

Bewildering Stories: Issue 71

Twilight Zone, in the Year 4615

conclusion

by Deep Bora

Part 1 appeared in issue 70.

“This forward observation post shall immediately relay all such anticipated meteor showers directly to Earth stations! Our computer telescope-radars located upon Satellite Two are placed at the furthest distance from variant atmospheric levels. These can therefore, neatly trace graphic lines describing trajectory paths of oncoming rocks, meteors, meteoric showers and the like. Our view of the cosmos from advanced space labs upon Satellite Two is uninterrupted and constant. There are no chances of disturbances to our observational teams, and we require perfection in our agenda. This is a matter of Earth and our future. Everything is at stake here and now. We cannot fail for our success is assured.”

Senior members within the upper hierarchy of Earth Command — the primary world governance order — directly under which the World Council functioned, had issued their unanimous advice. Such comments were clearly understood nearly half a century earlier.

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“Are you sure that is our correct search area?” The lady’s companion scientist had enquired at the commencement stages, when the team members were bent upon a dual observational study-pattern of attempting to rediscover the lost coordinates leading to the Twilight Zone. It was widely believed fact that such a zone had been spotted earlier in the mid twenty-fifth century, prior to the last major battle upon Earth.

This outer space group comprising twenty-four personnel was sent upon such an delicate mission for yet another reason. Matters assumed further importance when documents in form of computer records pertaining to the twenty-sixth century of Earth time were discovered and scanned for further significance. References were drawn to the Twilight Zone wherein it seemed — that is what the time keepers of Earth deciphered from twenty-sixth century Earth languages and scripts — that major intelligence of Earth records had been secured therein.

A million other factors were included, and one such fact was presence of weather, a climatic condition really, which accelerated improved good health of humans, particularly those under recuperation therapies. There were reports which went to the extent of stating that besides physiological-medical factors related to humans, the health factor of humans was rated okay for the peculiarly beneficial climatic condition was then somehow transferred to the remaining portions of Earth. Computers supplying relevant data beyond this fact were activated to further search capabilities, but were unable to perform further, at least by the technological standards of the year 4615.

Other, more efficient computer data derived reference to certain select coordinates upon Earth within which zones Extraterrestrials determined greater efficiency to land and interact with Earth humans. There were further derivations leading to inexplicable factors which correlated to an increased and fertile Earth production of the granaries of the Earth. One such derivation stated that paddy fields produced finished grains at a highly accelerated time span of one month rather than the usual three to four months. It was therefore a technologically-derived and understood factor that such highly fertile lands of the Earth could only exist at the “Twilight Zone.”

“Gentlemen and ladies of the squadron! You shall enter habited station areas inside Moon One and take possession of your individual cabins, immediately we recondition entry chamber to near equal atmospheric pressure. Remember, our present atmospheric pressure is on higher readings. We have yet to acclimatize ourselves to the internal atmospheric pressure existing in space lab, vis-a-vis the external elements of Satellite Two. Of course, the internal pressure shall always be greater as compared to atmospheric pressure present outside the space lab.” The gentleman

scientist-cosmonaut and leader of the dual purpose observational crew had made that official statement nearly six months ago.

“Five Earth minutes shall be complete upon Satellite Two, for internal pressure to regulate itself upon you and your physical activities. This also includes successful regulation your individual heart rates.

“Our primary schedule remains unaltered and is of utmost importance, which is detection of meteors and space-rock showers aimed directly into Earth’s orbit, or are likely to be, within timely detection graphs produced by our altered computer generated graphic-trajectories. Additionally, we have ample spare time to devote to detection of another matter, for which we are carefully selected by the World Council.” Five minutes passed as he finished his acclimatization speech.

Satellite Two did not rotate upon its own axis like the other planets. It therefore never experienced the oddities of day, and nights, mornings and evenings. There existed just one simple, constant climate and weather while it circled the moon, remaining within total view of Earth at any given time. The time was yet not yet right to bring in altered climatic changes to the satellite, scientists upon Earth and Mars claimed.

There were other personnel now stationed upon Moon Stations, in Moon Forward Space Research Labs, who constantly recorded unknown and ever so slight climatic variations upon Satellite Two. However, that was for the future, and they were acutely aware of a future, which may perhaps extend to a time zone comparable to their great-grandchildren’s days. However, every effort was being made to hasten up those time limits: “Bring in the controlled climate of the future to present-day times!” was an accepted directive, an order and the motto.

* * *

“Towards the upper reaches of the north pole, sir. No, not at the axis! Much lower, rather below. Towards the western region, perhaps inclining at the eastern skies.”

For six months they scanned Earth at millions of probable locations simultaneously, attempting to determine the near impossible—coordinates leading to the probable, though lost, Twilight Zone. Matters had reached a peak in their era and no further justification was required to emphasize upon established facts which would prove this factor otherwise, that the Twilight Zone was reported to appear within easily visible limits from Satellite Two, and of course the Twilight Zone did really exist upon Earth, of all places! Matters were therefore accorded greater importance particularly since all previous Earth records provided no conclusive results as attempts were made by prior Earth-human generations to rediscover those critical coordinates.

For two hundred and fifty Earth days they decided to forgo manual cooking, indoor games, and various Earthly recreations. They instead, took keen turns at studying Earth as it had never been studied before.

During rest times followed by starlit days influenced by the Moon, with Earth contacts via the computer telescope-radar speaker phones, during meal times and shifts from endless studies of the skies, they also scrutinized Earth as it rotated upon its own axis from west to east, counterclockwise. They noted the hemispheres of Earth as the Moon revolved around the Earth. Robotic computers were activated to take further photographs of the Earth at given coordinates, from longer view points and from close quarters.

Until it finally happened! She was the first to spot those meridians, the lady astronaut scientist deputed from Mars Forward Research Space Lab.

“An approximate area of land measuring four hundred and fifty square miles, just northwest by east of continent two... Ahem, country two, sir.” She concluded, while gradually withdrawing her sight from a pair of extraterrestrial lenses now connected to certain computers scanning Earth’s soil.

Such lenses were uncommonly discarded a long time ago upon Earth, with no rational explanation of their existence; however there were innumerable controversies leading to extraterrestrial landings taking place upon Earth's given coordinates in earlier centuries. There were presently other select teams despatched by Earth forward space research laboratory to research into such coordinates — if any existed— and there were viable details of one such extraterrestrial landing conclusively taking place earlier during the century.

Hence, Earth humans evaluated Earthly conclusions and discarded several theories while accepting many new ones. Earth had conclusively been visited by extraterrestrials, perhaps immediately after the last major battle fifteen hundred years ago.

* * *

“An area of land which has witnessed no major sunset or even sunrise; wherein even the moon fails to make much impact, while sunshine in its present form and impact, perhaps does not exist. Yet, every botanical plant grows to maturity like all other botanical wonders of our Earth. We have named such a country as the ‘Twilight Zone’, though immediately after the last war much havoc was wrought.”

The world population drew easy reference to the Chronicles of 3200 which continue as read in the year 4600: “There have been sightings of the extraterrestrials. Some amongst them have even talked to us.

