jack Howling

It was on the third day of collecting life specimens from the planet known as 22606 Lito-b that the three-man crew of research vessel Ember 5 brought back the large, mollusc-type creature they'd begun jokingly referring to as *the blob*, but which MacQuoid, for reasons the others pretended not to understand, later nicknamed *Gloria*.

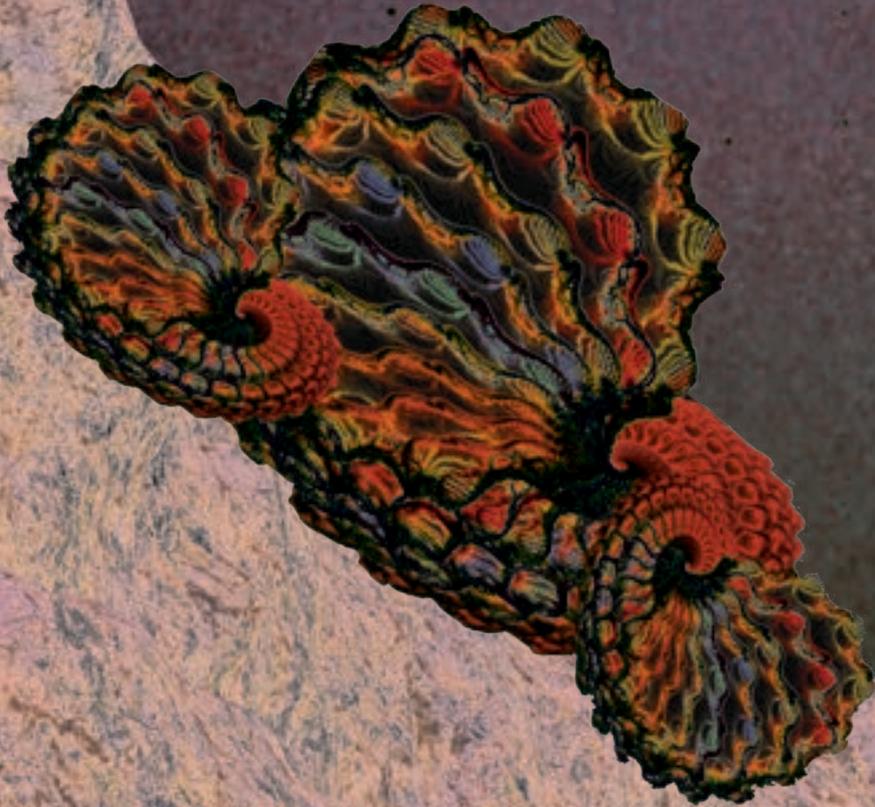
It was a gelatinous, semi-transparent, roughly cylindrical invertebrate which they'd discovered wedged into a cave mouth some way along the beach from where Fernsby set the lander down. It gave no indication of being alive, but it didn't look dead so Hart estimated it to be in a dormant state. Prying it out of that cave and onto a rubber stretcher so they could carry it back to the lander took hours. It was about the length of a man if he was lying down and had a height of roughly a metre. It had an orifice at each end—one small, one large—and six limp tentacles which protruded from what they had already begun thinking of as the head-end despite there being no features such as eyes or a mouth. It was by far the largest specimen they had so far discovered on 22606 Lito-b, and Hart was already excited about studying it.

Carrying it into the largest of the ship's three labs, Hart instructed the others to lay it down in the middle of the room.

"Good Christ this thing's heavy," Fernsby said.

Once they'd set it down, MacQuoid crouched to examine the smaller orifice at the creature's head end.

"What is that?" he said, glancing over his shoulder at Hart. "The thing's



mouth?”

“Don’t think it’s a mouth,” Hart said. He indicated the descending rings of muscle inside the circular hole. “Could be its anus though.”

MacQuoid stood and walked around to the other end of the creature. “Then this thing has two assholes?”

“Maybe.” Hart said. He took a probe from the pocket of his hazmat suit and inserted it into the small orifice. His eyebrows shot up when he saw the rings of muscle tighten and clamp down on the probe, almost jerking it free of his fingers. For a second Hart panicked, thinking his probe was about to be swallowed by the creature, but instead it was simply held fast. The rings of muscle appeared to ripple and flutter around the probe; a sight Hart found mildly disturbing.

“Jesus,” Fernsby said when the flaccid tentacles at the creature’s side lifted up and began to waver and feel at the air up around its head-end. “You woke it up.” He pointed at the body of the thing, which—as if at the flick of a switch—had lit up from inside with a dull, reddish glow.

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Hart placed one hand on the creature’s body and felt a slight pulse. “Looks that way.”

“You did just shove a cold probe up its butt,” Fernsby said.

“We don’t know that’s an anus,” Hart told him.

MacQuoid, who had come back around to the creature’s head-end, watched with interest as Hart struggled to retrieve his probe.

“She’s clamped down on that thing pretty tight, eh Cap?” he said, and gave a bawdy laugh.

“It’s not a she,” Hart said. “Molluscs are asexual.” With some effort, he managed to retract the probe, which came free of the creature with a slurping-sucking sound which made MacQuoid’s eyes widen. The probe was slicked with some clear gel-like secretion. The blood had risen to Hart’s face and when he stood he was alarmed to realise that his penis had

stiffened and was pressing uncomfortably against the inside of his underwear.

“Reckon this is some kind of mollusc we haven’t seen before,” MacQuoid said. A blush had also risen to his cheeks, and he had a leery look on his face which Hart didn’t like.

In the back of his mind, Hart detected a new smell mixed in with the stale sweat stink he and the other men gave off: something equally pungent, sharp and bitter.

“I’m calling it a day,” Hart said. “Let’s hit the showers.”

“You two go ahead,” MacQuoid said, putting his back to Hart. “I’ll finish up here.”

Despite his vague unease at leaving MacQuoid alone in the lab, an unease he couldn’t justify, Hart nodded and followed Fernsby into the decontam room. To his bewilderment, he realised he had a full erection.

Whilst showering, he turned the water as cold as it would go in the hope of dampening his inexplicable arousal, but to no effect. His engorged penis throbbed and slapped against his abdomen. *What’s wrong with me?* he thought. He couldn’t stop thinking about his wife, Greta. She was a few million miles away on a science research space-station named *Miracle* in orbit above the planet 54678 Saltern HB, and it had been three Earth months since he’d last seen her. Now all he could think about was her body. Images flickered through his mind of the two of them in bed together. How she writhed when he sucked on her nipples. How her slender legs peeled open to allow him to enter her. The way she bucked and sighed beneath him. *Oh God*. As the images flooded his mind, he also recalled the way the muscular orifice on that creature they’d brought up from 22606 Lito-b had clamped down on his probe. He didn’t want to think about that but couldn’t help it. Taking hold of his penis in one hand, he jerked once, twice, and then, biting down on a moan so as not to be heard by Fernsby in the adjacent cubicle, he ejaculated, spraying the cubicle wall with a blast of semen.

My God.

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Spent, he propped one hand against the wall and allowed the cold water to cool the heat in his face. He fought to regain control of his breathing.

What the hell?

Emerging from the showers, both he and Fernsby were silent as they dried-off and began to dress. Hart noticed Fernsby avoided catching his eye. Had he been similarly afflicted?

What was that? What the hell came over me?

He wondered if his sudden arousal could have had something to do with that creature. Could it have emitted something perhaps? Something that had generated that state in him? Some kind of—of course! That smell! That slight musky odour, barely detectable, which he'd noticed after removing the probe from the creature's orifice. Pheromones! It had exuded pheromones! And—

Oh God!

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In a sudden panic, he peeled off his jumpsuit and grabbed a fresh hazmat suit down from the locker.

Fernsby froze and stared at him. "What's going on?"

"MacQuoid," Hart said. "We shouldn't have left him alone back there."

Fernsby's brow knit before realisation lit up his face. His mouth fell open. "Oh no."

Hart struggled into the hazmat suit, while Fernsby followed his lead by unzipping his jumpsuit and rushing to the locker. Without waiting for the other man, Hart passed through the decontam room and ran along the short corridor to the labs. Not much time had passed, he told himself, not much time since... but then looking through the window panel in the lab door, he saw to his utter horror that MacQuoid was pressed up against the head-end of the mollusc. He'd shed his hazmat suit and wore only a thermal shirt and his underwear which was down around his knees. He lay upright against the creature and—Hart saw—he was

rhythmically working his hips. The creature's tentacles encircled MacQuoid's waist like arms and appeared to be holding him pressed against itself. A shimmer of light radiated up and down the creature's body, changing from a vapid red to orange to yellow during the few seconds that Hart stood and watched.

"MacQuoid!"

Hart barged the door open. At once a sharp, pungent odour assailed him, thicker than what he'd smelt earlier. Images of Greta's naked writhing body immediately began to swamp his mind again. He pushed them away. "MacQuoid! What the hell are you doing? For fuck's sake—no!"

He ran, but before he reached MacQuoid the man cried out and began to flip and jerk on the spot. Hart froze. MacQuoid's buttocks tightened, he arched his back and snapped his head back. Thinking to yank MacQuoid free of the creature, Hart shook off his inertia and leapt forward but MacQuoid pushed his palms into the creature's yielding body and let out a great orgasmic roar which froze Hart once more in his tracks. There was a moment of stillness. Then MacQuoid staggered backwards away from the creature, his legs appeared to buckle under him, and he collapsed into a sitting position. His arms fell limp at his sides, his head lolled to one side, and he was laughing uncontrollably under his breath.

Hart ran to him and slapped his face, trying to bring him to his senses. MacQuoid's mouth was slack, his eyes half-closed.

"MacQuoid! MacQuoid! Are you alright? MacQuoid!"

Behind him, Hart heard the door bang open and a gasp of disbelief. Fernsby.

MacQuoid's eyelids fluttered. He shook himself and with some apparent effort focused his eyes on Hart. A grin crept up one side of his face. Darting one hand forward, he grabbed at the front of Hart's hazmat suit and jerked him forward so that they were eye to eye. His breath clouded Hart's visor.

"What have you done?" Hart said, shaking his head. "What have you done,

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man?”

“I’m not sorry,” MacQuoid said. “It was the best damn fuck I’ve ever had in my life. Oh my... You have to try it, Cap. We should all try it. At least once.”

“Are you mad?” Hart said, pulling himself free from MacQuoid. “You could be in some serious trouble for this. We’ll have to quarantine you! We don’t know... We haven’t even had a chance to study that thing yet.”

At this, MacQuoid started laughing again, becoming increasingly hysterical. Tears spilled from his eyes. Hart turned to Fernsby who stood gazing at the creature. It had become placid again, its internal light extinguished, tentacles lifeless on the floor. But the orifice at its end oozed the thick, clear secretion Hart had seen on his probe earlier. Hart shivered in disgust.

“Fernsby,” he said. He snapped his fingers when the man didn’t respond and said more sharply, “*Fernsby!*”

Fernsby switched his head around. “Captain?”

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Hart indicated MacQuoid who was lying on the floor now, balled up with laughter.

“Help me get this idiot out of here, will you?”

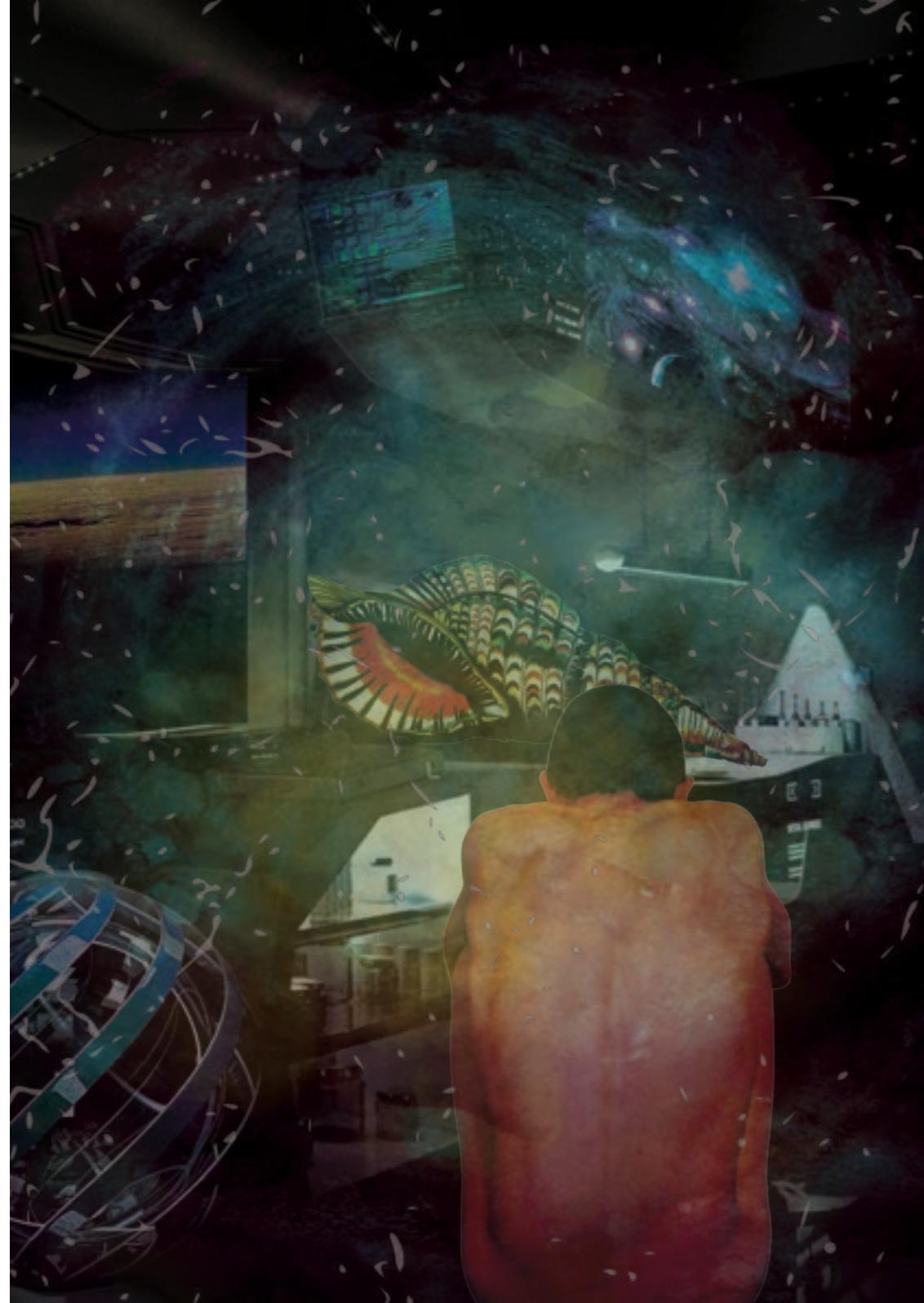
“Captain...uh...?”

“Get it together, man!”

MacQuoid put up no resistance when told he’d be going into the quarantine chamber for fourteen days. He was languid and compliant. Hart and Fernsby sometimes heard him singing from the other end of the ship, some ancient song from the last century.

“Glooooooria! Glooooooria! All night! All day! Yeah!”

Hart and Fernsby busied themselves doing preliminary tests on the first specimens brought up from 22606 Lito-b: some phytoplankton taken from a rock pool and large, crab-like creatures about the size of a man’s head.



Hart found he was struggling to focus his mind.

“We going back?” Fernsby said one day.

“Back?”

“To 22606 Lito-b. Are we going to take more samples? You said there might be some large mammals down there, maybe some kind of humanoid creatures. Remember those footprints we saw on the second day?”

“I think we might have been mistaken about those,” Hart said. “22606 Lito-b’s biosphere isn’t advanced enough yet for those kinds of creatures to have evolved. From the look of things, life is still in its early stages.”

“But—”

Hart glanced up at Fernsby, willing him to continue, but Fernsby diverted his gaze. The man had been unlike himself since the incident with MacQuoid: distracted and mostly mute. They’d not discussed the incident, except when Hart told Fernsby that he thought it best that, for the time being, they should both avoid entering the lab where the mollusc was housed. Fernsby agreed.

