



The
World
Set

**Science Fiction
Short Story
Collection**
by
Lily Splane

The Vortex

*Science Fiction
Short Story Collection*

*by
Lily Splane*

The Vortex

Science Fiction Short Story Collection

Copyright © 1986–2002 Lily Splane

ISBN 0-945962-18-5

No part of this work may be reproduced in any form—existing or to be developed in the future—without the express written permission of the author/publisher.

Published in the United States of America

Anaphase II Publishing
a Division of Cyberlepsy
2739 Wightman Street
San Diego, CA 92104-3526
www.cyberlepsy.com/anaphase.htm

Contents

Sunday Afternoon at the Mall 5
A strange couple invites a bit of suspicion from a secret observer.

Convergence 9
Parallel experience across time.

Without Dark Matter... 13
Poetic prose for all we can't see.

Feedback Loop 14
Mental health architects learn the cure may be worse than the defect.

Final Thoughts 35
Dying companions ruminate on what happens after death.

Funerarium 37
A woman's fears become an obsession.

Awww...Baby Gators! 43
An unbelievable TRUE story.

Master of Fine Arts 47
A difficult artist paints herself a future horror.

Paradox 62
Stream-of-consciousness commentary on a schizoid society gone mad.

Puss n' Bats 66
Your cat's taste for peculiar prey may bring unforeseen complications.

Rapport 70
Hearing voices is less troublesome than you might think.

Rendezvous 72
A novel solution to the terrorism problem.

Resonance 77
A Native American finds his future spiritually incomprehensible.

Short Shorts

 A Confession 87

 Bad Feelings 87

 A Child Contemplates Death 88

Snoyheat 89
A unique telling of a time-travel event.

How I Spent My Summer Vacation 92
Family recreation and all its trials in the not-too-distant future.

The Noblest Profession 99
When love conquers all—even if it's illegal.

SUNDAY AFTERNOON AT THE MALL

You saw them and you didn't tell anybody? Christ, how could you keep something like that to yourself for so long? I don't blame you for not telling what you did, but you could've omitted that part.

You remember—you skulked around, ducking behind parked cars as you watched those long tan legs emerge from the red Maserati, and oh, if that wasn't enough to die happy with, next came those firm thighs and narrow, compact hips, that wasp waist, those unbelievably huge, erect breasts. Wow! What a figure! And then don't you remember how your excitement shattered to a thousand dirty pieces when he stepped out after her—an Adonis in his own right, muscled and styled and polished.

But life isn't always fair, is it?

And to add insult to injury, she smiled lovingly at him, hooking her arm around his, her hips swaying, brushing sensuously against his as they walked through the parking lot and through the main entrance.

You followed them, you sneaky bastard.

After they bought tickets at the cinema, you rushed to the window and asked the pimple-faced nerd there which movie the previous couple had purchased tickets for, gulped when you heard the answer, and bought a ticket for the same movie: a revival of "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre."

In the dark you sat behind them, simultaneously entranced by how the woman's golden hair seemed to absolutely glow in the dim light, and irritated at how her head blocked your view. Not that you were interested in the movie at all. That's not what you were there for, you scoundrel.

Through the butchery, the gore, the screams, the whining chainsaw, you became entranced with her voice as she made comments on the film. The words danced in the air like glitter. You didn't stop to consider the content of what she said until after the film. A comment like "Wasn't it creative how Leatherface cut up all the people and they stayed dead?" didn't strike you as particularly profound. Perhaps only stupid. Stupidity in a goddess can be overlooked, can't it? Sure. The man with her knew how to handle it. He had the right idea. He answered, "I'm a little disappointed they didn't switch all the heads on the bodies." The goddess laughed. Clever, that man. You'd never be able to think of things like that. You'd never have a chance with her, you lecherous moron.

Undefeated, you followed them, cautiously, into the pizza joint and sat down at a table just across from them, your face buried in a menu, your eyes dancing at the rim of the menu as you longed for her, ached for the touch of those long manicured fingertips. You ordered wine. You had to.

It didn't even strike you as odd that their pizza was brought to their table in a take-out box. Maybe they were light eaters, you thought. They'd take the rest home.

If you hadn't been so enraptured by her full, glossy lips, her delicate tongue and tiny white teeth, if you hadn't been imaging her mouth all over you, you would have noticed how she chewed. Ferociously, with great difficulty. She was eating the cardboard box, after all. But you didn't see that. You just saw her mouth, the mouth that held the promise of all the erotic fantasies you've ever entertained. And were you unconscious when she said, delicately picking cardboard out of her teeth, "Just like homemade"?

Giving no thought to the entire uneaten pizza they left, you stood behind a tall display case of jade figurines in the jewelry store, watching her, her eyes asparkle, her tongue flicking lightly over those full pink lips as she perused the jewelry cases. Finally she decides on a pair of amethyst earrings and asks the clerk to remove them from the display case. She unscrews the keeps from the earring posts. Her man stands by, smiling approvingly as she brushes back her hair, exposing her ears.

The clerk faints. Didn't you wonder why, for chrissakes? Didn't you wonder why the clerk, when he finally came to, recommended a plastic surgeon? A plastic surgeon, for chrissakes! For that goddess!

The woman seemed bored, preoccupied with other thoughts while you watched her waiting for her man to get measured for a new pair of slacks. When the tailor measured the inseam, you could see the blood drain out of his face, staggering backwards. He stammered and politely asked to be excused.

That should have tipped you off right there. But instead you decided to follow them into Radio Shack. Haven't you tortured yourself enough?

A bizarre sense of humor, you say. It was more than that. No one in their right mind goes into an electronics store and dances in front of the display stereo... when it isn't even turned on. Give it up, relinquish the fantasy before you succumb to it. But would you listen?

Even when you followed them into the shoe store and the woman tried on pair after pair of sandals, rejecting them all because her heels

wouldn't touch the floor, you persisted in your fascination with this woman.

You couldn't take your eyes off the long legs, the tiny feet, still shod in high-heels. Her feet must kill her, you lamented. But it made her walk with a sway that brought tears to your eyes. And that's what counts, isn't it?

You relaxed some when they decided to have a little fun in Nurseryland. How amused, how delighted you were, watching as the woman barked commands, shook her finger. "Roll over," she said over and over again at the Chia-pets. You laughed out loud, catching yourself just in time to avoid a collective stare.

Doesn't that bother you?

It was getting late, and the couple decided to stop at one last store on their way out of the mall. You shouldn't have gone in. You shouldn't have followed them. I warned you, I tried to protect you from your own lust, from the perversity of her act. but you had to see, concealed as you were by the display of Venetian blinds. You got a real good look at her, too, when she popped the lid off that can of light blue latex and dipped a finger in it, smearing a stripe across her upper lid.

I told you weren't going to like it. I told you not to look.

Near the exit to the parking lot, dazed, you sat on a bench watching her study a bikini on a mannequin in a display window. She wanted that bikini, you could tell. But there was some reservation in her voice; you caught that. Did her perfect boyfriend or husband or whatever he was to her, refuse to pay for it? The lout! Is that what you heard? Are you sure? You saw him suddenly rush off and dash into an auto supply store just before they locked it up for the night, leaving her alone. The bum, the scumbag. How could he just leave her like that? Surely the bikini was no match in cost for the earrings this beauty never got. You wanted to go up to her, offer to buy the bikini for her, offer to love her forever, be the father of her children. What stopped you?

You knew you didn't have a chance, you loser.

As if struck by lightning, she shot into the swimwear store and returned with the bottom half of the bikini on display, nearly running headlong into her man, who clutched a bag beneath his armpit. He beamed at her, caressed her cheek, pulled something black and leather from the bag. He wrapped the bra of a '75 Corvette around her bust. She giggled in delight. It fit perfectly.

Something dangerous was beginning to eat away at you, by then. It gnawed, and nibbled and clawed at your insides like a starved vulture, waiting to devour your resolve, the last of your good sense.

You followed the couple through the parking lot in the waning light, your presence unnoticed, your heart galloping wildly. You were just two cars away when they got in their Maserati—first the woman, then the man. It was now or never.

You lunged at the passenger side, yanking the door open, the man staring up at you in the dimming light. You grabbed his lapels and pulled him from the car. He didn't struggle. Did you expect he would? Then you grasped him at the sides of the head and jerked. It popped free, just as you'd hoped. You bowled the head into the back seat and thrust the headless body over the seat and onto the floor behind the passenger seat.

“Ken!” the woman screamed.

“Don't worry about that asshole. It's you and me from now on baby!”

What? Me? Hell, who'd believe me?