“They — the extraterrestrial document-records — confirm our sighting and description of the Twilight Zone as a crude definition in comparison to their own perception of the same zone explained in higher intelligence and which Earthlings are unable to draw references from.

“Extraterrestrials have consented to the fact that in reality, there exists an actual ‘Twilight Zone’ somewhere in the limitless existence of nature, beyond human conception of time and comprehension. The real ‘Twilight Zone’, which they have seen and experienced, is possible to be visited, though not by utilising and application of present-day human methods of transportation, they added. Earth possesses a mere look-alike, much smaller in dimension, a fraction of an effectual ‘Twilight Zone’,” they concluded.

“Perhaps such a zone exists before one reaches the fourth dimension. Or immediately after!”

* * *

a few days later upon Earth, she held on to the gentleman's arm while they walked into a near-continuous sunset, at the lower passages of country two — followed by twenty-three members of advanced space research programme Moon One satellite. Their team had been granted few more Earth months of rediscovery status, a term signifying advanced rest programmes. Such deviations from space programmes were required and imposed compulsorily upon all crew, immediately after two continuous tenures upon Satellite Two.

Totally non-comparable to the aurora borealis of the twentieth through to thirtieth century combine, the climate here in the mid-fortieth century was vastly different. The former seemed comparable to mere play stations in those three-dimensional “look-alike experience studios” simulated by obsolete twenty-fifth century computers.

The various entrance areas to the Twilight Zone of Earth were thoroughly rediscovered, from Satellite Two! One could not be incorrect this time. Six months were spent in thorough search and they had finally located those entrance coordinates!

“If this is Earth's conception of the Twilight Zone...” she commenced.

The gentleman scientist smiled. Romance and he were poles apart.

Some of the most readily available advanced space stations available to mankind were installed within those particular coordinates, even before they stepped back upon Earth. The Twilight Zone was therefore rediscovered from a lost era of the Earth. All approach zones were thoroughly calculated from Satellite Two, or Moon One.

Earth Central commanders took over total controls of primary directives of Earth Stations as soon as flight rocket from Moon One appeared within ionosphere limits of Earth. They coordinated with the gentleman scientist-astronaut and finally, the remaining members of the ship unanimously decided to deviate from predetermined landing zones at the higher reaches of Earth at fifteen thousand feet above sea level and upon usual mountain landing zones.

They landed into the Twilight Zone instead and skipped atmospheric regulations-procedures. There was no need to adjust oneself to compression or decompression chambers, either. Not within the Twilight Zone! They made that crucial decision to visit Earth beaches and mountain resorts at a later date, their regular, booked suites indicating rediscovery status.

"I wonder what the actual Twilight Zone shall look like." Her lady companion-scientist friend ended a semi-spoken sentence.

"Rather, feel like..." The astroscientist standing immediately beside them, made one final remark. "I meant the climatic changes in the real 'Twilight Zone' which the extraterrestrials have significantly defined as existing in another part of the universe?" The last part of his sentence formed a semi-question.

A pair of eyes observing them through extraterrestrial lenses upon Satellite Two at Advanced Space Research Lab hastily withdrew his line of sight from lower reaches of country two.

Twenty-four pairs of eyes upon Earth were looking up towards the heavenly skies, surrounded by an never-ending sunset. They were looking upwards in the general direction of Satellite Two, aware of a peculiar sense of privacy stealing upon them.

Two days had passed into nights. There was an absence of the sun above horizon points, and even the moon seemed unusually yellow in 4612 C.E. Yet the air was warm...

The Other Side

part 1

by Michael J A Tyzuk

Space is vast, space is dark, and space is empty. But every now and again you can find an oasis in the desert, and the same is true for space. Not every star has a system of planets, but that's okay. Even without a system of planets there's still more than a lifetime's exploration out there.

Space is empty between these oases. It always has been and it always will be, worlds without end, amen.

Or is it? Let's have a look, shall we?

Somewhere out there, in a far-off corner of the explored galaxy there was a phenomenon. It was unlike anything the Confederate Science Directorate had ever seen before, and their long-range sensor observations were raising more questions than they were providing answers. So the decision was made to send a team to explore the phenomenon, determine what it was and what its effect on the fabric of local space and time would be, and then report back.

But what kind of expedition should be sent? On the one hand the Science Directorate wanted to send a purely scientific expedition, with a cruiser fitted with the most advanced sensor suites that modern technology could produce and hordes of scientists in a dozen specialties to interpret their readings. On the other hand the Armed Forces were concerned about the possibility of this

phenomenon being artificially generated, and reasoned that if it was artificially generated then there would be some purpose behind it, and that purpose could well be a threat to the Confederation and its holdings.

In the end those two elements of the Chancellor's Advisory Council deadlocked each other. One would think that this would enable the decision-making process to go forward, but one would be wrong, for those two elements of the council had been most persuasive in their arguments. Now the Council was almost evenly divided between those who were afraid of the phenomenon and those who were curious about it.

In the end the Chancellor made the only decision he felt was available to him. He sent a single vessel, a scout ship which would be fitted with the very latest sensor suite and which would carry a single scientist to act as an interpreter for the readings. If the phenomenon were truly benign then the scout would come back with a treasure trove of sensor observations and all would be well. If it proved to be a threat, then the scout would be destroyed and all the Confederates would have lost would be a single small ship and a handful of people. Cheap at the price.

The Chancellor felt there was no way that things could possibly go wrong.

* * *

The first problem that had to be dealt with was how to get there. The phenomenon was not located in a charted star system, so making use of the Hyperspace Slipstreams that link some pairs of stars to get there was out of the question. Certainly those slipstreams could be used to get the Hermes to the closest star system, but she would have to make the rest of her journey through normal space.

Accelerating at one gravity the Hermes would arrive at the periphery of the phenomenon after nearly eighteen months of travel. The problem was that the Hermes was a small ship and was only capable of carrying enough supplies for a three-month journey. Her crew would run out of supplies before they were a quarter of the way to their destination. So the decision was made to install stasis pods on the Hermes. With the crew in deep sleep all the way there and all the way back the supply problem would vanish, and the ship's computer was more than adequate to the task of getting them there and bringing them back.

And so it was that the Hermes was equipped and provisioned at EII-Four, in Earth orbit. She was then launched to Stationary Station, where she would pick up Doctor Dylan O'Connor, the astrotelemetrists who had been assigned to the mission. With the Doctor safely aboard, Captain Oswald "Ozzie" Sinclair, mission commander of the Hermes, watched as his crew entered Deep Sleep. Once the crew was safely asleep he then put the ship on course for the anomaly. He stayed awake for an additional three days to make sure that the computer could be trusted to handle the ship, and then placed himself in Deep Sleep.

For nine months the Hermes accelerated deeper and deeper into the void, reaching out with her sensors to see what she could see. The sensor readings were stored in a computerized log that was maintained automatically, but the observations recorded therein would be remarkably dull. Then, halfway to her destination, she stopped accelerating and started decelerating, thus beginning the process that would bring her to a full stop some kilometers short of the periphery of the anomaly.