Still, Hart wondered if Fernsby had been tempted to visit the creature. Most nights, he himself lay awake, hot and restless, his mind plagued by images of MacQuoid pressed up against the creature, his buttocks working. *It was the best damn fuck I’ve ever had in my life*, he remembered MacQuoid telling him. *You have to try it, Cap. We all should try it. At least once.* As much as he attempted to push these thoughts and images away, they kept returning, to a point where he thought he’d be driven mad by them. Of course, he mentioned none of this to Fernsby.

One night, unable to sleep, Hart could stand no more. He threw off his blankets, got up, dressed, and went into the labs. He intended only to look in on the mollusc. He would stay outside the room and look in through the glass panel. He wanted to see it. See what it was doing, if anything. He thought that if he looked at it, saw it for what it was, he could end his maddening obsession with it. But in the corridor on the way to the labs he encountered Fernsby. Fernsby staggered like a drunk. His eyes were glazed and he could not stop

grinning, even when Hart threw him up against the wall.

“Fernsby, you haven’t—?”

“MacQuoid was right,” Fernsby said. “MacQuoid was right, Captain. It—”

Limp and apparently unable to support himself, Fernsby slid down the wall into a sitting position.

Hart, hands on hips, stood looking down on him. He bit at his lower lip. “That thing has made us all crazy. We have to get rid of it.”

He remembered then that a storage unit set onto the wall opposite the door to the lab housed a number of flamethrowers, for use if any of the specimens turned out to be hazardous. He went there and unlocked the unit. Inside, he also found some biohazard masks. He took one of these and put it on, then took down a flamethrower and placed the strap over one shoulder. He entered the lab, certain that the mask would filter out any pheromones in the air.

The creature was still laid out on the rubber stretcher in the middle of the room, flaccid and inert. As Hart approached it, he noticed the orifice in its head end dripped that clear secretion. He remembered how the muscles inside the orifice had fluttered and rippled when he’d inserted his probe.

You have to try it, Cap. We all should try it. At least once.

No, I—

I have to destroy it.

I have to—

At least once.

At least...

Hart lifted the strap of the flamethrower over his head and set the thing down on a nearby bench. He approached the mollusc.

What am I doing?

He took off the biohazard mask and was immediately besieged by thoughts of his wife. And not just her, but other women he had known too: pinned beneath him, or bent over a chair, or splayed out against a wall, or sitting astride him, or knelt on the floor on their hands and knees. *Oh God.* Memories of these women filled his mind: all panting and sighing, wet mouths opening, and all saying yes, more, yes, yes, yes!

Without having realised what he was doing, he'd unzipped his jumpsuit, taken out his engorged penis, and pushed it into the orifice on the end of the mollusc. The creature came alive as soon as he did, and he was at once dizzied by a sensation like none he'd ever experienced. The blood rushed to his head so fast he almost swooned. He began working his penis in and out of the orifice, emitting involuntary cries as he did, images of all the women he'd taken to bed still crowding his mind. He felt something pressing him from behind, forcing him to push deeper into the orifice, and glancing back he realised it was the creature's tentacles. One lightly probed his anus, sending a bolt of pleasure through him. The body he lay against was undulating and a light had come on inside it again, seeming to change with the rhythm of Hart's thrusts from a reddish glow, to orange, to yellow, and back to red.

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Losing control, he began frenziedly working his hips, slapping up against the creature's head end, uttering little deep-throated moans. "Oh oh oh oh oh."

"Oh! My! God!" he roared then, the cry shredding his throat. "*Oh my fucking God!*"

When he came to his senses he was lying on the floor of the lab, his limp glistening penis protruding from his open fly, and a warm, peaceful, sated glow coursing through his entire body.

Fucking hell.

This is how it must feel, he thought, this is how it must feel to be accepted into heaven.

From that point on, madness overtook them all.

MacQuoid was released from quarantine and they worked the mollusc, all three of them, taking turns, night and day. They couldn't get enough. On a few occasions they even came to blows over who was to go next. Or if one of them spent too long a time pressed up against the creature, one of the others would begin to get tetchy and aggressive. *Gloria*, they all three called it now. They would grab at its undulating flesh. *I'm next! Gloria's mine!*

How long did it go on?

In his rare moments of lucidity, Hart looked at the creature and saw that it had grown—bigger, longer—and that the lights inside it were brighter than before, and radiating up and down its length constantly. The entire body of the thing pulsed and throbbed.

A horrified convulsion would run through him then, and he'd think: *It's feeding!*

He looked down at himself, and at the others. He and his crew mates were thin, drawn, and exhausted. They weren't eating. They barely slept. They didn't leave the lab. Ribs exposed. Legs pale and thin. Sunken faces. But that thing, *that thing*, it was growing more vital every day. How long had it lay dormant in that cave mouth, Hart wondered, until he and his men had pried it out? How long had it been there, waiting?

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These thoughts pushed through the turmoil in his mind, the heat in his body, and he realised he had to do something. Do something, or he and his men would soon be dead. Then his mind would again be besieged by thoughts of sighing women and soft flesh and he would be on his feet, fully erect, and ready to take his turn.

Once he slept and dreamt that a monster the mollusc birthed through the large orifice in its tail-end, chased him through the ship's corridors. The thing had six arms and four legs, and half its face was MacQuoid and half Fernsby. The pair of eyes in the centre of its forehead Hart recognised as his own. It was some kind of patchwork baby and as it pursued Hart up and down the ship it wailed and screamed out "*Daddy! Daddy!*"

He jerked awake from this nightmare with a cold sweat on his brow and saw Fernsby hunched over Gloria's head-end while a pale and sick-looking MacQuoid looked on, eagerly waiting his turn, and it was then that Hart knew he had to act.

Casting his eyes around the room, he saw the flamethrower and biohazard mask he'd set down on a workbench that time he'd come here to destroy the mollusc some days—*weeks? months?*—ago. As he began to crawl towards the bench, a deluge of sexual thoughts and images filled his head.

"No!" he shouted. He tried to clear his mind. "No, goddamn it!"

In a bid to stem the flood of imagery clouding his thoughts, he sang a song to himself, the first one that came to mind—a song he remembered from his childhood.

"Three little monkeys jumping on the bed. One fell off and bumped his—ah!—his head."

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Reaching the bench, he pulled himself up into a standing position.

"Mama called the doctor and the doctor SAID. No more—GODDAMN IT!—monkeys jumping on the—

He had managed to get the biohazard mask on before MacQuoid saw what he intended and leapt forward to try and wrestle him away from the flamethrower.

"Two little monkeys jumping on the BED..."

Wrenching himself out of MacQuoid's bear grip, Hart spun around and punched the man as hard as he could in the face. MacQuoid went down.

"One FELL OFF and bumped his head."

Hart grabbed the flamethrower, flicked the ignition, and turned to face the mollusc.

"Mama called the doctor..."

Fernsby was still hunched over the head-end of the mollusc, working his penis in and out of the orifice, his eyes squeezed shut and his mouth making an O-shape.

"Get out of the fucking way!" Hart shouted.

Fernsby turned his head and fear pierced the mask of delirium he wore.

"Get out of the way! Can't you see it's feeding on us? *Milking* us? It has to die! Get out of the way, man!"

Instead of doing as instructed, Fernsby shouted 'No!', threw up his arms and arched his body protectively over the mollusc.

"Idiot!" Hart yelled. He strode forward, hooked one hand over Fernsby's shoulder, intending to yank him backwards away from the creature, but he had forgotten about the thing's tentacles, which encircled Fernsby's waist. Hart saw the tentacles tighten as he tried to pull Fernsby away, and Fernsby was snapped back against the mollusc. Aware that he was rapidly losing the battle against the urge to rip the biohazard mask from his face and take a deep breath of the pheromone-riddled air, Hart pointed the flamethrower down and blasted the tentacles with a quick stream of fire. Fernsby screamed. When the tentacles jerked away, Hart clutched the wailing man's shoulder again and threw him backwards to the floor. But then, when he twisted around and pointed the flamethrower at the mollusc, he was hit by a fierce blast that spun him around and knocked the weapon out of his hands. As he tried to right himself, he realised that his head and upper body was covered with the goo the creature secreted. A thick musty odour invaded his nostrils—the biohazard mask had been breached! No time to waste! In moments he would be enslaved again. As he turned, another blast of the goo knocked him off his feet and he fell to the floor alongside Fernsby and MacQuoid. Looking up, he saw the flame thrower lying a few feet out of reach. Hauling himself onto hands and knees, Hart scrambled over to it and grabbed it. Rolling onto his back, he pointed it at the mollusc.

"Die! Fucking *die!*"

But the mollusc was no longer there. What he saw in front of him was his

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ON HINSLEY KNOLL

by
Tim Jeffreys

The old man sat alone in a shadowy corner of the Traveller's Rest. Though his gaze was directed towards a small framed picture hanging on the wall to the right of where he sat, it was clear to Livvie Prouse that his thoughts turned inward. Not wishing to disturb his reverie, she waited until it was almost four-thirty before crossing to his table and collecting up his plate and empty pint glass. The dinnertime rush would soon be upon them and if he wasn't going to order anything more they would need his table to seat other customers.

"Anything else I can get for you?" she asked, brightly.

He shifted his gaze to look at her without—she thought—really seeing her, smiled, and shook his head. His short white beard, bushy white eyebrows, and the tufts of white hair above his ears made him look as if he'd been dusted with frost. The set lines of his face and his faraway gaze spoke of a lifetime of befuddlement. He gave the impression of being haunted by a question to which he'd never been able to learn the answer.

“Haven’t seen you around before,” Livvie said. “Are you new to the area? Or here on holiday?”

The old man squinted at her, as if trying to make her out through a fog. “Just visiting. I grew up here in Mells. This is the first time I’ve been back here in over sixty years.”

“Wow,” Livvie said. “The village must look very different now.”

The old man gave a little chuckle. “Not as different as you might think. There used to be a tradition here when I was a boy.”

Livvie nodded. “You mean Daffodil Day? We still have that. Every Easter Sunday. People come from all over to see it.”

“No, dear,” the old man said, shaking his head. “I’m not talking about Daffodil Day. Tell me, is that old ash tree still standing on the top of Hinsley Knoll?”

“Hinsley Knoll?” Livvie knit her brow. “You mean out past Puxton Farm? You know I think there is a tree on top of that hill. You can see it from the road if you’re driving out towards Newbury. Big old tree stood all by itself.”

The old man nodded. “When I was a boy, we had a village tradition. Every boy on his eighteenth birthday would have to walk out to Hinsley Knoll and spend a night under that old tree. You know ash trees are sometimes called the Venus of the woods?”

“No, I didn’t,” Livvie said. “And I’ve never heard of any tradition like that.”

“I suppose it died out years ago. Before you were even born.”

“What did you do out there under that tree?”

“I suppose you could call it an initiation.”

Livvie laughed. “That sounds ominous. What kind of initiation?”

The old man glanced to one side, then back at her. “Memory’s a funny thing. Sometimes you look back and you remember something, and you think: how

could that have possibly happened? But the memory of it is right there. Clear as day.”

“Did something happen?”

“Maybe it did. Waterhouse, isn’t it?”

“I’m sorry?”

He gestured at the framed picture on the wall which he’d earlier appeared to be entranced by. It was indeed a reproduction of a painting by J.W. Waterhouse. She knew the artist because her mother was an art lover and amateur painter, with a particular fondness for the Pre-Raphaelites. The painting showed a boy, naked but for a tiger-skin loincloth sleeping in the grass on the bank of a river. A naked girl, who appeared to have emerged from the water, stood on the bank gazing at him in fascination. There was a strong suggestion that something sexual was about to occur.

“I believe it’s called a *naiad*,” Livvie said. “Very Victorian, isn’t it?”

“Why do you say that?” the old man said.

“It’s all about fear. Fear of the female.” Livvie gestured at the painting. “She’s a seductress, isn’t she? She’s going to steal that poor sleeping boy’s innocence. Ruin him.”

The old man stared at the painting for a long moment. “You know I never saw it that way. In my mind I imagined she was going to rescue him.”

“Rescue him? From what? His virginity?”

The old man laughed. “His ignorance.” He met Livvie’s gaze and smiled. “Guess what, young miss—today’s my birthday.”

“Is it really? Well, happy birthday.”

“I’m eighty.” The old man was silent for a few moments before he said, “You know I worked in an office for forty years. Forty years cooped up in an office with computers and telephones and photocopying machines. Stale air and

cigarette smoke. Waste of a life. I should have stayed here in Mellis. There's magic here." He looked straight at her now. "Did you know that? Real magic. I should have stayed here and become a gardener. Lived my life outdoors. I should have listened to my father."

Though confused by this, Livvie nodded. Turning, she glanced at the clock on the wall above the bar. *A quarter to five*. Already there was a huddle of customers at the bar.

"Well," she said, hoping the old man heard the prompt in her voice. "Are you sure there's nothing else I can get for you?"

"Quite sure," the old man said, rising to his feet. He looked behind him for his jacket.

"I have to be going. I want to visit that old ash tree one last time." He looked at her and held her gaze for a long moment. "Then maybe I'll know what to make of these memories. Do you understand?"

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"Yes," Livvie said. Although she didn't, of course, understand. Not one bit.

Abandoning his car in a dirt lay-by, Owen Johns entered the paddock through a gate and began walking towards Hinsley Knoll. The sun was sitting on the crest of the knoll, directly behind the ash tree so that its lower branches glowed gold and its long shadow stretched down the incline like a hand reaching out towards him. His heart beat so fast he had to stop and catch his breath. He recalled how his father had walked with him to the foot of the knoll on the evening of his eighteenth birthday. On the way his father had stopped and looked sadly at a newly-cleared section of Botten Wood.

"Cutting down trees," his father said. "I hear they're going to build a hotel here. First this section, then the rest of the wood. And these trees have stood here for hundreds of years, until now."

As they walked on along the road, his father spoke again, "You know what I saw in the war, son? I saw a lot of men who'd forgotten their place in the world. Bombs and guns and tanks and planes. All the miracles of modern warfare. Made by men who'd forgotten how to look at the leaf of a tree and be awed by it, to see the beauty of it, the intelligence. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Owen had replied, though he hadn't been sure he understood at all. One of his great loves at the time had been the Saturday matinees at the Odeon in Newbury. There he'd watched *The Dam Busters*, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, *The Enemy Below*, and many other films that had made war seem exciting, a great adventure; and he'd often lain in bed at night imagining it was him, not Michael Redgrave or William Holden, who was leading a troupe of men in a battle against the Germans.

On they'd walked through the silent summer evening. Owen could remember seeing a starling murmuration dipping and rising in the sky over the paddock, and when he'd pointed and said, "Look, Dad!" his father had smiled and patted him on the back.

Arriving at the foot of Hinsley Knoll, his father had halted and gently urged him onwards, his expression an odd mixture of pride and concern. "Go on, son." Then his father had turned around and begun walking back towards the road, limping on his right leg, from which he'd had a piece of shrapnel removed during the war. His last words to Owen, said over his shoulder, were: "Your mother will say a prayer for you tonight."

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So Owen had climbed the hill, just as he was doing now, although then it had been with bounding steps, not slow painful ones. And, like now, the sun had been low in the sky so that he had felt its soft rays on his skin, the grass was full of that peculiar honeyed light, and the ash tree's long shadow made a dark path for him to follow. Standing at the top of the knoll, he had looked over the surrounding view of fields and woods and farmhouses and church spires as if he were looking out on all the possibilities the world offered to him. Now he dragged a weight of experience up that slope, though none—*not one*—as vivid, as fresh in his memory, as perplexing to him, as *thrilling*, as what he'd experienced under that ash tree on his eighteenth birthday.

