

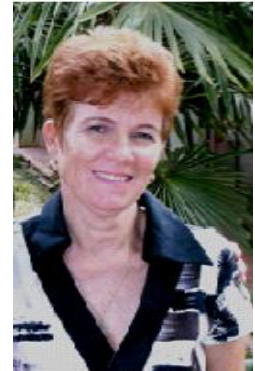
PROBE 160

June 2014

3. Editorial
4. Chairman's Note - Andrew Jamieson
6. Nova 2013 Joint 2nd Place General Section. The Jacket
by Piers Carey
14. Terry Pratchett interviewed by John Connolly
17. Blast from the Past
18. Nova 2013 S.A. Section 3rd Place Graveyard Shift by
Sean Harvey
38. Books received
39. Magazines received
40. Nova 2013 S.A. Section finalist. The Jackal Poacher by
William Mabin
55. Book Reviews. The Jamiesons'
58. Nova 2013 General Section Finalist See You Tomorrow
by Sal Garbier
65. L.O.C Lloyd Penney

Editorial

If you read through this issue's "Blast from the Past" (pg. 17) by Simon Scott, which was written when the club was just 11 years old, you too may be struck by how he could have written most of it just yesterday. Okay... you can tick off the Planetarium and I'm not really sure you could call Cesco's a "posh" restaurant but we have held our annual dinner out at an eatery for a couple of years now. But people still come and go. Simon is actually one of the longest standing members of the club and I am sure he will agree that the club has changed in



many ways but that in others it has stayed much the same. Not sure what this says about SF.

On a completely different note on Saturday the 31st of May a group of more than twenty, mostly SF members and some friends, went along to see the Da Vinci exhibition that was being held in Woodmead, Sandton. The exhibition was more or less divided among the engineering ideas, including architectural designs and paintings, including anatomical studies, of Leonardo Da Vinci who lived from 1452 to 1519. I was not so much amazed by some of the innovative thoughts for his time but more by the simple volume of his different ideas. And looking at the documents that have survived, it would appear that there may have been a lot more ideas that we do not know about. I was not aware that this Renaissance scholar and mathematician was also a musician. He rose above being an illegitimate child and it is rather sad to think that a man of such genius was reliant on the good graces of his patrons. We spent two hours enjoying the interactive exhibition and I can definitely recommend going along for a visit if this global travelling exhibition comes to a city near you.

For those of you who have an inclination to write science fiction or fantasy, the Nova short story competition is once again open. You have until the 30th of September, 2014 to submit your winning story. Please go to www.sffsa.org.za and download an application form. As you can see the winning stories and other stories chosen by the editor fill the pages of PROBE, which is read around the globe.

Once a month Cedric Abrahams gives a report on the number and distribution of visitors to the SFFSA website. It is interesting to see that over the past couple of months we have had hits from Brazil, USA, UK, Netherlands, Columbia, Romania, Italy, Argentina, China, Canada and even South Africa to name some of them. So let no-one say that we are not connected to the international community.

Chairman's Note – Andrew Jamieson

Hi all. Welcome to the first chairman's note! As I believe is always the case... every first time writer goes through the same thing: What to write about! I am no exception. Seems I put this off time and again until I eventually had to tell myself to just sit down and do it! Now that I am here... I am still wondering what I will talk about? Ideas popped into and out of my head over the past months, but nothing that stood out. I often thought of my New Age Gaming magazine where you will, every month, find the Editor's Note at the front of the magazine, and they often say similar things. Should I talk about life in general? Life in South Africa? About Science Fiction and Fantasy in South Africa? In the rest of the world? Hmm... the second last one seems kind of obvious really. You get the Probe fanzine, and it contains articles, short stories, reviews, etc. but not too many Letters of Comment (like this Note, it is difficult for people to put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard). So generally I guess I should think about talking about the things you don't often find in Probe. About all of the things I mentioned, preferably with a Science Fiction bent... but not necessarily. So let's start there.

So as Chairman of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Club... wait, did anyone notice that we changed the name some years back? Ever wondered why? Not that I recall, but I don't know if everyone got the memo about why we did this. To put it simply it was because too many people (especially publishers) would take the "Science Fiction" part of our name literally and thus would only ever send us things SF related... but not Fantasy related. Even normal folk would sometimes ask us if we also included Fantasy in the club. Seems a bit silly really, after all everyone who is in the club knows and understands that we mean all forms of Science Fiction including Fantasy and even Fantasy and even some Horror. But there you have it, people would think we were PURELY a Science Fiction club instead of the many facets it actually pertained to. So the committee made a decision to change the name so that going forward, everyone would understand that we are interested in all aspects of Science Fiction and Fantasy (and some Horror even though some don't think it is included).

Anyway... where was I... oh yes, back to SF&F in SA... sigh... well, I can tell you that the committee really wishes it were better. We live in a really wonderful country with so many possibilities... unless you love Science Fiction. Go to any of our meetings and you will see on average between 15 and 20 people there. Go to any such meeting overseas and you could see potentially many, many more... and don't even mention the Conventions! In America they are mobbed, and even when I had the good fortune to attend the Convention in Japan it was still very crowded. Compared to South Africa, our attendance is far below what we would really like to have... like in the good old days when I was just a youngster. Unfortunately Science Fiction in South Africa is just not as big a thing now as it used to be. When you realise that the majority of our population are not readers, as such, and besides the odd newspaper or magazine are disinclined to read any books and even less likely to read science fiction or Fantasy ones, you start to realise... our potential base for members is very, very small. Now start to add the proliferation of modern conveniences like HDTVs and Blu-ray players, Satellite TV, etc. etc. and now we as a social club have to contend

with all the pleasures people have right in their own homes! It seems quite daunting really... but it is a challenge we take on every month! We have a Probe that I believe is one of the best in the world (and I've seen some of the offerings from around the world!). We have a dedicated committee that meets every month and really tries their best to bring our best to the club. We have a rather large library with over 2000 books which anyone in the club can make use of... we really do wish more people would! We have been going on for longer than I have been alive (and my dad has been a member for longer than that... which basically makes me having been a member my whole life), and it doesn't look like we will be quitting any time sooner. However... yes... we would like to see the SFFSA club go bigger and better, but things just conspire to make it hard for us.

Enough melodrama and negative thoughts. You have in your hand (or on your tablet or however you read this) our wonderful quarterly Probe which I am sure you will find filled with goodness and much enjoyable reading. So get to it!

Should you feel the need to comment on anything, to encourage or provide criticism for anything we on the committee do, please feel free to email us secretary@sfsa.org.za. I somehow don't think we will ever start one of those "Letters" type pages you find in magazines in Probe, but hey, if you send us something, maybe we will print it... you never know!

Well there you go, my first Note. I hope you had a wonderful Easter and thoroughly enjoyed yourselves.

Cheers,

Andrew

NOVA 2014: Is Fiction Stranger Than Fact?

South Africa provides a rich source of themes for SF&F short stories. We have an unbelievable president. Literally. And a Bishop who claims he can cure HIV with water that he sells for R10. Incredible! The first of 64 antennas making up South Africa's new radio telescope - MeerKAT - and the high-tech data centre were launched in the Karoo this year. The Cradle of Humankind is one of eight World Heritage Sites in South Africa, and is widely recognised as the place from which all of humankind originated. And as for the soap opera of televised court proceedings... you just can't make it up! Or can you? You're challenged to try your hand at writing an SF or F story that rivals the fantastic tapestry of daily life in SA. The South African Section offers prizes to the value of R2000.

Or, if you prefer writing about BEMs, space ships, robots, witches, wardrobes and their ilk, enter into the General Section. The total prize value, though slightly less - R1500 - is still something to write home about. Or even better: to write us about.

Nova 2015. R3500 awaits. We have a bank of judges, just waiting to process your entry.

Download the entry form at www.SFFSA.org.za

Nova 1013 Final 1st Joint 2nd Place General Section

The Jacket by Piers Carey

If I don't get warm soon, and something to eat, I'll die. The wind is strengthening on the high moors, and lowering clouds look like snow tonight. I've found no food or shelter up here for the last two days. Bare ground and occasional bare trees. My pants are padded on the thighs and bum, and my boots are still keeping out the wet, but my shirt's just spray cloth, and I only have a wrap of the same to put over it. No hat or gloves, and I'm freezing. I have to risk recognition, and go into the town below. I have no weapon.

The track downhill turns into a lane, wide enough for vehicles, but it's unsmoothed. Some trees and weeds remain along its edges. They haven't defoliated here yet. That means the slugs haven't made it this far, at least by themselves. It's too cold for them here, anyway, right now. But a town will have its police force, and they're worse, in a place like this.

I'd rather approach the tight knot of buildings as if at random, taking one route and then another. It's thrown slugs off my trail before, but there aren't enough roads to do that here. The lane leads straight down the slope of the hill and joins a larger road by a bridge, which heads directly uphill again into the town. I can see walls and hedges and occasional trees I could hide behind, and approach in more secrecy, but if anyone saw me even go near them I'd be dead. Everyone knows it's summary execution if you try to hide.

I trust to the cold and gathering darkness that no one will be out to see me coming down from the hills. All uplands are forbidden territory, free-fire zones, although I haven't seen any burnt-out areas on these moors. The slugs like to do that themselves, the burning, and this weather doesn't suit their aircraft. I guess their own climate is more stable, or something, but it's more evidence I'm beyond their direct presence. Breathe out a little, but not too much.

A rough stone bridge spans the stream, with stone approach walls extending a few meters on either end. The road up to the town is bare and empty until I am amongst the houses. Many of the buildings are abandoned, some poison-sealed to prevent anyone else using them. Some show signs of fighting: beam-burned scars and craters, bullet

holes, collapsed and ruined buildings here and there. OK, so the slugs must have been here, maybe last summer. The damage looks fairly fresh: not much growth of weeds since, but enough that they can't have bothered with defoliants. No bodies lying around, either. They were probably buried by the survivors. It's cheering to see that a few folk hereabouts put up a fight, no matter how one-sided it may have been. I hope not too many died. I wouldn't stay in a town, though, it would be too risky. The slugs will have left a human control unit.

I can see a glow of light ahead. I'm hoping it'll be a food booth, as long as it's not a new one. They're too hard to fool.

Yes. I edge around a corner: the ancient stone glistens with damp, reflecting the light. It's a food booth all right, and even better; I can make out a human server through the plastic side-flap. I can also make out an eye-scan near the entrance, but it looks like an old one. There'll be a camera behind the counter. My lens should fool the scan, but I'll have to take the risk that no-one in the control unit's doing their job this evening, watching the camera feed, or that my image hasn't been referred this far north.

Take a deep breath, and slip the lens in my right eye. It's a good one, it was worth the money. It still itches, but in this cold anyone's eyes would water.

The first flakes of snow are beginning to drift past me as I duck under the awning of the booth. Out of the wind just the warmth from the cooking is absolutely delicious, even before I've had a mouthful. The smell isn't so great, to be honest. The slug muck that Food International makes always stinks. I hope the bastards are making a fat enough profit on it.

Then I spot a hand-written sign at the counter:

"We apologise for the lack of moderated food. This is due to supply problems. We hope un-moderated food will be acceptable. Signed, the management." It has a date, which might be today's. I've lost touch.

Real food? I haven't had any for two years, not since Food Int did their scumbag deal with the slugs and it all disappeared. I have to try hard to suppress a grin, as I amble up to the scan. I take it slow but steady, like I do this every day, but my heart rate's up. Good job the scan doesn't pick that up, they'd be on to me immediately as suspicious. I'm still surprised the ticker's held out so well: it must be all the walking. I've certainly lost weight. When I catch a distorted glimpse of myself in the transparent plastic of the flap, I don't recognise the skinny old tramp I see. I try surreptitiously to tidy my hair before stepping up to the scan, but no-one else here looks any more glamorous.

The scan's an old one, and takes a few seconds longer than I'm comfortable with before giving me the green light and the ticket. More deep breaths, and join the queue for the counter.

No one says anything as they shuffle forward, and only a few words are spoken. People pass me with cups and plates, and saliva surges into my mouth at the sight and smell of the dishes. I can see what looks like tea, and actual bread! Jesus, what a treat! One or two people have bowls of something, stew perhaps, or soup. I'm in heaven, I couldn't have hoped for more than hot slug food, but this will keep me going for at least another couple of days.

As long as my card holds up.

Crap. I hadn't thought of it, why not? Excuses, quick! Well, I can blame the machine, or offer cash, people still take it some places, and I've got a little still left over, but now my heart's going, and I'm out of breath all of a sudden. Phoo. Take deep breaths.

Christ, OK, there's two possibilities, no, three: it'll be OK; or it won't work, but that'll be all; or it won't work and it'll flag an alarm at my identity, and then I'll be completely fucked. Shit. And I can't leave now without people wondering why, and people who wonder why someone's done something odd often go and ask this question of people in authority. Shit and double shit.

OK, tough it out, I've done this before, have to do it again, that's all. Get a grip, get ahold of the heart rate and the breathing. Don't get sweaty. Apart from everything else I really don't want to look sick when I get to the counter. You can get notified for that too. Quick calming exercises. They help a bit.

The woman behind the counter gives me a quick sharp look. She's about forty, I'd say, certainly younger than me, although nowadays it's hard to tell. Dark hair, streaked with a bit of grey, thin face, and missing a couple of teeth, I notice when she speaks. That's more common now, too.

"Alloa, stranger," she says. Oh fuck. "Aven't seen you for a while, isn't it, Ned?" I swear a shadow of a wink flickers across one eye. A warning, then.

"No, love," I manage, "I bin away." I try to match her accent. I might fool someone from elsewhere, but never a local, and I can't help wondering what ears have pricked up at the sound of my voice. The hair rises on my neck, as if someone's watching. She glances at the counter. Is she looking at my hands? They're pretty grimy, everyone's are, but you don't want to look too educated. That'll have you hauled away, too. The world according to Pol Pot.

"Soup and bread?" she asks. I nod. She's made it unnecessary for me to ask what she's got: that would also mark me out as from elsewhere, I think.

Take a deep breath, and hand over my card.

She hands over the food, and slots the card into the machine. I try to look bored, and take a bite of the bread. God, it's good. If I have to run for it at least I'll have had one mouthful.

"Ach, what's wrong with this, then?" she mutters, and my heart lurches and sinks at the same time.

"Problem with the machine?" I ask. It's not my fault it's not my fault it's not my fault... "I've got cash."

"No..." she frowns. Shitshitshitshit...

She glances behind me for a moment, and keys a sequence of numbers into the machine. She looks up again, behind me, and smiles, and now there's definitely a wink. I realise she's had her body between the machine and the camera all the time, so anyone watching couldn't have seen what she did.

"Nice balance you got there, Ned. You bin working?"

"That's right," I croak. I wonder if there is a real Ned who I should know about, or if it was just the first name that came into her head, and I turn to find a seat. No-one talks about what work you have to do, it's not done. Everyone knows who you're likely to be working for.

But I haven't been working, of course, so has she crooked credit onto my card? Too much to hope for, but why else would she say that?

There's a seat facing the entrance opening, one table in from the street. All the tables nearer the warmth are full, of course, but I don't mind. I've got food, and shelter for the moment, and someone seems to be trying to help me, even if I don't know why.

The food is delicious; it would be even if I wasn't starving. The soup is thick and rich with beans, potato, carrot, slices of onion, and it even has herbs for more flavour. The bread is thick and coarse, and takes some chewing, but springy and full of flavour. It's actually fresh, I realise. I finish the soup first, before it goes cold, and I'm just trying to decide how much of the bread to eat now and how much to save for later, when I hear the woman coming along the chairs and tables, collecting crockery. She stacks cups and plates into a plastic basin as she moves, reaching the outer tables last.

"Sorry you got to sit out in the cold, Ned," she said. "Bit busy tonight."

"No problem."

"Your work finished then?" she asks. I nod.

"Cause if you want summat to work at, a couple days at least, you could go back to the shepherdin'." She gives me a warning look, so I say, "Who's looking for a shepherd now, then? Thought all the sheep had been sanitised."

"No, old Cartwright's still got a flock, he's got permission, see. The slu..., the government wants 'em for research, I think. They're up by Kirby Cross, you know, in that old sheepfold he's got up there. You know the old stone one just past the crossroads?" and she nods in the direction I need to head. "He'll need 'em bringing down someday soon, what with this weather setting in. They're warmer up there than we are here, with this wind." She chuckled.

"Ah. Well, I'll go see him about that tomorrow, then. Thanks, love."