When the Hermes had left EII-Four her hull had been painted an almost uniform ivory. The only breaks in the color were the logo of the Confederation and her identification and call letters. When she came to a stop her hull was no longer white, no longer pristine, for she had suffered eighteen months of micrometeorite impacts and had traveled through many trillions of kilometers of interstellar dust.

As soon as the instruments on the Hermes registered that the ship had come to a full stop relative to anomaly the ship's computer sent a command to the control system for the stasis pods. At

length the stasis process was reversed and the crew was slowly brought back to life.

Ozzie climbed out of his pod and scratched absently at the bristle on his chin. Time is supposed to have no meaning in stasis, he thought to himself. If that's true, then why does my beard grow? It was a question for which he had never been able to come up with an answer.

The next one to emerge from her pod was First Lieutenant Nicole "Nikki" Campbell, Ozzie's copilot and second in command of the Hermes. She stretched her lithe body, tried to work the kinks out of her muscles as her conscious mind struggled to cut through the mental fog that Deep Sleep always seemed to leave behind. She opened her dark eyes and was pleased to discover that her vision was no longer blurred. She looked down at herself and smiled at the sight of the bulky t-shirt and panties she was wearing. Back home she would put them on before climbing into bed with her husband, for the simple reason that he seemed to enjoy taking them off of her. Of course, her husband seemed to enjoy taking anything off of her, but he was many hundreds of light years away. The memory made her smile, though, all the same.

Second Lieutenant Janet Parker, a Signals Specialist, was next to emerge from her pod. She stretched and ran her fingers through her shoulder length blonde hair as she looked around. Her eyes lingered for a moment on Nikki as she worked her way through a stretching routine and wondered in the back of her mind how she would look spread out on her back, wearing nothing but a thin sheen of passionate sweat. For a moment she considered all the ways that she could possibly find out, but then she managed to get control of her thoughts. It was always like this after a Deep Sleep, for she always came out of it in a high state of sexual arousal. She was ready to take on anything she could get her hands on, whether it was male or female or alien. But she also knew that they had been brought out of hibernation for a reason, and soon she would be up to her neck in sensor and signals data. Business before pleasure.

Second Lieutenant Angus MacPherson, Chief Engineer of the Hermes, climbed out of his pod and tried not to scratch himself too obviously. He was a Scot from New Edinburgh, a descendant of one of the original groups of migrants to leave Earth during the Great Exodus. The son of a merchant captain whose wife had died giving birth to his son he had spent most of his youth in space, traveling from one port of call to another. Between tours his father would take them back to New Glasgow, the capital of New Edinburgh, and Angus would have all the freedoms of normal children. He would laugh and play, get in and out of trouble with his friends. And he would always wear the kilt. That was one thing he hated about space travel. It was completely impractical to wear a kilt on a starship, so he would be forced to wear trousers, which he despised. But, such was the nature of service in the Confederate Armed Forces.

Dylan O'Connor was the last to emerge from his pod. He awkwardly pulled himself upright as he stumbled on the unfamiliar deck. He fisted the sleep from his eyes and looked around. He knew why he was here and he also knew that the Confederate leadership considered him eminently expendable. Given what was at stake he understood the logic of this implicitly, but by the same token he had no desire to die. He resolved to do his best to make sure that the Hermes made it back home in one piece. Just as soon as he woke up.

With everyone out of their pods the first order of business was to shower and change. So the crew filed out of the stasis chamber and staggered down the corridor to their individual state rooms. Their uniforms were laid out on their bunks, ready to put on, just the way they had left them before they had gone onto hibernation. Each member of the crew stripped out of their hibernation wear and stepped into the sonic shower, stood silent while the vibrators shook them apart and put them back together again. Sonics were a poor substitute for soap and water, but water is at a premium aboard a ship, especially a smaller ship like the Hermes. Despite that, each member of the crew felt more or less like a new person when they stepped out of the shower and crawled into their uniform jumpsuits. With their suits zipped up and their sidearms strapped to their thighs they filed out of their quarters and made for the galley.

Dylan wasn't used to wearing a sidearm. As a staff analyst on Earth there was little reason for him to wear one. Indeed, most of his colleagues tended to leave their weapons at home despite the

fact that regulations specifically called for them to be worn as part of the uniform at all times. He had known that he wouldn't be able to get away with that kind of thing on the Hermes and had made certain to bring his pistol with him, lest Ozzie kick him off his ship before the mission even began. He had even made a visit to the firing range and tested the pistol to make sure it still worked. The memory of the loud snap and the flash of light when the weapon had been fired were still fresh in his mind, as was the memory of how angry the Marine in the slot beside him had been when he discovered that the bolt that took out his target had come not from his own weapon, but from Dylan's. He had barely escaped from that with his life, and had resolved that the next time he went to the range it was going to be when no one else was there.

The galley had been stocked with sufficient provisions for five people for three months, and most of this was freeze dried. Each member of the crew stepped up to a storage locker, selected their meal of choice, and fed the packet into a food processor. A combination was entered into the control panel, and some moments later the packet was removed and the plastic layer covering the top was removed. Meal thus in hand, each member of the crew dropped into a chair at the galley table and proceeded to tuck in.

Conversation was light while they broke fast, for as far as they were concerned mere hours had passed since they had last seen each other. The meal passed largely in silence. Finally, with their bellies full the crew filed off to their duty stations. Angus went aft to the engineering spaces while the rest of the crew made their way forward to the cockpit.

The cockpit was a large flattened spheroid which made up the bow of the Hermes and it had sufficient space for four control stations. The forward most of those were the stations for the pilot and the copilot. These two stations were largely identical and bore a striking resemblance to the pilot's station in a star fighter. The ship would be controlled through a combination of control stick, which came up out of the deck between the pilots legs, throttle, which was built into a panel to the right of the pilot's chair and was studded with buttons and switches and warts and protrusions, and rudder pedals, which were built into the deck at the pilot's feet. The stick was built for the right hand of an average human being. There was a trigger where the first finger would rest, and a series of thumb controls. The stick acted just like the control stick in a fighter. To make the ship dive the pilot would push the stick forward. To pull up the stick would be pulled back. To bank left or right the stick would be pushed left or right. A left or right motion of the stick, in conjunction with a push against a corresponding rudder pedal, would cause the ship to turn to the left or to the right. The throttle served to control the ship's speed and acceleration.

The controls built into the throttle served to give the pilot instant access to sensor telemetry and communications channels, and also served to engage a holographic heads-up display which would manifest itself in front of the pilot between him and the forward viewport. Directly beneath the heads-up display was the main control console, which housed three main display monitors. The controls arrayed around each monitor would allow the pilot to display whatever piece of information he chose on whichever monitor he chose. He also had the option of sending that information right to the heads up display so that he would never have to look away from the viewport.

The copilot's station was an almost exact duplicate of the pilot's station, but with one crucial difference. A number of controls were built into the arms of the copilot's chair to give the copilot control override over many of the ship's core systems. These controls could also be used to allow the copilot to access the ship's data library.