When he made it to the top of the slope he stopped and stared at the ash tree. He would not approach it. Not yet. From where he stood, he could see the cankers, fissures, and vine-like protrusions on the trunk which he couldn't prevent his mind from composing into the shapes of figures. As a boy he'd seen female forms and had run his hand over the trunk, cupping a gnarly fist-like node as if it was a ripe young breast and running his hand along the smooth surface of a branch and imagining it as an outstretched thigh. At that time in his life, his experiences of the opposite sex had been confined to the



time his school friends had dared him to kiss Jilly Hammond, and he had gone with her into the spinney of trees behind the school where she had closed her soft hot mouth over his and pushed her hips against him with a display of knowledge he'd not expected and which had left him dizzied. Then there was the time he'd seen a woman swimming naked in Hawksby pond early one warm Sunday morning when his mother had sent him to buy eggs from Puxton Farm. He had noticed the flash of her white body in the water as he picked out a shortcut through the trees surrounding the pond. Then for a few minutes he had crouched and watched, until she turned her head in his direction—alerted, he thought, by the sound of his laboured breathing—and he'd leapt to his feet and ran.

Those moments with Jilly, and the memory of the woman's slim, white form sliding through the water of the pond, had replayed over and over in his mind for almost a year afterwards, a blush rising to his cheeks, and his cock—his *little chap*, as his mother had always referred to it when he was a child—thickening every time he thought about them. He'd thought about them again that evening of his eighteenth birthday as he ran his palms over the ash tree's trunks, imagining he touched entwined female forms instead of the twisted trunk of an ancient tree. And then when he'd lifted his eyes to an oval knot in the bark suggestive of the shape of a head, he had given a cry and staggered backwards, having been confronted with a pair of flashing eyes.

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This was the point where he began to doubt his memories of that evening. No matter how hard he tried to recall what had actually happened to him sixty-four years ago, what he saw in his mind's eye were those eyes. Those eyes suddenly looking out at him from the bark of the tree, and then... *then...* something shifting, slowly at first, and moving forward as if breaking out, breaking free, from the trunk. He had drawn further back, gasping. Then all at once figures surrounded him, peeling out from behind the tree and quickly encircling him.

He could remember what he had felt at first: *terror*. Genuine fear.

The sun had begun to sink behind the low hills along the horizon by that point, and the lower half of the sky was full of yellow and orange light. Half silhouetted against the sky, the figures joined hands to form a circle that enclosed Owen and the ash tree. They were women, all naked except for patches of moss on their skin, which he saw contained tiny white flowers.

Branches and ferns were caught and tangled in their hair, the branches sticking out from their heads like a multitude of reindeer horns. Their skin was white with a silvery sheen, and the flat, dimensional plains of their faces and bodies gave them a look of figures carved from wood, as if they would be solid to the touch. They laughed as they danced in a circle around him, pressing inwards and forcing him to back-up against the trunk of the ash tree.

41 Eighty years old and standing once more on the top of Hinsley Knoll, Owen could not recall what he'd been doing as these strange figures danced around him. He might have been sobbing and screaming for his mother. He might have been watching the circling figures in awe. What he did remember is that all at once they had stopped dancing and had begun to cluster in around him. Bright inquisitive faces. Smiling mouths. Exploring hands. Taking hold of his arms, they had drawn him in among them, cooing and offering their breasts to his lips, their bodies to his open hands. He was surprised to find their flesh soft and pliant not hard like wood. He was no longer afraid. A strange peace had come over him, a sense of surrender. He moved his fingers in the patches of soft moss on their skin. Moisture oozed out of it when he pressed his palm against it, sometimes tiny scuttling insects. The women's busy hands removed his clothes and laid him out in the grass. He had been startled to realise that their ministrations had left him fully aroused; his *little chap* large and agonisingly swollen, like something that had sprouted suddenly out of his body, like the flowers filmed with time-lapse photography in a film he'd recently watched: Walt Disney's *Secrets of Life*; flowers that budded and blossomed in a matter of seconds. One by one the women—if indeed that's what they were, these creatures—straddled him. One would straddle and take him into her hot, pulsating flesh, while her sisters stroked, or ran fingers through his hair, or put the tips of his own fingers to their mouths to suck and nibble, making his cock leap anew, and it crossed his mind that they might not stop there, that they meant to devour him. Then one of the others would become eager and laugh as she gently pushed the one straddling him aside and took her place. It was like a game. And all the while he lay powerless, swooning, a lad of eighteen years, who had never touched a woman before, whilst they each took a turn until steadily a cry mounted inside him, he jerked his hips upwards, and stars exploded in his mind.

When he came to his senses he was alone, it was fully dark and the night sky was laid out above him, its endless dark seeming now, as he gazed at it, full of

mystery and fathomless depth. As if to force some order on it, he made himself name the constellations: Ursa Major, Orion, Ursa Minor, Aquila... one after another he named them until a low wind moved over the crest over the hill, goosebumps flashed along his arms, and he shivered.

Picking himself up, he had looked around for his clothes. They were scattered wildly across the slope of the hill. His trousers he found in the branches of the ash tree, high up so that he had to climb to retrieve them.

For the rest of the night he sat shivering on the slope of the hill with his knees tucked against his chest and his arms wrapped around himself. The moon was full and bright, and he found that he could not take his eyes off it. For the first time in his life he saw it for what it was: a dead rock, a dusty pebble, caught in the orbit of a world that teemed with life.

This, as it turned out, had been his life's great adventure. If only he had known it then. Like a fool, he'd thought there were many, many adventures to come. And though he had known sex, known women, indeed had even briefly been married, never again had he felt so free, so serene, so powerless in the presence of a female... so at one with the world. He had felt his heart beat with the thrum of insects under the earth, with the dip and rise of bird murmurations, with the ache of the trees, with the blink of stars. Everything, *everything*, connected.

When he'd returned home early the following morning, though his mother had given him a cautionary glance and his father had patted him on the back, nobody questioned him. And he had known instinctively that he shouldn't speak about what happened to him on the top of Hinsley Knoll. The experience was his alone. His secret to keep. And though he had thought about it often for a time, and sometimes dreamed of it, eventually it had faded to the back of his mind so that the next time he recalled it clearly, years later, he no longer believed it. For how could something so strange, so extraordinary, be true? There had to be some other explanation. Perhaps women from the village had painted their bodies and bound branches in their hair, rolled themselves in moss and soil, then met him there on that hill to initiate him into the world of sex? Some archaic tradition. Over and over he had asked himself: Could that be it?

Approaching the ash tree, he sat down at its foot, with his back against the

trunk. He wished he could see them again, those strange beguiling creatures, whatever they were. Not touch them or hold them—no. He could not expect such privilege again. Just see them. That was all he wanted. To know that they were real. And to know that he'd experienced real magic at least once in his eighty years.

Resting his head against the trunk of the tree, he closed his eyes. The day's last sunrays warmed his cheeks. He savoured the warmth.

And imagined he heard footsteps in the grass, and soft female laughter.

•••

It rained through the whole of the first week in September, and it was quiet in the Traveller's Rest. Even the usual lunch and dinnertime crowds were mostly absent. Resting on the bar in an idle moment, Livvie Prouse saw a local newspaper nestled among some leaflets and picked it up. Idly, she began to flick through the pages until a headline caught her attention.

43 *MELLS MAN FOUND DEAD ON HINSLEY KNOLL.*

She scanned the accompanying article.

...body found on Hinsley Knoll...

...man born in Mells...

...returned to the area after living in London for over fifty years...

...believed to have died of natural causes...

...police unable to trace next of kin...

"Oh my God."

Livvie suddenly felt close to tears. Could this be the old man she'd spoken to the previous week, the one who'd said he was going to visit the ash tree on the top of Hinsley Knoll? The one who'd said it was his birthday? Had he died up there, all alone? Had he gone up there to die? Was that what he'd

been trying to tell her? And she was so concerned with getting him to leave to free up the table he occupied.

That poor man.

Taking a deep breath, she closed the newspaper and set it back among the leaflets. Resting her chin in one hand, she listened to the spatter of rain on the windows and watched water surged down the glass panel set in the pub's doors. The light falling in through the door panels cast long, wavering shadows across the tiles on the floor. And, for a short while, Livvie watched them dance. ■

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Tim Jeffreys' short fiction has appeared in *Supernatural Tales*, *Not One of Us*, *The Alchemy Press Book of Horrors 2 & 3*, and *Nightscript*, among various other publications. His novella, *Holburn*, a ghost story set in an exclusive girl school, will be published by Manta Press in August, 2022. Follow his progress at www.timjeffreys.blogspot.co.uk.



OBSCENE

by

Peter Mladinic

A family moves out of a house,
leaves a dog there to starve.

A man says something to a child to make
her feel she is no more
than a chewed piece of gum spit out
in a supermarket parking lot.

Two men in a ring, one kicks the other
in the face.

Two women in a ring: one
breaks the other's kneecap.

The big game hunter gloats
beside the elephant he has shot.

A man lusts for money, for land, for more
than he or his children will ever need.
A woman chases a delusion dreamt up
by a charlatan.

Someone else says: sex is good,
it could be better. When I try to make
the most of it, I'm being obscene.

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Peter Mladinic's fourth book of poems, *Knives on a Table* is available from Better Than Starbucks Publications. An animal rights advocate, he lives in Hobbs, New Mexico, USA.



LUSTMORD

by

Julian Grant

Das Zoo reeks of wet beast as cattle citizens herd into the shoot. I avoid their sharp hooves and lemon bitter snouts as best I can. It is every citizen for themselves as we spill out of the Metro, racing for the trams and *Busse* that will spirit us away. Berlin never sleeps, even as the *Reichstag* burned and *Das Party* became *victors supreme*. We are cloaked in the ash of our democracy while the band plays on—quieter now as jazz is suspect and the city's shadows are filled with long, sharp knives.

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I pull my cloche hat down, hiding my platinum hair as I allow Papa's great coat to swallow me whole. Now, hair like mine, unnaturally colored bright white, is reason alone to be listed or questioned. *Das Party* has armed supporters on every bus and *Straßenbahn*, checking identifications, asking questions as they push Jews off vehicles so a *Reinblütiger Deutscher* can sit without fear. *Das Party* are made up of swines and they take pleasure finding 'degenerates' that 'soil' their *Fatherland*.

I am proud to be hated by them. And terrified to be found out.

Outside the windows, the street is filled with bitter diamonds—smashed glass and broken bottles litter the cobblestones reflected back in the cold streetlight. Before this, *die Straße* sang—Heidelmann's *Delikatessen*, the *Fonk-Shop*, even the *Café* owned by the *Ketelman's* are now boarded and closed. Crudely written epitaphs scrawl across shuttered windows—*NSDAP Uber-Alles* and blood-red *Jüdische Ratte* barbs.

“Gute-Nacht, Fraulien. Papiere, bitte.”

The Party member in front of me smiles, his fresh face bright in the passing lights. He's only started shaving it seems with a fresh cut nicking his neck. I can smell the wintergreen he has slathered on over the fresh leather tang of his new Party uniform. I pluck my identity card from my purse, making sure to open Papa's coat just enough so he can see a hint of the silk chemise I have on underneath. My stockings are silvered electric silk designed to compliment my platinum hair. As the 'First Lady of Electricity,' I am dressed for my evening ahead—and *mein Professor* has instructed me well on how to disorient an opponent if stopped.

“Use what you naturally have to confuse them. But be careful how much you show. Too much and they will take you away. Feel your way through every situation, *Schatz*.”

49 I hold my breath as the armed guard flits through my document and pretends not to look at my slick thigh just visible through the open seam of my coat. I glance up at him under half-lidded eyes and breathe slowly, trusting that my fake paper will pass scrutiny. Judging from the eager rat eyes of the man-child, ignoring my ID as he pays attention to the hidden realm of my sex before him, I shall have no problems here. The swelling of his prick near my face is an obvious sign.

“*Ein Darsteller? Cabaret? Are you a dancer?*”

I shrug, reaching up for my identity card as I let the coat slide open even more. In public, these monsters beat and imprison my kind but in private, all of us know worse.

“*Ja*,” I answer. “I dance and sing a little... *Ich bin ein Entertainer*.”

He pushes closer, his leg and leather boot between my legs as I feign a blush at his forwardness. His uniform gives him unfair license. Again, I use my skill to escape further interrogation. It would do no good to be arrested tonight.

“But only rue *reines deutsch* songs. At the *Salon Kitty*,” I whisper with wet lips.

“I am expected there.”

I try not to show distaste in uttering mention of the accursed brothel beloved of *Grofaz's* senior officers as I nod at the boy, dismissing him. He straightens immediately, his leg withdrawn as he acknowledges my support of the *Verrückter Wolf* and his executive branch. The boy snaps a sharp turn and moves on to the next woman seated alone as I pull my coat tight against me. It was bad enough before the fall. Now, everywhere is a hunting ground for them cloaked in death and blood.

I wonder what he would have done if he knew that beneath my bright ironed hair and silk shift beats the heart of a *Judische Ratte*? I ignore his lingering look as I skip off at my stop and into the night.

•••

“*Passwort?*”

The eyehole on the beaten metal door snaps open as I shiver in the basement entrance after making sure that no one had followed me as I exited the tram. I could have used a car tonight but even those luxuries are forbidden now. Only Party members drive and none of us, not even *mein Professor* has the power to forge documents of that caliber.

“*Scheiße Schickelgruber*,” I whisper.

The door to the secret Garden of Eden opens, a thick black cloth barely visible in the half-light masking all inside. I can neither hear nor see anything from my vantage point. All is as it should be.

“Follow the rope,” a voice whispers in my ear as a thick, rough hemp is thrust into my hands. The door is slammed shut and I am alone in the dark. But I am not afraid. I have made this journey into the abyss before and within moments, I can hear the sound of music over the clatter of the *Kino* projector. As I part the final curtain, the room is spread before me under the silver light of the cinema light. I drop Papa's coat to the floor and bathe in the flickering luminescence as if before *Gott* himself.

On the screen, black and white abstract shapes flicker and bounce, a cacophony of images, metal factory fittings, children's toys and marching Party members in cruel competition. It is an exercise in *montage*—film editing—quick cuts moving fast, ever-quick imprinting themselves on the mind's eye and then moving to the next. I watch spellbound as image after image undulates before the crowded room. There are no seats here in Eden, just a long silver bar complete with padded stools and a dance floor. The stage and screen area is where all the action is and now the trio of musicians saw and pound away in discordant company to the *Kakophonie* of images onscreen. I slide past admirers and friends, hands reaching up and touching me gently as if to affirm my presence amongst them. Lithe fingers and strong arms pinch and embrace me as I glide through the sea of love. Here I welcome their ever-present touch as we assure ourselves of our selves and sex. Here, in Eden, we are free to love and live and be ourselves. I make my way backstage with my molten center already wet in anticipation.

I am slick and ready to be enjoyed.

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“You have become everything the Party despises,” *der Professor* whispers to me as he fits me into the contraption that shines before us. I nod in agreement, trusting myself fully to his gentle hands. “You are a beacon of hope.” I lean back in supplication with my legs spread firmly to the upright metal dais. “You are everything they desire yet cannot admit.” My breath comes faster now as the first of the locks connect me to my instrument. “You are a goddess.” I lean back against the leather board that holds me fast making sure both feet are properly grounded on the wooden platform beneath. As *mein Professor* cinches me tight against the restraining board, I gasp as the constricting cable lifts my full breasts up so they overflow from my so-soft coverlet.

“Are you comfortable, *meine Liebe*?” he croons, standing back to examine his own handiwork. I roll my shoulders in anticipation as he slides my instrument before me and connects the last of the electrical clips to the back of my neck support. He slips next to me, his long, capable fingers caressing my tender

breasts. His tongue slips into my mouth as he fingers my sex in complete adoration.

“Ja, *mein Lehrer*... I am—open for transmission,” I gasp.

•••

As *mein Professor* moves to the stage curtain, he peers out at the audience still enraptured by the avant-garde *Kino* finishing. Tonight, I am the attraction that all have come to witness. *The First Lady of Electricity—der elektrische Singvogel*. It is a perfect opportunity for us to meet, to love, to mingle—and pass on what limited information we have about the NSDAP and themselves under the guise of my performance. All of us have contact, in our public lives, with many webs of the spider that chokes us. Together, our knowledge, our love, our plans will make a difference before it is too late and we are all carted away outside of the city. It was only thanks to *mein Professor*, *mein Liebhaber* that I was missed in the *zusammenfassen* that stole my parents and brother away. Intellectual Jews were the first on the list for *Das Party* and there was not a person in the room that had not lost someone to the butchers of Berlin. Artists and decadents have targets on their backs daily. No one knew who would be next.

