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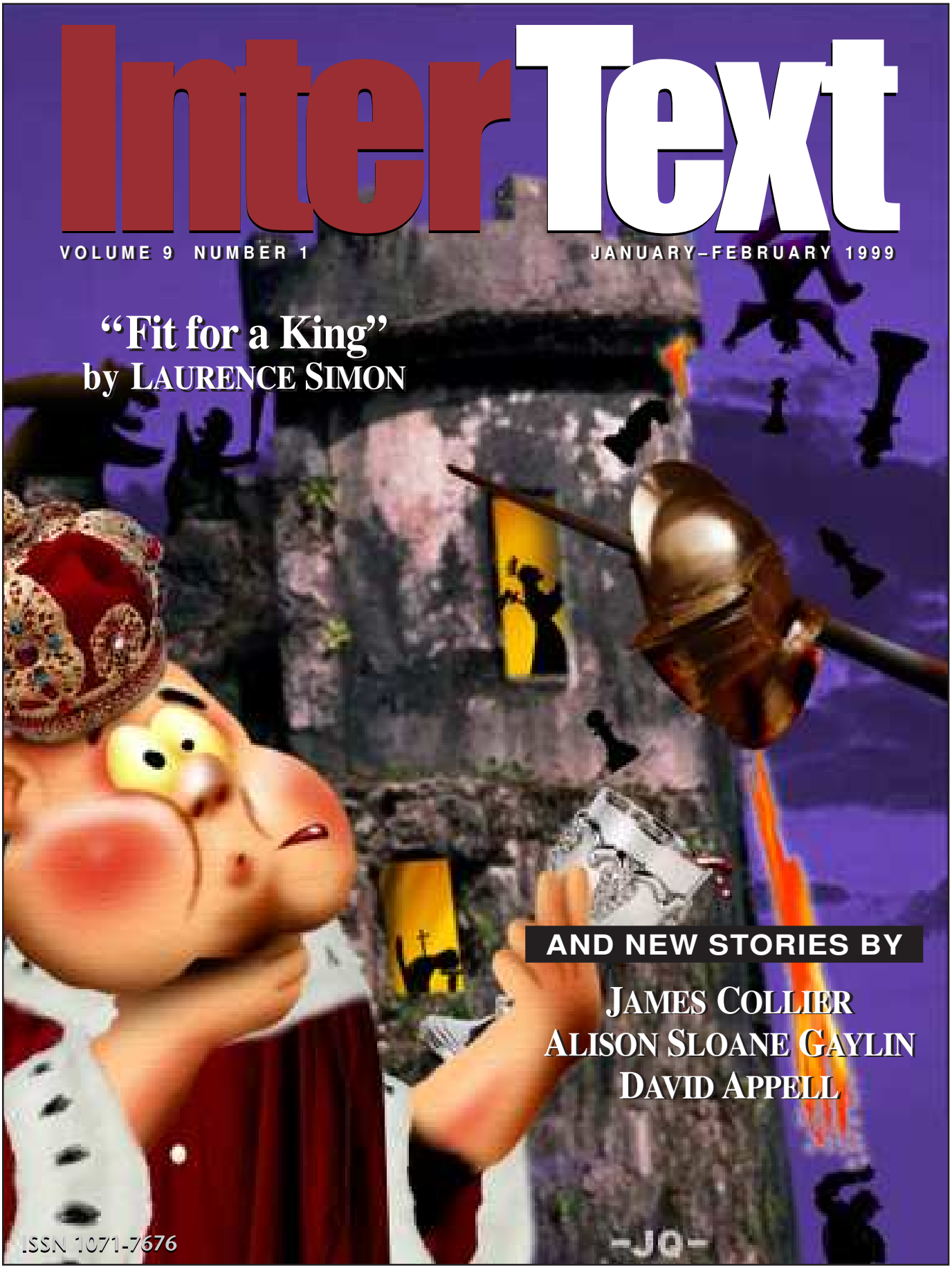

"Fit for a King"
by LAURENCE SIMON

AND NEW STORIES BY

JAMES COLLIER
ALISON SLOANE GAYLIN
DAVID APPELL

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Fit for a King

LAURENCE SIMON

It's good to be the king.
Or maybe not.

KING ALPHONSE TWIRLS A FEW STRANDS OF spaghetti onto his fork.

"I like this spagehtti," he says, smiling. "It is much better than the spaghetti I had last week."

His Queen nods. "Yes, my Lord."

"There is something different about this spaghetti, though. What is it?"

His Queen smiles. "Acid."

Alphonse looks up at his Queen for a moment, and suddenly his face falls into his plate of spaghetti.

EVERY MORNING KING BERTRAND GOES FOR A JOG. His route is always the same. He goes through the outer portcullis, over the drawbridge, around his orchard, past his vineyard, takes the trail by his stables, comes around the stream, and finally heads back over the drawbridge.

The outer portcullis slams shut behind him. The inner portcullis has not yet been opened.

"Hie, guard!" shouts King Bertrand. "Open the gate and bring me a towel!"

He looks up to see molten lead pouring through the murder holes.

OLD KING COLE WAS A MERRY OLD SOUL, AND A merry old soul was he.

He called for his pipe and he called for his bowl, and he called for his fiddlers three.

One shouted "Death to the King!" and stabbed him with a knife.

THE COUNCIL MEETING IS GOING LONGER THAN expected. King Darius scratches the back of his neck.

"Is there a problem, Your Royal Highness?" asks The Chamberlain.

"No problem," says Darius. "Please continue." He scratches the back of his neck, and his hand comes away bloody.

"Perhaps you should have that checked," says a general.

"I'll be fine," says Darius.

Boy, was he wrong.

TOO MUCH TO EAT AGAIN. TOO MANY PILLS AGAIN. He heads for the bathroom, and sits down.

"Are you okay in there, Elvis?"

"THE WORLD IS ROUND!" SHOUTS CRISTOPH.

"The world is flat!" shouts Ferdinand.

"The world is round!" shouts Cristoph.

"The world is flat!" shouts Ferdinand.

Queen Isabella raises her hands and screams. "Enough! Both of you!"

"The world is round!" shouts Cristoph.

"Would you care to stake your life on it?" growls Ferdinand.

"Would you care to stake your own life on it?" responds Cristoph.

Three ships and eight months later, Cristoph returned with his proof. King Ferdinand caught something from the natives Cristoph brought back. Isabella buried him two weeks later.

He called for his pipe and he called for his bowl, and he called for his fiddlers three. One shouted "Death to the King!" and stabbed him with a knife.

KING GEORGE PLANTED HIS SWORD IN THE DRAGON, placed one foot on its chest, and he gave his best royal pose. "How is this?" he asked.