Ozzie and Nikki took their places as pilot and copilot respectively. They strapped themselves down into their chairs and began running through their status checklists. Though the two officers had memorized the checklists many years before, they still went to the trouble of taking the data pad and stylus which contained the written version of the checklist and studiously marking each item as it was verified. Routines were routine for a reason, they believed, and complacency could make you very dead very fast.

As Ozzie and Nikki were going over their checklists, Janet was strapping herself into the chair at

her station right behind Nikki and going over a checklist of her own. Like her comrades she dutifully logged completion of her list before returning her data pad and stylus to the compartment beneath her seat.

The only member of the crew who had no official checklist was Dylan. Like the others he strapped himself down to his chair and then busied himself performing status checks on the sensors and data gathering equipment. He also checked the integrity of the sensor logs by flipping through the last several weeks of entries. He noted that the automatic sensors had gathered a great deal of data on the anomaly as they had drawn closer and closer to it. He kept that information opened on one of his screens as he brought the sensors off of automatic control and assumed direct control over them.

Having completed his checklist Ozzie brought his screens to life. On the left hand screen he called up a repeater of the sensor telemetry. On the right hand screen he called up the navigational sensor readouts, and on the center screen he called up a repeater of the ship's status. He brought his heads up display to life and settled himself back in his chair, his left hand gently gripping the throttle and his right hand gently gripping the stick. He turned and looked over at Nikki, who was sitting with her arms resting on the arms of her chair. He nodded at her and she nodded back. All was ready on that end.

"Janet, are you ready?" Ozzie asked.

Janet gave her instruments a last once over before answering, "Ready."

Ozzie used the controls built into the throttle to open an intercom channel to Engineering. "Angus, are you ready?"

"Aye, I'm ready," Angus answered from the after end of the ship.

"Good, we're about to get started." Then Ozzie turned to face Dylan, who was seated right behind him. "Doctor, are you ready?"

Dylan took a deep breath. "Yes. Yes, I'm ready."

"All right, then." Ozzie himself took a deep breath before throwing the final switch that would bring the ship's systems firmly under manual control. "Here we go. What can you tell me, Doctor?"

Dylan paged through the most recent entries in the sensor logs for a moment before replying. "We've been able to map the outer edge of the phenomenon," he said, "but I can't tell you what's happening inside."

"Why not?" Ozzie wanted to know.

Dylan shook his head. "Our sensor returns are coming back heavily scrambled," he answered. "I've not been able to figure out why yet. Perhaps if we get a little closer I might have a better chance."

Ozzie shrugged. "It's your show, Doc," he commented. He pulled the throttle back and guided the ship closer to the anomaly. Nikki searched the sensor logs for the dimensions of the anomaly's boundary. When she found that information she sent it to Ozzie's heads up display. Ozzie smiled his thanks and placed Hermes into orbit around the anomaly, leaving some ten thousand kilometers distance between them.

As the Hermes drew closer and closer to the anomaly Dylan worked frantically to clear up the sensor returns from the center of the anomaly. He treated it as he had numerous intellectual puzzles over the course of his life. He was both curious and determined, and he knew that one way or another he would solve this puzzle. It was a mystery, and Dylan loved mysteries. He entered a final sequence into the control panel, and suddenly the returns cleared before his very

eyes. He logged the algorithm he had been using and applied it to the garbled readings from the sensor logs, was unsurprised when they cleared up too. He brought another screen to life and displayed the two sets of readings side by side.

Ozzie waited patiently for a few moments while he and Nikki went through the ritual of confirming their orbit around the anomaly. Once the two of them were satisfied with the results of their efforts Ozzie returned the ship to automatic pilot and turned to Dylan. "Do you have anything new?" he asked.

This time Dylan was able to provide him with an answer of sorts. "The readings have cleared up," he explained, "and I've been able to clear up the readings posted in the sensor logs, but I'm not sure about what I'm seeing."

"What do you mean?" Ozzie wanted to know.

Dylan shook his head. "These readings aren't like anything that I've ever seen before," he said. "If I had to guess I would have to say that the anomaly is some kind of portal. I couldn't say to where, though."

Ozzie snorted derisively. "I thought this ship was supposed to have the most advanced sensor suite in the Confederation mounted on her. All that equipment installed and that's the best answer you can give me?"

Dylan raised his head from his console. "These are the most advanced sensors in the Confederation," he defended. "And the computers on this ship have been programmed with the sum total of human scientific knowledge, as well as all the long distance sensor observations from Earth." He gestured out the forward viewport at the anomaly. "What we have here is something outside our experience, something that's never been seen before. Personally, I'm amazed that we know as much about it as we do. Perhaps we should be patient."

Ozzie shook his head in disgust but otherwise let the matter drop. He had been a combat pilot during the Rebellion, and as such he was used to having all the data he needed readily available at the drop of a hat. This scientific scouting, though, this was another thing entirely. It was frustrating for him not to know everything there was to know about the anomaly. They had been within sensor range of it for weeks; surely the sensors and the computer must be able to come up with something in all that time. Perhaps Dylan was right and patience was required.

Ozzie grinned to himself, for patience was never his strong suit. "Janet, are you getting anything on the comm bands?" he asked.

Janet looked up from her console and shook her head. "I'm not picking up anything from the center of the anomaly," she replied.

To be continued...

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White Kangaroo

by Thomas Lee Joseph Smith

I entered the warehouse. Walked in, right off the street. I had a dozen 260's in my left hand, and a double-action pump in my right. Big Tony's men pushed their chairs away from their desks, and stood up, and came rushing over. They met me before I was half-way across the loading dock. They looked confused... surprised. They didn't expect me to come back. I could tell by their faces, they hadn't expected me to ever come back.

They were almost right too. A dozen times in the past five years I'd come within a tulip twist of giving up completely. I'd spent five years mowing lawns and waiting tables. All the time my hands

were getting rougher and rougher, and that can be death to a balloon artist unless he uses good hand lotion. Every night I went home, tired from working menial jobs, but still I always walked over to my portable spotlight and stage and worked on my act. After five long years of practice, I was ready. At last, I was ready. I had new tricks all ready and I was going to show Tony and his gang. So an hour ago, I picked up my props and walked across town. Here I was.

"Well look who's here... If it ain't the pink popper."

"Where's Fat Tony?" I said.

"He ain't in. Come back later."

"You tell Fat Tony I want to see him. YOU TELL FAT TONY, MR. SMITH WANTS TO DEFLATE HIS LITTLE EMPIRE AND PUT HIM OUT OF..." But I didn't have to resort to any threats. The door at the top of the stairs opened. Fat Tony was looking down from the landing.

"Whut youse want?"

"Powder your hands you bastard. I'm back."

"Wait right there," he yelled. "Guido... Johnny... keep him right there. We're thru playing around. This time it's for keeps!"

Anthony Astor Puttman Jones, alias Fat Tony, stormed back into his office. Boxes were thrown around. Drawers opened and slammed shut. A lamp knocked over. He emerged carrying a fist full of long colorful blanks and a portable electric Airmaster pump.

He came down the steps slowly. Taking his time. Looking me over as he came closer. "What's happened to your hands?"

"Some of us have to work."

"No man serves two masters."