Master of Fine Arts

Rebecca cautiously removes her sunglasses just as the last flash from the transforming mass of animal flesh subsides.

Margaret shudders and grins her satisfaction: another transmutation complete. She stands and closes her eyes, still smiling to herself, content and pleased with the unique knowledge she will use to complete her next painting.

This painting will be special—infused with the pride and permanent internal alarm the magnificent beast carried within. She had become him for a few brief minutes, standing there in the spacious second-story studio, hoofs clacking and pawing the polished oak floor, sniffing the air for the scent of the predator she knew lurked within every shadow.

“This was the most spectacular yet,” Rebecca says. “What was it like? How did it feel?”

Margaret settles herself on the padded stool before her easel. In her stylish British accent she says, “My insides sort of quivered uncontrollably; I was ready to run at the slightest provocation. But it was strange. At the same time, I felt invincible, unconquerable. I felt supremely free and yet imprisoned by an unrelenting fear. What a bizarre sensation—not what I expected at all. Such a fragile heart....” She falls silent with the second stroke of her brush. The work begins; nothing can tear her away from her creation until the soul of the stag is captured on the canvas.

She hears Rebecca quietly maneuver her wheelchair through the narrow passage, then call out uncertainly, “You’ll page me when you want dinner?”

Margaret does not answer. The hum of the descending wheelchair lift fades slowly from her awareness as her brush dances madly across the canvas, bringing the stag to unbelievably accurate life. His eyes, his stance, every delicate hair on his powerful body surrenders his odd combination of assured power and secret internal terror. Only Margaret can paint him so perfectly, so lovingly, for she had been him, felt what he felt, sensed the world through his eyes, his nose, his every neuron. She had felt his sharp hoofs slice into the waxy shine of hard floor—slipping—and had felt that momentary dread of unsure footing. She had felt his lean body tense and quiver at every strange sound. She had felt the paradox of his pride and invulnerability, and the frantic beating of his frightened heart. And now, she will put it all in the painting.

This contract could possibly bring in more revenue than the last four combined. The client will be so enchanted with this painting, so taken by the perfection and accuracy, indeed, the very soul of the stag, that he will double, even triple the price of the original contract. Margaret knows the client can be counted on to do that. Clients always do that, much to Margaret's great satisfaction. She revels in the predictability of their infatuation. She loves the certainty of the power the paintings always have over them—and the power they always feel when they are certain they are making the artist surrender a cherished work.

Margaret works feverishly, stopping not even for a drink of water, or to relieve the throbbing cramp in her upper arm. The last of the rays of a vermilion sun spray the canvas through a glass west wall, spreading an orange wash throughout the spacious and sparsely furnished studio, distorting the colors of the paint. The slow intrusion of unwanted shadows halts her work; it is nearly finished.

Margaret stands and stretches, kneading the muscle of her right arm. The sudden realization of intense hunger flags her attention and she walks to the intercom console to page someone in the kitchen.

In minutes Rebecca wheels herself into the studio, a tray attached before her to the arms of the wheelchair. "Spaghetti and meatballs. Glenda made it this morning. Smells wonder—"

She stops, gasping. "It's fantastic! It's like you could walk up to him and he'd eat right out of your hand." She wheels closer, unhooking the tray and placing it on the long bench that runs beneath the entire length of the forty-foot wall of windows.

"God, the photograph looks so... so dead compared to what you've done here. It's the best yet."

"I think so. Should bring at least \$9000."

"But, that's triple what Mr. Simmons agreed. How can you just—"

"He'll pay it. Believe me, he'll pay it."

"If he knew how you captured that buck so perfectly—"

"You're not getting ideas again about telling anyone, are you? You know, I'm really getting tired of your disguised threats. I thought we had an understanding about that."

"Oh, we do. No need to worry about me breaking my agreements."

"You can't tell. We'd both be finished—if anyone believed you, that is."

"I wish I could understand how you do that stuff. I've seen it dozens of times, and I'm still amazed at how you can know how to be an animal. For instance, how do you know how to wag a tail you've

never had?”

“Family curse, I guess. All my relatives from as far back as I can remember have had a special empathy with animals.”

“Family gift, Margie.”

Margaret lurches and stiffens in her seat, then turns slowly to face Rebecca. Her voice is low and deliberate: “Don’t you ever call me Margie. You understand? Ever!”

Rebecca freezes. Her head drops as she lowers her gaze. “I... I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

“This gift, as you like to call it—it’s the only way to truly know an animal. Just looking at him, studying his dimensions and proportions isn’t good enough. I must feel everything he feels, sense his existence through his senses. And the best thing about it is, I still have my own consciousness; I can think about and analyze the sensations as I’m feeling them.

“That’s why I only do mammals. Lower life-forms don’t have a sophisticated enough mind to hold my consciousness. My free will could be lost in a simpler mind, disabling my conversion back to me. You see, this gift has its limitations—even its dangers.”

“I still don’t fathom how you know how to become something so... so alien.”

“It’s not all that alien, to become another mammal. We all know how, unconsciously. I know how consciously, that’s all.” Margaret waits for agreement from Rebecca, but it does not come.

“Think about it. When you get down on all fours, you can walk—just like any other quadruped. We did it for millions of years. Race memory, genetic memory—call it what you like. The quadruped is in us. Babies start out this way, then change—even when not encouraged—to bipedal stance in order to free the hands and take advantage of the higher cortical functions of the human brain. We are closer to the other animals than we would like to admit.”

Rebecca listens silently, seemingly interested.

“We all want the same things: air, food, water, sleep, and a safe comfortable place to call home. Humans, mammals, all other life-forms share a single goal—to reproduce. Everything we do—all of us—is to insure the success of the next generation. It’s that simple.” Margaret could see the astonishment on Rebecca’s face. “I see you disagree.”

Rebecca again drops her chin to her chest, then jerks it up, eyes wide with a sudden spark of insight. “But what about people and their material possessions? What about the drive to excel at work, at a sport or some talent? How is that related?”

“Becky, Becky. Don’t you understand that all that stuff—the fancy house, the expensive car, the high-powered job, any kind of recognition at all—attracts others of the opposite sex, and therefore ensures reproduction? At the same time, fame and fortune eliminates through fear any competitors. We may have some very complicated ways to achieve the same goal, but these things are, nevertheless, ways to achieve the ultimate goal: reproduction. If there was no drive to reproduce, there would be no point in living.”

“What about eunuchs? They have no desire to reproduce, yet they desire to live.”

“The drive is still there—in the brain.” Margaret shifts on the stool and softly clears her throat. Rebecca is showing more reasoning ability than she had expected. “Still, eunuchs and other non-reproducing people contribute to society—improve its chances of survival somehow—even if on a seemingly insignificant scale.”

She pauses a while, immersed in disjointed, almost panicked thoughts. This challenge of Rebecca’s will not go unanswered. “Just serving someone lunch can insure that the diner goes on to reproduce. Nature has it all planned—if you live, one way or another you reinforce someone’s ability to reproduce.”

“What about a bedridden quadriplegic? Or someone who’s comatose?” Rebecca asks quickly.

Margaret tips her head slightly back, inhaling audibly. “Think about it. Even a human vegetable employs others—government employees, medical professionals, caretakers, technological workers—ensuring all those others’ survival, their reproduction.” Margaret stares at Rebecca until her chin again drops to her chest. Her opponent has backed down.

“Once I understood this simple concept, it was easy for me to become an animal. You see, I already am one. And I not only admit it—I embrace it. I pity those who only know the fraction of themselves they call ‘human.’ They are incomplete, fractionated—ignorant. They are impoverished, wretched souls who know nothing of what it is to be fully alive.

“Every time I become for them the object of their wonder, every time I recreate for them the object of their displaced reverence, I mock them.” Margaret chuckles, mostly to herself. “And they still come, and they pay. They will fork over their life savings for their ignorance and longing. What they ask for, what they buy, is an immortalization of that part of themselves that they deny: the animal—the beautiful, alive, and perfect animal they refuse to see in themselves. They feel so proud,

so superior, so self-assured. I despise them.”

“Your misanthropy is... highly developed,” Rebecca says almost inaudibly. Then, more assertively, “If you hate people so much, why did you hire me as your assistant and companion?”

“Though I find this one of my less admirable traits, I need you. And more important, dear Becky—you need me. You need the income and the friendship to go on with your pathetic little life. And worst of all, you need to be needed.”