"Perfect!" shouted The Royal Artist. He started a few thumbnails.

"You'll clean up the blood on my tunic and leave out the gouge on my arm, right?" asked George. "Not to mention the ballista bolts and the poison grain we left at the cave's mouth."

"Certainly," said the Artist. "We can take license with this so that your bold spirit shines through."

"Wonderful," said George. "Simpl—" He wobbled for a moment.

"Mind that you stay still for a while," said the Artist. "Once I finish a few sketches I can start work with the oils back at the castle."

"I am still," said George. "I think that this dragon may not be—"

THREE CHEERS FOR KING HAROLD THE UNBEATEN!

"Hooray! Hooray! Hooray!" shouts the crowd.

Harold tips his lance to the crowd and lowers the visor on his helmet. His horse flicks its tail and they are off, heading full speed through the fairgrounds towards their opponent.

"For the glory of England!" he shouts.

"What did he say?" asks someone.

"No bloody idea," responds someone else. "Shouldn't try to talk with his visor down. Bloody fool, if you ask me."

In a few moments, Harold will no longer be unbeaten. It takes the priests more than a day to pull all of the lance's spliters out of his head.

"ANOTHER BOTTLE!" SHOUTS IVAN.

"Another bottle!" shouts his troops. They toast their fearless leader with their bottles of vodka, and they all begin to sing and dance.

"It is late," says Ivan's advisor. "It is cold. You are a king first and a soldier second."

"What is a victory if you do not celebrate it, my simple friend?" shouts Ivan. His troops laugh and continue to drink.

"What is a victory that you do not live to tell tales of it to your grandchildren?" responds the advisor.

"I have had enough of your whining," growls Ivan. "Tonight is a night for celebrating. Now leave me be, I must make room for more to drink." Ivan stumbles to the edge of the cliff and lowers his breeches.

"I piss on you, cowards of the Ukraine!" he shouts. When he finishes, he leans down to check that he has not soiled his uniform.

He falls over the cliff.

JOLO IS RUNNING.

Jolo runs through the jungle as fast as he can. He has already shed his leopard cape and leopard-tooth necklace and nearly everything else.

The strange men toss a net at him and Jolo is caught.

One of them puts his hand on Jolo's face and checks his teeth. "This one will fetch a fair price in the Carolinas."

Another binds his wrists and he is dragged off to the ship. He is tossed in a hold on the third deck. He sees other members of his tribe. Some of them are already sick.

Jolo never sees the Carolinas.

FALLING.

Falling.

Falling.

Thud.

"Beauty, my ass," thinks the gigantic creature. " 'Twas all those damned airplanes shooting me."

LOUIS LOOKED AT HIS REFLECTION IN THE RAIN bucket. Gone was the gentle, powdered face and wig. What stared back at him was a horror. Mud and grime on his forehead. His hair was tangled and greasy. His face had three days of stubble on it. To appear as a mere commoner! He could not stand this!

"In my heart, I am still King," he mumbled. He gripped the bars of his cell and shouted. "Guard! Guard!"

"What is it now?" asked the guard, carrying a burlap sack.

"My face is a fright," said Louis. "Bring me soap and a blade."

The guard shrugged. "Keep your noise down. Soon enough, we'll bring you to the blade." He reached into the burlap sack and pulled out the head of Marie.

If not for the blood, Louis swore that she had been allowed to make herself presentable before her final moments.

He screamed.

THE FAERIE APPROACHED MIDAS LATER THAT afternoon. The foolish king was sitting on a golden log, surrounded by golden food, golden clothes, a stream frozen in gold, and his golden daughter.

"If only…" he muttered.

"I bring respite from your troubles," said the faerie. "I shall lift the spell. Whatever this water touches shall be restored to life."

Midas looked up at the faerie and cleared his eyes. "Can this be true?" he said. "I have learned my lesson, and I thank you for releasing me from this curse." He reached out to shake the faerie's hand...

Which turned to gold. The pitcher of water fell from the golden faerie's hand. Midas reached out to catch it.

It turned to gold.

Several days later, Midas's body was found in the forest. In his hand was the golden knife which had slashed his throat.

SUSAN BIT HER LOWER LIP AND WORRIED. SHOULD she, or shouldn't she? She sat on the toilet in her tiny bathroom and considered.

"Let me go!" she had shouted. But it was no good. They were in one of the palaces in the country, where nobody ever went these days. She struggled at the ropes on her wrists and legs.

"I must have an heir," said the King between the times he came to her.

Except for the last time. Then, he had said with a weak voice, "We will name him Nathan." That was right before he had died.

"Name who Nathan?" she asked him. But, of course, there was no response.

After two days, Susan got free of the ropes. She ran to the bathroom and threw up. After a few weeks, she knew for certain.

Susan reached for the hook on the bathroom door and took down the hanger.

MARCH 15, 1778.

The mystery grows worse, I'm afraid. Until now, we weren't certain, but this most recent discovery makes any doubt unlikely.

We found another leg at the swamp's edge last night. This one had a royal slipper on its foot, and there can be no mistaking. All of the Royal Fishermen have been instructed to check their nets regularly for any further remains of our dear departed King Oliver.

Especially the hands. That ring has been in our family for generations.

Love, Walter

PHILIP IS ANGRY WITH THE TIME IT IS TAKING FOR HIS workers to finish his castle. Two years and barely any progress! He orders them to increase the pace of their work. The Royal Architect raises a fuss, but he is quickly silenced by the Executioner.

A year later, and the workers are a blur. The castle raises itself around Philip at a pace more agreeable to him. At this rate, he will hold court in his new castle by next fall. He smiles and spits on the grave of the Architect.

It is that same smile he wears when a flying buttress collapses on the inner courtyard.

"Not enough mortar," mumbles the foreman.

"CAPTAIN QUENTIN!" SHOUTED THE RADIO MAN. "There's an urgent message for you!" He ducked as a line of fire strafed the runway.

"There's no time!" yelled back Quentin from the cockpit. "Spotters have more of them over the coastline."

"It's your father, he's—"

"When I get back, soldier!" shouted Quentin. He slid the canopy closed and taxied his plane down the runway to join up with the rest of the squadron.

The radioman ran back to the base.

"Did you tell him?" asked Commander Briggs.

"I tried to, sir, but he cut me off."

"Can you fix the radio?" asked Commander Briggs.

"It's a mess," said the radioman, picking through the debris that was once the base radio. "Right after news of the bombs leveling the palace came through, too."

"Well, let's hope that His Majesty comes back for his coronation on one piece."

He didn't.

CATESBY TRIES TO HOLD HIS LIEGE BACK. "Withdraw, my Lord. I will help you to a horse."