"They do if they work for a partnership," I said.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Simple contest. We go till one of us admits defeat."

"Like we trust each other..."

"There's witnesses."

Tony looked at his men. They all nodded to each other.

"Not in here," I said. "Out in the street."

They all nodded a second time.

We went outside. The sun was shining. It was almost noon. People were walking past. Some of them stopped to watch.

"Animals?" Tony suggested.

"Anyone can do animals," I said. "Any... damn... fool."

One of his clowns started forward, but fat Tony held him back. "Let him talk," Tony said.

I picked up on my idea and began complaining with some enthusiasm, "A cat looks like a dog, looks like a camel, looks like a horse. Just tricks of the trade. All that differentiation, that's what felt tip pens are for. Add whiskers and it's a cat. Add a saddle and it's a horse. Add eyes, hell, some people even use adhesive eyes."

"Get to the point."

"Animals ain't excluded, but we're not limited to animals."

"Agreed."

"We each take turns."

"Okay."

"You first," I challenged.

Tony used powder. Some like powder and some don't. Some feel it can make your hands slip on hard twists. Tony put a spot of powder on his hands and rubbed. The whole time he prepared he looked me in the eyes. He had nerve. I liked that. Then he took his equipment and began.

He pulled out a 260 and stretched it twice. Only twice. When fully inflated, A 260 is two inches in diameter and sixty inches long. Like me. He also grabbed a 350, which is a little fatter around, and a little shorter. I was watching his hands. His hands were the key. When his hands moved, things happened. He threaded the fat balloon into the skinny one. He inflated the inside balloon. Only the inside balloon. The outside balloon had to conform. He took out a red sharpie and made stripes and eyes and long lines that refined the look. I could tell it was some kind of snake. What fool would make a balloon animal snake during a contest? Snakes were for kids who didn't have money. Snakes were what you gave people you wanted to move along. They were for clearing an audience, not holding one. But this snake was different. Tony tossed the snake down. Hard. Smoke came up off the sidewalk. He must have also tossed down some hidden pyro, which hadn't been outlawed in our simple rules. The snake started crawling. Tony must have slit the outside balloon as he tossed it down; and the inside balloon being bigger, it started squeezing out. It was impressive. The snake slowly shed its skin, then turned around and swallowed the skin, and then turned around again and swallowed itself. In the end all there was on the sidewalk was the snake's shadow.

Tony waited for me to comment.

"Hasn't that been done before?" I said dismissively. "Like, in front of Pharaoh?"

Tony was angry. I could tell he was angry. My comment had been cruel. Being good Catholics we both knew Moses and his friend Aaron hadn't used latex balloons. Latex hadn't been invented back then. It was probably some poor dumb animal's intestines, inflated without a pump, and wiggly because they were placed on hot sand. That's what was shown to Pharaoh.

Tony held his hand out in my direction. Letting me know it was my turn.

"Like I said, anyone can do animals." I chose a clear balloon. I went to work using three felt markers. Red. Black. White. I turned my balloon inside out.

"What are you doing?" he wanted to know.

"You'll see."

Next I lit a match and very carefully brought it close to the balloon. I moved my hand along the surface of the balloon, the match causing parts of the surface to shrivel and blackened. I was in

luck, no holes appeared. I inspected my work. I was ready. I very carefully inflated the balloon. I inflated it without using my pump. I kept my hand cupped between me and the balloon. In case it popped, nothing would snap me in the face.

“You’ve learned,” he said.

He was right. I had learned. There would be no repeat of that terrible accident; the one that caused me to lose my previous contest, five long years ago. The deep disfiguring scar that ran from my forehead to my chin grew warm with embarrassment as Tony stared at me. Maybe he was even sorry he’d been part of that long-ago crime.

The clear balloon grew, and became gnarled, and as it lengthened it changed directions, and branched off, and parts of it doubled back. When I stopped — just at the right moment — the thing in my hands looked like a branch broken from a old tree.

Tony stepped in and looked at my creation. Because it was clear you could see inside. Because of my work with the felt tipped pens you could see art on the walls. Because of my work with the match; there were stalactites and stalagmites and narrow passages and wide chambers and bottomless pits.

“Oh my God,” Tony said, reaching out and touching the balloon. “It’s Lascaux. In France. The cave. The prehistoric art on the walls.”

He turned to his men. “It’s Lascaux,” he said.

They shrugged.

“Cretins,” he said.

They shrugged again.

I was waiting for him to concede defeat. He didn’t. He had art in his soul. He wasn’t a quitter.

“Could I borrow a small rolled neck pearl coffee dark?” Tony asked after looking through his pockets and not being able to locate one of his own.

“How small?”

“Small as you got.”

I handed him a mustard seed’s eyelash; light brown in color. He did something to it with his fingernail and then dropped it into a 350 opaque white. To the same balloon he added two tiny holes. Holes added near the neck of a balloon don’t necessarily lead to a popped balloon. Done carefully they can leave openings. He inflated his three white balloons and twisted them together with reckless clarity.

It was the fictional spaceship, the USS Enterprise, when he was finished.

“A kid could do that,” I said. “Even The Ultimate Balloon Book by Shar Levine and Michael Ouchi only rates that a ‘difficulty four’.”

“Look inside,” he said.

I peeked into the pin hole even though air was streaming out. I peeked in the window. There she was. That coffee-brown, buxom, beautiful, bold lieutenant Uhura was seated at the controls, sitting in the captain’s chair. She finally had a starship for her very own.

“Wonderful,” I said.

We battled some more. I did a car with working speedometer. He did Big Bertha, that big cannon firing shells at Paris during WW I. Again pyros. Smoke coming out of the gun. The church burning when the shells hit. I did a biplane chasing Cary Grant, the scene from North by Northwest.

Keeping, for a moment, with a movie agenda he also did a movie scene. He did a scene from The Wizard of Oz and I felt sorry for him when his flying monkey sprang a leak and actually flew away.

It was my turn. "Enough foreplay," I said, quoting a James Bond movie. I inflated a low gloss speckled grey.

"You forgot to burp it," Tony said.

I was impressed with him. For the first time I actually had some respect for Fat Tony. He was reminding me of something important so he didn't win through an error on my part. Just like the bicyclists on the Tour de France, when they wait for each other if one is knocked down by a flying champagne cork; Tony was being magnanimous.

"This one doesn't get burped," I said.

He looked horrified. He looked stricken. "They all get burped," he said. "It's like a law."

"And you never break the law, do you, Fat Tony?" That silenced him.

I continued. Even though what I was doing was unprecedented. I continued. Without being burped a balloon stands a very good chance of popping as it gets handled. I'd have to be very careful. I tied the necessary knots. I performed the necessary twists. It was a kangaroo when I was finished. A tall kangaroo. Almost four feet tall. All by itself, it deserved to win. Because it looked so life-like. Because it looked so real. From its rounded, attentive ears, down to the claws on its toes it looked almost alive. I pulled out a small knife.