She's just told me where I can get shelter for the night.

She takes the basin back to the counter.

There's a mechanical whine and screech outside, and a slab-sided vehicle lurches to a stop just beyond the awning. I freeze. Only one type of person has a vehicle like that.

Two heavysset men stroll in, in the dark helmets and uniform of the Sanitary Branch. The worst. The place goes silent instantly. I stare at the table: you don't catch their eye, if you want to stay alive. Please God, let them not be after me. If they are, everyone here will die.

They stare around, and one drops a bundle on a chair across the aisle from me. They swagger up to the counter, and the queue disappears to one side. I slip the bread into a pocket: my mouth's gone dry as graveyard dust. I daren't look round, but my ears are bent back as far as I can listen.

The SBs' uniforms creak as they move: it's said they're waterproof so as not to show the blood. Only in the name of Sanitation, they say, we just clean things up. Yeah, there's certainly nothing left when they've been through.

"Good evening, officers. Can I help you?" The woman's voice is tight with fear.

"Why aintcha got no real food here?" The man's voice sounded foreign. I couldn't place it.

"I'm sorry, officers, they told me there'd been an accident with the supply trucks. We're so far up the valley here we do sometimes get left out. I just had to make do with what I could find."

"Whaddy got then?"

"I've just got vegetable soup and bread, and tea for them as wants it."

"Goddamn pig food." Another voice.

"I have to make something for people; it's my job, sir. The unit would have my license if I wasn't open every day." Her voice is shaking.

Everyone is listening hard. We know the shock batons, the nerve rounds, the dribbling incontinent wrecks and broken corpses these guys leave behind, if they decide to leave something behind, *pour encourager les autres*. I can feel sweat cold on my back.

A chair scrapes across the floor, and then I hear a flurry of movement. Someone's probably got out of their way in a hurry. There's a heavy sigh.

"OK, gimme summa this shit. 'S it hot?"

"Yes, sir. And for you as well, sir?"

"I ain't eating that shit. Haveta sanitise myself if I ate that."

The other laughs, and the sound rings loud and harsh in the silence.

"Hafta stay hungry till we reach camp, then."

The other grunts.

A soft thump sounds, and I glance sideways. The bundle on the chair to my right has fallen on the floor.

"Hey, shithead! By the door! Pick that up!"

I'm the nearest to the entrance. I look around. One of the policemen, facing me, is gesturing at the bundle.

"Yeah, you, pig-fucker! Pick it up!"

I say nothing, and go to do as he says. Draw no attention to myself.

The bundle has fallen open, and I see the contents: a thermal camouflage jacket. Military type, but unofficial. I know the kind: they have hoods and face-flaps, big pockets, built-in half-gloves so only your fingers are bare, and they will keep you warm and dry down to the mid-thigh in the worst of weather, as long as you have something for the rest of you. The camo is so good you're next to invisible.

It is absolutely what I want.

"Don't touch that, asshole! Put it on the table and fuck off adda here, or I'll killya!"

A cup flies past me and smashes on their vehicle.

"An' clean that off!"

No one else moves. I do as I'm told.

Bastards. Bastards!

The wind outside the shelter of the booth is razor-cold. I won't be able to stay out for long without hypothermia, but I wipe the tea off with my wrap. A gust of wind nearly tears it from my hand, and I hear a creak from the far side of the vehicle. Maybe the left a door

open. The sound registers through my steaming resentment, and I slide around the vehicle's armoured flanks to see. Maybe I can steal or wreck something.

The heavy door has moved slightly open, and I prise it further, hoping that the wind will cover any further creaks, but none come. Faint dashboard lights illuminate the interior, throwing the blackness into relief. Could I steal the vehicle? No, they're traceable.

My eye falls on a light that suggests a fuel pump. Surely these things have some weird slug fuel? But no, when I pull it there's a clunk, and a filler cap pops open. Maybe I can put some sand in it, at least.

I reach further, and touch rope, metal, cloth. A crowbar. A long knife, the blade still dark and wet. A handgun of some kind, which I tuck into the back of my pants. I lift the rope, but it's just a short piece. Something cylindrical, with a nozzle. In the better light outside, I recognise one of the little blowtorches the SB use to set fire to places and torture people. Well, now I can use it against them. I put it on the seat.

Jemmy past the fuel valve with the crowbar, feed the rope into the intake pipe, slice it off a few inches outside the vehicle. I'm still holding the crowbar as I reach into the cab again for the blowtorch.

There's the smallest of sounds at the back of the cab. Something is moving.

I know what it is. I know by the smell, a stench of slime and rotting flesh and infernal chemicals.

It's a slug.

I've run away from that smell since I ran away from my burning street, mixed up with the smell of the flaming house and the dear bodies. It was weeks before I stopped smelling it, and now here it is again. I start shaking.

No. Shut the paralysing memory out. Act.

The slug must have its own compartment in the vehicle. It must be in command of the two men in the booth, and it's opened the hatch to find out what's happening in the vehicle when it knows they're over there. I can see the tentacles reaching out, readying their poison, smelling and tasting what's out here. Light glints on the poison spines. I can feel it in my mind now, trying to identify me. It will attack and raise the alarm when it can't. The mental blow comes, a screaming pain smashing across my head, as though it will explode, as though I've been hit by all the steel bars in the world at once: deranged colours loop and roar in my sight, and a million buzz-saws screech in my ears. The

spines are next, and then agony and death. I saw it in that house, before the fire. I saw my family die.

My hands spasm, and in my panic I press the trigger on the blowtorch. I have no control of my limbs, and my arms gesticulate wildly. The blowtorch passes across the open hatch, and blasts the slug across the tentacles and in what passes for its face. The mind storm crashes into panic and pain and fear, and it drops my mind. I fall backwards out of the cab, and drop the blowtorch. Something catches my sleeve as I fall, and I wrench my hand away, ripping cloth and skin. Something in the cab jerks and gives. I can hear uproar from the food booth as the SBs respond to the slug's fear and pain. Their minds are tuned directly to it. Furniture crashes and breaks.

I scabble in the mud for the torch, and realise the vehicle is moving. I don't know if the brake was off, or I jerked it off somehow, or the slug's thrashing has set the vehicle moving. The street slopes down to the bridge I crossed earlier, a straight slope, and quite steep. The SPs are out of the booth now, and heaving at the other door. It sticks for a moment, and the vehicle rumbles on, radiating the slug's mental screaming, as they scramble to get in, and I lift the blowtorch and set light to the rope in the fuel intake as it trundles past.

I can see they 're trying to gain control of the vehicle, but it shakes and lurches and accelerates down the hill, trailing flame and clinging men and the slug's agony. It scrapes walls on the side of the road, but it's moving too fast for these impacts to slow it down.

Everyone has run out of the booth to watch what is happening. No one sees me. They think I'm gone.

The vehicle crashes into the stone wall on the left of the bridge and spins into the road, toppling over on to its side, and explodes. A brief mental shriek collapses, there's a blast of flame, then foul smoke blocks the view in the darkness. Nothing will come up that road for a while.

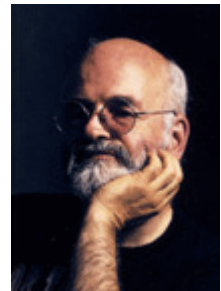
The villagers run down the hill, but the heat and smoke and corrosive stench of burnt slug drive them back. What a terrible accident, officer. No, we only realised their vehicle was running away when the dead officers ran out after it, but there was nothing we could do. Nothing at all.

I've never killed anyone before. I shiver, and I'm not sure if my eyes are watering from the wind or if I'm weeping for those men, even for son-of-a-bitch SBs. I feel nothing for the slug.

The shivering gets to me, and I shake myself for a moment. Then I slip into the booth again, and the jacket is where I left it. I slip it on, and it's warm and comfortable and a perfect fit. I fill the pockets with bread, and walk north out of town. I hope I get the chance to thank that woman for her help, but for now, the wind is at my back.

Terry Pratchett interviewed by John Connolly

A year or so ago a letter appeared on the correspondence page of the Irish Sunday Times. The subject of the letter was one J.K.Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, or more particularly an article written about her latest novel in the same newspaper the previous week.



"Why," the correspondent asked, "is it felt that the continued elevation of J.K.Rowling can only be achieved at the expense of other writers?"

Now we learn that prior to Harry Potter the world of fantasy was plagued with 'knights and ladies morris-dancing to Greensleeves.'" The letter went on to point out that this was not the case, and that the best of fantasy writing has always been edgy and inventive, with writers constantly reinventing and subverting the genre, bending it to reflect their own times and the issues of the day. Finally, in reference to Rowling herself, it took issue with her claim that, prior to the publication of her first novel, she didn't realise that she was writing fantasy. "I'm not the world's greatest expert," the correspondent concluded, "but I would have thought that the wizards, witches, trolls, unicorns, hidden worlds, jumping chocolate frogs, owl mail, magic food, ghosts, broomsticks and spells would have given her a clue?"

The letter writer in question was Terry Pratchett, author of over 40 fantasy novels, recipient of the Carnegie medal for children's literature, and, Rowling apart, the most successful genre writer in Britain, so his claim not to be "the world's greatest expert" was slightly disingenuous. While the letter was mistakenly interpreted in some quarters as an attack on Rowling, it could more accurately have been described as an attack on a certain attitude towards fantasy, a kind of intellectual snobbery that Rowling herself initially appeared to share by attempting to distance herself from the genre, and that Pratchett wittily punctured in his final paragraph.

There is no escaping the f-word when it comes to Terry Pratchett's work. The majority of his novels take place on the Discworld, which floats through space on the backs of four elephants, who are supported in turn by the great turtle, A'Tuin. The busiest city on the Discworld is Ankh-Morpork, ruled by the less-than-benevolent Lord Vetinari and patrolled by the good men, women and assorted other creatures of the Watch. There are dwarfs (never "dwarves"), trolls, vampires who have taken the Pledge against bloodsucking,

reluctant werewolves, and the wizards of the Unseen University who behave much as academics everywhere behave, except with the added danger of potentially fatal magic being used to solve disputes over tenure.

The fantasy elements in themselves might be enough for some to damn Pratchett as unworthy of critical attention, but the fact that his work is also very funny renders him doubly problematical; quite simply, the Discworld is the most perfectly realised comic universe since the glory days of P.G. Wodehouse's Blandings's Castle. Add to that his massive commercial success - in its first week at number one in the UK top ten best-seller list, his latest novel *Thud!* sold nearly 40,000 copies, more than half as much again as the other nine titles combined - and Pratchett is open to that most grievous of accusations: a lack of seriousness. After all, wit and popularity still tend to be frowned upon in certain literary circles.

"It used to bother me more up until about five years ago," he says. "Now my philosophy can be summed up as 'What the hell.' It's just the way the world works."

So he's funny, he's popular, and he still answers his own, not inconsiderable, fan mail. He is heavily involved with the Orang-Utan Foundation, a consequence of making the Unseen University's librarian an orang-utan; he sponsors the Sagittarius Prize for the best first novel written by an author over 60; and a bookseller friend of mine, who was going through a difficult separation some years ago, suspects that he rigged a raffle in her store so her daughter would win the first prize of an enormous cuddly toy.

That said, I have to confess to being a little wary of interviewing him. I'd met him twice before when I was a young journalist, and neither was a particularly satisfying journalistic experience for me. (On the second occasion, he answered my perhaps over-elaborate opening question with a look of bewilderment and the words "That's for clever buggers like you to figure out", and that was pretty much the end of that.) I suspect that Pratchett once had a slight, if perfectly understandable, chip on his shoulder towards the media. While his work had hardly been ignored by the mainstream press, and he had certainly been well reviewed, it was clear that he owed his position in large part to the consistent and prolific production of solid work that was loved by an ever-increasing number of fans. Now that he was achieving a measure of success he seemed reluctant to indulge reporters who were trying to make up on lost ground.

Thankfully this encounter is happier than the last, perhaps because my questions have become a little better, or at least intelligible to the person being asked them, which is always an advantage. Pratchett is very good company indeed for our entire time together, a treasure-trove of little facts and details. In the first five minutes he moves from the precise meaning of "cornucopia", through the Battle of Marathon via his mother's naming habits, and on to the greatest difficulty facing 18th- and 19th-century women who joined the army by pretending to be men. (They found it hard to swear, apparently.) I also learn that he once banged his head after carefully hiding away his first decent sized cheque - for

#250,000 - and promptly forgot everything he'd done in the previous minute or two, including where he'd put the cheque. He never found it again.

Pratchett, now 57, is a former journalist who, in his thirties, jumped ship to become publicity officer for the Central Electricity Generating Board, with responsibility for putting a positive sheen on the activities of four nuclear power stations. "I can say, even though I'm not being paid anymore and I never signed the Official Secrets Act, that we had journalistic emergencies rather than real nuclear emergencies," he recalls. "After Chernobyl, anything that happened at a nuclear power station was automatically a nuclear holocaust unless you could prove otherwise. Showing them that the power station was still standing with people working in it sometimes did the trick. While I was there we tried a new technique of telling the truth as soon as possible instead of waiting until the last minute. After the press got used to it, it worked out very well. After all, the stations were all run by guys called Jim and Bert and Sid who smoked pipes and, on the whole, weren't particularly anxious to irradiate the place in which they lived."

By then he had already published a number of novels, but it was not until 1983 that *The Colour of Magic* appeared, the first of the Discworld novels that would make his name. Since then, he has written 30 Discworld books for adults, using the series to explore topics as diverse as opera, the birth of popular music, cinema, organised religion, and the continent of Australia, known as XXXX in the books. (Think about it.) Certain characters have recurred throughout the series: the incompetent wizard Rincewind; the no-nonsense witch Granny Weatherwax; Death himself, who always speaks in capital letters; and, as in *Thud!*, Sam Vimes, the Commander of the City Watch.

In common with a number of Pratchett's later novels, *Thud!* is actually rather more serious in intent than it might at first appear, using as its starting point the murder of a black-garbed extremist dwarf who has been inciting hatred against the city's trolls. Quite clearly it is dealing with fundamentalism, albeit by using dwarfs and trolls instead of Christian, Jewish or Muslim extremists, but it's hard to pin down precise modern corollaries. Pratchett is actually far too subtle and clever a writer to fall back on such easy comparisons. Similarly, in recent years the shadow of war has increasingly fallen over the Discworld. Again, it's not hard to see where this might be coming from, but you will look in vain for direct equivalents to Blair and Bush. The Discworld functions less as a mirror of this world than as a kind of prism, refracting our experiences and allowing us to see them in new and slightly curious ways.

"Whether or not people are trolls, dwarfs, vampires or humans, as a matter of course they will in some understandable way behave like humans," says Pratchett. "They're all people, and in certain circumstances people act in a certain way, so you get, as in *Thud!*, a situation that you could map onto modern preoccupations such as fundamentalism. But just because you can map it doesn't mean that that's what it is. It's saying that you get idiots and clowns everywhere, and have done for a long time: Northern Ireland and

southern Ireland, Protestants and Catholics, Muslims and Jews, whatever. The same kinds of dynamics are involved."

It's Pratchett's humour that allows him to slip complex ideas under the wire, enabling him to examine issues like interracial conflict, diplomatic manoeuvrings, the media, the postal service, even modern warfare without ever losing sight of his mission to entertain. In the end, the humour in the books enables him to be more serious while appearing less serious than he is.

"Sam Vimes fails to see why war isn't murder," says Pratchett. "The fact that it's happening to lots of people, and the state is involved, doesn't, in his simple mind, mean it's not murder. We kind of agree not to ask questions of fantasies and fairy tales, but Discworld works because those questions are asked, and it's embarrassing that they should be asked, and so they're made funny, or more interesting, so that they can be asked."

The next adult novel, *Unseen Academicals*, will see a return to a more straightforward humorous style, tackling as it does - if you'll excuse the pun - the brief history of the Ankh-Morpork soccer league. Nevertheless, for those who have forgotten it, or who never quite believed it was true to begin with, Pratchett's work offers continuing proof that serious and funny are not mutually exclusive concepts.

"G.K Chesterton once said that the opposite of 'funny' is not 'serious'; the opposite of 'funny' is 'not funny', says Pratchett simply. "They don't interact in the way people think."

Blast from the past.... From PROBE 45 August 1980

Whither goest thou, O Club?

Simon Scott

SFSA has just passed its eleventh birthday. Now is perhaps a good time to take a look at ourselves. The main question is whether the club is fulfilling its objectives: and what are the objectives it should be fulfilling?