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Tonight I perform for us all.

•••

The theremin is a wondrous device—a musical instrument an artist may play without touching it. Two long, diametrically opposed metal contacts, one vertical and one horizontal are connected to an electronic amplifier as the performer conducts the music of the spheres by moving their hands across the magnetic poles. As *mein Professor* rolls me out, crucified on my electric platform, I strike up the opening refrain of 'The World is Ending' by master Rezső Seress. A fitting debut for him here in Berlin, I feel, as democracy fails.

The baby-spotlight at the back of the club is my only illumination as I arch my back, thrusting my breasts out towards my audience—all of whom snap their fingers in appreciation as my *chemise* strains against me. I lift my left hand,

sending the electric note into a high modular pitch which is my cue to my lover cum teacher to turn up the voltage to the platform.

I gasp aloud as the electrical pulse passes harmlessly through me lifting my white hair from my neck. With my feet grounded on the wooden floor of my restraint, I am unharmed by the deadly current that illuminates me on my altar as my hair begins to sparkle and undulate in unison to the current.

Gazing out to the crowd, I await their response.

It is the men, of course, who are first to react. Hands slide inside trousers as they grasp themselves. Generous partners, men and women both open themselves to their lovers' touch as I propel us all into the night. Warm electrical waves of pleasure begin to build in my shoulders and breasts as I continue to cajole my instrument to life.

I watch them as they watch me lifting us aloft.

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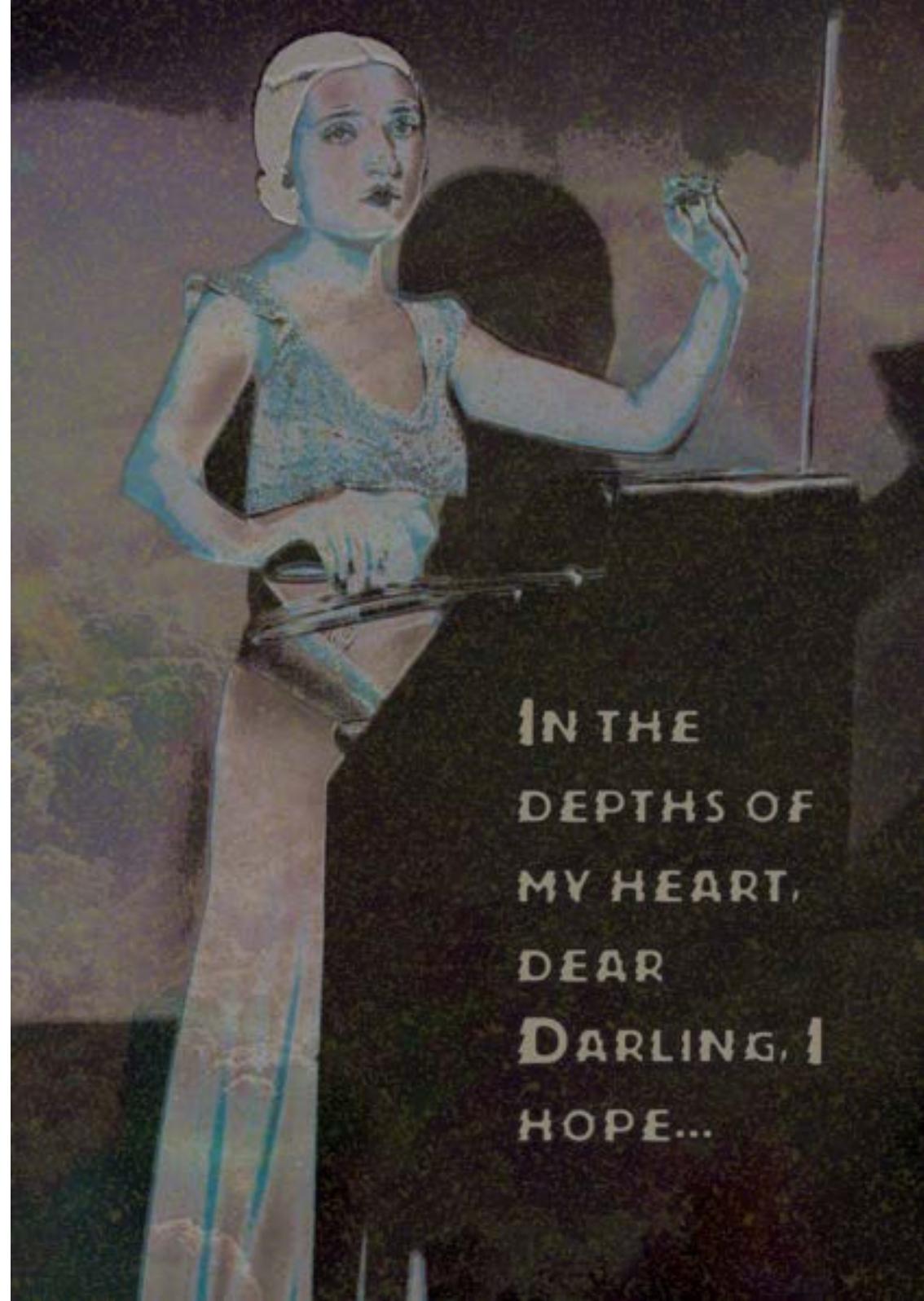
You do not touch the Theremin, you merely gesture above in an array of syncopated right hand movements while the left controls timbre and volume. I stroke my machine in honor of us all—seeing the wet slick tongues and glassy eyes locked on me as I begin to sing.

“Dreaming, I was only dreaming...” I breathe, the microphone on my pedestal catching my every word. *“I wake and I find you asleep...”*

I glance at *mein Professor*, my love, who clasps his heart, mouthing along with me as he continues to turn up the electrical current on the controlling platform.

Blue electrical charges now arc across the two posts mounted at my shoulders as sea-blue light emanates from my control panel. I tremble in anticipation of what comes next.

“In the depths of my heart, dear Darling, I hope,” I sing as my tongue slicks my open lips.



“That my dream never haunted you...”

Beyond the stage, I can hear them now. The moans and promises of love and adoration. Shadows moving as one in a pantomime of flesh. My nipples throb in anticipation of touch denied as I push my aching quim towards the vibrating metal.

“My heart is tellin' you... How much I wanted you...”

Words fail after that. My love spikes the voltage as I nestle against my trilling musical instrument. Suspended as I am, my sex the sole contact to the machine, I cry out in sizzling rapture.

My audience explodes in wet, desperate approval. Fireworks of images like the Kino before. Women's mouths to one other. Men impaled on eager thrusting sex. The sharp, bright scent of semen.

I am not alone in my triumph.

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It is then they attack—when we are most vulnerable—chained to desire, not caring who knows or sees us in abandon. I buck and writhe against my electric lover as the door breaks down to the club. Harsh, angry calls from the *Wölfe* in heat. Shots crack as screams punctuate our reverie. Lost in my cavalcade, I cannot stop myself as I ride against the throbbing machine. Wave after wave of crashing passion would drive me to my knees if not held tight by my bonds. My motions are none my own as I buck in full view of the *Schakale* who use truncheon, gun, and fist to subdue my audience. Cries of pain and horror mix with my own shrieks of pleasure as I try to contain my passion.

And cannot.

I look desperately to *mein Professor*—my mouth gaping, eyes pleading for him to cut the current.

He lies slumped against the main power switch, an ugly hole smoking in his forehead.

I cry out as the machine continues in cruel application as light flashes onto

me in wanton discovery. My fingers fly over the arms of the theremin, shrieking in fury at the marauders that have broken down the door force their way into my sanctum.

I see only flashes next.

The young guard from the tram pointing at me next to an older officer enjoying my torment. I had not been as careful as I thought in finding our place tonight and I have doomed us all.

I see the *Hundes* chase out the crowd—others raiding the bar and drinking freely as they jeer at me on display. The young guard from the tram, proud of himself.

I see their pig faces laughing through the flashing light.

My feet pull at my shoes knowing well my fate if they slip from the grounding platform.

Pushing back from the vibrations, I howl as I break contact with the wood.

In the instant before the power fires through me, I pray all die tonight.

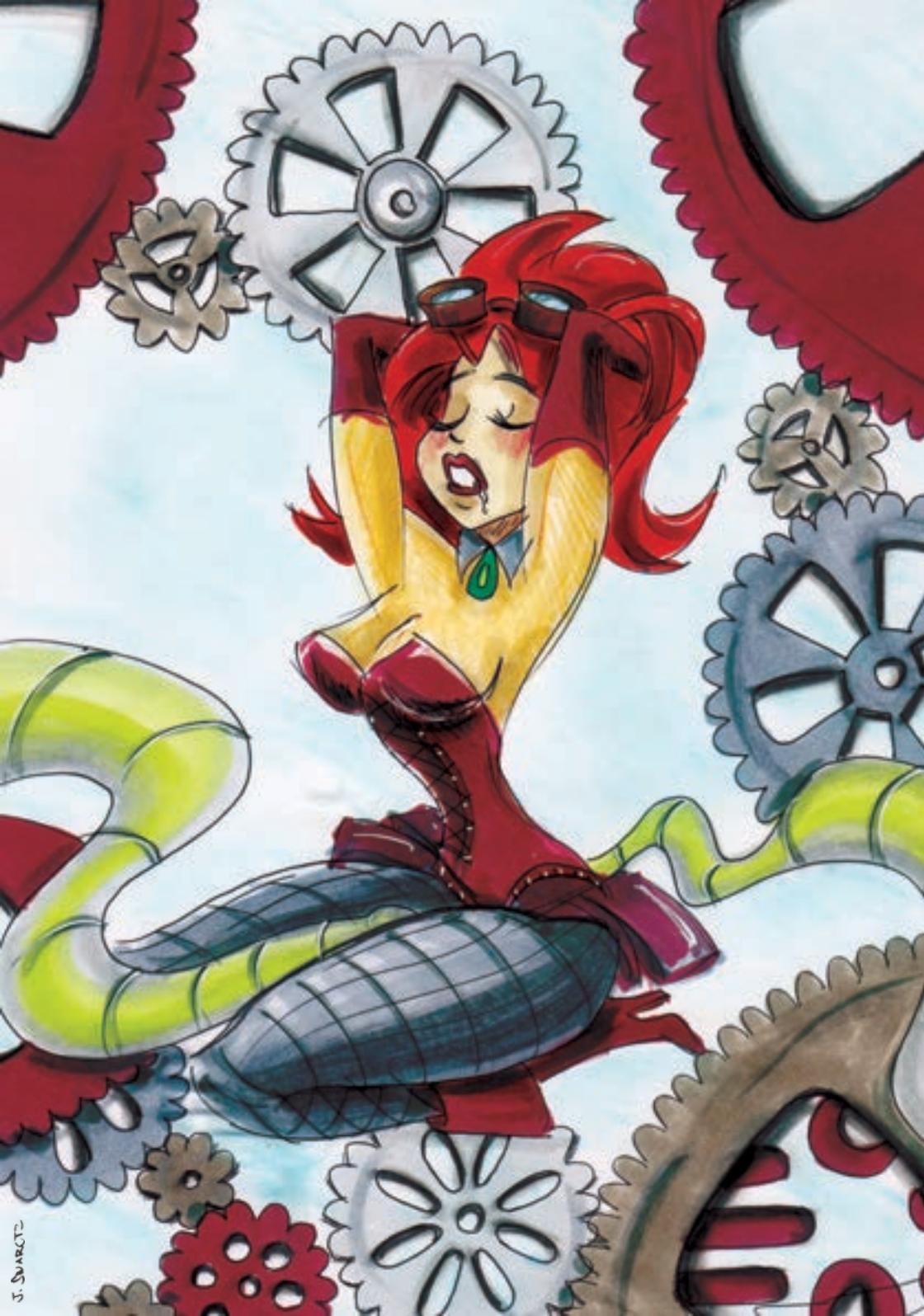
I burn so they are denied my *Ekstase* as *mein Professor's* generator explodes in protest.

Lang lebe die Freiheit! ■

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Julian Grant is a filmmaker, educator, and author of strange short stories, outlaw poetry, full-length novels/non-fiction texts and outsider comix. A tenured Associate Professor at Columbia College Chicago, his work has been published by *Dark Fire UK*, *Quail Bell*, *Avalon Literary Review*, *Crepe & Penn*, *Alternative History Magazine*, *Granfalloon*, *Altered Reality*, *The Chamber Magazine*, *Dark Lane Books*, *Clever Magazine*, *Peeking Cat Literary Journal*, *Danse Macabre*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Night Picnic*, *CafeLit*, *Horla*, *Bond Street Review*, *Piker Press*, *Retreats from Oblivion*, *Free Bundle*, *Filth Literary Magazine*, *Horror Sleaze Trash*, *The Mythic Circle*, *Murderous Ink Press*, *Superlative Literary Journal* & *The Adelaide Literary Magazine*. Find out more about him at www.juliangrant.com.



THE VERY BEST OF FUTURES WITH THE LADYSPIKE

by

Ralph Greco, Jr.

with an illustration by Joe Swarctz

The girls were whipping knots as we sluiced to periscope depth. Setting the toes of their short metallic boots, rolling their loosed ponytails around blushed downy necks, breasts heaving (even Julie who only sported firm little B-cups), each piston insertion worked my feminine engine to an unmitigated forth, their sweat (and other juices) flowing down and out the tendrils of the StemSuits, converting their secretions into engine steam via the hollowed-out, plasticine, octopus-like ductwork dangling from the ceiling. The trio of our current shift gave me a hearty smile in unison, knowing their tireless efforts were seeing us safely away from Dr. Malt and his crew.

Malt was none too happy with our progress of late, henceforth his giving chase south of São Paulo. We had had many a run in, that particular doctor and I, and I knew he as much had his eye on *The LadySpike* as he did my engine crew.

Who could blame him? What heterosexual man wouldn't be after these women? Luckily for me, I wasn't tempted in this manner as my particular desires ran to my own gender. Still, I did enjoy fitting the ladies into the StemSuits I had helped invent as much as they liked getting into them; the tight leather backpack deliciously pinching into their bare backs, the two

thick straps running under each woman's armpits pulling her prone, the heavy gum-heel ankle boots securing each pretty little barefoot, positioning the piston close to each woman's bare and oiled rear for quick access. I was as enamored by the look of my lady crew riding multiple orgasms to fuel my ship as I was just happy that they did so.

"Starboard, coming in fast," Bents grumbled loud enough to be heard above the rivets knocking and Cindy's guttural moans. The most vocal of all the women, she had a true skill for keeping herself riding the very crest of her waves as we rode under the crests of real ones.

I swung the periscope to me. The ship Bents was referring to was indeed gaining, a sleek metallic vessel I did not recognize even from viewing up under her.

"Take us down," I called.

"Aye, bulkhead flappers engaged," Bent replied, seeing to my command as the women suspended at the far corner groaned louder (Cindy meowed), and we made depth. These days, it was hard to know who were fellow smugglers lighting out to pry their pickings just as we did or what vessel might be the law—such that existed out here in wild southern waters. They may have even been agents of my arch-nemesis.

"Going," Bents said, and I 'felt' that unknown ship glide over us.

I sighed as we angled downward; these lower byways carry as much comfort as they do caution.

"Shzzz Akka'ak," I heard, then saw the grey snake attack Bents with such speed I barely had time to jump from my listing chair and knock him away from it.

"Siapa, sippa sippa," the undulating tube spoke as it bounced over the raised metal floor, spraying spunk steam far and wide.

In the exact moment that I lurched to get the undulating tube secure against the bulkhead, I spied Bents standing to brush himself off. My squat, best friend was the most resilient of crewmen; it was more Rachel I was worried about, sprawled as I suddenly saw her to the far corner, jettisoned as she was

out of her suit, harness, and that loosened tube. I braced for the worst but was happy to find the redhead merely unconscious folded in on her naked self, a bruise at her lower back, and a shallow slash across her right shoulder. Although professionals, their concern for Rachel won out, and Cindy and Julie unhooked themselves as I attended Rachel. Bents went back to the conn.