"What I'm about to do," I said, "comes from a deep understanding of magic, comes from a deep understanding of entertainment and art. It's a product of years of practice." I placed the blade along the kangaroo's tummy. I started to slice through the first layer. "Balloons are made from layers," I said, "layers of microscopic fibers interlaced for strength, interlocked by ancient chemical bonds. Balloons are amongst the strangest things ever made. Filled by our expelled breath, they can become fish, and spiders, and hats, and swords. They can become toys and props; they can lead children away from hard drugs. They can float to the ceiling like clouds. I believe we only age on those birthdays when balloons aren't present."

I finished slicing the kangaroo's tummy. I folded the pen knife and stepped back.

Something twitched. Something moved. While Fat Tony stared. A tiny little joey, a baby kangaroo, slowly edged up and peeked out from its mother's poke, the pouch I'd cut in the big kangaroo.

The little joey blinked its eyes and clambered out and stood all on its own on the sidewalk. It hopped twice. More than even I'd expected.

Fat Tony placed his pump at my feet. He emptied his pockets, dropping his balloons on the street. He walked away. I hear he's been seen down near the florist shops on produce row. I hear he makes flowers from tissues. I hear he tries origami from time to time. I hear he moves slow now. Like an old man. And he only regrets giving up balloons when a big-breasted woman walks by. Or when he hears a gunshot and it reminds him of a popped balloon.

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Afterlife

by Kevin Ahearn

Meeting your maker is nothing like this. But one day...

Angela of Shephard, age 25 and beautiful, a princess in King Arthur's Court. Pursued by a quarter of the Round Table, she's the choicest catch in Camelot. Knights, castles, and royal pennants waving in the cause of chivalry. But when it comes time to visit the privy...

"What a load of crap!" said Angela Shephard.
Stop Program — Reboot

A South Sea Islander, Angela Shephard, 25, clad in a red bikini, strolls along the unspoiled beach. The sun is shining. The sand feels warm and pure. And for lunch...

"Ugh!" said Angela Shephard. "I hate fish!"
Stop Program — Reboot

Angela Shephard, ambitious executive, addressing corporate meeting. She'll shake them up! Dressed in gray flannel suits, the all white male board laughs in her face.

"Oh, well," said Angela Shephard. "It was worth a try."
Stop Program — Reboot

Angela Shephard, long straight hair and 'love beads,' smoking dope, drinking tequila and making eyes at a hippie folk singer. This is cool! Suddenly she bolts and vomits out the nearest window.

"Those were not the days," said Angela Shephard.
Stop Program — Reboot

At last, the gigantic spaceship taking humanity to the stars is ready to lift off. With a winning smile, Command Pilot Angela Shephard calms her anxious crew. But when the fusion engines roar to life, her face pales with fear. A mile off the earth, she's totally terrified.

"No way!" said Angela Shephard.
Stop Program — Reboot

Angela Shephard composes herself. She can do this. Isn't this what she always wanted, what everyone who ever lived ever wanted, especially men?

Reception will be instantaneous to ten billion people in more than a hundred languages. The introduction plays... "United Peoples of Earth, our Supreme Ruler, Angela Shephard..."

"My fellow Earthlings," she begins...

"Oh, please!" said Angela Shephard.
Stop Program — Reboot

Angela Shephard, 25, awakens alone for breakfast. She feeds her cat, then has her coffee on the porch overlooking the ocean. Life doesn't get any better than this, she thinks, but there's something missing. Always has been, but what? A man? Half the single men in town and a few husbands are after her. Something else, what?

Angela drives her five-year old car to a small Pacific Coast high school. She's the most popular teacher, but why does she feel like she doesn't belong?

The Super Bowl is this weekend as if she cared. But she can't help it; she tells her first period class who will win and by what score. How does she know?

Her prediction is the buzz of the school. She turns down party invitations and watches the game at

home alone. When the final gun sounds, she is right down to the last point!
Malfunction — Cannot Reboot Program

“Damn!” said Angela Shephard.

Thunder shakes the sky. Jagged twists of lightning turn night into an eerie dawn again and again. Angela is terrified. What’s wrong with the world?

The sun brings a fresh new day. Angela is still afraid. Why is it she knows so much? In class, one look at the map and she sees catastrophes coming for country after country. Floods, earthquakes, wars! How does she know this stuff? Why? Closer to home, she tells her class that the state governor will soon be indicted in a sex scandal. But she has no connections in politics, how could she...?

Unauthorized Data Insertion — Program Decay Imminent

“Me and my big ideas,” said Angela Shephard.

The story breaks that afternoon and the sky turns orange, then red. Angela gets in her car just as the media arrives at her house. She races away, faster and faster. Six vans chase after her. Two helicopters join in. What’s happening? She can’t believe her eyes. Houses and trees and fields and mountains on both sides of the road are... disappearing. It’s as if they are made of snowflakes and are blowing away in the wind.

Faster, faster, her car begins to break up into pixels and bytes. The steering wheel dissolves in her hands. The red sky goes whirlpool. Her car is gone, but she is speeding at a gaping maw on the horizon. In a flash she is through to...where?

Unauthorized Data retrieved - Program aborted

Angela Shephard was alive in a big white room. A hospital? A laboratory? A morgue? She went to the door, but as she tried the knob, her hand passed through it.

“What am I?” she cried. “What’s happened to me?”

Had she died and become a ghost? She walked through the door into a hallway and kept going. At the end was another door. Without feeling anything, she went through it.

The old woman lay on the bed surrounded by an array of machines. Tubes ran into her nose and out of her chest. She seemed calm and concentrated on the tech board in front of her, stroking it with her fingers. Angela stared. Whose wrinkled, bloated face could that be? And the eyes, those eyes! No, it couldn’t be!

“Hello,” was all Angela could say.

“I’m so sorry, dear,” said the old woman, her voice somehow familiar. “This wasn’t supposed to happen. I got adventurous and upped the program a bit over parameters. I was hoping to get away with it, for your sake and mine.”

“Are you... God?” asked Angela.

“Heavens no!” said the old woman. “But I am your creator.”

“How?”

“DNA coding via matrix,” said the old woman. “I souped up the given ingredients. You know me, always pushing the envelope. Made you prettier than I ever was.”

“I’m what?”

"Now, don't get upset," said the old woman, the tubes in her nose jiggling as she spoke. "I tried my best and then some to find you, and me, the perfect afterlife. Again and again I put you in a world where I hoped you'd fit in as I never had."

"Who are you?" asked Angela.

"I am... you," said the old woman. "I'm Angela Shephard."

"No, no, no. I'm Angela Shephard," she insisted.

"Of course you are," said the old woman. "You've got my spirit alive in you. Except for flesh and blood, you're more human than I ever was."

"Why? Why did you do this to me and yourself?"

"Because I could," said the old woman with a toothy smile. "At first there were only a few simple worlds to enter, as crude as the old Pong games. Competition being what it is, the offered environments grew by leaps and bounds as others jumped into the market. Pretty soon everybody was leaving their DNA encryptions to be phased into Afterlife... Put it in their wills guaranteeing themselves spots in worlds still in Research and Development."

"Immortality inside a machine?"

"But it seems I went a tad over program."

"What do you mean?"

"I was never satisfied with who I was. Never got what I really wanted. I wasn't going to bequeath you my flaws and failures for all eternity."