Rebecca’s friendly expression dissolves into a blank stare of incredulity. She grips the arms of her chair until the blood evacuates her fingers. “How can you talk like that to someone who admires you, who only wants to help you? Who only wants to relieve you of the daily burdens of taking care of your bodily needs so that you may do nothing but what you were born to do: paint? There is a shimmer of tears filling Rebecca’s eyes as she continues. “Do you really think insulting me and treating me like an indentured slave will endear you to me? Will make me glad to do your shit-work?”

Margaret sees Rebecca flinch when she hears the profanity come from her own mouth.

“I’m not paying you to love me. The only thing I want from you is what I pay you to do. It’s not important that you like it, or like me.” Margaret’s voice is firm, almost disciplinary. She punctuates her assault with a final harpoon: “I’m not going to swim with you in your sewer of self-pity.”

“I don’t want, or need, your pity. All I want is to be treated with a little kindness. Is that so hard for you?”

“You’re paid in cash—not kindness. Satisfying your emotional needs was not part of the job description. I am fair—that’s all that counts.”

“Fair? What good is fairness when it isn’t tempered with kindness and respect?” Rebecca nearly shouts, checking herself just in time.

Margaret’s glare denies Rebecca the evidence of an emotional response. “Your severance paycheck is in the lower right drawer of my desk.”

A shocked droop overtakes Rebecca’s face as she utters, “You’re... you’re firing me?” She gently strokes her lower abdomen.

“Of course not,” Margaret laughs. “You’re backing out all by yourself.”

“But... but... I’m not.” She pauses, breathing a little heavier and blinking nervously. “You have the check made up in advance? How do you know how much to make it out for?”

“I made it out for three days plus a week’s severance pay. That’s how long it takes you to succumb to your self-contempt for staying here and taking what you fondly refer to as my ‘abuse’—three days. It’s the same every month. Three days after I pay you, you play this ‘tape’ about kindness and regard and decency.” Margaret laughs again, leaning forward on the stool. “Hell, Becky, that check’s been laying in the drawer for twelve months. All you’ll have to do is date it... and leave—to your freedom and your kind, respectful, adoring world. They do adore you out there, don’t they Becky? They treat you with respect, roll out the red-carpeted wheelchair ramp for you, pile job offers before your numb, lifeless feet. Don’t they, Becky?”

Rebecca tries not to cry, but loses that battle, as well as the monthly war with Margaret. She tugs the wheelchair around and vanishes out the door.

Mildly elated by her victory, Margaret twirls the spaghetti on her fork, anticipating the magical blend of herbs only Glenda could master. She tastes the sauce. Slamming the fork to the plate, she stomps over to the intercom. “Glenda! Glenda, are you there?”

The intercom sputters and clicks. “Yes, Ms. Copley. What do you need?”

“Did you use granulated garlic in the sauce, Glenda? I specifically said fresh garlic, now didn’t I?”

“But Ms., there was no fresh garlic in the pantry. I couldn’t just take off to the store, I’d never return in time to cook the sauce for the five hours required. If used properly, granulated garlic is... there’s hardly a noticeable dif—”

“I said fresh garlic, dammit. I detected the difference, didn’t I Glenda?”

A long silence.

“Then there must be a difference! When a client asks me to paint a Pit Bull, I don’t present him with a Chihuahua, do I Glenda?” Not waiting for an answer, she jerks her finger from the intercom button and spins around, trudging to her now very cold dinner. “Dammed incompetent help.”

* * *

“I’m here to collect the tray. Are you finished?” Rebecca asks, timidly entering the artificially illuminated studio.

“It’s nearly eight-thirty,” Margaret says, glancing at her watch. “I’ve been finished for nearly an hour.” She continues to put the final touches on her creation, squinting and weaving to evade the shine from

the overhead lighting.

“Oh, Mrs. Wentworth called to change her appointment from Thursday at 1:00, to tomorrow. You had 11:00 open. I hope that was OK.”

“Without consulting me? Maybe I had personal plans, plans that aren’t in my appointment book. Did you ever think of that?”

“I can call her back and change it, if you’d like. Which day and time would suit you?”

“Forget it. She wants that damn shivering toy poodle of hers done. Let’s get it over with. Set up at 8:00—don’t be late.”

“Yes, of course.” She turns her wheelchair to leave, then yanks herself back around. “Margaret?”

“What is it now?”

“I just wanted to say I’m sorry. I shouldn’t blame you for being temperamental; I guess artists are just that way. I still want to work for you—I have no plans to quit. Not to witness daily your tremendous talent and extraordinary genius would be like... would be like a kind of soul death for me.”

Margaret puts down her brush and scoots around on the stool to face Rebecca. She begins clapping her hands, saying, “Very good, Rebecca! A fine performance!” Then, as if suddenly possessed by an unseen demon, “You’re still in my will, Becky.”

“Oh, no!” Rebecca gasps. “I didn’t mean to give you the impression that... I said those things with all sincerity. I’m sincere, Margaret.”

Margaret resumes her painting. “Sincerity. God Almighty. Sincerity is for diplomats; they need it to lie well.”

“Diplomacy is an art, and I am no artist. That’s why I enjoy watching—”

“Do be on time tomorrow morning, Becky, will you?”

* * *

Margaret stands in the middle of the studio with her eyes closed, gorged with the two thousand calories required for the metamorphosis. She waits for the perfect moment when she will drink the quintessence of the small poodle in the photograph Rebecca had enlarged in the lab downstairs. It will be the first time she set eyes on her subject. Margaret’s eyes flash open and Becky quickly removes the drape from the poster-sized photo. Margaret stares intently; a growing energy begins to build inside her, burning and chilling simultaneously. A vivid blue aura bathes her body, makes the hairs on her arms and head shriek and quiver. Her

breathing becomes labored, an unfamiliar heartbeat clicks and gushes in her ears.

The room looms huge. The walls grow more distant, the ceiling higher, and the floor closer through the veil of fierce blue light and burning ice.

Screaming smells like perfume and ammonia blended and shot through a blowtorch, assault her nasal cavities. Her sinuses feel like they have been irrigated with noxious effluvium: many odors too intense to separate and identify. It must be turpentine, linseed oil, the clogged toilet, and especially the cologne that Becky wears—lingering not like a delicate reminder, but raging like psychotic gardenias.

It's cold, the Margaret-poodle thinks. She shivers in the gray-tones of the enormous, resonant room. She feels so small, so insignificant, so... abandoned. Sounds squirt through her nerves to ears far too sensitive for such a noisy world, especially the bustling city traffic outside. A siren shears through her head—she wants to scream, but only pitiful animal sounds escape from her larynx. She feels her throat swell; a high-pitched howl escapes. From far away, others of her kind join in the opera of pain and recognition.

A searing blue flash; the flame dies. Margaret stands panting and sweating, not very sure she is herself yet.

Becky's amazed expression is partially hidden behind her dark glasses; she removes them. "What was that one like? I'll tell you, you looked scared."

"That poor creature thinks she's a person, a child-person. She doesn't understand why her mother drags her all over hell and back, leaving her with strangers who maul her. It's disgusting what people do to animals to satisfy their own needs. They can't just let their pets be themselves." And she begins to paint, quickly, expertly, focused and undistractable.

* * *

Margaret steps aside as the portly middle-aged woman bulldozes her way through the front door. "Yes, Mrs. Wentworth, it's finished but—"

"Oh, I must see it!" the lady gushes.

"Mrs. Wentworth, please. I have to explain..."

"Is it up here, in your studio? I can't wait to see it. And Pooopsie's anxious, too." She leans down to the shivering poodle and pats its fluffy white head. The animal ducks and flattens its ears, staring straight up at Mrs. Wentworth's ample and approaching bosom with wet, pleading eyes.

Margaret holds back, watching the fat lady labor up the stairs. She then follows her, remaining two steps behind, imploring, “But, Mrs. Wentworth. I don’t think I can give you this one. I’ll paint another. Please, just give me one more day, I promise I’ll paint an even better one than—”

“Oh, my heavens!” the woman wheezes, entering the studio. “It’s wonderful, Margaret! It’s splendid!”

“Mrs. Wentworth, you didn’t hear me. I can’t sell you this one. I’ve... I’ve grown very attached to it. You see, it came out so well, better than I expected. I need to use it in my portfolio—for when I tour. I’ll paint you another—a far better one. I think I can really capture your Poop—the true Bubbles—this time, especially now that I see her in person. She’s so adorable, so sensitive.”

“Nonsense. I want this one. It’s perfect—more than perfect. It’s absolutely... angelic.”

As rotund as the woman is, her dress fits perfectly; no doubt professionally tailored. “Please, Mrs. Wentworth. It’s so important for my career that I have this charming little dog in my portfolio.”