I do admit my mind, as it always is, was as much on the women as on the ship. Surely, I was concerned for the pretty, petite lady lying on the wet floor, and I recognized the need for her fellow sisters to attend to her, but I also had *The LadySpike* to worry about. The ship was the mother of us all and the lady we counted on the most. If we lost power because we spent too much time attending a fallen crew member, we'd all die.

"I better stay. Julie can get her down to Delilah," Cindy said, standing and seemingly reading my mind.

The tallest lady of my six wasn't being unkind as she was being practical. Like me, Cindy knew that, yes, our only Nubian crew member Julie could walk Rachel down to Delilah, our engine/nurse. But with those three engaged then in sickbay, and Angela and Season both not yet ready to return to their suits, we'd be short. Cindy took a step to hook herself back up (the women can do so certainly in emergencies, although we all prefer the ritual of me helping), smiling at me, realizing what I too had suddenly realized.

I stood fully, and turned to get Rachel's swinging pack over my head. There'd be time to figure out why Rachel's suit had given way. For now, though, I had to undress, and fast!

I was Captain, after all. ■



Ralph Greco, Jr. is a professional writer and musician living in the wilds of suburban NJ on the east coast of the United States. Ralph works in both the mainstream and the adult space and his essays, poetry, fiction, interviews, reviews, erotica and children's stories have appeared in nine countries. Ralph has had his one-act plays produced across the U.S., co-hosts the *Licking Non-Vanilla* podcast, and is an ASCAP licensed songwriter (Ralph's music can be found at the cleverly named, www.ralphgrecomusic.com) Ralph can be reached by writing ralphiedawriter@gmail.com

MY GIGOLO FROM THE GALAXY

by
LindaAnn LoSchiavo

Night's canopy dares me to steal away,
Rebellious, jumping that forbidden fence
To gather prized morels, their strong, distinct
Intensity appealing—curious
Excursions undertaken secretly.

Morchella have a symbiotic, deep
Relationship with trees, though unlike,
Attachments that help growing things survive.

An alien has been observing me.
Where'd you come from? What made me unafraid?

You plucked me from Earth, softening my limbs
In chemical light. I became your mate,
Lit from within, like mushrooms that can glow
In darkness, bioluminescent, strange
Befitting me, the beams igniting flesh.

Your not-hands cup each curve, warm, tenderly,
With extraordinary skill, hoist me
To not-lips that emit erotic sounds,
Transporting me to heights I've only dreamed
About 'til now. My skin looks new but pruned.

Was this your planet's purification,
My intergalactic, suave gigolo?

One moment floating through thin air
Together, wrapped in not-arms, we've escaped
Through time and space, strong currents pulling me
Along. But then you've vanished utterly.

My knees kiss forest soil and, fingertips
Away, green glowing fungi grow, as if
Predestined. "Just a dream, a fantasy!"
I think—except my thumb cap's been tattooed,
Gold runes encircling it like a ring.



Native New Yorker **LindaAnn LoSchiavo**, a Pushcart Prize, Rhysling Award, and Dwarf Stars nominee, is a member of SFPA and The Dramatists Guild. Elgin Award winners, "*A Route Obscure and Lonely*" and "*Concupiscent Consumption*," are her latest poetry titles. Forthcoming: "*Women Who Were Warned*" by Cerasus Poetry [May, 2022] and a full-length collection in hardcover by Beacon Books. She has been leading a poetry critique group for two years. Her Texas Guinan film won "Best Feature Documentary" at N.Y. Women's Film Fest (Dec. 2021).



KARNAK DESIRE

by

Eloi Roman Bengochea

Hugh McAndy's penultimate dream was to bring his girlfriend to the Temple of Karnak in Egypt, find another willing participant for a ménage à trois, and fornicate under the stars from dusk until dawn.

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To accomplish this, McAndy required funds—a lot of funds. Unfortunately, the little chap didn't have much to call his own except for a paltry inheritance from his late grandfather, Mr. Peaslin, who had worked for several years as a gentleman usher. Incidentally, Peaslin was a bit of a history buff in his spare time, with a particular interest in worshipping at the altar of Venus.

As it happens, one day, as McAndy was walking by a lottery kiosk, the words "Maypole Jackpot" caught his eye. Curiosity aroused, he purchased a ticket.

Then, he forgot all about it.

One day, as winter began its transition to spring, McAndy rediscovered the

lucky ticket and decided to check the numbers.

The rest, as they say, is history...

The first thing McAndy did after claiming his winnings was to visit Mrs. Fubb's Parlour for a drink and a lobster pot pie. After that, he began to plan his ancient Egyptian sexcapade.

McAndy didn't have too much difficulty convincing his girlfriend, Kitty Redlane, to go along with his plan. Her pretty blue eyes widened and twinkled as Hugh described in graphic detail how their night in Egypt would unfold.

Their main problem now was how to find another woman to join them to play rumpscuttle and clapperdepouch on the banks of the Nile. Hugh assured Kitty that a local prostitute would be easy enough to find. Kitty agreed.

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So off they went to the land of the pharaohs.

A local fixer, an expat named Don Cypriano, greeted Kitty and Hugh at the airport in Cairo.

In the taxi on the way to the hotel, the pair asked Cypriano if he could help them find a prostitute when they arrived in Luxor. Cypriano, always obliging, assured them that he knew just the person.

After a night in Cairo, Hugh and Kitty boarded a dahabiya boat that would take them down the Nile and drop them off in Luxor.

The boat ride was uneventful. Ten days later, with stops at the great sights and museums along the way, the boat finally arrived at its destination.

The pair disembarked and made their way to the Barnaby Hotel, just a hop, skip, and jump away from the Temple of Karnak.

After Hugh and Kitty checked in, they were told to remain in the lobby for

a minute, whereupon a tall, gorgeous woman in sunglasses came forward with her hand extended—her name was Cupcake, the prostitute Don Cypriano had arranged for them.

"We are set for tomorrow evening?" Cupcake asked with a sexy accent that made Hugh feel tingly inside.

"Absolutely," replied Hugh and Kitty, almost in perfect unison, awestruck by her exotic beauty.

The next day Kitty and Hugh slept all day, charging up their batteries for the night ahead.

•••

The bed, fitted with the most luxurious, snow-white Egyptian linens stood on a raised, golden platform. It was placed among a row of thick, ancient, sky-high columns adorned with hieroglyphs.

Kitty stripped, climbed on the bed, and gestured to Cupcake with her index finger, beckoning her to join.

Cupcake peeled off her dress and crawled provocatively across the bed toward Kitty. The soft moonlight made Cupcake's beautiful, tanned breasts glisten like golden orbs. She began to kiss Kitty gently on the neck, slowly making her way down her body.

Hugh strutted up to the bed and dove between the two women.

Kitty and Cupcake then turned and refocused their attention on Hugh. They took turns kissing him passionately while slowly undressing him.

Finally, after an hour or so of foreplay, Cupcake backed up to the foot of the bed and motioned Hugh to get behind her. Recognizing that Cupcake had requested the corkscrew position, Hugh hopped off the bed and took his place at the edge. Cupcake let out a breathy gasp as Hugh slid into her. Meanwhile Kitty placed her body in such a way that she could kiss Hugh

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passionately on the lips while Cupcake provided her with pleasure from below.

Just as Cupcake and Kitty were about to climax, Hugh felt an eerie presence behind him. At first he thought maybe it was Kitty's hand brushing up against his arm, but whatever it was, it felt rough and scaly.

Suddenly alarmed, he turned his head to have a look and let out a bloodcurdling scream. The two women opened their half closed eyes, shrieked, and scrambled away toward the top of the bed.

What they now beheld was unfathomable.

A tall, strong man wearing what appeared to be a crocodile mask was holding a fully naked Hugh firmly by the arms just above his elbows. The giant had lifted Hugh several feet off the ground.

Suddenly, the atmosphere changed. Ancient scents, probably frankincense, began to waft through the air, and Cupcake disappeared.

The crocodilian effortlessly tossed Hugh on the bed.

Dishevelled, disoriented, half erect, his member twirling like a helicopter blade as he flew, Hugh landed next to Kitty, who was now scrambling to cover her nakedness with the linens.

"I am Sobek, the one Egyptians have anointed their crocodile god," said the menacing giant in a clear, authoritative tone.

A row of Egyptian soldiers wearing golden masks with holes cut out for the eyes, nose, and mouth appeared from nowhere and formed a line behind Sobek as he spoke.

Kitty and Hugh looked at each other, and they both started to scream.

"Quiet!" bellowed the crocodile god, "You have desecrated the holy Temple of Karnak with your actions. Do you not have any shame?"

Kitty began to sputter out some words: "What... What... Where? What is this place?"

"You are as sharp as you are attractive. Your instincts are correct, I have transported both of you back in time, 2,300 revolutions of your sun. It is here, in this time, that you will recreate this act except 100 times over, as an orgy of 300 participants, if you ever wish ever to return to your own time!"

Hugh, his adrenaline subsiding and confidence returning, managed to mutter, "Mister... Mr. Sawback..."

"SOBEK!" the crocodilian giant corrected him.

"I mean Mr. Sobek," Hugh was careful to get it right this time, "I don't understand."

"What's not to understand, human? I have stated the charge against you and clearly laid out the terms of your punishment."

"What have you done with Cupcake?" Kitty spat, interrupting the exchange.

"She has been left in your time—she was an innocent party, cajoled into this by you." Sobek directed his ice-cold, reptilian gaze at Hugh.

Kitty was relieved Cupcake hadn't been harmed. That woman is incredible, she thought to herself, biting her lower lip.

"You have been told what you must do," said Sobek.

Suddenly, there was a loud thunder clap. The bed vanished, and the pair now found themselves on the cold, hard ground of the temple.

When Hugh and Kitty looked up, Sobek and the soldiers had disappeared.

"What the fuck just happened?" Kitty asked, turning her head toward Hugh.

Kitty's eyes said it all—*this is all your fault!*

They could hear footsteps and the murmurs of priests and priestesses emanating from the shadows of the temple.

“I have no idea what’s happening, Kitty,” said Hugh, “But, look around you, we’ve definitely travelled back in time. We have to find a way to get back to our own time, otherwise, we could be trapped here forever.”

Actually, I can think of worse places to be trapped, Kitty silently thought to herself, her eyes following the grand columns upward, eventually glimpsing the streak of stars making up the milky way over ancient Egypt.

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Taking advantage of the dark, Kitty and Hugh managed to sneak out of the temple and took sanctuary in a nearby cave, which became their temporary shelter.

Getting back to their time wouldn’t be easy.

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“That Sawback guy is nuts!” Hugh exclaimed, “He wants us to arrange an orgy with 300 participants in ancient Egypt? We have no money, no clout. We can’t even speak the bloody language. We’re royally fucked.” He pounded the desert sand with his fists.

Hugh and Kitty thought about the possibilities: using spells, mass hypnosis, or hallucinogens. At the museum in Cairo, Kitty had read about how the ancient Egyptians used the blue lotus flower from the Nile as a mild hallucinogenic drug, and she wondered if it could be harnessed to get enough people to participate in their orgy.

They threw around ideas for hours, but they eventually ended where they had started—at a complete loss. They were trapped in a place with none of the comforts of home, none of the conveniences of the modern world, no phones, no computers, nothing.

“I’ll go,” Kitty finally declared.

“What do you mean? Go where?”

“I’ll go find Sobek and plead for mercy. I’ll ask him to send us back.”

“And what makes you think he’ll oblige?” asked Hugh.

“If I ask him at his temple, he can’t say no, especially if it’s on a holy night—that’s what the exhibit at the Cairo museum said.”

“I dunno, sweetie, this could be dangerous.”

“It’s the only way, Hugh—we’ve got nothing to lose.”

Kitty was adamant, and when Kitty had made up her mind, nothing Hugh said could ever stop her.

“Promise me, you’ll be back in three days.”

“I won’t promise.” Kitty smiled. “But I’ll try.”

•••

That night, Hugh and Kitty made their way to the shores of the Nile. Hugh spotted a raft and quickly unmoored it. He silently gestured for Kitty to get on. Kitty pounced on the raft, catlike, barely making a sound. Hugh waved goodbye as the raft was picked up by the current and began to float down the river.

Kitty disembarked at Kom Ombo a few hours later, and as soon as she climbed up to the main thoroughfare, she found herself in a procession of young virgins being led to the Temple of Sobek. At the gate, priestesses greeted the women, made them undress, bathed them in rose water, and made them put on fine chiffon garb perfumed with the most pleasant nectars.

The women were then led into an antechamber where—from what Kitty could tell—they were instructed to wait.

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Ever resourceful, and with a good sense of direction, Kitty snuck out, making her way deeper into the temple. Finally, she tiptoed into Sobek's inner sanctum dressed in her chiffon priestess gown which left nothing to the imagination—the gown highlighted the soft, luscious curves of her body.

The air in the room was rich with the sweet smell of incense.

Suddenly, she had a feeling that Sobek was behind her.

"I thought I sensed your presence in my chambers," said Sobek softly, whispering into her ear. Oddly, hearing Sobek's voice echo through the chamber made Kitty's heart skip a beat.

She turned to face Sobek, but he looked different—he had assumed the appearance of a tall, handsome Adonis with features and muscles that looked like they were cut from stone. There was a large blue lotus flower peeking out from his shiny, black hair.

"What brings you here, my fair maiden?"

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Kitty was unable to speak. Then, she murmured softly, "I came to ask for mercy for me and H—"

Sobek placed his index finger on her lips, and Kitty, overcome with desire, immediately began to kiss his finger. The crocodile god lifted her and placed her gently on the altar.

She glanced down and saw Sobek's throbbing male appendage shaped like a large obelisk that widened dramatically toward the base.

Hours of intense intercourse followed. Kitty groaned, gasped, and pleaded for more. She discovered pleasure nodes in her body that she hadn't realized existed, and she reached rapturous heights that were previously unattainable to her. It was like a door to a new realm of sensations had opened up, and she never wanted it to close.

...

Three days passed, then a week, and soon it had been an entire month since Kitty's departure.

Hugh began to worry that Kitty might be in danger.

In the meantime, he had found work at a quarry just outside Luxor hewing large blocks of granite. He was making some money now. Hugh noticed there were many foreign workers at the quarry who spoke their own languages. He couldn't speak any of them, so he kept to himself.

One day, after his shift ended, Hugh decided to find Kitty and bring her back. He went down to the Nile and hired a flat bottomed skiff which dropped him off at Sobek's Temple in Kom Ombo.

He waited until dusk and snuck into the relatively unguarded temple complex, making his way to the inner sanctum.

Suddenly, a priest discovered Hugh in the hallway. Just as the priest was about to cry for help, Hugh put his panicked adversary into a choke hold until he stopped squirming. He then dragged the priest's limp body into a quiet corner, undressed him, and donned his cloak.

Hugh followed some sounds and a voice he thought might be Kitty's all the way to the inner sanctum.

He rounded a corner and found himself in a sweet smelling, candle-lit room. There, he saw Kitty, riding a man on an altar in reverse cowboy.

When Kitty opened her eyes and saw Hugh, she stopped gyrating and gasped. "Hugh! What are you..."

Kitty dismounted her well-endowed partner, and the handsome man she had been fucking arose from the altar. Hugh immediately realized the man was Sobek, who was now donning his crocodilian face.

"What the fuck? Sawback!"

"SOBEK!" the reptilian yelled.

"You're fucking my girlfriend now?!"

"Yes—it seems your lady has taken a fancy to me."

"You piece of..." Hugh looked around for a weapon, but none were to be found.

"Hugh," Kitty spoke up, "Listen, I'm not leaving."

"Kitty, please. We have an orgy to arrange!"

"No, Hugh, look, there won't be any orgy! I'm staying, and that's that. Sobek is going to make me a queen!"

"Yes, we will go back several more revolutions of your sun, and I will install you as Hatshepsut, my lovely Queen of the Nile," said Sobek, addressing Kitty in a smooth, yet authoritative sing-song voice, "And what a fine queen you will make!"

"Kitty, what the hell is this asshole talking about?"

With that, Sobek raised one hand and said, "Read!" pointing to the column to the right covered in symbols with his other webbed, clawed hand.

"I can't read hieroglyphs, you half-baked lizard!" Hugh exclaimed.