"How did I get here? How am I?"

"My fault," admitted the old woman, having trouble getting her words out. "I added a few info files to give you an edge in the program I'd chosen. Afterlife got wise. Their security's getting damn relentless. They tracked you down and kicked you out."

"I was expelled for cheating?" said Angela. "But I didn't do anything."

"And you wouldn't have without some help from me. That's what life is all about. Doing things. I never did. I wanted you to."

"Didn't you have any children?"

"Three. My son's Afterlifing in World War Two. He never did get the chance or the guts to fight for something he believed in. Bet he's a real hero now. My twin daughters are saving up to get the Deluxe Future Worlds. Such is life and beyond in the Twenty-Second Century!"

"More like the Middle Ages," said Angela, the programmed history teacher. "Living one's life solely to prepare for the afterlife."

"Don't mock your creator!" retorted the old woman, her thin, frail body shaking as she spoke. "You have no idea what Afterlife means... Humanity no longer fears death. The risks we can take, the sacrifices we can make, knowing the life of our dreams awaits us after we leave here."

"A self-created heaven?"

"And elsewhere," said the old woman. "Capital punishment is no longer a necessary deterrent. When a life sentence is up, the convicted's DNA is sent to a hellishly programmed place."

"My God!" said Angela. "And the Devil, too."

"You weren't supposed to find out," said the old woman. "It's the unknowing that makes Afterlife real. I wanted too much and got caught."

"You can send me back? Make me unknow? Isn't that who you want to be, an ignorant ghost of yourself playing in make believe?"

"I wouldn't understand either," admitted the old woman. "That's how we got into this mess."

"But if I'm you, or who you always hoped you'd be, you can't leave me like this," pleaded Angela. "What I am now is no life, Afterlife or otherwise."

"Don't be bitter," the old woman said, her tubes rumbling as she spoke. "That's the me you were never supposed to become."

"Who have I become? Your recreated self sent to live an unreal life in an imaginary world."

"Better than I've got here, wouldn't you say?"

"What you've got is real. Who you made me isn't."

"Look at me!" ordered the old woman. "Would you have done any differently?"

"I'm sorry," said Angela. "Can you blame me for only thinking of myself?"

"How could I? After all, you are me."

"Will I always be?" asked Angela.

Suddenly, a bell rang and lights flashed and half the room's machines began to whir.

"Oh, no!" cried the old woman. "Not... not now!"

"What's wrong?"

"Technology has done all it could," gasped the old woman. "My time is up."

"Oh, no. Why do I always wait till the last minute to do everything?"

"It's somewhere in our DNA. I've got to reprogram before it's too late."

"But, what'll happen to me?"

"We're both going to die," groaned the old woman, writhing in pain. "And neither of us will, not ever."

"What are you doing?" asked Angela as her creator stroked the tech board.

"I've only got one option left," said the old woman. "It's not guaranteed, but I don't have any other choice for either of us."

"There's another world I can go, another time I can live for both of us?"

"The final option. No one I used to know ever chose it. Nobody does, I hear. Too much left to chance."

"Sounds almost like real life," said Angela sarcastically. "How much more of that do you want?"

"I... I don't have any more left," cried the old woman, her body trembling as she finalized adjustments. "Neither do you. I'm sorry."

"No, wait. You can't...!"

Angela looked down at herself. Like the blowing snowflakes she had seen before, her body was vanishing via an irrepressible wind. Her feet were already gone... her knees, her thighs...

"Please, I don't want to die!" she cried.

"We won't!" said the old woman. "Trust the technology. Angela Shephard will live forever."

"How? When? As who?" asked Angela. "What will happen to who I..."

The last of the pixels glistened briefly in the air as they disappeared. The old woman felt very alone. It would not be for long. As preset, half the room's machines ceased functioning; the other half began anew.

Angela Shephard is alive. She doesn't know where. She doesn't know how. She doesn't know anything. But she can feel. Wetness and warmth all around her. Can she see? There is nothing but darkness. She hears, but doesn't know what the strange beating sounds are.

She is afraid, but she doesn't know why. From wherever she is she must escape. To where? Something begins pushing her. And then pulling. She's sliding through a moist, living tunnel.

Angela Shephard is free. The light is so bright she cannot see. Not yet. Sounds flood her new world, but she doesn't know what they are.

"Congratulations, Mrs. Shephard. It's a girl!"
Program fully initiated — All systems functioning

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The City Far Away

by Steve Bomkamp

When grass was emerald green
a lonely star went wandering
across a distant city

the best things were ripe for dreaming
this road is the path that leads to the chaos night

When the streets are alone at night
you hear the sound of your feet
the thumps shatter the streetlights
as snow rains down

the best things were ripe for dreaming
this road is the path that leads to the chaos night

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Mystic River : Like the Waters of The Mystic, the Pain Flows On

by Mel Cartagena

In Clint Eastwood's latest outing as a director, *Mystic River*, we are shown to a borough of Boston as gray and hopeless as the skies above it. Not once in the movie is the sun allowed to shine over the psyches of the men the movie analyzes. Three childhood friends whose lives are never the same after Dave Boyle (Tim Robbins at his best since *The Shawshank Redemption*) gets into a car with two pedophiles while Jimmy and Sean watch. Eighteen years later he is bent, both figuratively and literally. Tim Robbins brings to life this tortured man in a walk that is a doubtful shambling; in the hunch of his shoulders, in a face that is always scrunched, even though there's no sunlight to shield his eyes against. When he sits in the funeral wake of Katie Markham, the nineteen-year old daughter of Jimmy Markham (Sean Penn) he's "not quite there," as we watch him sitting among the guests with a dazed, almost idiotic expression.

Dave is fact, still in the basement the two men in the car locked him in, still running from the imposing fake authority figures. He tells his young son stories of a child running from the wolves, a boy who had to run because no one would come for him, while his wife Celeste (Marcia Gay Harden) watches in the dark, mystified by her husband's choice of bedtime story, but too insecure to do anything else. She is the perfect compliment to Dave's broken man. She walks with a quick, mouselike stride, looks down and shifts her eyes when confronted with direct questions by the police. She is a flake of a woman who doubts everything, needs reassurance from others she unconsciously sees as powerful and confident, and in doing so sends her husband to his death; but perhaps that's the best a man like Dave could hope for after his four-day ordeal with the two pedophiles.

At times Clint Eastwood seems unsure of his own symbolic elements in the movie. We see the flashback image of the young Dave running through the woods when he tries to explain to Jimmy that the bruise in his hand came from beating up a pedophile he ran into after leaving the bar he was in (where Katie also happened to be having a few celebration drinks with her friends), and again in the instant after Jimmy shoots him, when the screen becomes bright and Dave, perhaps in catharsis, sees the image one last time, having found peace at last from the past eighteen years.

The movie as a whole retains a slow and steady threnody of suspense, maintained through the clever intermix of characterization and dialogue that has become typical of Brian Helgeland (the same verve of seemingly indirect speech that propelled *L.A. Confidential*, *Conspiracy Theory* and *Payback*.) It builds to a momentary crescendo as we simultaneously learn (through alternate staging of two separate locations) of the identity of the killers of Jimmy's daughter and of where Dave really was when Katie was being murdered and the cruel fate that awaits him (then again, perhaps this is what he's wanted all along.)