Basically we should have everything going for us - our members can broadly be describes as IMAGINATIVE, also, possibly, TALENTED, and, CREATIVE. If they were not they would not be attracted to the club in the first place.

But now, having patted ourselves on the back, let's get on to the bad news. Everyone who joins or contemplates joining any club, asks the inevitable question "What's in it for me? What do I get for my hard earned subscription money?"

And, for many, this question remains unanswered. This is borne out by the disturbing fact (which hasn't changed in 11 years) that a high proportion of members become "one-offs." : they join once, pay their subscriptions once, come to one or two meetings and disappear into the void - often with their quota of library books.

OK, so every club has "one offs", we can live with that. Less easy to accept is the defection of long term members, who have often contributed a great deal of their time: even serving committee members have faded out without warning.

So, where are we going wrong? Confucius, some 25 centuries ago said something to the effect of "He who try to please everybody, please nobody" We cannot be all things to all people.

Club members come from widely different backgrounds, have widely different tastes and are of widely different ages. Consequently meetings which appeal to some will not appeal to others.

Let us now look at some of the things we HAVE done over the past eleven years, and, what is even more important, what we have not done.

The first purely social meeting was held at a rather unlikely place called Daggerfontein, which for those who do not know it is a rather derelict mining village in the remote depths of the far East Rand. The occasion was a "bring your own meat, bring your own drinks" braai.

Other successful social meetings have included a Buffet supper with members contributing the meal.

Other very successful meetings have featured a guest speaker such as Professor Jacques Schellschop and the astronomer, Jack Bennett.

Let us look at what we have not done.

We have never had an outing to the Planetarium. (Disgraceful)

We have never had a club dinner at a posh joint, although it has been suggested.

And now over to members. Let's have your thoughts on what we should be doing.

What other activities would you like to see the club participate in?

Does being as club member but you what you think it should?

Please us know?

Nova 1013 3rd Pl ace S.A Section

Graveyard Shift by Sean Harvey

I looked up at the clear night sky and saw the half-moon shining dim light over the Kleinbergton graveyard half a kilometre away from town. Apart from a refreshing summer night breeze, everything around us was calm and peaceful. I thought that was very odd. I gazed at what I had set up with the help of Johan and his sister, Tanya, around some

random tombstone. Considering what we were about to do, I assumed that there would be dark thunder clouds, howling winds and a spine-chilling mist surrounding the three of us. But what did I know; I was only 14 years old. My name is Clayton Meintjies, and I designed and built a machine that I hoped would raise the dead.

“Do you think what we are doing is right?” Tanya asked.

When she turned to look at me, her face shone with that rare beauty that reminded me of her late mother. For a moment I was lost in her eyes and forgot what we were doing. A ridiculous thought popped into my mind, but I quickly squashed it. I didn’t have to be a genius to figure out that a girl as amazing as Tanya would never land up with a super-nerd like me. I blinked twice, and brought myself back to our current situation.

“What do you mean?” I asked, “Don’t you want to see your mother again?”

“Of course I do, but...” she said, “We’re messing with the very laws of nature... of God.”

“Actually Tanya,” I said, “Without God’s help, this will not work. The scientist who did the ground work for the ‘ghost frequency’ could not get it to work. I later found out that he had stumbled onto the theory by accident, but never really believed that there was such a thing as God or an afterlife.”

“So you believe that the missing ingredient for this theory to work is faith?” She said.

“Exactly,” I said, “The machine can only help you from this end, but there needs to be help from the other side.”

“Wow,” said Johan, shaking his head, “Not that I don’t appreciate what you’re trying to do, but I brought monopoly for us to play just in case this doesn’t work out.”

“Thanks,” I smiled.

“Hey, Clayton,” Johan said, “So why aren’t we going straight to my mother’s grave?”

“I wanted to test it first on a random grave,” I said, “just in case things don’t happen like we expect.”

“You mean like zombies and stuff like that?” Johan said.

“I wouldn’t say that...” I said, and saw Tanya going pale, “It’s just that this has never been done before. If it works, great, but if something... else happens, at least it happens to somebody we don’t know.”

“What about this random guy you chose?” Tanya asked.

“He’s already dead,” I said, “What’s the worst that could happen?” That was probably the worst thing I could have said.

“Alright,” Johan said as he checked the last connections to the machine, “I think everything is ready. Are you ready?”

“I think so...” I muttered.

“Is this thing safe?” Tanya asked, “You said that this super microwave of yours emits tons of radiation.”

“Ah...” I said, trying to think. I can’t believe I had never really thought about it. I had put so much thought into how this machine would affect the dead that I forgot to think about how it would affect the living. Luckily I could always count on Johan to provide a logical answer to life’s difficult questions.

“Don’t worry, Tanya,” Johan said, “If the same machine can kill you and also bring you back from the dead, it sort of cancels itself out.”

Tanya and I laughed. We really needed that.

“Flip the switch, Clayton,” Johan said. For the first time that night, Johan let his cool slip and I could see the desperation in his eyes. Even though he tried to be strong for his sister, the weight of the last few months weighed heavily on him. He needed this to work, just as much as his father.

“Ok,” I sighed, “But we need to pray first... remember the help from the other side.”

“Yes,” said Tanya, “Let’s stand in a circle and hold hands.”

Normally, I would have resisted, but that night it was a welcome comfort. As we stood in the circle, I stopped worrying about whether my hand was sweaty holding Tanya’s hand, and focused my attention upwards. While we all prayed quietly, my thoughts shifted to memories of Sarah, their mother. It always amazed me how she could lighten up any situation, and make you feel not only welcome, but better about yourself. It was like she had this invisible aura of light around her that when she was around, you knew everything was alright. Right then, all of my own doubts about what we were trying to do was expelled, and I opened my eyes with renewed determination to help this family that I had grown to love.

“Amen,” I said, and the siblings opened their eyes. I thought that I saw the same renewed determination in their eyes that I now felt. I said, “Now we’re ready.”

“Stand back from the tombstone,” I said as I began to charge the capacitors.

“Oom Piet might not be happy when we wake him up,” Johan chuckled, “What kind of guy only gets his first name on his tomb stone? No loving father, or husband, nothing...?”

“Do you think we chose the wrong tombstone?” Tanya asked.

“It is too late to second-guess ourselves now,” I said as the capacitors reached 90%.

“I suppose so,” Johan said, “But I hope that he isn’t holding a grudge from the ages, waiting for this moment to unleash his fury.”

That was another thing that I never thought of, but as the capacitors reached 100%, I remembered what was at stake and, looking at Tanya and Johan again, I knew that the risk was worth it.

“Activating the machine,” I said, taking a step back with the remote switch, “Now!”

I was expecting something dramatic to happen, like the heavens to open up with flashes of lightning and thunder. It was illogical, I know, since most of what should have been happening was beyond what the eye could see, but I thought that would have been really cool.

Instead, what happened was that the machine let off a spark as the capacitors unloaded their charge into the extremely rare cavity magnetron I found from a discontinued microwave, which pushed out huge amounts of radiation targeted at the grave.

Apart from that little spark, and hum of the machine, nothing had changed, well except for the appearance of an old man standing in front of the tomb stone.

“Holy crap...” Johan muttered, “Holiest of holy crap!”

“It actually worked...” Tanya said in shock.

I said nothing, but turned off the machine and took a step toward the ghost. He looked like a normal person, although his clothing was from another time, and every now and then he seemed to fade a little and then come back again.

The old man took off his hat, and then looked around in astonishment.

“I can’t believe it,” he said, “He told me that I was going to come back, but I thought he was joking.”

“Who told you?” I asked.

“Hey,” Tanya said, grabbing my arm, “You can’t talk to the ghost... I mean Oom Piet like that.”

The ghost smiled, “It’s alright, Tanya,” he said, “God told me.”

For a moment, it seemed like we all held our breaths. I released my breath slowly and said to the ghost, “How did you know her name?”

“Things work a little differently on the other side,” he said, “It would be impossible for me to explain,” he then looked more earnestly at me, “You seem to be a little disappointed?”

“Well...” I said, “Meaning no disrespect, I was expecting something different.”

“Flashes of lighting, heavens opening, that sort of thing...?” he said, and I nodded and then he laughed.

Johan turned to me, and I could still see the shock in his face, “What do we do now?” he whispered to me.

“I don’t know,” I said, with a shrug. I guess there were many things I didn’t think about when planning this experiment - like what to do after you’ve resurrected a test ghost.

“Oh...!” the ghost gasped, as he faded a little again.

“What’s wrong?” Tanya pleaded.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I just haven’t felt this for so long... it’s terrible.”

“What haven’t you felt?” she asked.

“Boredom,” he said, “You never get bored on the other side.”

“Wow,” Johan said, “They must have the best computer games ever!”

“Anyway...” Oom Piet said, “I don’t have much more time here. You might have already guessed that Clayton.”

“I had a theory it wouldn’t last,” I said.

“There is something I need to ask before I leave,” Oom Piet said, “Something I need you to do, Clayton.”

“What is it...?” I said, nervously.

“My name is Piet Niemand,” he said, seeing the shock on our faces, “Yes; I am Mal Koos’s grandfather. I was not a good man when I was here, turning to God only at the end of my life. That is why, Johan, there is no salutation of loving father on my tombstone.”

“But...” said Tanya, “...I know I just met you; but you seem like a nice man.”

“The other side changed me to what I was meant to be,” Piet said, “You would not have liked my old self, especially you, Clayton. I had so much hate inside that I channelled it to hating people of other races and even to my son, Bertus, Mal Koos’s father. Bertus in turn, channeled that hate into his son.”

“What is it you want me to do,” I asked through gritted teeth. I tried not to let my emotions show. I didn’t like to hold grudges, but if there was one person that I hated, it is Mal Koos,

the most racist bully in school. From the time my family moved out of the coloured area into town, he had been my constant source of terror.

“I need you to deliver a message to Koos,” Piet said, “I know that this will be very difficult for you, and that you have every right not to do this, but I need you to tell Koos that it is not his fault.”

“It’s not his fault...?” I asked, “His fault for what?”

“He will know,” Piet said.

“Won’t it be better if I told him?” Johan asked, “He is a legendary racist after all.”

“No,” Piet said, “It will need to be Clayton who delivers the message.”

“Why?” Johan asked.

“There’s not enough time to explain,” Piet said, “My time is up here,” he said as he faded deeply and then came back, “Please do this,” he said before disappearing completely.

The silence that followed weighed heavily on me, and I could feel that Johan and Tanya were looking at me.

Tanya asked, “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

Johan said, “Let’s not lose sight of the big picture here... the machine works!”

“Yes,” I sighed, “We’ve got bigger things to worry about.”

“Yah,” said Johan, “You thought raising the dead was hard, try convincing my father to come watch your magic microwave raise his lost wife.”

“Yet another problem I did not anticipate,” I said, “You know, for somebody who is supposed to be a genius, I’m quite stupid.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself,” Tanya said, “We’ll think of something.”

I arrived at the Van Heerden home the next day with a trolley and found that both Johan and Tanya looked as nervous as I felt. Willem, Johan’s father was a Dominee in the local Dutch Reformed Church, and the church had given him a year off while he mourned the loss of his soul mate. 6 months had passed since her death, and things had only become worse. He had taken to drinking and spent most of his days in his study, drunk.

Johan frowned at my trolley, and then at me, “What’s in the trolley?”

“The machine,” I said.

“Why?” He asked.

“To help explain what we are going to do,” I said, a little baffled.

“That won’t be necessary,” Tanya said, “I’m going to lie to him.”

“Really..?” I said.

“Do you really think he would believe what happened?” she asked.

“I guess not...” I said, “So what are you going to tell him?”

“Tomorrow would have been my mother’s birthday,” she said, “So I’m going to tell him that we’ll be having a memorial for her at the graveyard tomorrow night.”

“Oh,” I said, as we went into the house, “Not bad.”

“You can leave the Ghost Buster in the kitchen,” Johan chuckled, trying to lighten the mood, “With the other microwave.”

“I’d like to see any other microwave raise somebody from the dead,” I joked.

In front of Willem’s office door, we became serious again. My heart began to race as Tanya knocked on the door. I was a terrible liar, and I didn’t know how the son and daughter of a Dominee would perform. *Please, let it work*, I prayed silently.

“It’s open,” was the response from inside.

Johan opened the door and when I stepped inside the room darkened by closed curtains, I was shocked again that this could be the same man that I had met a year ago. Back then he had appeared to me as a wonderful mix of dignity and good cheer, and because of him, I began to truly believe in God. Now he slouched on a recliner with half a bottle of Jack Daniels in one hand.

“Ah... Clayton,” said Willem, after taking a sip of his bottle, “Just the boy I wanted to see. I hear that you’re quite the genius, can you please answer a question that’s been bothering me?”

I peeked towards Tanya for some support, but she looked just as nervous as I was.

“I’ll try, Oom,” I said.

“Tell me, my boy, what did I do wrong to deserve this? Was I such a bad guy that God had to take my Sarah away from me?”

How do you answer something like that? I might be a genius at quantum physics, but these sorts of things were way out of my abilities. I waited a little longer, hoping that this might be a rhetorical question, but Willem’s glare never wavered from me.

“Oom,” I muttered, “Maybe the other Dominees would be better able to council you...”

“I know what the Dominees will tell me, damn it!” said Willem, “I am one... or at least was one. I know what they believe; I’m just not sure I believe anymore.” After taking another sip of his bottle he continued, “You know I had never been drunk until this year, can you believe that? I always thought - no believed - that if I served God with all my heart I’d be blessed, my family would be taken care of, and we would enjoy the favor of God into a good old age. But she was 38 for God’s sake!”

In the silence that followed, I turned and saw Tanya wipe away a tear before working up the courage to speak.

“Pa...” she said, “Tomorrow is Ma’s birthday, so we would like you to come with us to the graveyard for a memorial.”

“I can remember her just fine from here,” Willem muttered.

I saw Johan’s face turning red, “Please Pa,” he said, “It would mean a lot to us. It’s really important.”

Willem took a long, deep gulp from his bottle and took a moment to study each of our faces.

“What’s really going on here?” he asked, almost in a whisper.

“A memorial...” Tanya started to say, but then was cut off from her father.

“You’re lying!” he shouted as he stood up from his chair, “What’s really going on here? Tell me now, or so help me God...!”

“Oom, ok... ok!” I said with my hand out, “It’s my fault, I’m sorry.”

“Clayton...!” Tanya said to me.

“What is your fault boy?” Willem grunted, “Come on, I don’t have all day, I need to get back to my business!”

“Last year I began researching an article that I read about generating what was termed a ‘ghost frequency’ through emitting microwave energy at specific frequencies and a highly powerful and concentrated burst.” I said.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he said, as he sat down again and took the last sip of the bottle, and threw it onto a pile that had gathered next to his chair, “Get to the point.”

“Ok,” I said, “After your wife’s death, I became obsessed with getting the theory to work, and after some time I got the parts together that I needed, and built my own version of the machine. Even though it did not work for the scientist who made the theory, I believed that faith was the missing factor to make it work.”

“Are you saying that you built a machine that can bring my Sarah back?” Willem asked, and I nodded, “Let me see this machine.”

I turned and looked at the siblings and saw a mixture of concern and desperate hopefulness, but I knew that I didn’t really have a choice.

“Yes, Oom,” I said. When I got back, I put the machine down on the floor as gently as I could.

“It looks like a microwave,” Willem grunted.

“Most of the machine is made up of a limited edition microwave which was banned 11 years ago because its cavity magnetron was too strong – which was perfect for this experiment. I was very lucky to find one on the internet. An old guy in Cape Town had one that had broken, and he didn’t even know how dangerous it was.”

“Lucky us,” Willem said, as he got up again from his chair, “Is it ok if I take a closer look?”

“Yes, Oom,” I said. I cringed when he started moving the machine on its side, apparently examining every facet of the machine. “Please be careful with it,” I said, “The machine is quite fragile and highly calibrated.”

“I see,” he said as he lifted the machine into the air, apparently examining underneath the machine, “So I guess this won’t be good for the machine,” he said as he hurled the machine from above his head and onto the cement floor. With a loud crash, the cubed shape of the machine warped into a mangled mess, spilling wires and components onto the floor.

For a long time I couldn’t say anything. In my shock I couldn’t even hear Tanya crying and Johan shouting something at his father while Willem just sat down in his recliner and opened another bottle of whiskey. When I finally began to come to grips with what had just happened, a single word escaped from my mouth, “Why...”