Mrs. Wentworth straightens herself and thrusts her abundant bosom forward. “Margaret, we had an agreement. I can understand your feelings, but a deal is a deal, you understand. Why don’t you paint a second one for yourself? Poopsie and I can watch you work. It’ll be our honor.”

Noticing the probable worth of the diamond ear-clips on the lady’s pudgy earlobes, Margaret twitches her upper lip and shifts her weight to her other foot. “I’m sorry, but I must work alone. Solitude is part of the creative process. Mrs. Wentworth, a second painting will be far more detailed—”

“Well... I’ll tell you what, Dearie. Why don’t I sweeten the offer—say, \$4000. That’s twice the agreed fee.”

Margaret lowers her head and gazes at the lady’s feet. Nice shoes. Guccis. Six hundred easy. “Mrs. Wentworth....”

“Five thousand. That’s final. I must have this painting. Poopsie and I are not leaving without it.” The round lady removes her floppy sun-hat and fans her moist face with it. “Do you have a phone in here, or do I have to call my lawyer from downstairs?”

“That won’t be necessary, Mrs. Wentworth. All right, five thousand, then.”

“Fine, fine. You had us worried there for a moment, didn’t she Poopsie?” She plops her hat back on her head and rummages through her purse. Nervously, she hands Margaret a check, then makes a greedy

dash for the painting. “Lovely, just lovely. It’s dry? I can touch it?”

“Oh yes. Acrylic dries quickly. It’s all ready to be mounted.” Margaret hands her a cardboard sleeve.

The plump lady snaps up the painting and the cardboard cover and waddles out, Bubbles scampering behind. Her clomping can be heard all the way down the stairs.

“I can’t believe she paid that,” Rebecca says, emerging from the bathroom.

“You’ve been in there listening in on my transaction?”

“I was just setting up for your next client. The toilet works now, too.”

“It’s about time you got to that. Who’s the next appointment?”

“David Gentry from the university—a marine biology student. He has some fantastic photos of a seal colony he was studying off the coast of Alaska. The one we decided on is in the enlarger right now. He’ll be by about 4:00.”

“Hmm. Not likely to be too emotionally involved. He’ll probably only pay the base fee. How much did you quote him?”

“Five hundred. He’s only a student.”

“Another charity case. Well, get on it. Setup takes time.”

* * *

Rebecca watches the swirling azure light enveloping Margaret, die away.

Margaret sighs and wipes her sweaty forehead with the back of her hand. She doesn’t speak, but stares straight ahead out the windows to the sea.

“Margaret, are you OK?”

“It’s amazing sometimes,” she whispers. “I find out things about animals, understand things biologists and behaviorists have been trying to figure out for decades, but can’t.”

“What did you find out about seals?”

“Remember watching those nature programs with me, and the narrator talking about the peculiar behavior that the adult seals have of almost violently slapping and scratching at the pups?”

Rebecca nods.

“No one knows why they do that—until now. They thought maybe it was to get the pup away, but the mother does it too, so that wouldn’t make sense. Maybe it was to discourage flies, they thought. Or to remind the pup to stay close. All of that’s wrong.”

“So why do they do it?”

Margaret smiles. “It’s so simple.” She laughs lightly to herself, still staring out at the sea. “It’s to stimulate coat growth so the little bastard doesn’t freeze. The scratching and slapping stimulates blood flow to the coat.”

“You ought to tell that to David when he comes to pick up the painting.”

“And how, do you imagine, do I tell him how I know this?”

“Maybe suggest it? Like you’re guessing?”

“Go on. Bring me my tea, then leave me. I have a seal pup to whelp.”

* * *

“This is stupendous! It’s remarkable how you picked up the helplessness and bewilderment. Every whisker, every hair is perfect. You’re a genius, Ms. Copley.” David says.

“You flatter me. And it’s Margaret, please.”

“I’ll have to tell Dr. Morrison about this. He’s writing a book and he could really use a professional artist to illustrate it.”

“Dr. Morrison?”

“Yes, he’s one of my instructors at the university,” David says in his rush to wrap the painting and count out five hundred-dollar bills.

“You know, of course, that this is my student rate. I usually charge two thousand.”

“Oh, and I appreciate your giving me a break. But money won’t be a problem for Dr. Morrison. You know that big estate up on the hill off the coast road? That’s his. He’s all alone up there in that big house.”

Margaret’s expression brightens. “Oh. How can he afford that on a professor’s salary?”

“He was doing research for some huge multi-national firm before he came here. Very well paid, I understand.” David halts his exit. “Say, what about I bring him over this evening and introduce you?”

“That would be marvelous! I look forward to meeting him. I’ll have the cook prepare a little something for us. Please, bring a date. We’ll make it an evening. Eight o’clock?”

David nods and gallops down the stairs, followed by Rebecca in the wheelchair lift and Margaret struggling to get ahead of Rebecca to the front door.

Rebecca smiles as David leans over to kiss her. Margaret shudders in surprise. She’d had no clue her faithful servant was spreading her loyalty and devotion elsewhere.

The front door closes. Rebecca and Margaret are left alone with

Margaret's chaotic emotions.

"Why didn't you tell me you were seeing him? I made an ass out of myself just now—'bring a date.' Why do you always put me in those situations, Becky?"

"I didn't think you would appreciate the details of my personal life interfering in your... you have enough to—"

Margaret bends closer to Rebecca, pointing her finger at her, shaking it. "Everything that affects me is my concern. Your forgetfulness affects me. Your tardiness affects me. Your handicap affects me. And this—" She waves towards the door. "Are you screwing him in my house?"

"No. No, Margaret. We're not even... we're just good friends," Rebecca says, round-eyed and flushed.

"Don't you ever let me catch you spreading for him in this house, you hear me? And don't let your interests wander—I come first!"

"I wouldn't..." Rebecca explodes into tears.

"You disgust me, you and your youthful lusts. I suppose I'll have to tolerate your presence at dinner—it seems I've already invited you without knowing it. I expect perfect manners tonight. The only thing to come out of your mouth should be an empty fork." She storms off into the kitchen, screeching, "Glenda!" and listening to the echoes of her voice bounce off the tiled walls of the spacious kitchen.

"Glenda, where the hell are you?"

The cook enters the kitchen wiping a stray lock of blond hair from her eyes. "Yes, Ms. Copley?"

"Dinner party tonight. Four guests. Do something healthy. Californian. Eight sharp, preceded by cocktails."

"Ma'am, Wednesday is my short day. I leave at five. I can't possibly—"

"You stay, or you go—for good. This dinner is extremely important. It could generate thousands, and for you, a raise. I'll be fair—time and a half. Stay till eleven."

The cook hesitates momentarily. "I do need the extra money. Very well, Ms. Copley."

Margaret spins around on her heel and makes a dash for the staircase, nearly taking a dive over Rebecca's advancing wheelchair. "Clumsy child! You damn cripples think everyone should jump aside for you!"

"I'm sorry, Margaret." Rebecca's eyes are still wet from crying, the red flush in her face obscures the freckles. She strokes her abdomen absent-mindedly.

Margaret dashes out of the kitchen, and suddenly stops to flatten up close to the wall. She listens for the inevitable conversation taking place; they always have one when they think they are alone, and it is always about her.

“ . . . going through her change or something. God, how can so much beauty and talent reside in such a hateful bitch? Sometimes, I wish she could feel as insignificant as she makes me feel.”

“Take it easy, Rebecca. It’s all hot air, that’s all,” Margaret hears Glenda say. “Just a blow-dryer with fangs and an ego. You know damn well your job is secure here. And don’t forget about the will.”

“The will. The will. If someone throws that in my face just one more time....”

Margaret smiles to herself as she climbs the stairs, her mind filled with the excitement of the upcoming evening and the very eligible Professor Morrison.

* * *

“Wonderful dinner, Margaret,” Don Morrison says, lifting a glass of Chenin Blanc to his lips. “The scallops were prepared perfectly. It’s not everyone who can cook shellfish properly. It seems your talents extend beyond the studio.”

Margaret likes the man, even finds him handsome. His curly gray hair complements his gray jacket. She feels his stare as she sips her wine. “Thank you, Professor Morrison.”

“Please, call me Don. Tell me, where did you study art? David showed me the seal pup you did for him. It’s breathtakingly precise, so detailed. And there’s something so... magical about it. I just knew that pup winked at me the moment I looked away.”

“I’ve never studied art. I just paint. Simple as that.”

“It just comes naturally? I must say, you have a very rare talent. The entire world should see your work. You would have more contracts than you could handle. As for myself, I am writing a book. I need someone of your caliber to illustrate it. Are you interested?”