Richard continues to babble incoherently. All Catesby can understand is something about his kingdom for a horse. Richard draws his sword and rushes headlong into the crowd where Richmond lies waiting.

"This is not good," says Catesby. "First he starts shouting about ghosts, then he starts going berserker-mad. What next?"

WISE KING SOLOMON RUBS HIS CHIN. "FOR THE LAST time, which of you two women is the mother of this child?"

"I am!" shouts the first woman.

"I am!" shouts the second woman.

Solomon looked at the water-clock. Nearly an hour wasted on this one. "Perhaps both of you are the mother." He brought out a knife. "In that case, it would make sense to carve this baby in two and give each of you half."

"No!" shouts the first woman. She rushes to the baby.

"It's a mess," he said, picking through the debris that was once the base radio. "Right after news of the bombs leveling the palace came through, too."

Solomon grins. The mother rushes to protect her child. He dismisses the two women.

Later that night, the first woman sneaks into his bedchambers. "Threaten my baby, will you?" she hisses.

How funny, thinks Solomon. *That's the same knife I used this afternoon.*

PRINCE TERRENCE WALKS UP TO THE CORPSE OF HIS father and grins. He is not as dumb as his father once thought. He was smart enough to murder his father and not get caught. He picks up the crown and puts it on his head.

"King Terrence," he says. He laughs, and the hallway echoes laughter back at him. "I crown thee King Terrence." He is overcome with delight, and then overcome with exhaustion.

His last thought is that the contact poison was in the lining of the crown.

The hallway continues to laugh at him for a while longer.

GRUNT. GRUNT. GRUNT.

"Ug!"

He is bigger than everyone else. If anybody acts up, he hits them with his club. He leads the hunt every night. He has many wives.

He is King Ug.

Not that the bear in this cave cares.

Swipe.

THE FIRST PANEL SHOWS PRINCE VALIANT PUTTING the crown on his head.

The second panel shows him drawing his sword.

The third panel shows the crowd, shouting "Long live King Valiant!"

The publisher looks it over and shrugs. "This is what you call making a change? Nobody reads serial cartoon strips anymore. They all want one-panel funnies, like *The Far Side* or *Bizarro.* If they want a story, they go see a movie."

He tosses the storyboard into the trash.

HE HAS HIS MOTHER'S EYES, THOUGHT THE reporter. Both he and his brother.

"William! William!" shouted the reporter among dozens. "Tell us how you feel right now! Is your father alright? Was Henry with him at the time?"

William put his hand in front of his face to block out the cameras and the lights. He ran for the garage, jumped in his car, and raced off.

Two minutes later, it was a smoking ruin by the side of the road to London.

The reporter cried in horror. He had his mother's bad luck with Mercedes, too.

XERXES THE BATTLE-MAD!

Xerxes the Bloodthirsty!

Xerxes the Slayer of Hundreds! Thousands!

Xerxes laughs and licks the blood from his sword.

Xerxes th— "Ouch!" he shrieks. He holds his wounded tongue.

Xerxes the Hemophiliac!

THE DOCTOR RUSHES TO THE ROYAL SURGICAL Center.

"There's not much time, Doctor," says a nurse. "His car exploded after it went into the ravine."

"How about the brain?" asked the Doctor. "Good readings?"

"They're stable enough for the transplant," says the nurse.

The Doctor looks at his clipboard. "Looks like we need a full body this time. Can't be red or blue. Bring out the clone with the yellow label."

Farewell, King Yellow Label, thinks the nurse. She turns a valve and the tank with the yellow label begins to open.

KING ZACHARY THE MAD INVITED THE CHESS master to dinner.

"I am sorry for your loss," he said, patting the old chess master's shoulder. "All shall be clear in a moment, though. Shall we play?"

"We shall," said the chess-master. "There is nothing else for me to do now."

Zachary led him up a glass staircase to an iron door and opened it. Beyond was a scene of blood and horror. Dozens upon dozens of corpses lay on the floor, mutilated and slashed with grid patterns.

"They would not remain still when I marked them," said Zachary.

"What?" breathed the chess-master.

"For the board," said Zachary. "You see? They'd knock the pieces around."

The chess-master walked through the carnage, stunned. He then bent to one knee and stared into the face of his daughter.

"I could always modify the pieces," said Zachary. "I could make them like corncob holders so you could stick them into the board. But I'm afraid that the screaming would be an unwelcome distraction from the game. Best to do it this way."

"You monster," said the chess master. He brushed his hand over her face and closed her frightened eyes for the last time.

"Her?" asked Zachary. "You wish to play on that one? Fine. Let me get the pieces—"

The chess master shrieked with rage, grabbed Zachary by the throat, and tossed him down the stairs. The stairs shattered into a million shards of glass.

"I GOT THE ONE ABOUT KING KONG," SAID THE EDITOR. "Nice. But what the heck was this one about Zachary?"

"It's something from college," said the Author. "My degree is in Biology. I was always amused by that little mnemonic we used to remember the classifications."

"Classifications?" asked the Editor.

"Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, and Species," said the Author. "Some folks used Kings Play Chess on Fat Girls Stomachs and others used Kings Play Chess on Falling Glass Stairs. I combined them into one story. See?"

"You're one sick bastard," said the Editor.

LAURENCE SIMON

Is an HTML developer and a research producer in Houston.He is known for traveling everywhere with his lucky Slinky in his pocket, and will hastily produce this object if challenged or threatened.

The Skin Trade

JAMES COLLIER

Even those who understand the illusion can still be seduced by its appeal.

I NEVER THOUGHT WHEN I FIRST WALKED INTO THIS titty bar that it would take a piece of my soul. I was there for a more innocent reason—I was visiting a friend. I remember how forbidding it had looked as a kid, going by the bar in the car with my mom. Real sin was going on there, I thought. I was scared the first time—The doorman checked my ID, I paid my five bucks, and in I went.

"Want a beer?" the bartender said as I approached him.

"You work here every day?" I asked in my most disapproving tone.

"Yeah," he says, smirking. *Jesus.* "There's nothing wrong here—just some girls showing their tits."

I grabbed my beer, sat down, took in the environment. What a sick place, I thought.

FAST-FORWARD FIVE YEARS. "YOU COME HERE ALL the time, James?" a friend says.

"Yeah," I say with a laugh. "You know, there's nothing wrong here. Everyone's an adult."

He stands around looking awkward for a while and tells me he has to get going.

"Take care," I say, barely taking my eyes off some redheaded girl. There's no way I'm leaving early tonight, I think. I am here for the duration.

IF YOU GET TO KNOW PEOPLE IN THE BUSINESS, ONE word pops up constantly: *Vultures.* The code name for customers. "How much money'd you get off that vulture honey?" "Gawd, this vulture just won't leave me alone!" "That vulture grabbed my tits!"