“Someday you will thank me,” he said, “It is important that my children get to understand the realities of life. You live and then you die, and that’s it. These games only make it worse. Sarah is not coming back, and the sooner they begin to grasp that, the better.

“I’m not sure if I have faith anymore...”he continued, but then smiled dryly at his bottle, “Oh, wait... I do have faith. I have faith in this bottle, because this bottle doesn’t make promises that it can’t keep. This bottle didn’t take my Sarah away from me, and leave this family empty. Although, it might help me get to her again if I drink myself to death, because God knows – if He is there – that I’ve been thinking about more effective ways of doing it,

but haven't worked up the courage yet. But tomorrow is her birthday, maybe then I will get the courage to do it."

I hated crying. I found it to be a useless and impractical activity since experience had shown that crying only worsened the beating I would get from a bully. So, from grade two, I had trained myself never to cry no matter how bad the situations got, and me being the super-geek that I was, it got pretty bad.

But now, as I stood outside of the Van Heerden house where we had carried the remains of the machine onto the porch, I looked at Tanya weeping in her brother's arms, and I could not with all my will power hold back a tear from escaping down my cheek. "Why did he do that!" she muttered through her sobs, "After all Clayton did for us..." While still comforting his sister, Johan looked up at me, and I could see that he was trying his best to hold it together for his sister.

"Can you fix it?" Johan said with a tiny glimmer of hope in his eyes.

I quickly wiped the tear away as I examined the wreckage. "Most of the parts I will be able to replace," I said, looking through the access panel that had been broken open when it crashed, "I'll need to replace the power supply, some capacitors..." but then I dug past some wires into the heart of the machine and pulled out what was left of the cavity magnetron, and I could not hold back tears from pouring out. I frantically wiped them away, hoping that it was the tears in my eyes that deceived me, but it was not. The limited edition magnetron was broken in two; its delicate coils and components were beyond repair.

"What's wrong," Johan muttered.

"The cavity magnetron – the main part of the machine – is broken," I said, "It was the only one left... I won't be able to find another one that could perform like it."

"But..." Johan said, "Can't you fix it? You're a genius after all."

I looked up at Johan and resisted shouting back how impossible that request was, and how hopeless I now felt, but that would not help anything.

"I wish I was that good," I said, "But even if I was, I would need a factory of equipment to fix this component."

"So..." Tanya said, still holding her brother, "Is it over then?"

It all looked like it was, but I couldn't let myself give up. Not after being so close, and especially not after hearing that Willem was considering committing suicide the next day.

“Just give me some time to work this out,” I said, packing the remains of the machine into my trolley.

“You tried,” Tanya said, “Thank you for that.”

“We’ll get through this,” I said, although my tears betrayed me.

When I was in my room, I called the only person I could think of that might be able to help: the old man who sold me the special microwave in the first place.

“What?” said Mr. Johnson. That was how he always answered the phone.

“Hello Mr. Johnson,” I said, “I don’t know if you remember me...”

“Ah yes,” Johnson said, “I remember you, Clayton, the microwave boy. What can I do for you?”

“Well...” I said, “I seem to have broken the microwave and was wondering if you knew where I could find another one.”

“I would try the nearest supermarket,” he said.

“I know...” I said, and heard him chuckling on the other end of the line, “I’m looking for the Infinity Special Edition microwave, Q75M.”

“Oh, you mean that super badass one-of-a-kind microwave death machine I sold to you four months ago?”

“Yes,” I said, “That’s the one.”

“Well, I did some digging after you told me how unique that old machine was, and it turns out you were right. Apparently it was so dangerous that wherever there was one, it was confiscated and destroyed. The company, Infinity, who made the microwave didn’t even survive. When I called some places in America, they said that I’ve been put on some sort of terrorist watch list just for asking for it, so, ah thanks for that.”

“I’m sorry about that sir,” I said, “But I really need another one. Is there no way of getting another one?”

“Not unless you can invent a time machine,” he said.

I must admit, the thought did cross my mind. But even if it was possible to build a time machine, I would probably need that same unique cavity magnetron to get it to work.

“Ok...” I sighed, “Thank you for your time.”

“You never told me what you wanted to use it for...?” Johnson said, “Are you some sort of terrorist?”

“No sir,” I said, and then I thought that he probably had a right to know the truth, “The mother of a family that I hold dear has died, and I built a machine that could bring her ghost from the other side, but it needs the cavity magnetron from that microwave.”

“I see,” he grumbled, “So you don’t want to tell me then. Goodbye.”

I was still frowning from Mr. Johnson’s putting the phone down in my ear when I heard a gentle knock on the door, and then my mother’s voice, “Supper’s ready.”

Was it that time already? I thought. The afternoon had passed, going into evening and I had still made no progress in finding a way to fix the machine before Sarah’s birthday tomorrow. I was not an expert on people, but I could sense that Oom Willem wasn’t messing around when he told us he was contemplating suicide.

“I’m sorry, Mum,” I said, “I’m not hungry tonight, and I have some stuff to do.”

“Ah...” she said, “Ok.”

A few minutes later I heard three not-so-gentle knocks and then my father burst through the door.

“Your mother has been cooking this lovely food for us to sit down and have supper together,” he grunted, “And now you say you’re not hungry...!”

“You know, I work hard six days a week with overtime for most nights just so that we can live here in town. Do you know why?” before I could reply he continued, “For you, son. Because we saw that you were special and that we wanted you to be in the best school in town because we knew that your potential was wasted in the coloured area.

“All I ask is that the few nights I’m home in time for supper, my whole family is with me. Is that too much? Now... what do you have to say for yourself young man?”

I looked up at my father and knew that he must have had a bad day at work, which happened about half the time when you’re in the high pressure work of the clothing factories.

“I’m sorry, dad,” I said and then another one of those cursed tears rolled down my cheek. Man, I hated those things! “It’s just the Van Heerden family. I thought that I could help ease their grief by doing something nice for them, but I only made it worse.”

I saw all my father’s anger and frustration from the day deflate in front of me. He could sometimes seem like a very intimidating man, but I knew that he was soft on the inside.

“Come here, my boy,” he said, and he gave me a brief but fierce hug, and then released me, “Tell me what happened.”

Despite common sense telling me that I should do otherwise, I decided that I should tell him the truth.

After I explained everything that happened up to this point, my father just stood, leaning against my wall, scratching his beard. He made a few deep hums in thought, and then said, "So... were you kids drinking at the graveyard? It is understandable after their loss, but I'm a little disappointed."

"No, Dad...!" I said.

"Of course, you were drinking," he said, "You are coloured after all."

"Dad..." I gasped, "That's racist."

"It's only racist when somebody else says it," he said, and smiled. I could not stop myself from smiling as well. He then added, "Anyway, the only thing that made sense to me in your whole explanation was the memorial tomorrow on Sarah's birthday. I must say that I'm impressed with you boy."

"How is that?" I said.

"I wasn't excited to hear that you became friends with the white people next door, but now that you are, I'm glad you're doing everything you can to help them. I would have drawn the line at drinking, but that memorial idea seems to be a good one."

"Ah... thanks Dad," I muttered, but then I thought of something, "But... I haven't tried everything."

"Really son...?" said my father, "What more can you possibly do? It's not like you can bring Sarah back from the dead."

I choked back a laugh, and then I realized that I should phrase my next statement carefully.

"There is something that I need for the memorial," I said, "There is a small chance that what I need might be in Niemand's Electronics Shop."

"The one owned by the family of the one they call Mal Koos...?" he said.

"One and the same," I said, "And I need to leave now."

"Ah... are you sure son?" He said, "It's getting late, and you know that family is not really fond of our kind."

"I have to try, Dad," I said, a small glimmer of hope causing me to smile, "I know they live in the flat behind the shop..." but then I remembered something, "...but I still don't know how I'm going to convince Willem to come to the memorial tomorrow."

“Ok,” he said, “Leave that to me.”

“Really...” I muttered, “No disrespect, but if his own children couldn’t convince him, how are you going to get it right?”

“Oh, son...” he said with a smirk, “there are three ways of doing things: the wrong way, the right way, and the coloured way.”

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” I chuckled as I put on my jacket and packed the broken cavity magnetron in my backpack.

“Good luck,” he said as he walked me to the door, and then my mother came out of the kitchen.

“And where are you going at this time of the night?” she asked.

“Don’t worry, dear,” my father said, “He needs to get something for a memorial for Sarah tomorrow.”

“Oh...” she said, “That’s nice... take your supper. I packed it already in a Tupperware just in case you get hungry later.”

“Thank you so much,” I said, nervously. Was I really that good of a liar? Well, actually I was mostly telling the truth. We were planning a sort of memorial for Sarah; I just didn’t mention that we planned for Sarah to be there as well.

Even though it was getting dark, I was filled with hope and courage to face my arch enemy and ask for his help, but as I drew near to the Electronics Shop, my courage seemed to disappear with the fading light as fear started to set in.

I had heard at school of how good Mal Koos was at electrical repairs, even though he sucked at everything else, but I knew that my cavity magnetron was beyond repair. *Wouldn’t it be funny if he had his own Infinity Special Edition microwave stashed in his workshop?* I thought.

As I got closer to the shop, I was surprised to see that the lights were still on, but then I realized that Koos and his father were arguing at the entrance of the shop. I hid and watched from around the corner of their building.

Bertus, Koos’s father, waved his beer bottle around while he spoke, spilling some of it on the pavement.

“Why do you embarrass me like this?” said Bertus, “You lazy rubbish!”

“I told you Pa,” Koos pleaded, “That TV was fixed when I sent it back to Steenkamp.”

“Are you saying he broke it again?” said Bertus.

"I don't know," Koos shrugged.

"I don't know..." Bertus repeated, "You're right, you don't know nothing! I should have known better to let my good for nothing son run the workshop. You can't even finish high school! If failing was a course at university, you would be a doctor by now!"

Koos said nothing. Even though he was almost the same hulking size as his father, somehow he seemed much smaller.

Bertus finished his bottle of beer and dropped it right there. "Ah... I suppose it's my fault too," he said, "you're stupid like me. It's too bad you weren't like your mother. Although I'm glad she's not around to see what a rubbish you have become."

Koos seemed to slouch even smaller as he said, "I'll fix it."

"You'd better..." grunted Bertus, "You're not allowed in the house until you've checked and fixed every circuit in that piece of junk."

"Can I eat first, Pa?" Koos muttered, "I missed lunch today fixing Miss Vorster's washing machine."

"You joking, right...?" Bertus said, "Get out of my face! I don't want to see you again till this is done."

I could almost feel sorry for Koos if I still didn't have the bruises from the last beating that he gave me. Still, I did understand him more now, and that understanding made me wonder if somehow he wasn't as hopeless as I thought.

When his father had left to go to their flat round the back of the property, I forced myself to enter the shop. My heart was pounding as I saw Koos moving towards the workshop at the back. I was trying to figure out the most subtle way that I could introduce myself when I bumped a display shelf of light bulbs and three boxes fell to the ground. I hoped that none had broken, but the cracking sound told me otherwise. *Nice*, I thought, *very subtle*.

"Hey...!" said Koos, turning around quickly. When he saw me his somber face turned into a dark smirk, "You...!"

"I'm sorry!" I said as he charged towards me. Everything inside me wanted to run for the door, but my cause was too great, "Please, I need to talk to you..."

I hadn't finished talking when Koos's fist sent me to the ground. My head was still spinning when Koos picked me up.

"And why should I listen to you, my coloured punching bag?" he grunted.

In the haze in my head, a thought flashed into my mind, "I've got food...!" I shouted with my hands covering my face, bracing for the next impact, "In my bag."

I felt his grip release and then my bag being ripped open while it was still on my back. When I took my hands away from my face, I saw Koos sitting behind the counter, digging into my supper.

"Don't think I'm finished with you," he said, "Your coloured ass is going to pay for those broken light bulbs, and then pay some extra just for being coloured."

"I'll pay for the globes," I said, but then could not stop myself from asking, "Why do you have to be so racist?"

"Why do you have to be so coloured?" was his reply in-between mouthfuls of beef stew.

I could see that that discussion was going nowhere, so I got straight to the point.

"I need your help..." I said, but then quickly added, "I mean, the Van Heerden's need your help."

Koos wiped his mouth with his sleeve as he put the empty Tupperware aside. "It is a shame when such a nice white lady dies," he said.

I placed the broken cavity magnetron on the counter between us. Koos picked it up and examined it curiously. "What's this...?" he said, "...a magnetron...?"

"Yes," I said, "A special cavity magnetron."

"So..." he said, "You came all this way so that I could fix their microwave...?"

"Ah... no," I said, "This magnetron comes from a limited edition microwave from a company that was called Infinity. They've been closed down because of this microwave."

"The Q75M...?" he said, and I nodded, surprised that he knew about it, "I thought that was an old technician's myth. What you want with it?"

"I need a replacement for this part, if it's possible," I said, and then he laughed, "I know they're hard to find."

When he stopped laughing he said, "Now what do you need this for?"

I sighed heavily before I said, "I built a machine that can get through to the other side - to the afterlife - and it, ah... broke. So I need a replacement part so that I can bring back Sarah's ghost tomorrow, before Oom Willem commits suicide." Koos didn't say anything, but just stared at me in a way that I knew meant that another beating was coming. I couldn't think of anything else to say which wouldn't make it worse when I remembered Oom Piet's request. "Before the machine broke, we tested it on a tomb stone with the

inscription 'Oom Piet'. When your grandfather's ghost appeared, he asked me to tell you something."

Koos then stood up slowly, preparing for the beating he was about to dish out.

"Mmm..." he grunted, "What did Oom Piet say?"

"He said," I said almost in a whisper, "That... it's not your fault."

"What the hell...!" he said, his face red with anger, "My fault for what...?"

"I don't know," I pleaded, as I slowly starting moving away from him as he stomped slowly towards me, "He said that you would know."

"Get the hell out of my shop!" he yelled, "Now!"

He didn't have to tell me twice. I was out of there so fast that I had forgotten the cavity magnetron behind, and I didn't think I would be back to fetch it anytime soon.

The next morning I was surprised to be woken by our doorbell so early since it was Saturday, and it was school holidays. When I got up, I winced at the pain from my cheek and then looked at my bedside alarm clock. It was 06:33 AM. By the time I put on my slippers and got to our gate, there was only an old rectangular box lying outside our gate. I opened it and found a magnetron inside and a little note scribbled on a torn piece of paper. It read: *Not same magnetron, but closest I find. Put two extra charging coils to increase output, but that means maybe not stable. Still owe me for the globes. Koos.*

"I can't believe it," I muttered.

"What's that?" my father said. I forgot that he would be leaving for work this time in the morning.

"It's..." I said, as I turned to him smiling, "Something for the memorial."

"What happened to your face?" he said.

"It doesn't matter," I smiled, "Are you still going to convince Willem to come tonight?"

"Yeah, when I get back this afternoon," he said, frowning at the bruise on my face,

"Consider him convinced."

"Thank you," I said, and then hugged him, "I'll be in the garage when you get back."

I didn't notice the hours passing as I completed the repairs on the Ghost Buster in the garage. I had to make some modifications because the new magnetron was shorter than

the original one, and a little fatter due to Koos's extra coils, but as far as I could tell everything was ready.

I tried to stay positive even though I knew that the unpredictable performance of this new magnetron made it impossible to be certain that the ghost frequency could be reached and sustained long enough to open the way to the other side. All I could do was hope.

I was startled when my father opened the garage door, and I saw that the sun was already setting.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"6 o'clock," he said, "And you're still in your pyjamas."

"Oh..." I said, looking down at my now dirty sleepwear, "I got too busy. Did you come right with Willem?"

"Of course," he smirked, "You look surprised."

"How...?" I said.

"I told him that if he doesn't come with us tonight, I would start drinking again," he said, "There are few things scarier than a coloured man with a bottle in his hand."

I laughed, and then realized what time it was, "Oh, crap!" I said, "Sorry...It's almost time to start, ah... setting up at the graveyard."

"Hold on there, boy," He said, "I would recommend a shower and something to eat first."

"Oh, yes," I said, "Thank you, dad."

With all my hurrying, I arrived at the graveyard before Johan and Tanya and thought that I would start setting up without them. But then my heart almost exploded in my chest when I saw Koos standing by Oom Piet's grave. I stood frozen for a moment, but then decided to quietly push my trolley away from him and towards Sarah's grave hoping that he would not notice me, but when I looked up again, I saw him waving for me to come there. When I stood next to him, he said nothing, but stared soberly at Oom Piet's grave.