“Yes, of course. How many paintings do you think you’ll be needing?”

“I’ll take care of that, Margaret,” Rebecca breaks in. “It is my job, after all, to book your clients and negotiate the fee.” Rebecca stares squarely into Margaret’s widened eyes, then quickly glances to Professor Morrison. “Dr. Morrison, Margaret works from poster-size prints from color slides or negatives. Can you bring them tomorrow? About 1:00?”

“No need. I have the negatives right here.” He pulls an envelope from an inner jacket pocket and stretches over the table to hand them to

Rebecca.

Rebecca peers into the envelope. “There are eight negatives here, Margaret. When do you think Dr. Morrison can have his paintings?”

Margaret, getting very excited about all the zeros she sees behind her usual fee plus ransom, chokes on a swallow of wine. “I... excuse me,” she says hoarsely. “Eight, you say? I could have them done by next Friday. You realize my fee is \$2000 per. I hope that won’t be a problem.”

“Not at all. There will be many more, I assure you—many more. I have plans to put at least two color plates in each of twenty chapters. And as an added benefit, I’ll get to see you more often. I feel a friendship developing out of this.”

Margaret feels herself blush like a teenager in heat. She hopes she still remembers how to behave around a man who may be romantically interested in her.

For just a second, the gentle embrace at the door makes Margaret wonder what Don could possibly see in her, but that ridiculous thought is quickly replaced by her usual arrogant self-assurance.

* * *

The misty seacoast light of early morning is even and gentle. The spot-lamps are positioned so that no shadows fall on the canvas. Margaret is standing in the middle of the studio preparing for her trance, eyes closed, breathing slow and even. She opens her eyes and Rebecca rips off the shroud from the photograph.

Margaret’s head implodes.

She screams a hideous, dwindling scream. The room blows out, expands impossibly fast, and disappears.

She can hear the immense thundering boom of Rebecca’s voice—laughing. She hears rhythmic thudding, getting closer... closer.

“What happened? Who screamed?” Glenda thunders.

“Oh, it was me. A spider,” Rebecca booms.

“Where’s Margaret? I thought she was supposed to be in here doing Professor Morrison’s paintings.”

“Don’t know where she could be. She’s uncharacteristically late.”

“What’s that—in the picture?”

“Oh, that’s a bacterium. Dr. Morrison’s a microbiologist.”

More thudding, fading away. The room grows quiet.

Suddenly, Rebecca roars a loud laugh. “You really didn’t think I was going to kiss your ass forever, did you Margaret? The matter of the will—no hanging that one over my head any more. Unfortunately, there

won't be a body to recover and make your death official, so the will probably be in probate for months, if not years. But don't you worry about me. David says his painting will probably become a collector's item, worth perhaps millions in a few years." She rubs her belly. "Just in time for our child's college education."

Rebecca wheels closer to the center of the room, and bends forward towards the floor. "I'll miss you, Margie. Sincerely, Margie. Oh, did I ever tell you my daddy was a diplomat?"

Puss n' Bats

(with apologies to Puss n' Boots)

The dinky, isolated island-like seclusion of the ranch would not necessarily cause its residents to indulge in nonsensical fantasy or delusion. Not necessarily.

But Rita wasn't exactly a resident; she was an occupant. Transient, ponderer of imponderables: a writer. She enjoyed her strangeness, finding it much more stimulating—even essential to creativity—than being what would usually be regarded as “normal.”

“How much do they pay you to stay here? Anyone would be crazy to actually want to stay here!” they'd rant, unthinking, unashamed of their harsh judgements.

“Maybe I am nuts! Maybe I am!” she'd declare, most determined, most convicted in her love of isolation and solitude. “Never lose touch with insanity, for it will take you... unawares!” Her last morsel of wisdom diffusing into the eerie darkness, visitors scattered to their respective vehicles, some sneaking away, denying their crippling fear.

Oh well, it kept Jehovah's Witnesses away.

She snickered to herself as she turned back into the ranch house. She wasn't a witch, but it was convenient to have them believe she was a witch. It rounded out her mystery quite nicely. There were very few visitors since her accident; she truly enjoyed tormenting them with their own dark sides: the secrets they even kept from themselves. It was delicious. She understood the secret self, the world of unseen but lurking haunts; they couldn't, wouldn't, refused to.

Zaphodina and Zelda romped up to her, *purrmeowing* their incessant questions and salutations. Their grey softness against her outreaching hands gave Rita an almost transcendental feeling of acceptance and bonding. She indulged, just for a few seconds, in the affection no others had offered since the car wreck.

Except for Nick. He had not abandoned her, her affected walk, her constant pain. He appreciated the solitude and isolation of the ranch perhaps as much as she did. Oh God, he'd be here in less than an hour.

“Tuna time!” Rita announced to her two beloved feline companions. They chimed their usual Pussinese response, clamoring to the kitchen where Rita emptied a can into their dish. They examined the offering, sniffing, turning, deciding not to eat. Bounding through the crack left in the kitchen door, both cats exited out into the night on their next creature conquest.

The dinner and conversation with Nick had been delightful and stimulating as usual for Rita. He shared her curiosity with ideas and worlds her other friends wouldn't allow into their consciousness. Worlds outside the realm of nine to five, outside the boundaries of the four walls, worlds unlimited by mere earthly existence.

Fatigue and mutual lust found them in Rita's bed as usual, entwined with each other until Nick had to leave.

Rita was jolted awake by thundering paws galloping, leaping and landing on the bare wooden floor of the kitchen. Something click-squeaked—short, high and desperate. The sound changed levels from the floor to the ceiling. Two felines chased it, thudding and slamming into walls and furniture.

Rita padded into the kitchen, straining to see in the dim light of the seven-watt bulb over the stove. Shadows alternately engulfed and expelled three shapes engrossed in a furious dance. The two cats were after no mouse, nor any slow, complaining vole. The small quarry's fuzzy grey body zipped through the air on four-inch black membranous wings, squeaking, clicking insults and warnings. In one clean swipe of a well positioned paw, Zaphodina hooked the bat and pulled it to her mouth where sharp fangs extracted from it one last click-squeak.

"Bats!" Rita gasped in a hushed whisper. "Don't you nasty girls know the difference between a bat and a mouse? No, I suppose it's just a flying mouse to you." Rita watched the cat devour her strange prey, crunching, licking, seeming to savor every last bat morsel. All that she left was the top of the skull, bat ears attached.

When Nick awoke, Rita told him about her early morning adventure.

"Bats? Rita, don't you know bats carry rabies, and God knows what else? You really shouldn't let your cats eat bats, much less bring them in the house," he lectured as he dressed. Rita wondered if his aversion to things that she found quite natural was enough to keep him away, like the others.

"Will I see you tonight?" she asked timidly.

"Yeah, I'll be here around nine. Champagne this time?"

"Fine," she answered distantly. Could bats really cause the break-up of this relationship? she thought sadly to herself. They had been through so much together, it didn't seem like something Nick would do. Not bats. No way, it would take more than bats.

Both Zaphodina and Zelda settled down and slept most of the afternoon, and again that evening showed only marginal ritualistic interest in the tuna treat Rita had been serving them every afternoon for

the last two years. Again at dusk they left the house, not to be seen until dawn.

Feeling somewhat abandoned, Rita continued the careful preparation of Nick’s culinary requests.

“Rita, you’ve got to do something about this. Not only is your health in danger, so are theirs. If one of them gets bitten... You wouldn’t want to see one of your precious companions succumb to rabies, now would you?”

“Of course not, Nick. But how can I prevent it? They seem to live for bats—won’t eat anything else now. It’s almost like an addiction,” Rita said, wandering around the house collecting uneaten remnants of bat wings and inedible bat faces, curling them into a paper towel. Nick followed, continued his lecture, injecting his anxiety into each biological fact he spewed.

“Well, at least they’re the small variety. I wonder where they hang out,” Nick said.

“That bamboo grove in back of the house is a pretty good bet. Must be Guano Town in there.”

“No wonder no one comes around anymore. It’s pretty weird, you gotta admit, to be keeping your cats on a diet of bats. It’s incredible to me how easy it is for them to be caught. I would think with that kind of echolocation system... What the hell was that?” Nick yelled.

“What? What was what?” Rita asked, pushing herself out from under a desk to her feet, tossing away the wad of paper towel and bat parts.

“My God, it was huge! It just flew by the window—just flapped on by, leisurely-like.” The blood drained from his face as he stood cupping his hands and hugging his face to the window, huffing steamy ghosts on the cold glass.