You learn quickly that customers aren't particularly well liked. Even the bartender and the DJ hate you. But I'm sort of a step up from Vulture—now I'm a *regular.* It means the girls tolerate me because they know that my money is something they can count on. All the girls know the regulars' preferences and moods. They know when to push, and when not to. The bartender will buy you a drink now and then. People greet you by name ("Hey, James!"). The DJ will play a song you like just because. It makes you feel like part of the club, even though you aren't.

One of the first things you notice about a club are the stage names of the girls. Nobody goes by their real name. It's always Angel, Gem, Trixie—some bullshit name. I remember there was this one place where a lot of the girls had stage names that they got off of cities. They're walking around calling themselves Hollywood, Montana, Maui, and Madison.

I've always found it funny that the women who dance for me are generally the same women who ignored me in high school. Now they have to pay attention, because they're making a living. I pointed that out to one once, and she called me a smart-ass.

Irony and dancers just don't mix.

LULA, THE BARTENDER, IS A DISPENSER OF GOOD advice. "Don't get too attached to anyone here," she says. "Sooner or later the girl's going to leave. This job wears down even the toughest people eventually." I nod my head.

"Don't have a favorite." That's her other bit of advice. "Because it's bad for the girl and bad for you."

But I do have a favorite. Monique. She's Latin. Long black hair. Green eyes. Pouty lips. Soul. Lula, of course, sees. Everyone sees, I think. We usually talk and then she dances for me.

I don't notice exactly when my emotions for Monique begin to run amok, but Lula senses something. "It's just a game, James," she says. "It's just tits, ass, and your money. A simple trade. Nothing more." I give her a shit-eating grin. What the fuck does she know, I think. And I continue to visit Monique, get my dances, fall in love.

"Don't get too attached to anyone here," Lula says. "Sooner or later the girl's going to leave. This job wears down even the toughest people eventually."

"Anybody who works or goes to a topless bar is a little crazy," Lula declares. "Everybody here has gotten fucked over one way or another."

I point out to her that her statement is a generalization.

"If they aren't crazy, they're assholes," she says.

I tell Lula that I'm not an asshole or fucked up. In fact, I consider myself to be a nice, normal guy.

She snorts, and then her eyes bore into me. "You don't think I know why you come here?"

I study her quietly for a moment.

"I believe you," I say quickly, and then change the subject.

I ALWAYS HATE MYSELF A LITTLE AFTER GETTING A lap dance. You always feel helpless when it's happening. You're getting all hot and bothered, but you can't touch,

kiss, or anything. You just sit there.

Well, some dancers don't mind if you touch just a little. Everybody has their little line they won't cross. And if they like you, they'll move the line a little for you. A dance only lasts a song, and you're so aroused you want it to last forever. So when she says "Would you like another?" You say *hell yes,* at least until you're out of money. Then, like your cash, *poof*—she's gone.

THE LAST FEW TIMES I'VE BEEN COMING TO THE club, Lula's been busting my ass. Finally I ask her what her problem is.

"You don't need to be here, James," she says. "This place is a crutch for you. Instead of going out there, playing the odds, and finding a woman, you come here. I know it's easy to come here—all the girls are nice to you. You know why? They want your money. That's it. Nothing cosmic. Nothing to do with your aura. Money. If you spent as much time looking for a woman as you spend here, you'd have a woman."

Then she walks off without even giving me a beer. "Bitch," I hiss.

Lula's right, of course. In my case, I've always gone for women way out of my league in terms of looks. The type of women I should be interested in have just never really captured my imagination. Maybe I don't try hard enough. Maybe if I did, I'd find someone who could do exactly that.

ONCE I WAS GROCERY SHOPPING WHEN THIS WOMAN walked up to me and said, "Hi, James!" And for the life of me, I had no idea who she was. She looked familiar, but I just couldn't place her.

"It's Casey, from the club!"

"Casey?" I said, astonished. "Jesus, I couldn't recognize you without your make-up. You look so much younger!"

She smiled at that. I noticed she was wearing an oversized t-shirt and baggy sweatpants. "This is what you go out in?" I said, teasing a little.

"I get stared at so much, sometimes I just—" she said. I nodded. She gave me a hug, and said, chuckling, "I'm sure I'll see you later!"

I waved goodbye in a daze. I have frequently seen girls outside the club and the girl I meet on the street is always different from the girl in the club. Some people look a little younger, some a bit older, some just plain tired. But if you see them outside you could never guess what they do for a living because they always look so normal.

If I see someone, there's a bit of etiquette I follow: If you don't know the person very well, avoid her; if she's with another man, let her say hello first; if they are with their kids, call them by their real name (if you know it), and never mention the club; and finally, be polite, nice, and keep your distance—it's *their* time.

MONIQUE HAS OFTEN SAID THAT MEN HAVE A HARD time with the idea that beautiful women are just normal people too. "They just can't see beyond the body," she says bitterly. A man that can make a woman feel normal is a man who'll always do well with women, Monique says.

"Do I do that?" I say.

"I'm talking to you, aren't I?" she says.

Then why aren't I making it with you? I think. I also think that for all of Monique's carping she'd be bored with a nice man. She's probably addicted to the whole drama of some man cheating on her, slapping her around, being an overall leech. She's watched too many soap operas.

I actually tell her that one day at the club.

"You think too much," she says.

"It's just a theory! An observation!" I say, smirking. She doesn't talk to me for the rest of the evening.

SOMEHOW I'VE GOTTEN A REPUTATION AROUND the club as a nice guy.

"But I come here to be bad!" I whine to Monique. "If I want to be thought of as a nice guy, I'd go visit my Grandma."

"You are what you are, baby," she says.

I slowly stroke her ass and say, "Would a nice guy do that?" She has this surprised look on her face, because I've never done anything like that her before.

"Gotta keep you on edge, baby," I say. Then Monique just laughs like a motherfucker. Later, she slips me a napkin with her phone number and tells me to call her anytime.

"You know what you're doing, Monique?" I say. She just smiles and walks off.

"TROUBLE," LULA SAYS.

I ignore her.

AT HOME, I LOOK AT THE PAPER, WONDER IF IT'S REAL, if it's the number to a deli or something. I call. A woman answers.

"Monique?"

"Yeah?"

"It's James."

"Hi, baby. What's up?"

"I was just wondering how you are."

She starts telling about her kids, her ex-husband, her ex-boyfriend, her car. "What about you, baby?" she says.

"Shit, Monique, my life doesn't compare to yours."

"Give it a try."

So I give her some bullshit soliloquy about loneliness

and life in the big city.

I know Monique only wants to be my friend, but I can't help wanting more. All I hope for is that I grow on her and that she'll come to her senses and see how much of an improvement I am over the creeps she usually fucks. That's the theory, anyway.