"Thank you," I said, "for the magnetron."

"Don't thank me yet," he said, "Might not even work."

After more silence, Koos sighed heavily and said, "My mother took her own life four years ago," he said, finding it difficult to contain his emotions, "I was fourteen and I was a very difficult child. After the funeral, my drunken father told me what I was already thinking: that it was my fault that she killed herself."

"I'm sorry..." I said, "But now you know the truth."

"Yes..." he said, smiling as a tear rolled down his cheek, "It wasn't my fault."

After some time, he said, "I'm sorry for all the horrible things I did to you. Can you ever forgive me?"

"I think..." I said, "That I already have."

"Thank you," he said. When Koos turned to head home, we both saw Johan and Tanya in the distance. "Good luck," Koos said, and left.

When my parents arrived with Willem, we had just finished checking all the connections to the machine. Johan looked at me and frowned, "The old people are going to ask a lot of questions," he said, "There're only a few ways to explain why you're connecting cables to my mother's tombstone."

"Then we'd better get right into it," I said, and then nodded to Tanya, who turned to the questioning adults with a pleasant smile, as if it was normal to be hotwiring a tombstone with a microwave.

"We would like to begin this memorial with prayer," she said, "Let us please join hands."

Both my father and theirs had a cautious look on their faces, but obeyed. Tanya continued, "Let us pray and focus on Sarah, and who she was to us."

My mother was the first to start praying and then the murmur of prayers grew into a low hum. I thought that I even heard Willem praying, but did not let that distract me from my own praying. Whether this worked or not, I prayed that this family would be ok.

"Amen," I said after everyone had gone quiet.

"Time to flip the switch," Johan said.

"Everybody, please stand back," I said, hoping that the new magnetron wasn't going to kill us all, "This part of the memorial might be a little dangerous."

"Son," my father said, "I have no idea what you are doing, but... do you know what you're doing?"

"I hope so," I said as I picked up the remote switch, and looked at the green light on the machine that indicated that the capacitors were fully charged. I was then startled by Tanya holding my free hand.

"No matter what happens," she said, "Thank you, Clayton."

I just nodded, and after a deep breath flipped the switch.

The machine hummed and there was a small spark and then the humming got louder and louder. I took another step backwards with Tanya and then noticed that everybody was doing the same. Suddenly, the machine exploded into a fountain of bright sparks and smoke. When the smoke cleared, there were smouldering pieces of the machine scattered all over the graveyard. *There is no fixing the machine this time*, I thought.

I turned towards Sarah's tomb stone, hoping to see her glimmering in the moonlight, but there was nothing.

"No..." I whispered.

Tanya hugged me and whispered in my ear, "It's ok."

I felt tears trying to escape again, but I used every bit of will power I had left to hold those slippery bastards back.

"Can I get back to my drinking now?" Willem said.

"Hold on, Willem," my father said, "Son... I'm guessing you were hoping something different happened besides the microwave exploding?"

Before I could answer I was interrupted by some rumbling in the sky. Dark clouds had formed, and seemed to be circling into a vortex right above us. Then a bright column of light burst through the centre of those clouds into the midst of us, and - lo and behold - wearing flowing white garments, Sarah drifted slowly down to us in the beam of light until she gently touched down in front of her tombstone, releasing waves of glowing light that seemed to fill that place with her comforting aura.

"So..." Sarah said, "What did you think of that, Clayton?"

"Ah..." I smiled, "It was a little over the top."

"He thought you would like it," Sarah said, smiling back.

"Ma..." Tanya said, as she embraced Sarah. Johan, and a shocked and ashamed Willem followed suit and I knew it was time to give the family some space. From where I stood, I could not hear what Sarah was saying to them, but I could see that a weight had been lifted and that tears of joy now bound the family together.

While I was still looking at them, my father got my attention.

"Clayton," he said, "What the hell...! Why didn't you tell us what you were doing?"

"I did," I said, "But then you thought I was drunk."

"Oh... yah," he said, "After this, a drink doesn't sound bad at all."

"Paul!" my mother said.

“How, I was just saying,” he said.

When Sarah was finished talking with her family, she called the rest of us to come near and said, “I just have one request.”

“Of course you do,” I said smiling.

“Please take care of my family,” she said, “Especially Tanya.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” I said, but then frowned in deep thought, “what do you mean, ‘especially Tanya’?” I looked at Tanya and saw that she was blushing but I still couldn’t put the pieces together.

“Don’t worry,” she said, as she began to ascend into the clouds, “You’ll get it eventually.”

When Sarah had disappeared into the light above, the clouds cleared, leaving a beautiful blanket of stars behind.

Willem walked up to me wiping the tears from his eyes.

“I’m so sorry,” he said with his hand on my shoulder.

“It’s ok...” I said.

“No it’s not,” he interrupted, “I should have known, should have believed she was in a better place, and had faith that God would take care of us.”

“Now you know,” I said.

“Thanks to you,” he said, and went to embrace his children again.

Although Sarah was gone, I still felt her warmth around us, and as I looked at the family embracing I knew that everything was going to be ok.

Afterwards Tanya came and stood next to me.

“There’s something I don’t understand,” I said, “What did your mother mean?”

“Oh, Clayton,” she said, and kissed me, “For such a smart guy, you can be quite dumb.”

Books Received

Jonathan Ball

Joe Abercrombie Red Country Orion R250.00

George R.R. Martin Tuf Voyaging Orion R260.00

Kim Harrison Into the Woods Harpercollins R185.00

Benjamin Percy Red Moon Hodder & Stoughton R235.00

Jack Hight Holy War Hodder & Stoughton R235.00

Mazarzis Williams The Tower Broken Quercus R250.00

From David Herrington:

Lois MacMaster Bujold Captain Vorpatril's Alliance Baen Books
Saladin Ahmed Throne of the Crescent Moon DAW
China Miéville The Scar Ballentyne/Del Ray
China Miéville Embassytown Ballentyne/Del Ray
Fred Nadis The Man from Mars – Ray Palmer's Amazing Pulp journey
Tarcher/Penguin
Jeff Vandermeer and S.J. Chambis The Steampunk Bible Adams Image
Kin Stanley Robinson 2312 Orbit
John Scalzi Redshirts Tor
Jo Walton Among Others Tor
Geoffrey Mandragora The Thunderbolt Affair Rosswyven Press

Magazines Received

Opuntia. Dale Speirs P.O. Box 6830 Calgary, Alberta Canada, TP2 #ET
269 November 2013
270 Saturnalia 2013

Via email:-

Newsletter of the Middle Tennessee SF Society (aka The Nashville SF Club)
Reece Moorhead reecejbm@gmail.com

Issue 137 March 2014
Issue 138 April 2014
Issue 139 May 2014

David Langford news@ansible.co.uk

Ansible 320 March 2014
Ansible 321 April 2014
Ansible 312 May 2014

Back issues (HTML archives) <http://news.ansible.co.uk>

Vanamonde. John Hertz 235 Corondo St No. 409, Los Angeles, CA 90027
918 - 9222 January 11 2011 – February 8 2011

Nova 1013 Finalist S.A. Section

The Jackal Poacher by William Mabin

1.

Everyone remembers the Great Fire. Although its presence has been distorted. Warped by something more than time. Its colour is faded, like the painted clay of the nomads' huts in the Great Northern Desert. In an uncontrollable moment, it swoops, a giant, dark bird of prey that eclipses the Sun. Of course the Great Fire was not a literal fire. It marked the day the Hacktivists were victorious. Desperate to be free of what they saw as a pox upon their brethren, they struck out, at first with restless protesting and later violence. They turned the tools that connected us, all of us, against ourselves, but instead of saving us, they condemned us to this...

I wake up, or at least that's how I refer to it, with this image branded into my mind. The searing pain is a programmed reminder of how we have all been herded into this virtual world. The walls of my flat are white. White. The colour that so long ago may have been used in another context. In a land that floats on this sea of perpetual consciousness.

'David?' the prying voice of my robotic, domestic worker splinters my determinants. 'Ja?' I reply, both slightly annoyed and relieved that my negativity had ceased, for the time being.

'I have processed your breakfast, master,' she says.

I derive the usual satisfaction from the absolute power one wields over these automatic servants.

'Thanks.' I grunt and wave my hand irritably, despite being pleased.

The Judy 3000 leaves without complaint. I sit at the cold table alone. I am eating borewors, pap and chakalaka, with two fried eggs, bacon and beans to seal the deal. It isn't long before my thoughts return to the dream of the fire.

You see there was supposed to be a safeguard. We were all online, all connected. There was to be no more 'them and us.' There was only going to be one. The neural network was a result of the evolution of biomechanical innovation. We were living somewhere near the full potential of the human brain. Our brains were modified with biological circuitry and became more powerful. Robotics and old-fashioned computers became things of the past. We were all part of one living, breathing network. It was supposed to be the start of peace and the end to war. Then came the Hacktivists. A group of people outraged by the idea that we would all have to belong to one system. They called it the Devolution of Fascism. At first they remained on the fringes of society. Their resistance to dealing with technology meant that they were relatively harmless. Then came Hector.

Hector, the People's Poet, was their living deity. He used his power to convince them that the path to organic salvation was to overpower the artificial grip on the people. But the biological nature of the system meant that damage to the network meant death to the human brain itself.

A sound shrieks through the clinical aura of the room. I check the wretched device that lies North of my half eaten plate of food and West of my packet of cigarettes. It is my Teller. A device with a screen that everyone must wear in order to communicate, strapped to his or her arm.

'Hello?' I gesture with a mouth full of meat and eggs and the Teller doesn't detect my voice, so I try again.

'Sout?' the anxious sound of Frankie, my employer drowns my hopes of having a peaceful day of existential reflections.

'Ja?' I mumble.

'Soutie, it's Frankie, hey. We need you down here ASAP, boet!'

'What's the problem?' I say with increased incoherence, due to the fact that I have begun guzzling down the meal.

'It's a Glitch, Sout. A big one. We're going to need you to sort this one out fast.'

The table is empty and the plate of food gone. The front door slides shut, automatically as I run out, trench coat and hat in hands.

2

There's a preacher standing on the corner of the street. He shouts through a loud speaker, roaring magnanimous orders at passers-by. It is difficult to determine if any one of the hundreds of moving pedestrians around him hears a word. Up on the highest floors, in the salvation of the tall buildings that surround us, the street sometimes appears empty. The masses of commuters blend together. Their plain clothing paints the street the colour of faded tar. Here on street level it is as if you have fallen into the river rapids. If you stand still and are unable to hold your ground, you will be swallowed whole and, in some cases, you will drown.

Sometimes shadows appear in this sea. They pull innocent victims down into the murky depths. More than opportunists, they are anarchists. Seeing little or no point in continuing a life they see as false. In my profession, we call these beasts the Jackals: Lone creatures, choosing to roam by themselves, keeping whatever intellect they have separate from the rest of humankind.

Of course most citizens aren't aware that they exist at all. My job is to make damn sure people don't realise this is the case. It involves memory planting and maintenance of the Habitat, the name we use in the business to refer to this place. The Jackals are mostly people who used to do what I did but developed a desire to change things. Glitches in the Habitat also result in their creation.

Jackals are easy for the trained eye to spot. They are spontaneous and break from the swarm.

I consider the preacher. He is just part of a cleverly orchestrated illusion to make the city centre appear as it once was. The Jackals play their part too. Like the criminals who used to exist if they are noticed, they are portrayed as common *tsotsis* from the old world.

I head south and after five blocks, turn left. I arrive at an ominous, tall building. It appears to be abandoned – a tarnished relic that keeps pace with the other buildings in this zone. Surely, the architects of this place had based it on something in the real-world. It's large and cylindrical, encircled by a dead, neon advert. There are fewer people around now because this part of the city is relatively inactive, or so it would seem. I walk up the concrete steps and open the out-of-date, wooden door. It creaks open and a cloud of dust is set loose into the dark interior. I crack a smile at this minor detail that has been added to make the building seem apparently unused. I move to the centre of the room and pull up the sleeve of my trench coat to reveal my Teller. I navigate to the Reveal menu and type in the secret password. The first things that can be seen are ghostly outlines of an office and people going about their work. Then thick lines of colour start to fill in the details. Out of the nothingness, a reception area appears, complete with a woman who is looking at me expectantly. No longer does the room take the form of an abandoned warehouse. The wooden door has become a mechanised sliding door. I approach the desk where the woman is seated.

'Hello, Mr Salt,' she says in an excited voice that doesn't match her apathetic facial expression.

'Hi, Cheryl,' I say, 'It's been a while, hasn't it?'

'Mr Oppenheimer is expecting you, Mr Salt', she indicates a lift behind her.

I see from the number display that it's on floor 150. It always takes forever to arrive.

As I wait, I wonder what the problem is and, glancing back at Cheryl, wonder why we don't use robots to fill in as administrators.

3

As the doors slide open a large room appears. At the centre, in front of two large windows there is a desk. The walls are lined with authentic tribal art. On the right, a large totem pole, carved from ebony, takes the form of three demonic-looking faces, one atop of the other that leer at me menacingly.

'Ah, Soutie. Hoe lyk dit, my boytjie?' Lieutenant Frankie Oppenheimer says from the corner of the room, staring out of the window.

'Howzit, Chief?' I begin.

'Look at them', he states in an melancholy fashion as he looks down onto the street level, 'A sea of souls.'

'They have no idea what has happened to them, do they Sout?'

'No, Sir.'

'Yes. And it is our job to see that they never do.'

'That's right, Sir.'

'It's a helluva job, but someone's got to do it,' he continues.

I smile because he does this every time we meet. He, like me, seeks another person's approval in order to justify what it is we do.

'That's right, Sir. If we weren't around nothing else would be.'

He turns around for the first time, shoots me a stern look, and then cracks a smile. Then he walks over to his desk and sits down heavily.

'It's a big one this time, Soutie, boet.'

I glance at the well-endowed fertility idol that is seated in front of him on the desk.

'It certainly is,' I venture.

Frankie laughs momentarily. It's a jittery sort of laugh.

'Jokes aside, Sout', he says in a harsh tone, 'Somehow they've got to the Source this time'.

The Source is where it all began. It is where our forefathers started the construction of this dream world. It is also where the design ended. It is effectively two seams that are the weakest points of this programmed illusion. Any severe interference with it could easily result in the end of everything we hold dear.

'We've picked up information that suggests that Jackals are working together in a highly organised way with the aim to cause a disruption there,' he says. 'We're sending you immediately to the Skyfall Zone, Sout!'

The Skyfall Zone gets its name because if the Source were ever to be disrupted it would be as if you are in one of those dreams where you're falling from a high building and then wake up with a sudden start. Of course, there would be nothing to wake up to. The name serves as a constant reminder to us in the Maintenance business that if we allow this to happen, everyone will wake up. The last thing we want to happen.

I stand up; ready to leave, with the knowledge that the details of my targets will be uploaded onto my Teller.

Frankie continues, 'There is one more thing, Soutie. Due to the fact that this type of, dare I say it, Hactivist activity, is unprecedented, we are setting you up with a partner.'

Suddenly a door slides open to my left and a burly man walks through. He looks smug. As he approaches he sticks out a hand to shake mine. I disregard it and turn back to Frankie.

'This oke here is Nick Venter,' says Frankie.

'Frank, you know I work alone.' I say coldly.

'Listen boet?' Frankie says, 'I know you've had some trouble in the past with other people, but Nick here maintains the Skyfall Zone. He knows it inside out.'

I have a sudden urge to complete the mission at hand.

'Whatever, let's get going. But I'm driving'.

To get to the Skyfall Zone, we are going to have to take our own vehicle. We enter the agency garage and find Tim, the resident mechanic waiting for us.

'Hoezit, my ouens?' Tim raps excitedly as he sees us coming.

'Lekker, Tim,' I say, looking at the car that he has been working on. It's an old school hovercraft, with an extended trunk. It's painted flaming orange and has a large spoiler on the back. The lower rims of the vehicle are sparkling chrome.

'Not exactly inconspicuous,' I say.

'Nay cousy,' Tim says indicating that we follow him.

As we get to another vehicle with a cover on it, Tim majestically unveils it.

'Here is your ride, my man,' Tim says.

My eyes grow wide at the square, box shape machine. A huge engine protrudes through the front hood and tinted windows add to the overall hearse feel of the car. It's a top-of-the line model.

A few moments later, accompanied by the seemingly solemn Nick, we blast through the exit of the base. Despite my rather eccentric driving, a walker on the street, or driver in the airway will not see us at all. The craft is cloaked and appears only as a vague blur in the corner of the most perceptive citizen's vision.