“We have a few pairs of raptors around here still. It was probably a hawk.” Rita heard her voice quiver and felt a smirk parade across her face. Poor Nick was really rattled; he acted like the Boogeyman knew his address.

“At night? Rita, you should know better than that! Hawks don’t fly at night, and they sure as hell don’t hang low at window level. Its body—it was huge, heavy. Grey, I think. That was no hawk.” He stood, petrified, staring out the window into the complete void of the country night.

Nick woke early, jabbing his thumb into Rita's side like a spur in a dead horse, whispering as if someone other than Rita might hear him, "What's that? What's that noise?"

"Hmmm? It's just the cats. They've probably brought in another bat," Rita mumbled.

"But, it's alive! I can hear it!"

"Yeah, sometimes they are. Go back to sleep, OK?"

"Rita, I gotta leave. If that thing gets loose in here... I gotta go," Nick gasped, frantically pulling himself into his clothes.

"Big stwong biologist 'fwaid of itty witty bat, huh?" Rita teased.

Nick was already fully dressed and in the bathroom combing his hair. "I'll call the Department of Agriculture or somebody for you when I get back to the office."

"What? And exterminate a lifetime supply of cat food? Despicable waste!"

He turned around and flogged her with his dark stare. "Rita, dammit this is a serious problem. Bats are ferocious little bastards. I don't want you or your cats to be hurt. Why do you persist in making this all a joke? It's not."

"I know. When you're right, you're right."

The scrambling and squeaking went on in the kitchen as Nick gulped and carefully picked a path to the door, slamming the screen door behind him. He didn't even let his car warm up before he scratched out of the driveway in obvious panic.

The predaceous ballet went on for two more hours until the gruesome quarry succumbed once again. Rita woke from an uneasy sleep, a sleep more disturbed by Nick's almost unreasonable fears than by her dear pets' hazardous appetites.

She creaked out of bed, dragging herself to the reward of a hot, joint-loosening shower. The morning light filtered into the cool bathroom, throwing amber rays into even the darkest of corners. Rita pulled back the shower curtain, groaned over to the faucet, and bumped her head on something—something large, grey, nearing sleep, hanging upside-down from the shower rod.

She stood stunned for several impossibly dilated seconds. In her shock, a poem came quickly to her, as others had in other situations—unmatched by this one:

Claws clinging to the shower rod,
 Webbed forearms hug grey fur.
 Long whiskers twitch, gold-green eyes blink,
 The bat begins... to purr.

Rendezvous

She was parked and blocked, vulnerable, isolated from other aircraft, shiny silver—the latest issue of a long line of exceptional commercial jets. On this crisp spring morning before sunrise, she shimmered as if radiating her own special alluring aura, beckoning, unguarded, almost promising to relinquish herself to any skilled hand—or any threatening firearm.

The portable metal steps glistened invitingly with dew. How stupid, these Americans, to leave the plane ready for boarding, free for the taking by one such as myself and my devoted soldiers of God, Mohammed thought. You could have at least tied a ribbon on our gift, you Western dogs. How foolish your trust! How blind your faith!

The five terrorists crept ever closer, silently, unseen shadows in the dark chill of the desolate airfield. Frightened, but determined, they scaled the slick metal stairway. Mohammed preceded his fundamentalist brothers and was the first to feel the satisfying give and clunk of the door handle. As if by reflex, he jerked his head up and scanned for security guards. There were none. It had been so easy, so incredibly, exhilaratingly easy. Not one voice was raised, not one bullet was fired. The joy of the break-in's simplicity gushed forth in Mohammed's throat in short gasps interspersed with praises to Allah. It was kismet, divine fate, that had provided this precious prize. Before entering the dark plane, Mohammed dropped to his knees in submission to the very generous and loving Allah.

The five nervously fumbled and groped in the total darkness of the interior of the aircraft. A startling, deafening thud suddenly swallowed the silence, embracing the intruders in a nauseating web of infrasound. Blinding lights flashed on; all was illuminated more brightly than any had ever experienced. Visually stunned, shielding their eyes, growing increasingly terrified, the unprepared men clutched at each other, scrambling behind each other as very small children do behind their mothers at the dentist.

“Allah, save us! This is not an American plane!” Mohammed cried out into the brilliant vastness of the golden circular space. His words, his very voice, deflected off the strange auric metal, repeating back to him in distorted emulation and colored flashes. His brothers in the Holy Quest stood frozen in disbelief, slack-jawed, weapons loosely held at their sides.

“Who is this here?” Mohammed shrieked, huffing. “We demand,

who turns the lights?” Absolute menacing silence. Unshaven faces glanced into other unshaven faces, searching for an explanation, a truth, a prayer.

“Mohammed, this cannot be a plane!” Khaled sputtered. “It—it has more inside than outside!”

A thundering boom escaped from an unknown place into the round room, setting up vibrations through the floor and up into the curved walls. Seized by an unspeakable terror, the five intruders panicked, grasping each other, looking to Mohammed for an explanation, a truth, a prayer.

Assad raised his machine gun and fired randomly at the concave walls. Bullets sprayed haphazardly, zipping from wall to opposite wall, none penetrating, some returning near to their point of origin, passing close by Mohammed.

“Fool! You wish to send me to my God this day?” Mohammed reprimanded, teeth clenched, flashing furious eyes at his over-zealous cohort.

An air-splitting squeal sheared through the atmosphere of the circular room, seeming to come from everywhere at once. “Your weapons are dangerous to your well-being. Do not fire them, you may injure yourselves,” a huge, calm voice instructed.

“American dog! What have you done? This is not your decision! Come before us and pray you live!” Mohammed jerked his gun and rammed the stock into his armpit, aiming at nothing.

“You are in error, human. You chose to be here by your own devious designs. And so you shall stay. It is we who now make the decisions.

“You are an interesting subspecies. Near Eastern, yes?” the voice responded in even, undistressed tones.

“We take this plane! It is the will of Allah! Show yourself now!” Mohammed raised his weapon, crouched and turned slowly on his heel, ready for the entrance of his unseen prisoner. The others cautiously spread out and cowered against the wall, eyes frozen and protruding, staring into the golden emptiness.

Minutes passed, hearts pounded, legs quivered and sweat trickled as the group awaited the emergence of their captive from unseen corridors.

A far wall shimmered and sparkled as the warped air surrendered to the slow materialization of a shapeless presence. It weaved unsteadily—clear, iridescent, colorful vacuoles distorting, growing, shrinking within eddies of swirling, impossibly contained fluid. The

entity stared—eyeless, listened—earless, gestured—armless, as a voice asserted its intentions. “I assume you all are the males of your species. How unfortunate you have not brought us females. This will retard our breeding program and resultant commerce in trading your kind.”

“You speak nonsense!” Mohammed proclaimed, too angry and intent on completing his holy mission to notice he was not speaking with anything remotely human. “You are our prisoner!” He shuffled sideways along the curved wall, still aiming at the quivering gelatinous mass before him. “We take this... this aircraft! It is ours!”

“Psst. Psst, Mohammed.” Khaled removed his cap submissively and whispered to his illustrious leader, “How we take this... aircraft? I see no cockpit, exalted one.”

“Shut up, stupid! First hostages—then the cockpit!” Mohammed said in a suppressed growl. Straightening himself as if trying to appear taller, more commanding, he yelled out, “Where are the others? Your crew... tell them to come. We will kill you if you do not cooperate with us!”

The being weaved and bobbed briefly, changing from a soft clear jade green to a bilious yellow shade. “Human—you are in error. It is you who are our captives,” it replied.

“Lying American dog!” Tensing and jutting his stubbly jaw, Mohammed stomped up to the creature and watched the tip of his gun sink into the trembling amber jello. Still blinded by his fanatic idealism, refusing to acknowledge the novelty of his situation, he pulled the trigger.

A bullet ripped through and beyond the creature, ricocheting off the wall behind, and zipped back to sink effortlessly into Assad’s petrified heart, dropping him like a Persian rug.

Gripped suddenly by the immediacy of his situation, Mohammed jerked backwards, stumbling over his own feet and falling heavily upon the lifeless body of his Muslim brother. Scrambling to his feet, shaking, alternately glancing at the being then down at Assad, Mohammed again bellowed his demands. “We are still four—you have no chance against us! Take this craft away from here!”

“We will be departing in forty-five Earth minutes. Until then, relinquish your weapons and accept your fate. You will be placed in separate confinement areas to prevent any further self-destructive behavior,” the unharmed entity explained.