Monique loves to bitch about her job.

"People think what we do is easy. Glamorous. Baby, they have not seen my swollen feet after dancing for eight hours. They'd scare off any man." I laugh.

She also tells how she's going to quit.

"Every time I dance, I feel like I'm losing a little piece of myself. It don't seem like a big deal when you first start doing it, but the longer you go…"

A couple weeks later she quits and disappears.

"WHAT DID I TELL YOU?" LULA SAYS.

"I know, I know, I know…" I say.

"You didn't love her, did you?" she asks.

My silence says everything.

"You are a sweet, beautiful man—but stupid," she says.

I can't help but laugh. When I leave that night, I tell myself that I've learned my lesson. Fuck this place. I'm going to find me a woman, play it cool, play it normal, play it smart.

Lula's right, man, I think. *Use your time wisely.*

FAST FORWARD A YEAR. NEW MANAGEMENT, NEW bartender, new girls—and the same old thing.

"Loneliness makes a person do stupid things," I say.

"Like?" the girl says.

"Giving money to a stranger hoping for some kind of love," I say.

She smiles. Caught in the con.

I smile, knowing I'm being conned but going along with it anyhow.

The song changes and she dances away, and me without my credit card.

JAMES COLLIER

Is a freelance photographer and graphic designer in New York City. He's also a frequent contributor to TeeVee *(www.teevee.org).*

Rules for Breathing

ALISON SLOANE GAYLIN

Some things never get easy,
no matter how many times they happen.

YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO HOLD YOUR BREATH WHEN you drive by a cemetery. I've heard two reasons for this. The first is, if you don't, you'll breathe death air and you'll die young. The second is, it's not polite to breathe in front of people who can't.

I learned both of these explanations when I was in the fourth grade. At the time, death was a weird thing that only happened to some people's grandparents. I figured it felt like your whole body falling asleep, including your brain. Try to imagine that sensation; you can't. Still, we nine-year-olds took it very seriously, the No Breathing in Front of a Cemetery rule.

Even now, if I'm alone in my car, or I'm with my boyfriend and I'm not in the middle of a sentence and I see tombstones out the window, I do it. Pretty embarrassing, considering my age. I'd never *tell* anyone about it. It's really more habit than superstition, anyway.

Okay, I'll admit it. It's a compulsion—a *minor* compulsion. Since I'm in confessional mode, you may as well know that I also cross my fingers behind my back whenever I tell a lie.

Thirty may be a bit old to observe childhood superstitions. But it's also extremely young to be attending the funerals of your contemporaries. So, the way I see it, everything evens out.

Today I went to David's funeral. I did hold my breath some of the time, but superstition had nothing to do with it. For the most part, I was holding my breath to keep from crying. My boyfriend Steven was sobbing audibly, so I guess I was trying to be quiet to balance him out. He needed the strong shoulder, so I gave it to him. Who could blame him? He'd been there when David passed on.

Today I went to David's funeral. For the most part, I was holding my breath to keep from crying.

So there I was, wearing a wool suit in the dead of summer because it's the only black suit I own, my conservative dress shirt shellacked to my body by sweat (which meant the jacket and tie were keepers, even after

the funeral) attempting to comfort Steven without sweating all over him, tears pooling up and pushing against the back of my eyeballs and the top of my throat. I'd never felt so wet in my entire life. The air around us was wet, too, like a sponge. Like the air was crying. I thought, *death air,* and I almost lost it.

I really wanted to be strong, though. I was holding my breath and thinking about baseball scores, which is the exact same thing I think about when Steven and I are having sex and I don't want to come too quickly. It didn't work very well at the funeral, and when my vision got thick and blurry, my mind began to wander.

I started wondering, "Which is easier to control, coming or crying?" And what if you're one of those people who cry *when* you come? What if you cry when you come and you have a psychiatric disorder that makes you fear your own physical secretions? Well, you may as well hang it up right there. Take saltpeter, join a monastery, cut your balls off and try not to cry about it.

Or kill yourself.

The priest was reciting the 23rd Psalm, which I've heard far too often recently and really didn't feel like listening to again. It's a very nice poem, actually. I'm not *that* cynical, but all the stuff about still waters and green pastures just sounds so *patronizing* to me. It makes think of a brochure for a rest home.

So, somewhere between that old familiar psalm and Steven's crying and my own pathetic attempt to be the strong, silent type, I remembered something David once told me, back when he was positive, but before he got sick:

"Bob," he said. (My name is Robert. David is the only person I've ever known who's so much as thought of calling me Bob. That includes my father, Robert Senior, a/k/a Bob.) "When I die, make sure they play 'The Macarena' at my funeral."

"But you hate 'The Macarena,' " I'd replied.

"Yes, and for once I won't be around to hear it."

I imagined all of us good friends in our black suits line dancing around David's coffin. It almost made me start laughing, until I saw what must have been David's parents. His father looked exactly like him, only younger (strange as that sounds), and he truly *was* the strong, silent type, staring off at some fixed, mysterious point far away. I couldn't see his mother's face at that moment, because it was buried in the father's shoulder. When I looked at David's dad in his pin-striped suit and rep tie, I remembered the time I'd helped David get ready for his cousin's wedding in Tarrytown. I cut hair for a living, and I'd given him a little trim. David wore a narrow-lapeled black 1962 suit, white shirt, thin black tie. He looked more handsome than I'd ever seen him. He looked exactly like Sidney Portier in "To Sir With Love." I'd been too shy to tell him that, though. It was the only time I'd ever felt shy with David.

I realized David was probably wearing the same suit today.

Dying had been David's choice. I don't mean to say he wanted to die at 28, of course. What I mean is, he wanted to die with his lover by his side and a few of his close friends around the bed and Beethoven's 6th playing on the stereo. David had been pretty far gone with the disease. To say he had full-blown AIDS would have been an understatement. His left side was paralyzed, and his right side was in so much pain that he wished it was paralyzed too. His lungs were full of fluid; he could barely breathe. David said his internal organs felt like they were made of Ginsu knives—he always had a flair for description, even when he was dying.) He could drink through a straw, but he had to be fed through an IV tube and he couldn't get out of his bed. He weighed 80 pounds.

Oh, and he was blind. I kept forgetting David went blind, because it happened so fast and he took it so well. He'd say, "As vain as I am, and with the way I look, blindness is a blessing." But still, it sort of landed on him, being sightless, like spit out of someone's window.

One day, about a year ago, his vision started to blur, and he went to the doctor, figured he needed a stronger prescription for his reading glasses. This doctor with a stellar bedside manner told him, essentially, that his eyes were melting in their sockets and in three weeks they'd be gone. (The eyes, not the sockets.)