I shoot through the midday traffic, disobeying every rule ever made. Nick ducks, as I drive toward an oncoming truck and then drop down beneath it at the last second.

From the windscreen the city screams forth with eloquent beauty. Tall towers and spiralling structures populate the sky. I can see the cylindrical HQ building and it triggers some faded memory. To its right is a tall black tower that looks like God has plunged a syringe into the ground. Far off in the distance, in this ever-expanding metropolis is its sister tower, looking like an inflated traffic robot, surveying the city. Flying cars and people populate almost every conceivable direction. Taxis, taking the form of white bricks tear through the traffic, hooters blaring. Adverts flicker on and off in radiant neon fury. I zoom through the 'O' in an airborne commercial for a soft drink company and Nick turns pale, looking as if he's about to lose his lunch.

I turn to him and ask: 'So what's your story, then?'

Nick tries to sit up straight, but can't really decide if cowering is still the safer option.

'Well, I've been on duty in the Namib deserts and the Skyfall Zone for a long time now. Most of the time I can remember, in fact.'

He pauses as another driver almost collides with us.

'Like the chief says, I know a lot about the goings on there. I maintain the Firewall.'

The Firewall randomly generates extreme weather conditions that act as a deterrent for curious individuals wandering into the Skyfall zone.

'Have you guys had a lot of these incidents down there?' I ask.

'Well, it depends what you mean. Our job mainly consists of deterring curious parties and ensuring the seamlessness of the area surrounding the Source. And fractures would be as dangerous as any Jackal – Watch out!'

Our hovercraft dives behind a levitating billboard and dips under an airborne tube that carries a shooting, white, bullet train.

'I've been to the deserts before,' I say, but never to the actual Source itself,' I admit.

'I think it's a rare privilege,' Nick states, 'We can't have just anyone interfering there.' 'You think I'm a danger?' I ask.

'Well, ja, if you wield your Teller anything like how you're driving...'

'Point taken,' I declare and I begin the rapid decent back down to the street level. In the distance I take note of the botanical garden that exists in the centre of the city. It takes the form of a koppie. A golden statue of a jackal rests on top of it. I consider the fugitives of the same name. Like their animal namesake, they have been driven from the heart of the city and forced into the deserts beyond its borders. They say that in that world that we left behind somewhere above this place this statue marked the last of the wild dogs that died here. For me, it signifies the death of the old world.

We've arrived at the city gates that act as a border between our massive metropolis and the wastelands outside it. As a result of the fact that we all exist in this one consciousness, certain aspects of our group personality had to be isolated because of its destructive nature. Thus, a great prison, taking the form of a swamp exists in-between the deserts and the Skyfall zone. There the dark side of humanity dwells: Hate, fear, violence, envy and desire.

There is a small queue of vehicles in front of us. These would be people transporting goods to other cities. Like the neurons in the brain they would act to fire information to other parts of this cognitive dimension. Police officers, clad in full body armour search the vehicles, pat down the occupants and scan people's Tellers, to see if they have official clearance to enter the nether regions. Unbeknownst to most, these officers of the law are entirely artificial beings, known as Bots.

One of them approaches us. I catch my reflection in his coal black visor. 'Bots,' I think, 'About as genuine as the city is itself.'

'Authentication?' the Officer requests.

I hold out my Teller and he waves his own over it. He looks at his wrist-mounted device.

'Carry on, Sir.' His tone becomes friendlier, obviously having seen my credentials. No, not so much friendly as obedient. He proceeds to wave traffic out of the way in front of us, prioritising our mission.

'That was easy enough,' Nick says, as if alluding to another, more bitter experience that he has had in the past.

I look straight ahead and say: 'It's got to do with rank. The higher you rank, the more they respect you.'

We edge forward, moving gradually, as agitated truck drivers try to manoeuvre heavy rigs out of our way. My elbow juts out of the window. I find I am slouching in my seat. In reality, this is absurd, I think, 'Here we are in a dream world. We should

be able to simply teleport to our destination. And why stop there? We could send a whole army to intercept them, or simply delete them. Pull their plugs. Of course doing so would result in too much awareness of change. Too much uncertainty would be created in our mass consciousness, threatening to cause the entire framework to collapse.

After all, these are not just my eyes that I am seeing through. My own thoughts and actions need to be modified to avoid letting people realise what is going on. There is a thin wall that creates the illusion that we are individuals. If that wall sprouts too many holes others would start seeing too much.

Abruptly, I notice a flash of blueish-purple in my right-hand side mirror. I turn around, craning out of the empty window searching the rear of the vehicle for anything suspicious. Nothing. I turn around and shrug it off. I look at Nick, who lights up a cigarette obliviously. At first everything appears normal, but then I notice that everything seems slower, more subdued. A searing pain cuts through my head. I wince, closing my eyes involuntarily. When I open them, the truck driver in front of us appears frozen, leaning out of his window, stuck in this perpetual state. No, not frozen. It is as if there are different layers with different opacities. It is like seeing the frames of an animation revealed, showing how the illusion of movement has been created. The light drains from the sky, creating the appearance of night.

'Glitch!' I yell at Nick, who is already drawing his weapon.

He taps his Teller and a burst of golden light spews out, taking the shape of a handgun. It spins around and lands up in his grip, solidifying into metallic colours.

'Wait here and guard the car!' I order and step out through the door.

I aim my own Teller into the unexpected darkness. Sparks and little images begin to flicker around it as I arm myself. I aim left, then right as I move forward. I stare straight ahead of me. There is an awful stillness amidst the chaos. I point my weapon forward. I see a flicker of something. It looks like the silhouette of a ghost. I fire. I release a beam of searing light so bright that it could be hell-fire.

The figure dives forward, avoiding the blast and does a roll before vanishing into obscurity. In the car, Nick looks perplexed.

'Where did it go?' He shouts, as if the harshness of his tone could create its own answer.

Then, there is the assailant. Right behind him. Standing at the window.

'No!' I scream.

As he tries to turn around there is an explosion of energy that tears through his chest. I run forward as the figure begins to flee. I shoot more deadly bolts at the assailant. One rushes by, just touching what would be his ankle. The cloak falters and flickers. Then, the attacker jumps on board a hover bike and is engulfed by invisibility once more. The sound of high-powered boosters tells me it would be a waste of time trying to pursue them now. I race to the car and meet the already cold stare of Nick.

Around me things begin to speed up again. I spring into action. I navigate to a screen on my Teller with a pause and play button. I tap the pause one and everything freezes. I target the glowing white tears that I created moments ago, navigate to a new page and hit 'Repair'. Strands of environment shoot forth around them and stitch them back into normality. I face Nick's body and hit a few more buttons until I see the words 'End Session'. I pause and then press it. Nick's body begins to dematerialize, replaced by 0s and 1s that filter downwards, into an unseen exit. Then I turn back to the chaotic scene around me and hit a few more commands, then 'Normalise'.

5

The deserts of the outer regions shoot past outside the windows of the hovercraft. I reflect on recent events and the demise of my newly acquired partner. Told them I work alone, I think. After patching up the errors everything continues as if nothing had happened. There is no Nick. It's like there never was. This is how we say goodbye to people in this world. We erase them.

I gaze into the shining sand outside. The sky is blue again and the Sun radiating. The dunes sparkle, a cunning trap for somebody ignorant of their perilous nature. Like a golden blanket draped over hills they recede into the horizon with an endless uniformity. For somebody that knows too much, like me, you can see the flaw in their symmetrical, repeating design. Like the deserts this is how we must exist too now. It is said that, some time ago, in a distant past we embraced uniqueness on the surface world. People followed different paths and defined themselves with radically different clothing, culture, music, ideology. Our country, South Africa, was the hallmark of how, against all odds, diversity thrived. But there were always those who claimed that war was caused by differing opinions and so to attain a utopian society, we all had to conform to one persona.

The final straw was a war brought about by these two different streams of thought. Bent on eradicating each other, their battle reached a climax when they amassed enough power to own armies and nukes. After the bombs fell, the survivors rose up against the governments. No more would the rich govern the poor and the corrupt send us to our deaths. Instead, people with higher IQs came to power.

At first some were shocked by the proposal that we were all going to be linked up via a biomechanical connection. But with the explosion of digital media and social networks over the preceding decades, most people welcomed the transition.

Eventually, after everyone was connected to the Network, we began to weed out remaining resistance. A beautiful sense of tranquillity existed on the Network. It seemed, at last, there was an end to war. But somehow, some Hacktivists survived. They found a way to disconnect themselves from the Net and set about plotting to uproot the technology.

A scene of people burning flickers through my mind. The image everyone saw when we were ripped apart from each other. It was a cognitive image that portrayed the terror of being left alone. The shock of being torn apart left nothing. The Great Fire. The bleeping of my Teller rouses me from my slumber. You don't so much dream as think in this place.

I see the expectant face of Frankie projected in a holographic form that shoots up from the dash. He looks anxious and it dawns on me, after a few moments that he doesn't realise I have answered.

'Uh, Frank?'

'Soutie, my boetjie,' he says with a certain solemn tone, 'what the hell happened?'

'There was an incident,' I say, 'a Glitch. We, um, lost Nick.'

'Liewe fok,' Frank says.

'Ja,' I agree and we both pause to light up cigarettes.

'That Glitch,' Frank says at last, blowing smoke towards me, 'it was a bad one. We believe that it was designed as an initial destabilising of the system. It was the boxer's jab that tricked us into dropping our guard, Sout.'

'So, it was a weapons test?' I ask.

'Exactly,' he replies.

'Look everything's fine,' I say, 'I will continue with the mission as planned. This changes nothing.'

Suddenly, an explosion ends the communication. Everything goes black.

6

Light. It cuts through the darkness like a spear, tearing through flesh. The pain accompanying the throbbing in my head is nothing short of the feeling of a stab wound. It's as if somebody is trying to open a pair of curtains, but the hooks are getting snagged on the rail. Then I slowly muster the courage and strength to open my eyes fully. There are flames in front of me and as I see them, my sense of feeling is resuscitated. At first there is almost comforting warmth, then a searing burning sensation that wraps itself around my body. I try to tell myself that this isn't real fire, but it doesn't help.

I yell as my muscles leap into action. I find myself running, doing a semi-circle, before I realise that this is a ring of death. I calm down, defensive instincts finally coming to my aid. At first they fumble, stunned from the attack, then my hand crashes down on my Teller. White cubes spiral out of the device and I am outlined with a lurid white light.

I suck air into my lungs and cough because of the smoke. Then I charge forward and leap into the air. Acrobatic resources that I have activated give me extra momentum, speed and agility. As I dive forward I perform a somersault mid-air and arrive on the other side of the flaming, spiralling chasm, landing in the sand without so much as a thud.

I immediately assess the situation. Behind me, my mode of transport smoulders. To my left there is only vast, hazardous desert. Ahead of me is the beginning of a rocky mound. I follow it round to the right and, as I do, the structure climbs up, until it becomes a sizeable butte. I quickly turn and start marching towards it, aware that my assailants are probably still nearby. I dart in and out of hiding behind scattered boulders and shrubs before landing up at the foot of the stony mass. What I see is bewildering.

Stairs have been carved into the structure and they weave upwards. High up, there is what looks like an entrance. It could be the door to a cave, while the building itself looks more spiritual in design. Suddenly, at the mouth to the structure, a figure appears, clad in a blue-purple, hooded cloak. Having seen me the person quickly retreats.

Somehow amidst the action I find myself considering the architecture that I now behold. It creates the impression of a temple that has been burned into the geology. How is this possible? The only way that this could remain such a secret out here must be the result of severe hacking. Hacking on a level that we have never seen. These Jackals possess the power to change the environment themselves and that means they could take over completely. This thought propels me forward. I race up the steps, arming my Teller.

At the entrance, I pause, wary of yet another ambush and peer inside. It's as if this place can't decide what it is exactly. Pillars jut, half carved from moist cave walls. Broken arches populate the inside and debris on the floor suggests that this place hasn't been maintained for some time. I wander inside cautiously.

I haven't got far when a blast of blue light comes through the air towards me. I fall more than leap behind some temple wreckage. Blasts of energy sear through my unstable shield and it rocks with the weight of the blows. I wait for a pause and then come up blasting. Before I can actually find a target, I shoot in all directions, hoping that the bluff will keep my unseen opponent at bay. I see him and plunge behind a pillar, before more bolts of energy start cooking the air in front of my nose. Another pause.

I peer out and see the man in a suit of white and blue calmly striding towards me with a fierce plasma cannon in his grip. He shoots again and I move out of the way. Just before I do I return my own well-aimed shot.

'Aag!' comes the disgruntled sound I was hoping for.

I lean out of my hiding spot, smiling at the fact that I have nailed him right in the Achilles tendon. He has fallen over from the pain and I take full advantage of the distraction. I dash forward and kick the weapon from his hands.

His face appears ageless. It also seems very hard to find distinguishing features. This is the case with Jackals. They abuse their hacking powers in order to make them harder to track. He has black hair, grey eyes and a white trench coat. I don't need to question this one, I think. He's a target and someone has to pay for Nick's death.

I take aim. His face is sinister as he cracks a knowing grin. Before I can do anything, he hits a button on his Teller. Blue numbers spiral outwards and consume him. I'm left standing, not sure if I should be glad he helped me out. It isn't normal for people to commit suicide in this place, but then again there's nothing normal about Jackals. I head towards the steps at the back of the room and begin to climb.

7

The staircase looks down at me like a giant, as I climb the decaying rock. The dank stone feels like it might crumble under my feet.

I clamber up the remaining steps and emerge at the top, expecting another session of hide-and-seek. I am wrong. As the stone sinks out of my view I see a round room with a short stage at the far end. Like a priest, my friend, the blue-hooded figure stands facing me. I take a few steps towards the figure before I encounter yet another obstacle.

A huge man emerges from the darkness and stands dead in my path. He towers over me. He seems unnaturally built. Absurd muscles protrude from every corner of his body. He has a shaved head and a face scarred with a huge X. Without warning, his expression changes from a look of condescension into a monstrous, contorted growl. With his teeth clenched, he charges at me.

A great calm comes over me and everything seems to slow down. I wait for the last second and then dive out of the way, hitting a series of buttons on my Teller as I do. I rise again, surrounded in searing orange light. As I come up a huge fist barrels towards my face. As the wrist twists, preparing to deliver devastation upon me, I raise my hands and parry the cannon of a limb sideways. As I do this, I throw a kick into the man's gut. He is forced back. A look of surprise enters his eyes. He gasps for air, obviously winded. Then, like an animal, unable to quit his primal nature, he runs towards me again. He delivers punch after punch with fists that resemble small boulders.

I parry the punches left and right, waiting for a gap. When it arrives I launch onto his left knee with my right leg. I grab him by the ears and shoot my knee into his nose. Then, stretching up into the air, I deliver a crushing elbow to the centre of his forehead. I exit the counter attack over the beast's shoulder and tumble towards the ground. I land with a gentle roll on the ground. I turn around and assess the situation once more. My arms are outstretched in the man's direction, awaiting further action. Momentarily he looks like a child who has been shown up for the first time, after trolling the school playground, stealing other kids' lunch money. He has a gash on the top of his head and his nose is bent out of shape. It's hard to notice because he wasn't exactly easy on the eyes to begin with. The injuries almost blend in with his facial scars and beaten face. The man roars, leaning back and then storms towards me again.

'Enough of this,' I say, under my breath, half considering the robed onlooker.

I move my hand in a figure eight motion and as I do a staff made out of molten energy springs out. This time as my assailant delivers a punch I move towards his centre line, blocking with my newly acquired weapon. I drive the device into the man's groin and then hit him in the head as he buckles forward. Then I position the bow in between his legs and push forward so that it pushes his front ankle into the air. I move backwards, executing the move all in one fluid motion. The man crashes to the floor with a grunt. Without giving him time to recover once more, I dart forward and drive the tip of the weapon into his trachea. He explodes into blue code and I stand in the biblical ring alone.

I look into my observer's eyes. They seem suddenly taken aback, as if this person has not predicted this outcome. Could it be, I think? I move forward in a series of quick movements, my Teller still rewriting the rules of this environment. I reach out and tear at the masked hood. The whole thing unravels, revealing a startled woman's face. In retrospect it seemed just as likely as anything, but for some reason I find myself standing in this bizarre place with a perplexed look on my face. I hit normalise on my Teller. The convulsing air swarming around me dies down, and then disappears.