"READ!" Sobek repeated sternly, trying to contain his rage.

Amazed, Hugh found that he could comprehend all of the strange inscriptions on the wall of the inner sanctum.

What was written was beyond belief.

The hieroglyphs recounted how an alien reptilian species had left their home planet after their sun began to die and arrived on earth in large



spaceships. They had landed in the Nile Valley and made contact with the ancient Egyptians. These reptilians had the uncanny ability to travel back and forth through time as they pleased, taking anyone or anything they wanted to take with them. Not surprisingly, the reptilians were regarded as gods by the ancient Egyptians who venerated them.

“Behold, I have brought you two back to what is basically the start of the reptilian age,” Sobek explained, his hands extended, his snake-like eyes firmly fixed on Hugh, “We reptilians will thrive on your warm planet. Your lifespan is akin to a mayfly compared to ours. We will be masters of your race, as we are masters of illusion. We will dictate the present and the future. I have given you the privilege of witnessing how you got to where you were. Are you not amused?” Sobek’s mouth stretched into the faintest of cold, reptilian grins.

With that, Hugh watched in awe as Sobek transformed himself into a very handsome man, followed by a strikingly beautiful woman with a blue lotus flower in her hair.

77 “Come with me,” said Sobek in female form.

After hours of being served horizontal refreshment, Hugh re-emerged—he was now a changed man.

Sobek stood behind Hugh in a sheer, blue dress, retaining the appearance of a stunning female with full breasts, auburn hair, and azure eyes like the lotus flower in her hair. She ran her fingers through Hugh McAndy’s hair, making his body quiver like a Nile reed.

“You, I will make Senmut,” she said, in a most alluring voice, “Courtier and lover of Hatshepsut, Queen of Egypt.”

Kitty smiled.

“Yay! We’ll be together again!” she squealed with excitement.

Sobek resumed his original, reptilian appearance and called Kitty and Hugh to his side.

Hugging both of them in each of his scaly arms, he said, “My little scullions, you will do my bidding while we rule all of Egypt together! And to keep you in this timeframe, all orgies shall be limited to 299 participants! So let it be written!”

With that, Sobek let out a hearty laugh.

“Ulaaka’am ennut’taiyatu,” he said in ancient Egyptian—the world is ours. ■

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Eloi Roman Bengochea was born in Vanuatu but now resides in Hamilton, Ontario. His recent anthology, *Rebels and Exiles: An Anthology of Dystopian Sci-Fi* has been published by Planetesimal Press, publishers of *Granfalloon*, *Speculative Fiction Zine*. This is his first erotic short story set in ancient Egypt.

LOVE POEM TO A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR

(FOR MYRON W. NEAL III)

by
Deborah Thomas

I want to send this Valentine
To you, my engineer,
in a user-friendly language
so my feelings are quite clear.

You found me just as if I were
an operating system,
With complex codes from Microsoft
So many, you can't list 'em.

You studied me, before we met, examined my
directories
for preferences in music,
wine, and sexual expectories.

We met; you scanned me carefully, And whispered
your conclusion: My blue eyes, at .1 dot pitch,
Foretold fine resolution.

You asked if I were intimate
with user protocol,
and whether, in the end, I would allow you to install

a network rich with memory
completely uninhibited,

with gigabytes of software
and sole access to you limited.

You held my hand, and absently would double click my
knuckle The closer it would get to your Snapped shirt and
your belt buckle.

You offered me your spreadsheet and you taught me
how to use it. You installed it in my laptop
Where I'd likely not abuse it.

You swore you'd read my hypertext whenever it
appeared,
You threw away password protect. Old messages were
cleared.

My poems, the programs that I wrote, You read, though
I'm no Plath, as if you'd find my heart in their
AUTOEXEC.BAT. path.

Although your history with kids Was brief, you were my
icon,
For it was you who got the air
For tires to ride the bike on.

Now, when ants are in the bathroom, and the kids want
pre-dawn hugs, I look to you for your advice.
You're good at fixing bugs.

And when we go out in the car, My door, you activate.
You launch my chair at dinner, Make eye contact while
we wait.

You offer me the MENU
And absorb the big expenses,
And whenever I've forgotten mine, You offer me your
lenses.

You format me for breakfasts
and you renovate my chassis
With romantic trips to mountain springs. You treat my
dog like Lassie.

You help me optimize my house, You help define the grey
scale. You make electric things turn on, And make fun of
my junk mail.

You bring wood to the fireplace, You help me to reboot.
You put up with user group's
behavior that's not cute.

But most of all, you fill my head with megabytes of laughter,
and ongoing connections
that are sweet forever after.

I find you on my monitor
responsive, every day
It means so much to me to know you're never far away.
Your cheerful voice, your silliness reminds me of my own,
This comfort of connectedness is one I've never known.

You're now a power user,
of my software and my drives, I'm working on the licensing
Required of ex-wives,

I hope you'll open up Drive C and download all of this,
And let it prompt you, night or day, As if it were a kiss.

And if you need a hand from me, I'll soothe your MHz,
Defrag your ROM just like your mom, And sometimes iron
your shirts.

I love to cook you dinner,
and make coffee dense as DOSKEY, then to find a landscape
posture in your arms to hear Bukowski.

You needn't ask, I'll multitask in every way I can,
Sweep your garage—or do massage To Ethernet our LAN.

Let me be your docking station Be your mother board, to start.
I would love a hard connection to The circuits of your heart.

Let me feel you boot your system in the morning when you
wake, Let me keep your programs flowing Even when they
are half baked.

Let me be your surge protector, Let me be your on/off switch.
I will be your back up copy
And try not to be a bitch.

I love you more than memory, and more than all the power
from an upgrade to your laptop, or from singing in the
shower,
I envy all the keys that feel
your touch when you're logged on,
I'd love to be the mouse you hold
when working until dawn,

But I love the way you hold me
when we're quiet, late at night,
So I'll share you with the Internet,
And be your faithful byte.

When all is said and done, my love, I'll write—protect each
word,
And send it to my Valentine,
My sweet beloved nerd.

Love, from Deborah, on Valentine's Day, 1997.



Deborah Thomas lives in Cape Meares, Oregon, and has been writing poetry since she learned how to read and write. Her work has appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *The Seneca Review*, *The Friendly Street Poetry Reader*, *Northwest Review*, *Red Sky*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, and *Prometheus Dreaming*. She has given invited readings at The University of Auckland, The University of Rochester Plutzik Poetry Series, Writer's Week in Adelaide, SA. After winning a love poem contest on "A Prairie Home Companion," she was interviewed by host, Garrison Keillor, and read her "Anniversary Poem" on the air. She has self-published a book of poetry for friends and family, "The Light in the Refrigerator", and is working on a novel about how a village of 65 retired residents deal with an imminent earthquake and tsunami off the Oregon Coast. She writes what she most wants to tell her children, but not necessarily at the dinner table.



BEDROOM EYES

by
Kris Cherita

The shield goes up, and one woman turns to face the window then swings her chair around to face me. She's already naked, but keeps her thighs together and rubs a finger over her palm, impatiently waiting for me to slide a tip through the slit in the glassteel. She looks too young for my taste. Her breasts are too large for her skinny frame, almost too round and firm and perfect to be real. Genemod, maybe, or old fashioned implants. Feeling vaguely hypocritical, I look past her to the other woman in the booth. She's voluptuous almost to the point of being plump, and her red hair isn't entirely convincing though maybe that's the lighting, but she looks real. The one facing me might almost be CGI.

The shield descends, and I wait before feeding more money into the slot. This time, the redhead is looking back at me with a faint smile. My face doesn't startle her; I get the feeling she's not only shown everything, she's seen everything, and she understands why I'm here even though I obviously could afford better. Her smile widens at the size of the tip I give her, as does the gap between her knees. My gaze is drawn down to that



heart-shaped patch of auburn hair, and she leans back and raises her knees to let me see even more. She rubs her clit, her lips part slightly, and a drop of moisture trickles down to her asshole.

She laughs softly at my expression. “You an ass man, honey? Or a tit man?”

I look at her face again, and before I can answer, she hefts one of her large pendulous breasts and runs her tongue around the areola. The pink nipple reddens and swells, and I gasp. Once upon a time, that would have been enough to push me over the edge. My hand stays in my pocket as she goes from licking to kissing, to sucking, to biting. Her left hand drifts back down to her clit, and soon I don’t know where to look, my gaze going up and down as though nodding agreement to anything she might suggest. Then she presses her breasts against the glass while she fumbles around looking for something, then sits back and slides a long dildo up between those enormous breasts and licks the tip. Soon her tongue is going crazy, sliding from nipple to dildo to nipple, and I bang my head against the glass as I lose control completely. I don’t even see the shield slide down again.

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I can remember a time when there was no glassteel, when an extra twenty would have let me fondle breasts like those, a time when I could have done much more than watch...

But some prosthetics are better than others. They can’t restore my sense of touch. But I can walk again, and my memory works well enough; I can see even better than I could when I first sneaked into one of these places, a hundred years ago. ■



Kris Cherita is the smut-writing evil twin of a science fiction and urban fantasy novelist who wishes to remain pseudonymous.

JOROGUMO

by

Richard Stevenson

Jorogumo's no Anansi imp;
ain't no Japanese tarantula.
Can shape shift into a femme fatale –

An any-kind-you-fancy Nancy
or Betty Noir. Buxom brunette
with or without mole? Lusty surfer blonde?

Or black, high cheek and long-boned –
the kind you wanna take home to ma.
Exotic Asian – whatever amazin' cliché

you got goin', she'll materialize for you.
Imagine the crookin' capabilities
of eight fingers in two. That hullabaloo.

She's gonna bleed you of your every resource
and then suck your soul thorough a hole
you didn't know you had. Lust and pride? Poof!

She'll ride you out to the sunset
and suck every bit of succulence
outta yer tired hide. Then abide

as a plump spider in a twelve-foot nest
in the forest between trees. Don't do
to get on yer knees when you sproing into that net!

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Richard Stevenson recently retired from a 30-year English and Creative Writing teaching gig at Lethbridge College and moved to Nanaimo, B.C. He has published thirty books and a jazz/poetry disc with Naked Ear.

THE HERO

by

Elaine Wilbur

Two months after the landing, Ship UXB-69311 was rigged out with most things needed to make life bearable, if not interesting, for the crew. Perched on the manicured, blue-green sod of the planet Engraham, its inner parts were transformed and refitted for the many months of the Exploration. No effort and no flight of imagination had been spared to make the ship resemble more a country club than a barracks. With the permission of Colonel Mondrain, the crew's bunk room had been completely rearranged, and a segment thereof made into a quietly elegant bar. Plans for this eventual rejuvenation had been fomenting throughout the very tiresome and very monotonous journey.

When they first landed, the natives fled, and thus it was easy to liberate furnishings from the adjacent village. When the inhabitants returned, after the purposes of the visiting Earthman were acknowledged to be harmless, they proved to be too courteous to carp about a few missing articles.

The chairs, of a very advanced design and most comfortable, were made of a light and durable metal alloy thus far unknown to Earth. The bar (which was probably not its purpose on Engraham, no one knew or cared what its function had been) was of a design so futuristic that it would have turned a modern artist mad. The glassware, also liberated, was unbelievably delicate, yet strong and easy to wash. At first, since the Earth had not intended the Exploration to resemble the type that Texas-stationed servicemen like to run in Matamoros, there was nothing to drink from those glasses. But hardly six weeks had passed before the first hero of the Exploration, a man named O'Connors, discovered a palatable fruit growing on nearby bushes. By means of a system of improvised



pipes (also liberated) it was no time at all before tasty beverages, somewhat strident but quite effective, were being run off and consumed in quantities. The machine known as O'Connors Joy-Juicer was concealed behind the bar, and all that was ever seen on the bar when Colonel Mondrain or the Doctors were around was an innocuous fruit juice.

The Earth Command had stocked the ship with reading material, most of it of a disgustingly educational nature, in photostatic cards: and the second hero of the Exploration was a man named Kosalowsky, who discovered in the psychology sections the works of Freud and Krafft-Ebing. After this discovery, a few interesting discussions arose.

After these changes had been made, there was very little to do.

The Earth Command had assumed that the natives of Engraham would resent the Exploration (most planets did), and so had sent along the crew of thirty men for protection. All had labored mightily to become part of this special crew, chosen for endurance and known, war-like qualities. For once they got back to Earth, all were slated to be mustered out of service immediately, decorated to the ears, and awarded full, life-time pensions. Many already had contracts to appear on television, and one man, Blunt, hinted at a long term Hollywood contract.

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But once they got to Engraham, there was little to do after all. A guard was posted; instruments were checked; and, although the necessity seemed slight, the ship was kept primed for instantaneous emergency take-off. On the day corresponding to Earth's Saturday, the ship was G.I.'d from stem to stern. The maintenance crew made sure that no parts deteriorated or got liberated by enterprising natives. But the natives were not an inventive race. It was discovered by the Doctors (Anker, Frank, Pelham, and Flandeau) that the natives literally did not know how to steal. They were backward. Dr. Flandeau, who was making great strides with the language, reported that there was some evidence that the Engrahamites had once possessed this skill, along with murder, mayhem, bad faith, and politics, but had lost it, through a deterioration of the species.

Thus, once the ship had been transformed into a place worthy of human dwelling, and the beverage question had been solved, and utter, imbecilic boredom circumvented by the timely discoveries of Freud and Krafft-Ebing, the men found time hanging heavily on their hands; and the more the doctors discovered about the Engrahamites, the more dismal the situation became. The doctors, growing more and more fascinated by their tasks, left the ship bright and early each day, returning around nightfall to reduce their growing stacks of data to points of Earthly relevance. The Colonel was also out most of the time. He paid many social

calls on the natives, who, being courteous, received him, and was often returned at night in a chauffeured native Hop-Hop. Life in the bunkroom became a sullen round of poker, reading of Krafft-Ebing, and gab: and Earth currency changed hands daily in the never-ending crap game.

For there was one great lack in their lives. This lack, and the inability to do anything about it, absorbed many hours of conversation. At first, complaints only occurred at intervals; but as weeks passed, the lamentations became so fervent, so constant, and so heart-rending, that Dr. Flandeau observed to Dr. Frank that more stirring passages had not been made since the Jeremiad. For Dr. Flandeau, although aging, was in his off hours a poet, and a Frenchman always.

Dr. Frank said, "Yes, well, poor bastards."

At first, nostalgically, the crew harked back to happier times on Earth. Soon not one young lady of their collective acquaintance had escaped the most minute analysis. They were young men—the oldest, Blunt, was only twenty-six—and several of them had married young, greatly limiting their activities so that even their cumulative memories could not last forever. After several weeks, repetition began to set in. Once all successes had been lovingly remembered, down to the last, exquisite detail, they began recalling their failures. The master strategist, the unofficial referee of these seminars, was Dick Blunt.

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"Now where you went wrong there," he would tell a fledgling reporting complete zero with a YWCA resident, "was in making her feel that you were interested. Your line with a girl like that should be one of charity. Pure charity. You impress on her that you're doing her a terrific favor. You offer to bring to her dull life romance, adventure, tenderness."

"I couldn't even get my hands on her," complained the reprov'd failure, Herbert Banks.

The testiness, the self-pity, the shortness of temper and the near-riots over stolen packages of cigarettes, were not improved after the Doctors, having surveyed the situation thoroughly, decided that it would do no harm to let the men of the crew go out on Liberty.

Fraternizing with natives was, of course, strictly forbidden. They were not to drink off premises. (Nor on, for that matter). They were exhorted not to steal and not to engage in fights.

Still, they could walk around, take pictures of the strange pink houses and the

dazzling cities. They could watch a covey of children swim in the municipal pools. They could look at the fountains, the so-called “miraculous fountains of Engraham,” or climb the strange, glassy mountains. The natives, although shy of them, were most polite, and some smiled enchantingly—especially the women.