The first thing David did was go out and buy one of those labeling guns that print out raised letters on thin adhesive strips. When the clerk asked him what color adhesive strips he wanted, David just laughed.

Next, he started labeling all his CDs, so he'd be able to feel them in three weeks. "Music is going to be really, really important," he said. "I can't wait to hear what it sounds like with no distractions."

It was a good thing he labeled everything so fast, because the doctor was off by a week, and he wound up losing his eyeballs in a fortnight. His lover, Rick, bought him some gorgeous wraparound sunglasses. They made David look like a much thinner version of Ray Charles, with darker hair and a more stationary head. I can still picture him, sitting on the parquet wood floor of his living room, tenderly running his long fingers over the raised letters on his CDs, deciding what he wanted to listen to. David had over 100 CDs. Labeling them must have been exhausting. He wouldn't let Rick help.

The blindness didn't bother David, but the pain did. A few months ago, David said he wanted to "be put to sleep," for he was fond of euphemisms. This time, he wanted Rick to help. He couldn't do it himself, because he couldn't leave the bed.

Rick couldn't bear the thought. They'd known each other for ten years, since freshman year at NYU. They'd lived together for four years. Life without David was as close to impossible as Rick could imagine.

But David was getting so, so sick. Rick's boss was really understanding, and let him take off work for a month. Rick didn't want to hire a nurse. He wanted to spend as much time with David as possible, even if it was filling IVs and emptying bedpans.

He didn't want to kill his lover. But David was in so much pain and wanted death so much that Rick finally went to David's untactful doctor and got him to prescribe a painlessly lethal amount of sleeping pills.

David invited five or six of us to his apartment. Said it was a "Bon Voyage" party. I went with Steven. At first, everything seemed so normal. David wore black silk pajamas and his gorgeous Ray Charles wraparounds. They were much too big for his face at this point. They made him look very old and small and eccentric. We all chatted for a while. Strange way to spend the last night of someone's life, but that's what we were doing—chatting. I can't think of a better word. David asked me what I was wearing, just like he always did. Made fun of it, just like he always did. (I dress for comfort rather than looks. I tend to buy things a couple of sizes too big. I wear cardigan sweaters and I adore seersucker. David thought I had the same fashion sense as Fred MacMurray in a Disney movie.)

Steven, Rick, Peter, Billy, Jonathan and myself sat in a tight circle around David's bed. We drank the beers that Rick brought us, passed a joint around. Rick told us all about a movie he wanted to rent—one of those big action flicks that Rick adores and David tolerated and the rest of us avoid.

It was warm that night, and Rick had opened all the windows. You could hear cars buzzing by from the street. An ambulance siren filled the room, so loud that Rick had to stop talking about the movie and wait until it passed. This lasted only a few seconds, but it seemed like hours. After the room got quiet again, Rick reached behind him, turned up the Beethoven, and tried to pick up where he left off. But David interrupted him, his voice gentle and ghostly, like snow crunching under your feet.

"Sweetheart," he said. "I'm ready now."

Rick swallowed. "Really?"

"Really."

The CD kept playing. Beethoven's 6th, which is also called The Pastorale. Green pastures.

None of us moved or spoke or even breathed. I wondered what it would be like if we all just froze like that, forever, with nothing to say and David still alive and no one moving an inch, The Pastorale playing over and over and over.

Steven took my hand and squeezed it. Rick stood up, went to the kitchen, came back with a glass of orange juice. I supposed he'd crushed the pills and stirred them into the juice because they were too big for David to swallow. There was a white straw coming out of the glass, and as Rick handed it to David, I tried to think about how nice a couple they were. I tried to think about how much I loved Steven. I tried to think about how the white straw set off David's dark skin and his black pajamas and his black glasses. I tried to think about anything other than what David was drinking.

David interrupted him, his voice gentle and ghostly, like snow crunching under your feet. "Sweetheart," he said. "I'm ready now."

"We love you, David," Jonathan said.

Rick leaned in close to David's ear. I heard him whisper, "You're so beautiful."

David didn't respond. He just kept drinking. I imagined those two sentences sitting in the center of the room like unopened presents. It suddenly became very hard to breathe.

"I have to go. I'm sorry," I said. "I'm… sorry." I ran out the door, down three flights of stairs, through the double doors and out into the sticky summer night.

I sat on the curb and put my head between my knees, sucked in, as hard as I could. I'd left both downstairs doors ajar. The idea was to catch my breath and walk quietly back upstairs. But the air outside was thick and unbreathable, like air from another planet, and I couldn't inhale enough. "Shit," I said. My voice sounded wet and choked.

I put my head in my hands and closed my eyes and tried to remember what David's eyes looked like. After about a minute, I stood up and walked back to my apartment, thinking of absolutely nothing.

Steven came home about two hours later. He wasn't mad at me, but he was crying. He'd heard David's last words: "Hi, Grandma."

That night, I dreamed I was following Rick down a dark, deserted street. I kept trying to say *hey* to him, but no sound came out.

At the funeral today, he sat in a chair next to David's parents, with his jaw clenched like he never intended to open his mouth again.

After the funeral was over, most of us went to David's cousin's apartment for coffee and dessert. What I wanted was a Vodka on the rocks, but there was no alcohol—not even wine.

It was the same cousin whose wedding David had attended in Tarrytown. She was about David's age and heavily pregnant. David's parents, she explained, "weren't up to having people over." Steven and I separated and circulated around her living room, exchanging condolences with David's relatives and friends. I kept trying to catch Steven's eye. I really wanted to wink at him, for some reason, and have him wink back.

Rick didn't go to the cousin's. I wonder what I'll say to him the next time I see him. I wonder if he'll ever rent that action movie he was talking about, how soon he'll go back to his job. Rick works in a video store. He wants to make a documentary about dogs.

Steven told me that Rick had gotten into bed with his lover, held him in his arms as he died. When everyone left, he was still holding him. I wonder how it felt to hold David's body, how it felt to finally let go.

Tonight, he'll go home and take off his black suit and lie alone in his big, empty bed without turning on the stereo. (He told me once that every CD he owns reminds him of David in one way or another, with or without the labels.)

Maybe, in the silence of the apartment where Rick used to burn magnolia incense to cover up the smell of medicine, maybe he'll lie there and look at the ceiling and try to smell the magnolia again, but he won't be able to.

Maybe he'll cry a little. Or maybe he'll hold his breath.

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Baby Glenn

DAVID APPELL

Blood is thicker than water.
And sometimes, lighter.

THE FIRST THING I WANT TO MAKE CLEAR IS THAT I did not ask for this. The only spotlight I ever craved was exactly like the one above my family's two-car garage in Akron, the one that washed across our front lawn on crickety summer nights.