'What, what is this place?' I ask, beginning my interrogation.

Silence. The woman's face is young and – unfortunately for me – pretty. Her sparkling green eyes are fixed on me and her full lips do not move. Her hair is what you might call auburn and her skin a light brown. Anger and frustration wash over me in a warm swell and I lunge forward as she tries to pull a weapon out from behind her. I stop her from drawing and discard the gun. I hit her Teller with my own and it goes offline in a few disgruntled sparks. I step back and begin retracing my steps. I look at the room. The ceiling recedes into a large dome. Books line the walls.

'Do you know why they call us Jackals?' Her lovely voice shatters the silence. Without looking at her I reply, 'Because you're a bunch of low-life scavengers, feeding off the sanctity of our collective thoughts?'

'No,' her calm, precise voice causing me to turn around once more, 'we were initially the ones who came up with the name. It denotes nocturnal. It is a reference to the fact that we are all living in a dream, that we can't wake up from.'

The anger returns. I stride up to her.

'You killed my partner!' I say in a matter of fact tone that demands that my logic override her own.

'Who says that I did?' she protests, 'the same people that hired you? In my view, I set him free.'

My aggression reaches a climax. I raise my hand to hit her and she cowers. Then I find myself frozen. I back off again.

'You're saying that you woke him up, and we both know that's bullshit. There's no world to go back to. No one is there, waiting to unplug you or offer you a job. The air would be... unbreathable,' I conclude.

'And who do you think plugged you in?' She asks

'The last of us,' I say, 'The people seeking to save the human soul.' She stands upright, regaining her poise. 'And who would that be?' she demands, 'If there is nothing left?'

I find myself feeling stupefied. I have no answer. It crosses my mind that I should have asked this before.

'My car...' I begin sheepishly.

'You must listen to me,' she says, 'this is why I have brought you here. I have temporarily separated you from the rest of them, but they will come. The truth is that Father Hector is the one who arranged for this place to be constructed. Our weapons disrupted everything. We were simply trying to save individuality, but we had no idea what it would cost us. In the end, we had no choice but to come too.'

I feel as though a travelling religious salesman has pitched his tent outside my front door and is saying everything that I don't want to hear. But it also feels like a great fog has been lifted. Without being in such close proximity to the rest of our collective consciousness what she is saying all makes sense.

'That madman?' I exclaim, 'but...' I'm cut off by the bleeping of my Teller.

'Sout, Soutie my boetjie? Come in?' Comes the crackling sound of Frankie's voice. I glance at the screen. The signal is weak.

'Frankie?' I say in a schoolboy's voice.

'Are you okay boet?' He asks, 'How is the mission proceeding?'

I look over at the young woman next to me. Something inside me gives. I need answers. I need control. I want to be free. In a moment of serendipitous elation I let out a scream, releasing my anger and smash my Teller face first into the wall.

8

Our feet plough through the sand. Here I am, in this perilous desert accompanied by a criminal. Have I gone mad? Has infatuation with my new companion overwhelmed my senses completely? Has she somehow hacked into me, programming me to be her bodyguard like that unfortunate lump of consciousness that I fought back at the temple?

Before I can ask any of the million questions that I have, we are interrupted by the sharp droning sound of hover bike engines. We frantically search for anything that can provide cover. The desert stretches forth in its abominable emptiness. Then in the distance, I see an oasis. A horrible twisted abyss torn into the white sand. It is the beginning of the jungles. The place where our primal thoughts are imprisoned. The engines are still quite far off, only echoing through the plains.

'We can make it, Jess,' I say to the woman who only moments ago revealed her name to me. We race towards the dark undergrowth. At its foot we stop to pant with exhaustion. I look up. The trees and plants of the jungle twitch as if they are alive. They are all dark green, almost black. A weird aura hangs around the place and I feel like we are being watched. We half turn around, realising what entering this place would mean. A searing blue bolt of energy flies past us and sizzles a leaf. We

look up at the ridge that we came from and see two black shapes speeding towards us. 'Bots', I think, 'I hate Bots.' I grab Jessica's hand and pull her into the sinister foliage.

Fragments of the past and the now seem to be colliding with one another. Terrifying sounds are all around us. The further we trudge the more swamp-like the place becomes. Squelching grey mud releases a putrid stench as my foot presses down on it. I have lost track of how long we have been wandering for.

Tentacles. They burrow through the nightmarish scene and wrap themselves painfully around my legs, arms and neck. I try to cry out, but there is no sound. I am pulled from the clearing into the fury of the jungle. I reach out my hand towards Jessica who seems to shout out my name.

The darkness clouds my mind. Then I see visions of people with distorted faces leering at me from a lab. They look as though they are operating on somebody. I see myself, injured and strapped to a surgeon's chop block. A figure brings a surgical tool down towards my head. Then they are plugging me in to some type of machine and tending to my wounds.

The tendrils around my arms snap as if someone has cut them. I fall forward into darkness. Then I awake in a sweat. Jessica is sitting above me. She places a cold towel on my head. I remember the jungle and sit up with a start.

'What happened?' I murmur, 'Did that really happen?'

Jessica pauses before saying with a smile, 'Yes. The jungle grabbed you. What did it show you?' She asks knowingly.

'It. The. Hacktivists. You. Were right.' I manage finally.

'So now do you see why they keep people away from that place?'

9

In the morning we arrive at the canyon where the Source lies. I set out to stop this plan from happening and now here I am an accessory to it. Something powerful has happened to me since I destroyed my Teller. I feel freer. The images of the Great Fire seem like a distant memory. I don't even really care about it now. I don't care that I could be arrested, or awoken. This place. This artificial place. It must end. We must resurrect the natural order. I understand that now. Our plan is simple. Go in, guns blazing and detonate the Awareness bomb, alerting everyone to their dream-like state. The jolt would force everyone to wake up, or so we hope. I am to take Jessica's pistol with me to the Source while she kept watch high above on the walls of the canyon. We have rigged boulders to fall as weapons and Jess will act as a sniper.

I venture down the valley feeling like a cowboy in an American Western. Everything seems too quiet. Surely they would send their forces to guard our target? I make it all the way to the door that acts as the entrance to the Source. Something is very wrong. There is no defence.

Beams of energy whiz past me, confirming my suspicions of a trap. I dive behind rocks for shelter and immediately return fire. Four bikes mounted by four heavily armoured Bots shriek toward me. I toss the device Jessica has given me onto the door and it arms. The weird coding and symbols on it ignite the seemingly red display screen an ocean blue. Still the mechanical monstrosities hone in on my position.

They zigzag in between one another in a threatening war dance. I tense up. Their beams pulverise the landscape around me turning it from tan to the colour of burnt flesh. I can't get a clear shot with the onslaught of fire. Then just when it seems like I'm nothing more than a trapped rat, a boulder comes crashing down on the Bot, obliterating it. Then another. Only two to go. One is blasted off his bike by a lightning bolt as Jess aims her cannon with critical accuracy.

'Finally,' I say.

I jump up towards the door. For a moment I am camouflaged as Jessica's device explodes behind me. It fractures the illusion of the fake environment. It is as if somebody has thrown water on a painting. My own blasts of coarse energy rip through the remaining Bot's chest armour and his bike flies into the canyon wall next to me. The force of the explosion sends me to my knees. Then strong wind appears and presses me down into the ground. A gun ship appears. The Bot's bodies turn into red code that spirals around and then forms their shapes again at the foot of the ship.

Then the massive carapace of the ship rises revealing Frankie.

'What are you doing, Soutie my boet?' he shouts, in an accusing, baffled voice.

'I am tendering my resignation,' I say.

Frankie grabs something from somewhere that is out of my view. His hands emerge, one with an armed Teller, the other with Jessica.

'You would sell us out for this fokken Jackal?' Frankie sneers angrily. I look at Jessica. She gives me a certain nod.

Frankie pulls the trigger. Then there is no Jessica and Frankie is covered in blood.

'Liewe fok!' he shouts, 'Look what you made me do now, Sout, my boy. Listen it's not too late for you. The mission is complete. What do you say? Let's go home, man.'

He extends his hand towards me. The Bots cock their weapons in case my answer is no. Jessica is gone. I could go home and tomorrow I will wake up in my bed, probably after a dream about the Great Fire. I will get another assignment. I will stop everyone from knowing the truth.

'Sorry Frank,' I say simply, 'but fuck you and the horse you rode in on.'

I turn and run into the gaping hole that was once the mechanised door protecting the Source. I hear the whining of the gunship's revolving weapons start to spin. The ground behind me explodes. It is like somebody pulled the carpet out from under me. It sends me rocketing through the air. An explosion of fire tears up everything behind me, sealing me in this tomb. Ahead of me I see the spinning blue orb that represents the Source. I hold out the Awareness bomb and throw it straight towards it.

Somewhere beyond the wall of flames I think for a moment that I can hear Frankie yelling.

'Nooooooo!' He cries impotently.

The world shudders. Everything goes dark.

There is nothing. An empty world with no colours and no sound. I am alone. Then I find myself swimming upwards through the gloom of obscurity. I see a light and paddle towards it, but it seems to be getting further away.

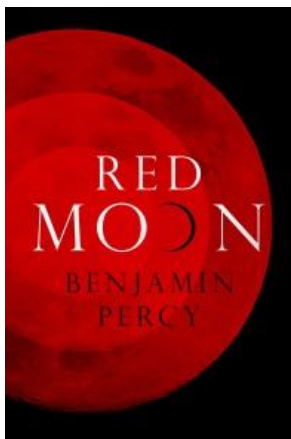
Then my eyes open. I am in freezing water. Wires are plugged into my body. I frantically tear at them as the oxygen mask that I have on starts to fail. I free myself in what can only be described as luxurious agony. I emerge from the tank: my watery prison. I am in a dirty white, plastic looking room. This must be one of the pods that our bodies were committed to after the Fire. All around me, other people are waking up.

I race towards the exit hammering the door release. I emerge, expecting to see war-torn wasteland, but am confronted with lush, green hills that rise above a wild-looking ocean. The sun warms my naked body. It's a different kind of warmth. I breathe in fresh air for the first time. I step forward into the unknown.

Book Reviews

Ian and Gail Jamieson

Benjamin Percy Red Moon Hodder & Stoughton R235.00



Benjamin Percy has conceived a world in which, werewolves (or “lycans,” as they are called) have been around since the seventh century. Their condition is caused by a prion known as lobos — a virus like, blood-borne contagion that stimulates sufferers in times of stress and can cause them to turn into violent werewolves. They are misunderstood and often persecuted. Most try to live as normal life as minorities but a radical section do not do so.

Patrick, a human, boards a flight when his father has to go

and do military duty in the Lupine Republic and ends up as the only survivor of a lycan who goes berserk on board. Claire, a lycan, only just manages to escape as her, unknown to her, radical family are killed by government forces intent on flushing out the “resistance”. She manages to get to a lycan only college and register under an assumed name.

Claire and Patrick, on opposite sides of the conflict, exchange cagey e-mails, but we can see the attraction between them and know they come together, and they do eventually end up in the middle of the showdown between humans and werewolves.

The country, meanwhile, has descended into chaos. Lycans are barred from air travel, leaving many stranded; under the terms of the Patriot Act (?), most of their remaining civil rights are rescinded. Friends and neighbours turn on one another. But the lycans are not without their human supporters. Protests happen everywhere and police use pepper spray indiscriminately.

The plot is complex. Government interference, a researcher working on a lobos vaccine, a presidential candidate who gets infected and goes off on a desperate search for the vaccine(of which it appears there is frighteningly little available, a bunch of Mexicans and too many coincidences keep the story going.

For me Percy tries to include too many social inequalities and the story gets muddled and confused in places. However the basic plot which follows the story of Patrick and Claire is interesting enough to make it a novel that is readable.

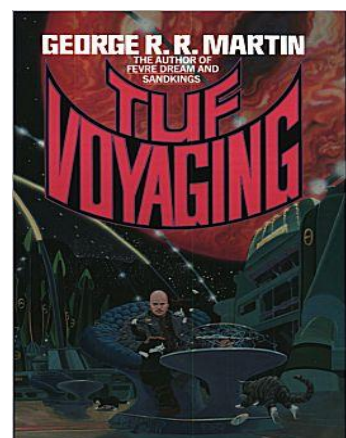
You will have to read this one yourself and decide.

GAJ

George R.R. Martin Tuf Voyaging

Although it does not say so this is a series of seven novellas, put into book form, about a space captain and trader called Haviland Tuf.

Tuf has acquired the last of the thirty kilometre long seedships once belonging to Earth's Ecological Emergency Corps. The ship can supply whatever is required, be it food for the hungry(special nutritious fast growing plants)life, (as in terraforming) or death,(as in plagues). Tuf has been given god-like powers, but luckily he is an honest trader, and he also likes cats. He is also extremely pedantic and does not like stupid questions or to have to repeat himself.

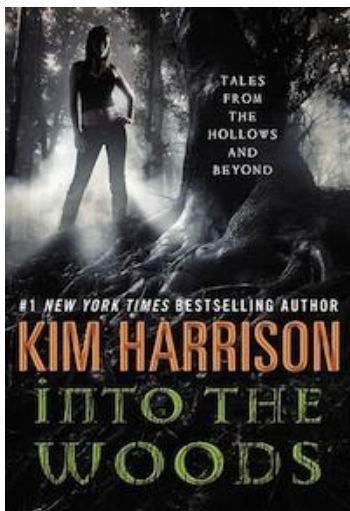


Thus is part of the charm of the book but it becomes a bit wearisome as the novel progresses. It is better to read one item at a time.

Tuf goes about solving planetary problems, and getting extremely well paid, but has to visit the same planet three times before finally solving its problems, which he could have done in the first story.

Readable enough 3/5 Ian

Kim Harrison Into the Woods HarperCollins R185.00



This is collection of eleven stories, including an original “Hollows” novella, “Million Dollar Baby”, as well as a couple of stories from other locales. For those who are fans of the Hollows stories about Racheal, Kisten and Ivy, these stories help to fill in some of the background behind the development of the characters we have come to know in the later novels. We even get a glimpse into a somewhat softer side of the Demon, Algaliarept and the development of the Hollows Banshees. There is even a story completely from the point of view of Jenks. And one that helps us to see the fragile, physically weak young Racheal more clearly.

For those who have not read Harrison’s Hollows novels, the stories are still self-contained and interesting to read. I have not read all of the novels and find myself inclined to go and do so now.

Pet Shop Boys is a rather creepy picture of fey living in a world parallel to ours who can pass through at times. Add a vampire slant for a further shiver down the spine, and Temson Estates and Spider Silk take us into the world of tree Dryads,

Kim Harrison writes well and the stories are entertaining.

Try this one out.

GAJ

Nova 1013 Finalist General Section

See You Tomorrow by Sal Garbier

“So what you’re saying is, you can see the future?” Kadeem asked with a look on his face that combined disbelief with exhaustion.

“No. Or at least I’m not sure. What I’m saying is that I’m getting visions and they are kind of coming true.” Daniel knew what he said was incredible. Ridiculous even. But he had known Kadeem since high school and he was the only one he could trust with this story. And the fact that Kadeem had a PhD in physics meant that perhaps he could make some sense out of this.

Kadeem let out a sigh and then chose his words carefully. “Okay, I don’t think your pulling my leg and you seem to believe what you’re saying. So I’m saying this as a friend now. The last year has been very difficult for you. And you’ve been a bit of a space cadet since the op. The stress from your separation and having to recover from what you’ve been through must be--- I can’t even imagine.” Kadeem was gentle with his next sentence. “I don’t know if I’ll ever forgive Marcy for walking away like that when you were recovering.”

Daniel flinched at the mention of Marcy. Kadeem paused to let his words sink in, and then continued. “Maybe the stress of everything is taking its toll on you. Do you think that could be it?”

Daniel was ready for this. “Do you remember that rambling email that I sent to you about six months ago?”

Kadeem looked confused for a few seconds until it hit him. “Oh, yeah. I was convinced you were losing your mind. Why would you write short stories about our friends? But let me tell you, you’re sounding even more unhinged now than you did then. And you sounded pretty unhinged then.”

“Those weren’t short stories. Those were the visions I had. And all of them came true. Kind of.”