This was the worst rub of all: there were women, and they were gorgeous. A little smaller than most Earth women, with bright eyes, and high, arched eyebrows, looking forever as if they had heard the most priceless joke. Their faces conformed to the most rigid standards of Earthly beauty. Their legs, so delicate, so tapering, so fantastically small of ankle, were breathtaking. Their clothes, which would have driven a Parisian designer to suicide, were draped carelessly over the most exquisite figures. True, they were a little deficient in one department, and this was explained, before they were granted liberty, by Dr. Flandeau. The women of Engraham, he said, did not bear children.

This announcement was not received with special gloom, for until then, none of the crew had seen an Engrahamite woman. But Willy Lanham, a dark-haired, skinny boy from Tennessee, asked, unhappily, “Don’t they even go in for games or nothin’?”

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Flandeau understood instantly. He shook his head sadly. “I should think not. It has been a long time since they have observed the normal functions. The women are mainly for decoration, although it is said that some are also created for brains. They are a most strange people.”

After this—granted these agonizing liberties, and able to see that which was biologically unattainable—the crew became so demoralized that not even Kosalowsky’s discovery of the works of Wilhelm Reik relieved the deep gloom.

However, they had reckoned without the superior genius of Dick Blunt. Blunt received Flandeau’s news as unhappily as the others, and, like the rest, was made miserable by the sight of the glorious damsels. But he was a reasonable man and he put his reasoning powers to work. Soon he alone was cheerful. He went around with the absorbed, other-worldly look of a physicist grappling with a problem in ionospheric mathematics without the use of a computer. One day he went on Liberty alone. He did not return until the fall of night, and when he came in his elation was so immoderate that the others thought there must be bars on Engraham after all.

“I have found the answer to our question,” he said.

No one needed to ask what question. O’Connors hurried to pour Blunt a drink.

“I have spent the day pursuing this answer logically,” said Blunt. “I have done what any thoughtful man would do. I have read up on it.”

“How?” cried Henderson.

“At the library.”

Blunt then described his day: finding his way to the library by means of pantomime; and finding at last, that file of photographs—photographs of an utterly self-explanatory nature. And these he pulled from his pocket, for ignoring all discipline, he had stolen them.

The pictures passed from hand to hand. O’Connors passed them on to Pane, and suddenly felt the need to open the window behind him. It was Willy Lanham, the boy from Tennessee, who voiced those exultant words that rose to the throats of all:

He said, “Hey! They’re made just like the Earth girls.”

The conversation, at this intensely interesting point, was cut short by the arrival of the Colonel. He alighted from the native Hop-Hop, waved cheerily to its driver, and began coming up. The bottle and glasses vanished, and Kosalowsky began to read aloud from a book especially reserved for these occasions. The men maintained looks of studious interest as the officer went through. He went up the ladder to his own quarters, there to write in his growing volume, *THE COMING OCCUPATION AND GOVERNMENT OF ENGRAHAM*. They listened until his door clicked.

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The conversation was resumed in more subdued tones.

“Do you think,” said Pane shakily, “They still could?”

“Not a question of it,” Blunt said. “These pictures prove it. It’s what you might call a *lost art*. Once upon a time, as with all the fortunate parts of the galaxy, this art was known to the Engrahamites. Through some terrific foul-up, they lost it. Probably a combination of the science of incubation, and the reign of some ghastly square, like Queen Victoria. Thus were the girls of Engraham deprived of the pleasures of lovemaking.”

“The men, too,” said Willy. All glared at him reproachfully. To care about the happiness of the Engrahamite men was thought not quite patriotic.

“Gradually,” Blunt went on, “they must have begun to lose interest. Probably

there was some taboo. In the end they probably all thought, oh, to hell with it, and began serving on committees.”

A long sigh went up.

“It is for us,” Blunt said softly, treasuring each word, “to restore these unhappy maidens to their original Engrahamite rights!”

“But it isn’t going to be easy,” Blunt went on. His voice dropped even lower. “Think what would happen if it went sour. Those Doctors would get wind of it. We’d be stuck in the ship for the rest of the Exploration.”

There was a sober pause. Finally Banks cleared his throat and said, “Well, how do you think it should be handled, Blunt?”

“Well, every beachhead needs an invasion,” Blunt said, casually holding out his glass. O’Connors leapt to fill it. “One guy has got to lay the groundwork. Let him enlighten one lady. Explain things to her.” He took a long, leisurely drink, and sighed. “This lady will rush around telling the others. Pretty soon there’ll be so many hanging around the ship that—”

95 There was a general rush for cooling beverages.

“Right,” someone said, when the faculty of speech was recovered.

“And necessarily,” said Blunt, “this has to be the guy with the most savvy. The one who knows the score. The one most likely to succeed. Check?”

All knew what this was leading up to. Martin said unhappily, “Check, Blunt, you’re our boy.”

Blunt was scheduled to stand guard the next day, but Willy Lanham, eager to assist the cause, volunteered to take over for him. The hours seemed to creep by. His air was swaggering and cool when he returned, and all gathered round with eager curiosity—all but Lanham, who had not recovered from standing guard.

Blunt sauntered to the bar, accepted a drink, sipped it, lit a cigarette, and took a long, pensive drag. Finally he said reminiscently, “What a doll!”

Pane, never a subtle man, cried in anguish, “Well, how’d you make out?”

Blunt smiled smugly. He began his recital. He was walking along the street

and he met this gorgeous creature. A full description followed (broken by the arrival of the Colonel and two paragraphs of the DECLINE AND FALL) making it clear that this was the dish of dishes, the most beautiful of the beautiful, the most charming, and the most intelligent. She allowed herself to be addressed in Blunt’s few words of Engrahamic and, smiling ever patiently, sat with him for several hours. Their talk took place in a secluded bower, in one of the many parks. She was agreeable and charmed and promised to see him again. He even managed, through terrific feats of pantomime, to impress on her the need of secrecy in future meetings.

“That was all?” someone said, when he finished.

“For the first meeting, I think I did wonders,” said Blunt. “After all, sex hasn’t been known here since a time corresponding to our Stone Age.”

Later, when the nightly poker game was beginning, Willy Lanham said, “Why didn’t you just make a grab for her?”

“That’s the hillbilly approach,” Blunt said disdainfully. “These girls are civilized—very, very civilized. It’s important not to shock them.”

Blunt’s next gambit was to set about learning the language. For this he went not to Flandeau, who best knew it, but to Ankers, who was a pure scientist in every sense of the word, and not so likely to suspect his motives. The girl proved very cultured. She took him to art galleries, to symphonies, and mountain climbing, for scrambling up and down the glassy hills was a favorite Engrahamic sport. As he advanced in the language, he learned that her name was Catataphinaria, which meant “she will attain relative wisdom.” He found that she worked for *the Eleven* who, while not rulers, offered general suggestions which the populace more or less followed.

Although his slow progress inevitably bored the crew, still, it offered that one precious ray of hope, and they became so tractable that even the Doctors noticed it. They laid it to the secret ingredient that Dr. Frank had introduced into the drinking water.

The summer wore on, becoming hotter each day. By the end of the second month of his courtship, Blunt began to speak to her of love.

She laughed. She said that she had little curiosity on the subject, although it was now and then mentioned by the students of antiquity. Assured that it was pleasurable, she said that she heard that barbarians also enjoyed murdering

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people and making them butts of jokes.

Weeks passed, the summer began to wane. Tempers again began to shorten. Flandeau said to Frank, “The men are worse again.”

“Yes, perhaps we should increase the dosage.”

The fruits for the Joy-Juicer grew thin on the silvery bushes, and men ranged far and wide, putting in supplies for the winter.

One night, when Blunt had won at poker, all the men lay in their bunks, too dispirited to drink, to shoot craps, almost too miserable even for speech. Blunt again began talking of Catataphinaria. Drowsily Lanham said, “I think you’re going at it the wrong way, Dick. Try some real rough stuff. You know—kiss her. She might like it.”

Before Blunt could defend his strategy, Kosalowsky sat up in his bunk. “Yes, for cripes sake,” he said, “Move in for the kill. Or shut up about it. You’re driving us all nuts.”

“Would you like to try?” Blunt suggested softly.

“Sure I’ll try,” Kosalowsky said. He turned on the light over his bunk. “Give me a crack at her. I could have managed it weeks ago. All you’ve done is talk to the girl.”

“Yah, Dick, maybe you’re using the wrong approach on this one,” O’Connors suggested.

“It’s the damn places you take her,” Kosalowsky said. “Art galleries. Anybody ever seduce a girl in an art gallery? Symphonies? Popping around in a damn Hop-Hop. Can’t you ever get her alone?”

“She lives with ten other girls,” Blunt said sulkily. “They’re all home all the time.”

“Well, bring her here, then,” Pane suggested.

“Here? How?”

There was no answer. They could not all, by day, desert the ship, and it was getting too chilly for the crew to hide in adjacent shrubbery. “We could put up a wall,” Pane said suddenly, “between the bunks and the bar.”

“With what?”

“I know,” Banks said eagerly, “where there’s a whole pile of stuff. It’s nice, thin metal, just lying there getting rusty.”

“I think you’re premature—”

“Premature!” Kosalowsky shouted. “Six months you’ve been chasing this tomato. You call that premature?”

“Only four by Engrahamic time,” Blunt said, insulted.

“Listen,” Kosalowsky said, “that wall goes up tomorrow. And you’re smuggling her in tomorrow night. Or else,” he said, glaring at Blunt, “after that it’s every man for himself. Check?”

Blunt, only slightly seen in the light from Kosalowsky’s bunk, was white with rage. “All right, guys,” he said stonily. “I’ve been trying to do right by this lady. Nothing abrupt or hillbilly. Nothing to hurt her delicate feelings or her fine mind. But if this is how you want it—fine, okay!”

The next day the wall went up.

Hardly a word was spoken as it was hammered in place. Once up, the place was cleaned thoroughly. The ashtrays were washed, the floor vacuumed, and the lights adjusted to achieve the most tellingly seductive effect. Blunt went out at 14:00, thin-lipped and silent.

“The jerk,” Kosalowsky said, “I think he’s a lot of hot air. That’s what I think.”

The Colonel came in at nightfall and asked about the wall. They told him that it was to cut off the recreation section from the sleeping quarters, for the protection of those who wanted more sleep to prepare for the gruelling winter watches.

“Very good idea, men,” the Colonel said, and went upstairs to write another chapter in his book.

At 21:00, the men disappeared into their bunks. O’Connors won the responsible job of peering through the narrow slit in the wall. Behind him could be heard the labored breathing of twenty-seven distraught men. One man snored. “Wake up, you stupid ass,” Pane told Lanham. “You’ll wreck the show.”



At last the door opened and Blunt came in—with the girl.

She was breathtaking. She wore, O’Connors reported, a dress cut to here—and her hair was piled high on her patrician head. Blunt had not lied. She was even prettier than the usual run of Engraham girls.

“He’s offering her a drink,” O’Connors whispered.

“She take it?”

“No—she’s sitting at the bar. He’s having one, though. He’s turning on the hi-fi.”

He did not have to tell them, since all could hear the soft music. They had selected a program of melodies considered sure-fire.

“He’s talking to her—putting his arm around her waist. Oh-oh. She knocked it off. She’s laughing, though.”

In the silence they all heard her laugh. Several men moved uncomfortably. “He’s leading her toward the couch—oh-oh—she stopped to look at the radar screen.”

101 It was the auxiliary radar, not the important one in the control room. “What’s he doing?”

“Telling her—he’s edging her to the couch again—now she’s asking about the Bassett Blaster. They’re fooling around with the gun. He’s showing her how it works—trying to put his hands—!”

This last was lost, for there was a sudden, resounding blast. Their bunks, the entire ship, trembled.

The meaning was clear to all. They flattened to their bunks, and waited tensely. They heard a sound, the sound of a foot kicking a body. A hand scratched tentatively along the wall.

No one moved. “She killed him.” O’Connors voice was no more than a slight whisper. “Lay low—lay low.”

Then a woman’s voice said, in perfect English, “All right, you men. Come out of there.”

The door was flung open. Catataphinaria stood in the dim light—still

holding the Blaster. She said again, more sharply, “I said, *come out of there!*”

Clumsily, they came down from their bunks.

“Now,” she said, as she had them all against the wall, “call down the others.”

But this was unnecessary, for the Doctors and the Colonel were already descending the ladder. They turned quite white at the sight of her. Wordlessly, she indicated that they were to join the others. The Doctors found it harder to adjust to a purely military sort of emergency. Ankers asked clearly, “What on earth is this nonsense?”

“No nonsense,” the girl said. “Just do as I say. First, surrender all your papers.”

“Our papers?”

“Your research. Your conclusions. Everything.”

Henderson said, “I’ll go get it, Ma’am.”

“I would also like the Colonel’s amusing work on the coming occupation.”

“I know where it is, sir,” Martin said swiftly. “I’ll get it.”

The Colonel’s expression was stony. He nodded to Martin to get it, and it occurred to him that the girl was one of those whom he had personally selected as the most promising for the puppet government. But when he asked about her identity, she cut him off without a word.

“Then, may I ask where you learned such flawless English?”

“All of us know English,” she said. “It is a very stupid language.”

Martin and Henderson returned with the papers. Gingerly they approached her, handed the papers to her, and darted back to their places in the line. She placed the stack on the bar, leafed through it, all the while keeping them covered with the Blaster, and remarked on finishing, “It is exactly what one would expect barbarians to find interesting.”

Flandeau, however, remained a scientist to the last.

“We find ourselves unhappily deceived,” he said. “We were certain—that you

were utterly without defenses. We were told that you did not know how to lie, cheat, dissemble, or fight.”

“Only not with each other.” she said. “It was, so to speak, a lost art.” She glanced at Blunt. Several men squirmed. “But it is one that we have regained,” she said.

“And what will you do with us?” Flandeau asked.

“We have decided to let you go,” she said. “Now that we possess this weapon,”—she brandished the Blaster—“which we can copy, we think we can prevent more Explorations. At least this is the opinion of the Eleven. So I am instructed to let you leave—at once, of course.”

“You are most charming,” said Flandeau.

“At once,” she repeated.

“Yes, of course... Men! Prepare for blastoff!”

The way back was tedious—the floating around, the boredom, the unending blackness of space—but at least it was going home. After the first weeks of space-sickness, things returned to near normal, and the Doctors conferred with the Colonel. It was decided that the best report should be that Engraham was uninviting, bleak, and of no interest to Earthmen. The reputations of all were at stake (the doctors found themselves, stripped of their papers, unable to recollect enough; the Colonel desperately feared a court-martial), and the crew was thus advised. All agreed to keep their mouths shut. Thus their honorable discharges, medals, and life-time pensions would be safe.

So, with all this decided, and Earth only a few months away, relative cheerfulness reigned. Only Willy Lanham continued to mope.

“What’s biting you?” Kosalowsky asked, one day as they lay strapped in adjacent bunks. “Your face is as long as this ship.”

“I just feel bad,” Willy said. “I can feel bad if I want to, can’t I?”

“What the hell, we’ll soon be home. We can really raise some hell, then.”

“I miss my girl,” Willy blurted out.

“You’ll see her pretty soon.”

“I mean my girl on Engraham.”

It happened that just then several other men, bored with lying still, were floating past. They gripped the edges of Willy’s bunk.

“You mean you had,” Kosalowsky said cunningly, “a girl on Engraham?”

“Sure I did,” said Willy defensively. “Didn’t all you guys?”

More and more men joined the knot of bodies around Willy’s bunk. The atmosphere became distinctly menacing.

“You mean you didn’t?” Willy said. “You mean it wasn’t a gag we were pulling on Blunt?”

They were silent. One pair of floating hands neared Willy’s throat.

“Honest,” he said. “I didn’t think you were that dumb. I thought you were just letting Blunt make an ass of himself. I thought that—well, it was so easy. I even told Dick a couple of times. You just had to make a grab for ’em.”

Pane suddenly let out a harsh sound, like the cry of a wounded bull.

“So who was this girl?” Kosalowsky asked heavily.

“Yeah!” echoed the others.