My childhood there was normalcy sanded down with two coats of varnish: Little League, high school band, a solid B average. Straight brown hair that I parted with the majority. Two girlfriends, both named Lynn. I went to the State University in Columbus and majored in accounting; I drank some beer, cheered for the Buckeyes, kept up my grades with little threat of overexertion. This was, after all, 1976, the war over and nothing left to protest, the entirety of Ohio sinking back into a bored state of midwestern bonhomie, which was perfectly fine with me.

Early my last year I met Margaret Glenn in SOC 321, The Sociology of the Family; she was petite and shy, and charmingly diffident. Nice cheekbones and light-brown hair. Hazel eyes set in milk. We made out on our second date, and began studying together on the fifth floor of the library stacks. Within a week I was having dreams about the shape of her knees. Within two I would have picked bugs out of her hair if she'd asked.

My roommate asked, "You know who she is, don't you?"

"Margaret?" I said, wondering what he knew about ring sizes.

"Yeah, Margaret." He looked at me. "Margaret Glenn." He waited again, then gave up. "As in 'daughter of John.'"

Oh. "You mean John Glenn, the Senator?"

"That's right, man. John Glenn the Senator, used to be John Glenn the astronaut, first American to go into orbit." He smashed a fly with a copy of Moby Dick. "Craig, you've just reeled yourself in a big one, man."

That night I dreamt I was David Eisenhower about to marry Trish Nixon in front of a billion people.

"Huh," I said. "Imagine that."

That night I dreamt I was David Eisenhower, wearing two inches of pancake makeup and about to marry Trish Nixon in front of a billion people, only seven of whom I knew personally.

I saw Margaret the next day at lunch, and when I asked about her father she immediately started crying and ran out. I caught her next to a mailbox, both of us out of breath, her cheeks turning red in the autumn air. "Two,"

she said suddenly, turning to me, agitated and stammering. "Two weeks," the tears pooling in the corners of her big eyes. "That's all it takes, anymore" she said, beginning to sob. "Just two."

The only time either Lynn had cried was when I shut the car door on the hand of the first one.

"Why did I expect you to be any different?" she asked us both, sniffing. "Either guys want me because of my dad, or they don't want me because of him." She stopped while her eyes flashed signs of things I sensed I could never understand. "Just once I'd like it to be me they want." She paused. "Or don't."

She paused and looked right at me.

"What about me, Craig Manney?"

Touching her, I thought she might split in half. I'd never even voted yet. "Well…"

"You know," she said, suddenly trying to sound convincing, "It's not like I'm a Kennedy, for God's sake." Which was true. "Or even Trish Nixon."

I suppressed a wince.

"And they hardly pay attention anymore, once you get your braces off."

I guessed she meant the media, but wasn't exactly sure.

"It's really not so bad, Craig," she said, reaching out to take my hand. She looked at me, into me, searching, waiting for an answer. A middle-aged woman stopped ten feet away, letter in hand.

Looking back now, it was the wait that did it. She asked for the truth, pure and simple, and what midwestern fourth-year college male could ever resist that? Besides, how bad could it really be? A large family picture, maybe, once a year at Christmas?

A swearing-in ceremony every six years? There could be advantages, too—the inside track to cushy jobs, wholesale prices at the hardware store. All of it with Margaret, lovely little Margaret Glenn.

"I'm sure it's not," I said, stepping aside while taking her into my arms.

The mailbox lid was opened and then closed. Margaret held me tightly and pressed her chin into my chest. A maple leaf, still red and yellow, fell to the ground, perhaps a little too soon.

And besides, we'd be on Mars in, what—four, maybe five years, and who'd care about an aging astronaut at the point, anyway?

I MET HIM TWO MONTHS LATER, WHEN HE WAS IN town to speak to the Chamber of Commerce. He took the two of us to lunch at the University Club; by that time Margaret and I were infatuated and inseparable, wide-eyed and syrupy, with a secret set of pet names.

He was older than I expected, wrinkles beginning to show across his forehead. Wise, with two eyes ready to go anywhere. Bald and small, like he was born to be stuffed into a VW bullet, like the first ancestor of a future race. Margaret was his image, small, light-boned, but not quite up to his orbital personality, his confidence, the starlight that still twinkled in his eyes. He loved Margaret, clearly, and said all the right things to me. The meal saw seven requests for his autograph, and by dessert I was calling him John.

I proposed to his daughter on Christmas Eve; we graduated, and a hometown job came through with Sorington and McKyle, Certified Public Accountants. The wedding was that June, a small, private affair at the Cuyahoga Country Club, covered statewide in two back-section inches of the Cleveland *Plain Dealer.* The country had a Democratic president for the first time in eight long years, and better things to worry about.

Margaret and I borrowed the down payment from her parents and took a thirty-year mortgage, three bedrooms and two baths located on a quiet, tree-lined street. When she signed her new name she looked up and smiled, safe now, anonymous and suddenly hidden, no longer conspicuous as a Glenn of Ohio, but simply the newly-married Margaret Manney of 1701 Chaney Drive. We spent our first month trying to conceive and figuring out how to light the gas grill.

"Please be careful," she would always call out to the patio, as if unaware that her father had once been shot into space on a huge version of a propane stove.

"Always, my little kiwi," I would say back, saving my abandon for more reproductive activities.

It was on a Saturday morning, our sixth Saturday of married life as I counted later, when she told me she was sure. I was at my desk, studying life insurance policies before cutting the lawn. She stood at the doorway and said, "Honey, we're going to be a mommy and daddy."

Within the hour I had purchased a half-million dollars of term, payable quarterly.

Our families were thrilled, of course. It would be the first baby on her side of the family, her older sister stuck the '60s with a Brazilian painter in Paris, her younger brother in his third year at the Air Force Academy. Vice-President Mondale sent a gold-flecked card through her father's office, wishing us his best. There were plans to make, decisions on names and a motif for the nursery. "Maybe it's guilt, Craig," Margaret told me, "but I'd like to name it after my father, Glenn or Glynnis, something like that." She was beaming and aglow for weeks, and then for months. "I've never felt better," she said to everyone who asked. She ate, lounged around reading glossy magazines, and ate more, and still she had to take in the waist on the maternity clothes she'd bought for herself.

Looking back now, we might have suspected some-

thing. Not a trace of morning sickness. No zits, no hemorrhoids, ankles as slim as ever and not a shiver of pain in her back. She didn't show until well into the seventh month, and by the end her weight gain was only a third of what was normal. In the delivery room she asked for nothing except a hard-tack candy.

"It feels like… a bubble," she said, giggling when Dr. Penrose told her to push.

At least *he* was sweating.