Kadeem tried to think back to that email. He had only browsed over it. He remembered his reaction to the email better than the email itself. He had called Daniel because he was really concerned about his mental well-being. After the tumor was removed, Daniel was a completely different person. He suffered from memory loss and seemed much more irritable. He pushed away a lot of his friends and family. When Marcy left him, many blamed Daniel’s post-operation mood swings, but Kadeem always thought it was something else that started years before. It was out of loyalty to Daniel that Kadeem visited him every week to see how he was doing. No matter the mood swings or irritability, Kadeem would always visit his friend. Daniel’s

mood swings seemed to have subsided in the last few months and he seemed to be coming around. But now Kadeem was worried about this recent development.

“Ok, so you’re saying that the email was actually stating the future for all the people we know in common?” asked Kadeem. He was now humouring Daniel.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. I thought you’d have called me up by now frantic because everything that I’d written had come true. But obviously you never really read it.”

“It was like 10 pages long. And it was rambling. I thought you were just a bad writer of fiction. When I asked you what the heck it was and you said it was the future, I got really concerned about you.”

“Well it all came true”

“Let me guess. You want me to open up gmail and read the email again?”

“Yes. Please.”

Kadeem sighed again. He was going to simply tell Daniel to get help when he decided that verifying the visions to be false may be the only way to persuade Daniel to get help. He also vaguely remembered that the first part of the email was actually pretty amusing. Scary, but amusing.

“Ok, my friend,” said Kadeem in a very soothing voice. “I’ll get the email up and we’ll settle this once and for all.”

Kadeem picked up his laptop from the coffee table and opened his browser. It took a few seconds for gmail to load. He searched for all of Daniel’s emails and raised his eyebrows when the results came back to show that there were 900 emails between them over the years. *We spend way too much time online* he thought to himself. Another few minutes passed, but finally, Kadeem found the email.

“Ok, Daniel. I’m going to read through this email. But if the things in this email didn’t happen, do you promise me you’ll speak to someone?” asked Kadeem.

“I promise,” responded Daniel in a solemn tone.

Kadeem started reading. It didn’t take long for Kadeem to realize that Daniel’s email was eerily accurate. So much of his life in the last few months was transcribed in the email. His son’s cut above his left eyebrow from the cricket ball; Genetek going bankrupt and him losing his investment; his wife’s killer being found *not-guilty* of vehicular homicide, but guilty of reckless driving; his cousin winning R10,000 in a radio contest. Kadeem read through the entire 4000 words. He was absolutely mesmerized. There was no way this email should exist!

“Ok, you have my attention,” conceded Kadeem. “What the hell is going on?”

“I really don’t know.” Daniel said as he shook his head in dismay. “I just really want it to stop. For everyone’s sake.”

“How do you get these visions?”

“It started coming in my dreams, about two weeks after my op. I’d have these weirdly realistic dreams about people I saw in the day. It didn’t take long to figure out that the dreams were coming true.”

“What was the first dream?”

"I don't remember exactly which one came first, but I remember the first one that came true. I dreamt that Shakes got hit with a cricket ball," explained Daniel, using Kadeem's son Shaqeel's nickname Shakes. "I saw the whole game in my mind and saw the batsman hit the ball --- it was more of a ricochet than a hit. It bounced off the edge of the bat at a funny angle and flew right at Shakes before he could react. After it hit Shakes, everyone rushed to him and the game was delayed."

"Incredible. I'm a bit creeped out here. I mean, you had a premonition about my son. So it happened just like you dreamt it? How long after the dream did it really happen?"

"It was about four days later. And it wasn't the exact same. They were wearing different colour uniforms. And the crowd seemed different. More people were at the actual game than in the dream."

"This is too much."

"Yeah. And then more and more dreams started happening in real life. The odd thing is that there are always minor details that differ from the dream."

"Ok, my mind is still reeling a bit. I know you well enough to know that you must have a few theories as to what is happening."

"I do. And I'm glad that my best friend is a physicist to help me out with this."

"You know I'm a nuclear physicist. I don't know much about relativity, time travel, or quantum physics, except what I remember from my undergrad days and attending the occasional talk. And of course what I've seen on TV."

Daniel exhaled deeply. "Well, you're the only physicist I know. What do you know about alternate universes?"

"I see where you're going with this. You think you're seeing alternate universes in your dreams? Are you serious?"

"Hear me out. From what I understand, every possible choice that a sentient being makes spins a new universe, right? One universe for every possible decision. So if a person has to make a decision, let's say to eat an apple or an orange, he does both in different universes. So there are infinitely many universes, right?"

"Ok, firstly, your knowledge of alternate universes comes from corny sci-fi movies and comics. Secondly, that is one theory. Another prevailing theory is that the universes collapse into one universe right after the split occurs or when reality is forced to resolve itself."

"Ok, whatever. Just stay with me. Let's say that every moment, a new universe is spun. That new universe will be exactly like ours except for the difference that just occurred. If that keeps happening, there'll be tons of universes that are just like ours with a few differences. We just can't experience them. Maybe that's what I'm seeing. I'm seeing these other universes."

"Ok. So why do you think you see these *close* universes? Why don't you see the ones where I'm a mutant cowboy and you're a mute thespian?"

"I don't know. Maybe I see the ones closest to me. Like field of vision."

“Well, we’re confusing the contexts of the word ‘close’. We shouldn’t think that close in distance and close in similarity of universes are the same thing simply because the English language doesn’t have separate words for the two phenomena.”

Kadeem didn’t want to encourage his friend by indulging him, but the truth is he couldn’t think of a better explanation. He was also fascinated by the possibility that the theory of alternate universes may be verifiably true.

“What is your view point?” asked Kadeem.

“Um, I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Are you looking at the scene from above or are you in the scene.”

Daniel thought about this for a while. He had never really analysed how he saw or experienced the visions, he more thought of the messages behind them. He was sure the visions had a meaning.

“The visions are always from the perspective of someone in the scene. It’s always like I’m there.”

“Do you only ‘see’ the universes?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you hear anything? Feel anything, Smell anything?”

“I experience everything. I’m a spectator in someone else’s body. But there was something weird. I was always in the scene, but no one interacted with me, like I was invisible. At first.”

Kadeem was now more than a little curious. “What do you mean ‘at first’? Did things change?”

“Yes. My visions have become more invasive. I used to get them in my dreams, but they’ve started happening while I’m awake. It’s like an image is superimposed on what I’m seeing. But something even more strange happened during my last few visions.”

“Strange? This whole thing is strange.”

“Kadeem, in the last vision, I was looking at a scene in the hospital. It was the day I had my last operation. I was actually watching myself get operated on. My head was split open and the doc was plugging away on my brain. But I could swear that the *me* who was in the vision and lying on the operating table made eye-contact with the *me* who was the observer. And my vision was slightly *off*. The *me* on the table said ‘be careful’ to the *me* who was watching.”

“God, that is strange.”

“No, it gets stranger. I was semiconscious during my operation. I was experiencing all sorts of things as Doctor Lim stimulated different parts of my brain. I asked Dr Lim and he confirmed that I did look at one of the nurses and gave her a warning. Maybe I’m experiencing other people’s consciousness in my visions.”

* * *

Kadeem sat in his old rickety chair at his desk and looked out the window. There were a number of students walking outside scurrying to their next lecture. He was

glad that he only had one lecture to give today because his mind was just not in it. The conversation he had yesterday with Daniel was surreal. How could he, a man of science, be convinced so easily that his friend since high school was experiencing visions of the future? How could he have indulged him like that? There are conmen all over the world who trick unsuspecting people into believing that they can read their future's for a small fee. He had always pitied those poor, desperate marks. He had assumed they were either uneducated or desperate in some way to believe something so absurd. Kadeem began to wonder if he too was desperate to believe that his friend was experiencing visions instead of believing his friend was ill.

His phone rang and brought Kadeem out of his mental bubble. He picked up the phone on the second ring and greeted. "Hello."

"Hello, Kadeem. This is Dr Lim. I got your message that you needed to speak to me about Daniel. Is he okay?"

Kadeem was momentarily annoyed that Dr Lim referred to himself as *Doctor* but referred to Kadeem, a man with a PhD in physics, by his first name. Kadeem swallowed his annoyance and thanked him for calling him back.

"Doc, I need to ask you something. Do you remember Daniel warning a nurse about something during the op?"

"Yes he did. It's not a big deal. We were stimulating many different parts of the brain. He gave us permission to conduct a few experiments during the operation, which involved us causing him to experience many different memories and emotions. He was talking throughout the operation. This isn't unusual. In fact, Daniel called me and asked me the same question just a few days ago. Is there something I should know?"

Kadeem considered telling the doctor about the bizarre conversation he had yesterday with Daniel. Of course, if he told him that he started to believe Daniel the doctor may think that Kadeem was unstable too. Besides, Daniel had told him about the visions in confidence.

"No," responded Kadeem. "I just thought it was strange for him to have conversations with the nurse during surgery."

"It's not uncommon at all. Certain brain surgeries require the patient to be conscious so there is always communication between the patient and the medical staff. Are you sure there isn't something you're not telling me?"

"No, doc. I'll keep you informed though."

"Good. Look, I'm glad that you're checking in on Daniel so frequently. He tells me about it and how difficult it's been for him since the operation."

They said their good-byes and Kadeem hung up. He had no idea how he was going to teach a course. This situation was just too overwhelming. Something else occurred to Kadeem: Daniel wasn't only seeing a different universe, but also a different time. And since all of his visions pertain to relevant events in his or his friend's lives, his mind must be guiding him to the pertinent universe and time. So he

potentially had an overview of many different universes, maybe even all universes, even if he wasn't aware he had.

Kadeem once again stared out the window and continued thinking about parallel universes. His phone rang again and startled him. He picked up the phone hoping it wasn't Daniel. He had a lot to think about before he spoke to his friend again.

"Hello," answered Kadeem into the receiver.

"Hello, Kadeem. It's Marcy. How did the meeting with Daniel go?" Although Marcy was estranged from Daniel, she still had a great deal of concern for him. She was also working through an incredible amount of guilt.

"He's doing okay, I guess." Kadeem debated whether he should tell Marcy about Daniel's visions. Although still technically married, Daniel and Marcy were finished as a couple. Kadeem knew this.

"Don't worry too much about Daniel," Kadeem continued. "He's a lot stronger than people give him credit for."

"I just feel so terrible for leaving him when he was like that. But you know more than anyone that he wasn't the same person anymore. And I can't be expected to give up on everything and have a shell of a life."

"Marcy, you don't have to justify things to me. You know how I feel. You did what you had to do. The only thing you could do. You have to continue with your life."

"I know. I still feel so bad."

There was an awkward silence that lasted a good twenty seconds. Kadeem wondered what he should say. Was he obliged to say more? Just then, his alarm went off indicating that his class would start in ten minutes.

"Marcy, that's my alarm. I have to give a class in a few minutes," explained Kadeem.

"Um, that's okay. I ..." she started to say something, then thought better of it. "Have fun in class."

* * *

Kadeem was nervous as he drove down National Road 1. He had been thinking about Daniel's visions nonstop since their conversation six days ago. It was the most intriguing and mind-boggling event that he had ever experienced. He also felt uneasy of the implications, but he couldn't exactly say why. There was a nagging feeling in the back of his mind that he just couldn't reach.

When Daniel called him this morning, Kadeem could tell that he was uneasy and was forcing his voice to remain even. Daniel had asked him to come to his home as soon as possible because he really wanted to discuss his visions. Daniel was afraid that the visions would start to torment him and he could sink into a depression. But that was a biological problem that should be solved by a psychiatrist, not a physicist. Kadeem pulled into Daniel's driveway, got out of his Toyota and slowly walked towards the door. The uneasiness didn't subside as Daniel invited him inside.

“Daniel,” Kadeem started, “I’m really sorry that these visions are visiting you. But I really don’t know how to stop them. I don’t even understand them.”

“That’s not why I asked you here,” responded Daniel. “Kadeem, I have a physics question for you. Do you think the future is set? That it can’t be changed?”

“I’m not sure. What are you talking about?”

“I need to know.” Daniel’s voice had a slight tremor in it. Kadeem could tell that he was trying to mask his desperation. Daniel continued: “These visions that I’m having, they’re all coming true. I’m seeing the future. Which means that on some level, the future is written. So I need to know, can it be changed?”

“Daniel, I really don’t know.”

“I’m sure you’ve thought about it before. Let’s say that the future was written a certain way. And then I got my vision. So the knowledge of the future can change my behaviour so then I could change the future, right?”

“Perhaps. Or maybe the future was written the way it was because you were going to get the vision. I mean the vision that caused your *change* in behaviour may have always been written beforehand. Why are you asking me this?”

Kadeem was beginning to understand now. One of Daniel’s visions had disturbed him greatly. That uneasy feeling that Kadeem was feeling the last few days was creeping to the surface.

“Daniel, what did you see?”

“I didn’t just see it, I experienced it. I experienced another man’s consciousness and felt everything he felt.”

The feeling of uneasiness Kadeem was feeling had bubbled to the surface and was now acute anxiety. “Daniel, you can tell me. I’ve been your friend since high school. What did you see?”

Daniel looked Kadeem right in the eye and the two awkwardly stared at each other for twenty seconds, not saying anything. Eventually, Daniel started to speak.

“Kadeem, you’re going to kill me.”

Kadeem eyes widened and his limbs stiffened. He couldn’t believe what he just heard. His heart started beating uncontrollably fast in his chest. *What a preposterous thought!* There was no way he was going to kill Daniel. Daniel was his best friend.

Daniel wasn’t finished with his revelations. “I experienced your consciousness, Kadeem. I know about you and Marcy. I saw everything. I felt everything.”

Kadeem’s knees buckled when he heard this and he almost fell. No one knew about him and Marcy. They hadn’t planned it. In fact, it was their common love for Daniel that brought them together. But there was no way he could even think about harming Daniel.

“You’ll come to my house in two weeks with a gun. You’ll justify it by convincing yourself you’re putting me out of my misery. You’ll feel terrible afterwards and cry uncontrollably. You won’t be sure if your motive was to put me out my misery or to pave the way for you and Marcy to be together.”

Kadeem was still reeling. He had to admit that there was a shadow of a thought deep in his subconscious. The thought was slowly becoming clearer. If Daniel was gone, everyone would be happier and Daniel wouldn’t suffer anymore. He tried to suppress the idea but it was seeping to the surface. He opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

Daniel had no trouble getting his words out. “I think it’s time for you to leave. There’s nothing more that has to be said.” He pointed at the door.

Kadeem staggered towards the door. He was more shocked by the recognition of the fact that he was subconsciously thinking about getting rid of Daniel than he was by the vision itself. He managed to make it make it outside despite the fact that he was still in a daze. Daniel closed the door as Kadeem left. He took a deep breath and considered the situation. He wondered if he'd ever see Kadeem again. More importantly, did he just set into motion his own prophetic murder or did he prevent it?

L.O.C

1706-24 Eva Rd, Etobicoke, ON CANADA. M9C 2B2 April 22 2014

Dear Gail:

Hello! and welcome back to the editorship (again) of Probe, and of Probe 159. Cheers to Carla for her years of editorial work, too. Our computer is once again in the shop, but this time to have the contents transferred to a new desktop computer. (Yes, they are still made.) With some luck, it will be ready for pickup today. I'm working on Yvonne's laptop, and it's time for a few comments.

Belinda Lewis' *Unearthly Creatures* is a wonderful story. I think many of us have felt alone in a crowd because our interests were different from everyone else's, and only a select few of us were able to visualize what we wanted to do with our lives. In this story, in a science fictional world with our modern tough financial times, Aida made some amazing choices when presented with her ideal position. May we all be so lucky.

My letter...the urge to read is slowly returning, as I have picked up the two books I had on the go, looked at them, checked them off my list, and have carried on with something new. And, in spite of my comments to Sheryl Birkhead, I am writing this on a brand new computer. Our old computer, with parts going back as far as 1999, finally failed entirely, and we were forced to buy a brand new desktop computer, Windows 7, Office 2013 and 2 TB of disk space. It's more debt we are forced to bear, but at least we are online again, and both of us are job hunting.

As for what we are doing, now that the computer is replaced...tomorrow is the annual CostumeCon, this year in Toronto, and we have established a small business as a vendor of Steampunk-themed jewelry and assorted other goods, like pillows and cup and saucer sets. We go in tomorrow night to set up our table, and return for the next four days to run our table, and with luck, sell some of our merchandise and make some profits. We are lucky not to have to take a room at the hotel, for we live ten minutes away. Next month, we will have a similar table at a local anime convention, and we're hoping for the same results. Best of all, we're having fun being vendors, and we've made friends with a lot of the usual vendors at our local conventions.

All done for now! Many thanks for this issue, and I look forward to the 160th issue..

Yours, Lloyd Penney.