Everything that happens after is post-climactic. The heavy-handed dramatics and hopelessly solemn tone that permeates the film demands a cathartic release much deeper than what was dished as the solution for the murder and for the reencounter of the three friends after nearly two decades of deliberately avoiding each other. After the weight of depression of this film is lifted of our shoulders, what we get for our time amounts to little more than a footnote, and the relation between the three men remains a much larger mystery, save for the obvious fact that Dave was never quite the same after his experience, and Jimmy and Sean (Kevin Bacon) seem to have shunned him afterward. Jimmy is now a local businessman and the king of the senile empire that is Chelsea, the borough to the northeast of Boston where the story takes place, and where we are reminded through clever quips and jokes in the movie, is being gentrified from the inside out with the arrival of neo-yuppies.

Perhaps *Mystic River*'s greatest achievement is the balance Clint Eastwood creates among the cast. No singular presence overpowers or dominates the others, with the possible exception of Tim Robbins', who simply stands out by sinking within himself. His acting is understated, more visible in gestures than in physical performance. His polar opposite, Sean Penn, operates in the same manner. He is calm and composed as he admits to Dave that years ago he killed a man who squealed on him after an armed robbery and dumped his body in the river, indirectly

informing Dave the same is about to happen to him. There is no questioning his power over the trio, even over the homicide detective Sean has become (perhaps learning from Dave's incident that there is safety behind a badge, as the men who abducted and raped Dave approached the boys posing as policemen.) Sean has moved out of the neighborhood, and lost the thick Boston brogue that comes with the territory (though he regains it over the course of the movie.)

But once again, the true nature of the relation between these three men in the years after the incident with Dave is never fully studied, which I daresay is what the book explores in greater detail (I haven't read the book, but what I'm putting down here relates entirely to the movie, so don't start with me about not doing my research.)

They are no closer or farther to each other than before. The gestures Sean and Jimmy make at each other as they watch the parade explain nothing, and whether Jimmy is going to dispense street justice on the true killers of his daughter as he did with Dave is never even broached, and whatever is left to discuss simply flows away with the ebbing tides of Mystic, as we see it in the last panning shot, as the camera pulls back, and WE FADE OUT, AND FADE TO BLACK OVER DEEP, STIRRING MUSIC, AND THEN, THE END.

Charles Stross' Singularity Sky reviewed by Jerry Wright

Title: "Singularity Sky"
Author: Charles Stross
Ace Books
ISBN:0-441-01072-5
HB Price: \$23.95

Charlie Stross is a madman. Oh, right, he is a Science Fiction writer, and therefore by definition, he is a madman, but I digress, or perhaps not. Anyway, anyone who has read "Lobsters" or any of his Manfred Macx stories knows that Charlie tosses off ideas like crazy as they come fizzing from his brain.

Singularity Sky is no exception. This is Charlie's first novel, and it has been aborning for a number of years, I am given to understand. The book fizzes with ideas, concepts, throwaways, and many SF in-jokes. The beginning of the book, and much of the action takes place on "Rochard's World", a colony of "The New Republic". It starts when something, perhaps a post-human thingie, called "The Festival" drops millions of telephones on an unsuspecting circa-1800s style public, offering all, peasants, revolutionists, and rulers alike, anything, (and I mean anything) they want in return for stories, histories, any sort of information whatever.

Oh, how did a bunch of Eastern European throwbacks end up on a planet 250 lightyears from Earth? Well, 400 years previous, in the late 21st century, The Singularity came about. Vernor Vinge came up with the original idea, that some day Artificial Intelligence combined with Mankind will transcend what we call humanity. Anyway, something called The Eschaton appeared, and without a "by-your-leave" transported most of humanity, nine billion souls, and spread them across the galaxy. For some reason, he/it/they stuck various mind-sets together, and so those longing for the Tsarist/Kaiserish past ended up together, many of them on "The New Republic".

When the leaders of The New Republic learn that their colony on Rochard's World has been invaded by the "Festival" they assemble a fleet in the finest manner of David Weber's Manticorean Navy, and FTL off to trounce the evil invaders. Charlie is well aware that FTL may very well by its nature include time-travel, and the boys from the New Republic, decide to use this ability in what seems to them a clever fashion.

Ah ah ah... The Eschaton says, "Do nothing that can change history, or be destroyed!" And it has the power to do just that. The NRNavy is running perilously close to running afoul of that command. And so there are two, two, mind you, spies from different agencies there to make sure

that the New Republic does nothing that could bring down the Eschaton on Earth or anyone else for that matter.

And that is just the very beginning of the book. There is information on Light Cones, and Time-like maneuvers, and far-future cybernetics, and spacewars and all kinds of weird stuff, and when you find out what the Festival really is, it will cause your mind to twitch, just a bit. This book is exciting, adventurous, funny, and filled with that "sensawunda" we all look for in our Science Fiction.

Editorial: KeyKilling

by Jerry Wright

Well, that was exciting. I had a nice long chat going and then I hit some unholy keycombination and blew it all away. That ain't no fair.

Anyway, as I was saying, before I so rudely interrupted myself, I promised David Wilson, aka D. Harlan Wilson that I would mention his new book. (Actually I promised him a couple months ago. Ow.) His new book from Eraserhead Press is *Stranger On The Loose* available at fine internet bookstores everywhere, and if you can't get to an internet bookstore because you don't have a computer, then what are you doing reading this, hunh?

Back in the early days of BWS, the best stories, the ones with the strongest Story flavor came from a coterie of horror writers who seemed to take *Bewildering Stories* to their little hearts (which no doubt they kept in jars, and/or under rocks). Since that time, the general quality of stories has just ZOOMED up, and the horror writers have gone, for the most part, elsewhere, although on occasion they return, as Steven Shrewsbury does next issue.

We never intended BWS to be a horror magazine, and instead we've become a place where stories that don't fit elsewhere can find a home. Which in a sense is sad. Why? We've been getting some top of the line stories here, because all we ask for these days is that it be a good story. Experimental? Maybe. But many of our stories are good enough to be in top-line magazines. If there were one like *Bewildering Stories*. So, we need to increase our readership. And the magic is "link, link, link". So Don and I are going to be running around (electronically, that is) to everywhere we can find and exchange links as much as possible. We want people to READ these great stories of ours. We want 50,000 hits a month. We want our coffers to fill with silver, and gold, and never mind...

We have fine SF, Fantasy, Mainstreamish, Noir, and I don't know whatall. If it's readable, and not boring, we want it. No... No Nurse Romances. But other than that... Well, we do have SOME judgement left.

Jerry. The Bottle Washer

Whut? Nurse romances is wuthless?! Awww... Hey, now that we've published horror fiction, what about a send-up of the Harlequin line? One thing we've learned is that we can't rule out anything, not as long as we can say, "Yes, that's truly a *Bewildering Story!*"

Don (a.k.a. Igor, the bottle drinker)