“Well, she was just a girl, I guess,” Willy said. “I used to see her around the ship. On guard duty. I used to see her all the time. What the hell,” he said, “You think I’m dumb or something? Why’d you think I was willing to stand guard all the time?” ■

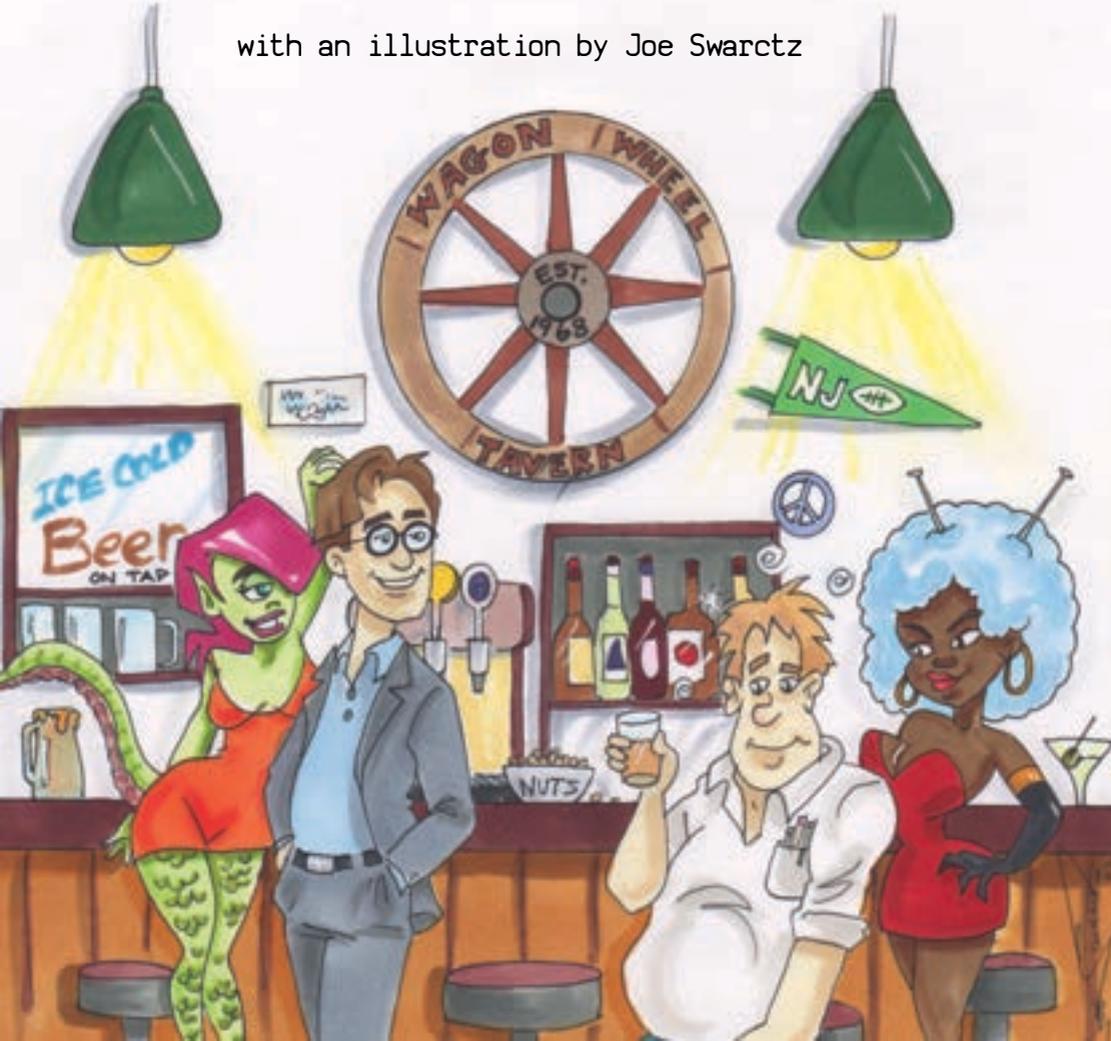


THE SMARQUIM SEDUCTION

by

Ralph Greco, Jr.
and Joe Swartz

with an illustration by Joe Swartz



A nearly imperceptible shift in the beer nuts' scent, a higher-than-usual frequency to the pinball game's 'pinging,' and the Walter Cronkite newscast playing on the Zenith TV in the corner set into a sudden, brisk vertical roll alert no one to the two stunning, yet obviously alien females, all but winking into existence at The Wagon Wheel Tavern, New Jersey, USA, on a sticky spring night in 1968.

The two aliens, Mabeseem and the one-eyed Brandleyy have come from the planet Smarquim on a galaxy-spanning surveillance (spying) alerting all of Smarquim of the recent progress of Joel S. Engel and Philip T. Porter, two men who are right then set at the very front of the The Wagon Wheel bar. Engel and Porter are two technicians employed at the nearby Bell Labs.

As is happening across Earth at this precipitous moment in history, scientists, researchers, and even laypeople are willing away long hours in ill-lit labs, underfunded university research centers, and in some private businesses attempting to find their way through the nascent and nescient days of this planet's yet unrealized wireless phone connection possibilities. Knowing fully well exactly what Earth scientists are lacking in their research and experimentation, Mabeseem and Brandleyy have come, via their planet-wide government's decree, to 'prompt' Engel and Porter, two of the leading lights of Earth's communication research, into bigger, better, and most importantly, a faster discovery of wireless communication.

Smarquim has been using wireless communication for the past century.

The alien duo also realize from their surveillance (spying) that of all the scientists and researchers they could attempt to seduce/contact across the little blue-green planet—even though they do

indeed appear quite unusual when compared to other human females, and have no way to rightly disguise themselves without appearing even more so—their actual physical appearance won't draw all that much attention in a bar in New Jersey. Thus they have come to influence Engel and Porter.

This long night will progress with the alien females attending to and dropping subconscious hints and suggestions into the brains of the two Bell Lab scientists (and not a small amount of liberally leaked libation that Mabeseem and Brandley can and do imbibe without any ill effect) with the alien females teleporting back to their scout ship come morning.

As any Earth-born historian will relate, in the decades to come, digital communication will indeed happen by degree and again, from the effort of many workers like Engel and Porter. The two American scientists make celebrated strides in their field, never realizing that what they come to barely remember of two comely, oddly scented, and oddly attentive females they meet at The Wagon Wheel this night, prompts them to their Earth-bound accomplishment and progress.

Realizing through their surveillance (spying), that humankind has now developed communications to the point where the planet is advanced enough to warrant invasion—always the Smarquim plan—Mabeseem and Brandley are dispatched to Sector 55, hence visit Earth again and make the necessary preparations to invade.

But what Mabeseem and Brandley find while floating in their scout ship parked outside the Van Allen Belt, monitoring the startlingly efficient Earth-wide digital communication network now in place, is that digital technology on Earth has as much made world-wide communication affordable and constant as it

has all but caused a planet-wide stagnation in all other areas of human development over the past decade. And that, in fact, humans and their planet now have nothing that Smarquim would want to acquire or have dominion over.

Mabeseem and Brandley's scout ship leaves the Van Allen Belt the next day, while yet again another cell phone rings. ■



Ralph Greco, Jr. is a professional writer and musician living in the wilds of suburban NJ on the east coast of the United States. Ralph works in both the mainstream and the adult space and his essays, poetry, fiction, interviews, reviews, erotica and children's stories have appeared in nine countries. Ralph has had his one-act plays produced across the U.S., co-hosts the *Licking Non-Vanilla* podcast, and is an ASCAP licensed songwriter (Ralph's music can be found at the cleverly named, www.ralphgrecomusic.com). Ralph can be reached by writing ralphiedawriter@gmail.com



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THE EROTIC IN SCIENCE FICTION

by

Mark Pearce

Science fiction writer David Blake sat at his laptop and stared at the screen. His editor had asked him to submit a story for the magazine's upcoming special edition: "The Erotic in Science Fiction." Blake had never written an erotic story before, but the pile of magazines on his desk gave evidence he was willing to do exhaustive research. Still his mind was a blank. He wondered if it would help to go out and perform some field studies.

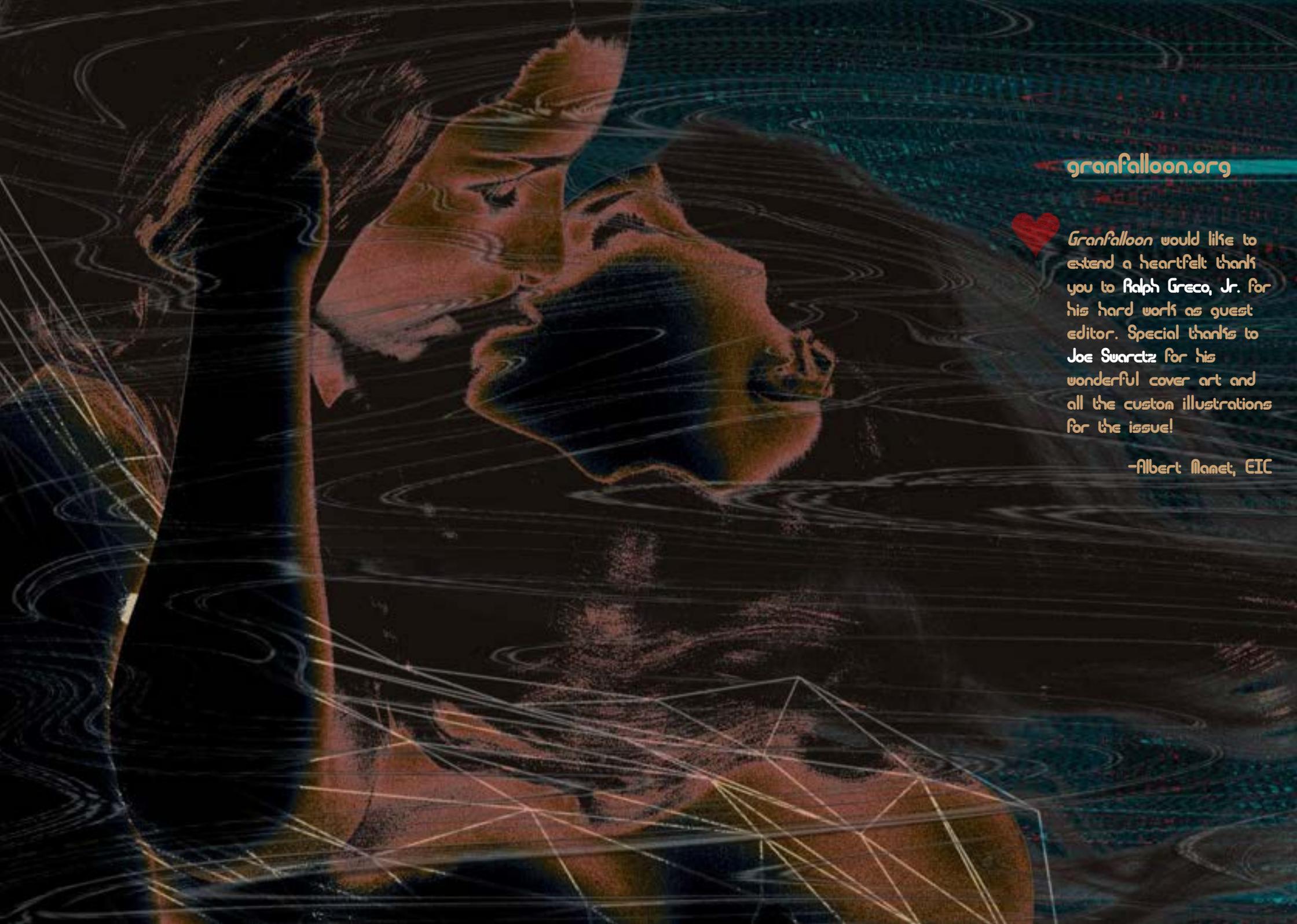
The deadline was fast approaching. He looked down at his most recent story. Perhaps he could adapt it.

The first line read: "Five people huddled together in an underground bomb shelter." He picked up his pencil, licked the point, and added:

"They were all nekkid." ■



Mark Pearce is an author/playwright whose stories have been published in national magazines and plays produced on the New York stage and around the country. He was formerly Resident Playwright of the New Ensemble Actors Theater of New York, and his play *Asylum* is listed in the *Burns/Mantle Theater Yearbook: The Best Plays* series. He resides in the Denver-metro area and has lived in Arizona, Texas, and briefly, Greenwich Village, while one of his plays was being produced Off-Broadway. He loves cross-country road trips, and his favorite activity is to sit in darkened theaters and watch characters come to life which had previously existed only in the privacy of his own mind.

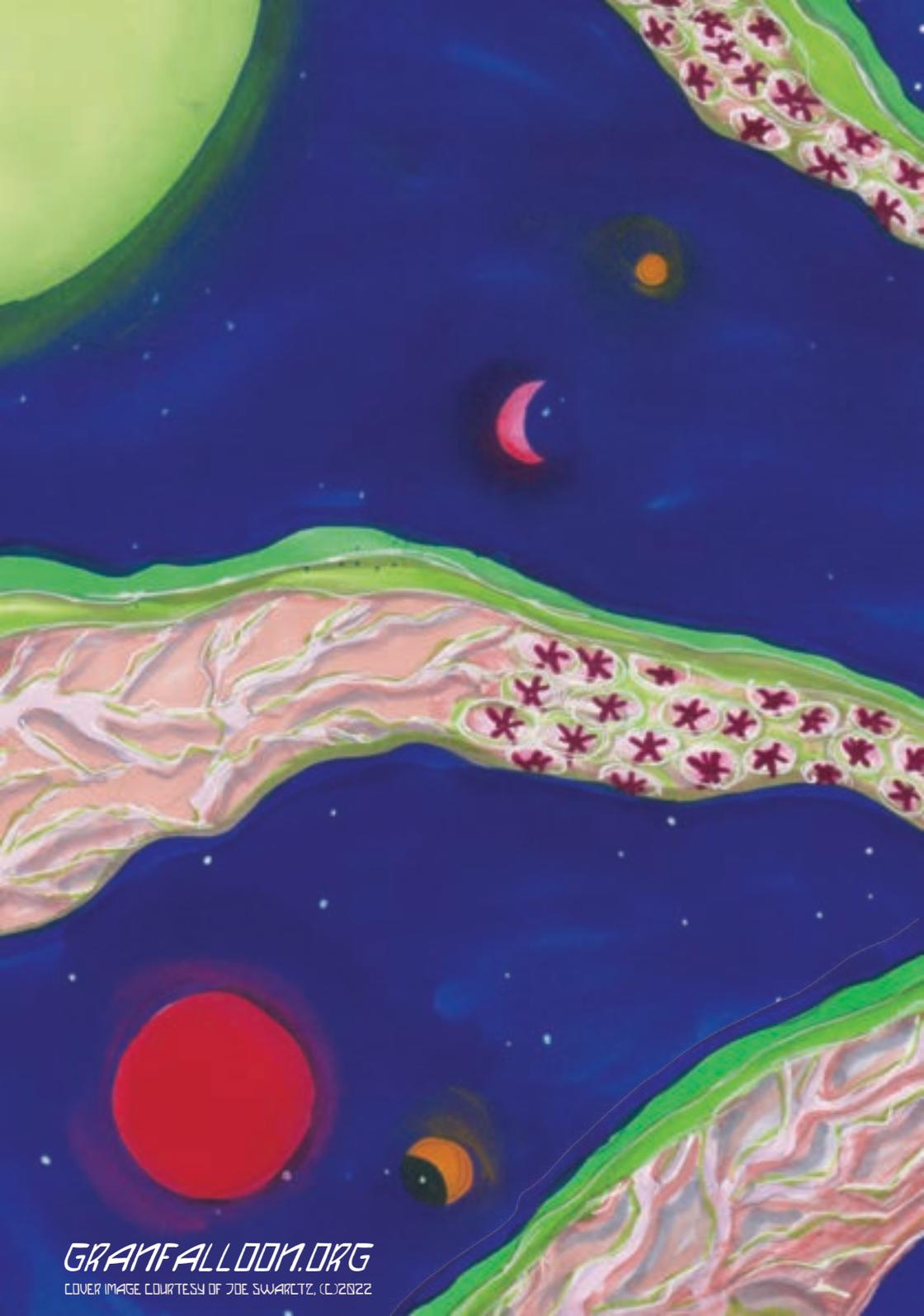


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-Albert Momet, EIC



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