The infrasound hum of the ship grew louder, buzzing the floor and bending the air inside the craft so violently the atmosphere visibly vibrated like the water inside an electric denture cleaning machine.

Voluntary muscles disabled, but fully conscious, the four terrorists collapsed in nauseated, flaccid heaps.

Mohammed felt a gelatinous pseudopod lock onto his skull and drag him along the slick, buzzing floor up to a curved wall. He could see the other three men being pulled in the same manner, sucked along by eerie electric webs coming out the ends of the pseudopods from three other creatures. Low frequency sound poured from his limbs into his bowels; he drooled uncontrollably. He wanted to scream or pray. No sounds would come from his throat.

The captives stomped and screamed at each other from their invisible cubicles, failing to breach the invisible walls between them.

“These new pets show healthy interest in their new surroundings,” a trembling being said in the collective voice.

Mohammed spat brown alien gruel at the growing gathering of bobbing, quivering onlookers, and watched it splatter on the unseen barrier before him, streaking the air like a suspended underwear stripe.

“And they seem to enjoy playing with their sustenance as well,” another entity observed.

A taller creature flushed in a delicate shade of lavender. “It’s so gratifying to see them adjust to captivity so readily. They will make a fine display back on Epsilon Eridani four.”

“Hey—fucking mucus bags!” Mohammed protested. “You cannot keep us here!”

“Observe the delightful, colorful colloquialisms which this particular subspecies exhibits. Much more stimulating than the others we’ve been secretly abducting over the years,” a subordinate creature mused.

Directing the voice to Mohammed, the elder said, “Our collection will be enriched by your presence. You will be well cared for, wanting for nothing. Why should you protest this?”

“You cannot just take us like this!” Mohammed cried, his voice higher and more desperate now.

“Of course we can. All of the Universe and all of the other creatures therein are provided to us by the Great Knowing Force, to do with as we wish. The Writings of The Illumination tells us so. Our destiny has been mapped out for us and is not open for debate.”

A long, thoughtful pause.

“Most of your kind also embraces this concept; how can you not understand this... this mirror of yourself?”

Flourescent ceiling lights flickered to life, muting the brilliance of the blue runway lights flashing outside in the grayness of pre-dawn. The control room filled with personnel rushing to their monitors and telephones. The busy, tense room immediately began to smell of strong coffee brewing.

“Well, there she is,” Robinson said, looking out at the strange round craft hovering just inches above the concrete airfield. “Get London and Paris on the phone, will you, Lynn?”

“It’s hard to believe that thing actually looked like a 747 just hours ago. The cloaking... it was so convincing,” Henry remarked.

Lynn interrupted, “London and Paris report identical incidences, sir.”

Robinson sat staring thoughtfully into the swirling patterns of cream in his coffee, the tension building inside him like the nervous gnawing of an insatiable hamster.

The windows of the control tower began to shudder delicately. The entire control team jolted to attention and watched as the alien craft lifted slowly into the air, the glowing, whirling, sapphire disk beneath it separated by a foot of empty space, seemingly unattached to the craft, but decidedly responsible for the ship’s levitation.

You know,” Henry said, arms folded confidently across his chest, “if only we could solve all our problems with the same kind of international cooperation we’ve seen here today.”

“International? Intergalactic! It’s perfect—an ideal agreement,” Robinson gloated, smiling a malicious rubber smile from beneath the gray foliage of an untrimmed mustache. “The real beauty of it is, we can actually say to these bastard terrorists, ‘Don’t screw with us. We have allies you have only feared in your dreams,’ and mean it.”

How I Spent My Summer Vacation

Flat tire.

No choice, gotta get out.

Shit, I'll never live through it. I'll be smeared all over the freeway by some creep hogging his way through an eight-foot space in an eight-and-a-half-foot-wide RV. He'll clip me, unaware, and drag my screaming body thirty feet—my hand still clutching the jack handle—before I fall away, tattered and mangled and unconscious, awaiting the final brutality of tread patterns ironing my meat into the road. By the time the wife and kids miss me, I'll be but a grimy blotch unceremoniously crammed into the concrete grooves of Interstate-5. I'll be just a memory, a deranged collection of unrecognizable but somehow familiar molecules, a gory shadow of my former self.

And I'll still have a flat tire.

Mustering the demented courage of a matador, I hug the stack of orange road cones liberated from an accident scene several miles back, and plop them strategically around the marooned Winnebago. At least my life insurance is up to date, I think as I hurry furiously to change the tire.

Finished. Amongst the living—still.

My stomach retreats cowardly behind my spleen as a huge jacked-up pick-up—you know, the kind that requires stilts to get in it—brushes my pant leg as it lumbers by, crumpling a cone into an unidentifiable fistful of orange polyethelene. A miss is as good as a mile, the wife likes to say. Oh no it isn't; I've never shit my pants just missing that semi five blocks down the road.

Getting back into the ooze of traffic would be about as easy as sewing a button on a poached egg. The kids are screaming and taking out their low blood sugar on each other's heads.

“Ow!” Billy howls. “Stop it! Dad! Cindy's poking me with her anti-nausea chip! Ow! Dad—make her stop!”

“Dammit Cindy! I told you not to pick at the incision—now the whole thing's fallen out and sooner or later you'll be car sick, barfing down your mother's back again.

“Pam, can you get back there and see if you can reinsert it? It goes behind the left ear this time. See if the wires are still intact. Jesus, Jesus, if I have to pay for another neural-medullary rechanneling....”

On top of that, the usual battle over what and where we would be eating, commences. No one could agree as I weasled the monstrosity

of an RV back onto the clogged freeway.

As usual with each approaching month-end, Pam and I had fought viciously for the three days before I finally knuckled under and took the family on their two week odyssey. I knew if I ever won this one and stubbornly stayed home—”held captive” (as the wife likes to say) by my custom fitted Cybervision device, can of beer welded to my hand, watching those three-day long football games—she would murder me in my sleep.

It was hard enough on me beating my brains out in Washington for six weeks straight; having to take the family out on this two week nightmare of recreational curses was almost unforgivable. I remember before we embarked on this month-end ritualistic torture, how I promised to myself I would take my own life if things got too hairy for me. It would have to be quick but suitably grotesque—gory enough to haunt those self-centered demanding little faces for the rest of their lives. I’d want it to say: “Oh God, look what we made daddy do. How could we be so insensitive?”

“God, how could this happen? How did it happen?” I mutter to myself.

“John, why don’t you just lighten up and enjoy your time with your family? We don’t see you for six weeks at a time, and when we finally all get together all you do is bitch, bitch, bitch,” Pam snaps.

Damn. I didn’t plan on her hearing my remark. Here we go again. This argument has been going on for eight years that I can remember—interrupted by intermissions of eating and sleeping.

“You know it’s all crap. I’ve been telling you this for years. It’s just another brilliant Government scheme brewed up to revive the floundering recreation industry. Can’t you see how miserable we all are? We’re killing ourselves with these vacations!”

“Six week work-months with two week month-ends are keeping the American family together. That’s why it was written into law in 2014. You’re such a pessimist,” Pam said.

Damn the ostriches. She had been thoroughly sucked in, just like those assholes in Washington who were obliged to ignore the flip-side of this “hurry up and recreate” mentality.

It isn’t the first time I’ve been accused of having a bad attitude. My visions of doom are not only ruining my marriage, they have prompted my superiors to shuttle me off into an obscure corner of the White House so I won’t bother anyone with my predictions of disaster. “Senator Thompson’s one tree short of a hammock,” I’d hear them whisper.

doubt the wife feels the same way about now.

“Here we all are, canned in an RV, monstrous suitcases packed to the ceiling, crawling for two weeks through ten-mile-an-hour traffic, praying we find a fast food line with a wait less than an hour. Tell me what the hell’s to be optimistic about!”

“For one thing, we have a nice space at the campsite. And the kids just love looking through the telescope at night. The view is so much clearer than back home.”

“Jesus, Pam. I had to reserve that space three years in advance! The place is absolutely packed. People scream at each other all the time. Hell, the tension’s so high strokes are routinely treated by first aid officers! How is this good?” I’m losing the control I promised to myself I would maintain. “As for skygazing, who wants to look at garbage in geosynchronous orbit?”

“If the telescope isn’t too powerful, it’s almost beautiful.”

It was hopeless. Pam had lost all of her discrimination as well as her good sense. “I fail to find esthetic appeal or entertainment value in man’s excesses and flagrant waste. I’d rather be at home watching the game.”

“How do you find plugging into Cybervision and going into a touchdown fugue entertaining? Since they began playing with relay teams and the games last for three or more days at a time, you disappear. You emerge only to gather munchies and beer so you can go under for the next game.

“I’m worried you could become addicted to Snooze Ender. You take twice the normal dosage so you’ll never miss a second of action.”

She pauses briefly, gulping a labored breath, then resumes her ranting. “The only time you even spend time with the kids is when they lead you back and forth to the toilet. You won’t even take off those damn goggles for that. What value could all of this possibly have? Do you want to escape from me, from your family? Is that it?”

Pam’s voice betrays her. She’s about to turn on the waterworks—again. I should never have told her how much I hate it when she cries. My guts ball up, only partly from hunger.

“Look, Daddy! An accident!” Cindy shrieks.

“Jesus, there goes another family’s nest egg. At this speed accidents disfigure rather than kill. I can just hear the plastic surgeons rubbing their hands together now. What happened to the good old days when people died gloriously with a steering wheel imbedded in their lungs? Or the emergency teams would have to pry your face out of a dashboard, and it would come up looking like the grill off a forty-seven

Buick? Sure as hell would solve the over-population problem if people died in cars like God intended.”

“John, you’re so morbid. Please don’t talk like that in front of the kids.”

“Daddy, I’m hungry!” Billy complains.

“When we get by this wreck, it’ll be easier to find a food outlet with a short line. Have you decided what you want?” I ask futilely.

“Daddy, let’s go to Taco-Mation,” Cindy cheers.

Billy wraps his sweater around her head, whining, “We went to Taco-Mation two days ago! Can’t we go to Burger Breeze this time?”

Pam glances back at Billy with her You-should-be-flogged look, turning a subtle shade of chartreuse. She has nearly become a vegetarian since Burger Breeze and some supermarkets have installed slaughter houses right behind their businesses, speeding up the moo to mouth production time for an ever increasing, ever impatient populace.

“Cluck-in-a-Bucket would be a nice change,” I suggest. Even Pam will concede to this. She says the chickens are drugged before they are killed, and their deaths aren’t audible from the ordering area. Steers, on the other hand, always bellow that one last forlorn protest which tends to take the edge off even the heartiest of appetites.

The line isn’t as long as we had feared—only fifty minutes. I lean out of the window and punch the picture keys on the order platform of the tollbooth-sized enclosure, and listen in anticipation as little servomotors retrieve our food from the underground robot-controlled food preparation lab. The food has never been touched by human hands; the days of the illiterate, zit-eroded, nose-picking food handler are long gone—thank God.

Of course, Billy didn’t want chicken, but he ate it anyway. Everyone fed, we start our fourteen mile, two hour drive to that cartoon character hell: Disneyland.

“I hope they have enough Benzo-Ped vendors there this time,” Pam says wistfully.

I hope they sell loaded guns, I think darkly. I wasn’t sure I could ever be ready for what awaits us inside those gates. I momentarily wish that I would just drop dead from some fortuitous stroke, but with my luck I wouldn’t be going to paradise as my priest had assured me I would; I’d be sentenced to stand in some interminable line at an amusement park for all eternity.

I take a deep breath and prime my squeakiest voice. “Welcome to Miseryland! This is Morose Mouse. Minnie died today. We’ll be having the funeral just as soon as we scrape her marginally identifiable body

from beneath one of the spinning teacups. Looks like the makings for a real down-home anniversary wake. Should boost our profits better than any—”

“Shut the fuck up, John! You promised me you wouldn’t do this,”

Pam growls.

“Sorry. Just trying to make the four mile walk to the entrance less of a drag.”

We arrive early enough to catch a glimpse of someone in a cute blond bear suit slip into the stockyards behind a burger restaurant, attempting to conceal some long device, on his way to prepare for the forthcoming supper crowd. The idea of Winnie the Pooh shoving an electric prod up a cow’s ass sends cold chills through my bowels. But that’s the way it is now, and no one ever gives it a second thought. The kids have grown especially indifferent to it.

We purchase our Benzo-Ped sandals and near the last hour and a half of our three and a half hour wait in line for Space Mountain. Pam’s feet and legs, as well as my own, are pleasantly numbed clear to the waist, but Cindy is acting a bit strange, unable to control her arms or her tongue. Billy just seems spaced-out, staring out blankly into the kelp-bed of distressed, shuffling humanity. He’ll be fine by the time it’s our turn, but Cindy is another matter.

“Don’t you think we ought to take her to a first-aid station, John?”

“I’m not getting out of this goddamn line for anybody! The devil himself will have to set me on fire! She’s got a little too much drug in her system, that’s all. Just take off her sandals. She’ll snap out of it.”

And she did. And we got our ride—our three minute ride.

Dinner at Donald’s Salad Pond. The entire Crass Family tries to move in ahead of us in line, mumbling something about there being too goddamn many people out on vacation. I reply with something like, “People who shit in glass toilets shouldn’t eat stones,” before I am able to close up the gap ahead of us and thwart their audacious advance.

Buy more Benzo-Peds; stand in line for three more hours. Scream and laugh. I’m glad this day is nearly over—I may not kill myself after all. I can’t wait to get out on that freeway for a leisurely crawl back to San Diego, police hovercrafts harassing us all the way. Another Fuckation over and done with.

Both kids drink their Coma In A Drum and will be asleep for three days—just long enough for me to recover and charge back to Washington to put in another grueling six weeks. It’ll be dawn before we get home—what’s left of it.

Robotic highway maintenance crews clear the last of a grove of

pollution-killed redwoods as a rusty red sun groans up through the smog-choked dawn horizon. Two more exits and we'll be pulling into our driveway. After all these years, I still have nervous currents fleeing through my viscera each time we come back from month-end vacations.

Making the final turn, I scan the houses. There's one. And another. Only two this time; that must be some kind of low record. A burglary rarely leaves a house in decent shape; inevitably it'll have to be renovated. Oh God, please don't let my house be one of the statistics. Those bastards couldn't have broken the security system this time. The security company assured me it would take many months and an entire gang of thieves to break all the codes. They'd better be as sure as I am paranoid.

Creaking the RV into the driveway, the breath I am holding gushes forth, startling Pam from her light doze.

"Everything's OK this time," I say.

Pam stretches and looks around. "Yeah, for us—but look. The Bartons got it."

"Jesus, they'll be banging on our door the minute we get in. Don't summon the cybermaid to collect the kids, we'll carry them in ourselves. Be quiet, we don't want to alert the Bartons."

"Too late, here comes Tom. He's not navigating too well either."

Tom Barton staggers up to the driver's side of the RV, almost snagging the ass of his pants on a rosebush. "You lucky bastards. They missed your place three month-ends in a row. We got hit bad. Took everything, tore out the walls, ripped up the carpet to get the floorboards up. Lucky they didn't go through the ceiling, that's where Cecelia keeps her silver service—in the crawl space."

"Tell Cecelia you can all stay at our place until you get your house back together," Pam said, leaning over me, her slender neck straining as she generously offers our neighbors refuge in a home I had only two days left to appreciate. If I had had a rope....

"You got insurance, though. Right? It shouldn't be too long before your house is ready." At last, a little optimism surfaces. I try to be concerned. I am—for me.

"No... let the payments lag. I ain't got work yet. Nobody hires on month-ends anyhow. But, I'll be lookin' next work-month," Tom slurs as his eyeballs switch sockets and he steadys himself by clutching the door handle.

"That's only three days from now, man. How long you been stoned?" My false hope erodes to dread.

"The whole month-end. I'll be sober enough to get work. Don't

you worry.”

“Listen here, Mr. Herbalife. With these long month-ends, it isn’t the same as before when we had only two-day weekends to get loaded, then straighten up before Monday.”

“It don’t make me no never mind anyhow. Can’t figure to fill out the employment application,” Tom sighs.

I glare over at Pam, wanting to show my gratitude for her samaritanism with a chokehold.

Resigning myself to the situation, we pile out of the van, unconscious kids in arms, stoned neighbor and family trailing.

After several minutes, all thirty codes are cleared by the security system, and the front door sweeps open—and stops halfway. A mountain of FAX paper cascades through the opening. It looks like the whole box of paper—all five thousand feet—has been blown this time. What a bitch when standard mail delivery is suspended. It’ll take weeks to sift through it to find the important stuff amid all the junk-mail ads like, Dick’s Odor Control Toilet Seats and A1 Portable Circadian Rhythm Adjustment Devices and Quiet Rampage Cat Food: one packet feeds twelve.

I smile evilly to myself as I envision Pam dealing with her house guests on her own. I’ll be gone in two days; work will be a merciful relief from vacations.