I was behind Margaret, talking into her ear, looking into the valley of her thighs. "Once more," the doctor said, and Margaret faked a little grunt. The doctor's eyes widened, like he was about to catch a pass. I said something to my wife, I don't remember, something loving and encouraging, and stood up to look. His white mask sucked against his face, the doctor moved quickly, lurched almost, like the baby was trying to slide past him and he'd almost missed the tag.

A boy, I thought, hoping.

At that point events proceeded rapidly. The doctor stood up, my wet, messy baby clamped in his hands. A sharp command and someone swooped in to cut the cord. Dr. Penrose was intent, concentrated, while the baby had yet to make a sound. I thought it strange the way it was being held, high and out at arms length, like you would hold a angry cat, but for what we were paying I assumed it was simply the latest advance in obstetrical technique.

Turning away from us, Dr. Penrose brushed off a waiting nurse and mumbled something through his mask. With a sharp pivot she followed, motioning to a colleague, and together they rushed through a side door with our baby. Took him away.

Kidnapped did not seem too strong a word. My mouth hung open when the second nurse returned just a minute later.

"Is something wrong?" I said to her, my quivering legs pegged to the floor.

"Uh, Mr. and Mrs. Manney…"

"What is it, dear?" Margaret sang to me, still up on a cloud.

"Mr. and Mrs. Manney…" the nurse repeated. Then, faltering, she rushed over to Margaret. She was looking under the sheets when the door opened again.

Two men walked in, one tall and slim, the other short and beefy, both with crew-cuts, both wearing cheap blue suits. White cords came out of an ear and disappeared under their collars. "Mr. Manney," the tall one said in a deep voice. "You'd better come with us, sir."

Large hands clamped on each of my arms, they rushed me down a hallway and into a conference room, and locked the door behind them. "Please have a seat," the tall one said, motioning to the table while straightening his suit.

"I won't!" I said, loudly, and turned back towards the door. "My wife, my baby… ."

"Please sir," he said, eyes like molten chocolate. He paused, heavily. "Please."

Old man McKyle, I thought suddenly, looking around for a phone. He'd know someone who could help, a lawyer. Maybe two of them. This is my family they're messing with. Hell, for that matter, just go straight to the top and get ahold of her dad in D.C. This was America.

The tall one sighed like a St. Bernard, and reached inside his jacket. "I'm Detective Warring," he said, producing I.D. from his wallet. "Frank Warring. And this is Detective Jaronik." He jerked his head to the short one, the bastard.

"He's alive," Dr. Penrose said. "A boy. And healthy, too. In fact, quite buoyant."

"We're with NASA, sir." He tried to smile. "Special Investigations."

FINALLY DR. PENROSE CAME THROUGH THE DOOR, his smock still dark with sweat. He was followed by more men in suits, but dark and expensive, wearing well-polished shoes. Lawyers, no doubt. Jaronik stood next to me, breathing heavily.

"Doctor," I said, rising from my chair. "What the hell's going on?"

"Mr. Manney," he said. "Craig." He looked at me and gestured to my chair. "Please, have a seat."

I did, huffily. "My wife…?"

"She's fine."

"And the baby…?"

"He's alive," Dr. Penrose said. "A boy. And healthy, too, from what we can tell." He paused, then added. "In fact, quite buoyant."

I was confused by his choice of words. A finger missing, I could understand. Or even (God forbid) something worse, a birth defect, a hole in his heart. I could adapt. We could adapt, Margaret and I. But buoyant?

"But… I don't…"

Dr. Penrose searched my face, painfully, rapidly, then swiveled his chair towards the wall. He pressed a button on the tabletop, and with a small whirr the wall to my left fell away, revealing a wide window into a lily-white nursery, empty but for three nurses standing near a back corner. They wore masks and gloves, and one held a baby in her arms—mine, I assumed. My baby boy. Glenn.

Doctor Penrose cleared his throat and spoke loudly, apparently toward a speaker in the ceiling. "Go ahead, Nurse Rowland."

A nurse looked at us through the glass, then back to the baby. "It's alright, nurse," the doctor said, and she stepped forward, slowly. Then she unwrapped my baby and held him outward with both her arms, as if offering him up to the gods. Speechless, my nails dug into the palms of my hands. I heard my thyroid flush. Little Glenn was there in her open, wavering arms, smiling, and then… he began to rise. Up. Steadily, quickly. An inch. Three. Twelve—when she reached up and took him back to her bosom.

The room was speechless, even the lawyers. Doctor Penrose turned back and spoke to me with as much clinical posture as he could muster. "Mr. Manney…" he said, and cleared his throat. "Mr. Manney, your baby appears to be weightless."

FIRST I HAD TO SEE MY WIFE. I FOUND MARGARET in Recovery, sitting on the edge of her bed, putting on makeup.

"It's a boy," she sang, as if it were the first ever.

Apparently she had not been told everything. I tried as best I could, husband to wife, one frightened parent to another. This was not something that had been covered in Sociology 321.

"…There must have been six lawyers in there, Margaret, more doctors too, and the nurses had on layers of protective garb…" She was crying now, quietly, mascara flowing south across her cheeks.

"…And some guys from NASA, whatever in the hell they're doing here."

"Oh my God," she said, stiffly, shifting suddenly into some kind of feminine survival mode. "Call my father." She jumped down off the bed. "And take me to see my son."

THEY HAD EMPTIED THE WING AND SPACED POLICEman along the hallway. At the nursery we looked in through the glass, still hoping for a simple bassinet, little Glenn's name written in blue, a wreath of plastic flowers nearby. A few spit bubbles, perhaps, nothing more.

Instead there was a stepladder, with a doctor on the top rung reaching upward. Glenn was bouncing against the ceiling, lightly, drifting away from his arms. The nurses were underneath, like firemen with a net.

"Don't let him get tangled in the lights!" one of them yelled, and Margaret resumed her crying.

Detective Warring appeared suddenly behind us.

"Mrs. Glenn," he said, and Margaret jumped.

"I'm sorry," he said, sighing. "Mrs. Manney… perhaps we can talk."

He lead us back to the conference room, Jaronik grunting along behind us. There Dr. Penrose was talking with a young women in glasses, a plastic badge clipped to the collar of her suit jacket. "The parents," he said to her when we came in.

I was holding Margaret's hand and felt her turning to steel again, ready to fight in defense of her nest. "I'm Leslie Goodall," the woman said, "from the National Security Agency, and…"

"I want to know about my son," Margaret interrupted.

The woman handed me her card. Biological Physicist, Ph.D.

"Yes, of course," Ms. Goodall said with a hint of nervousness. "In light of the extraordinary occurrence that's taken place in this hospital today, let me explain."

There was something buried deep in Margaret's mRNA, she said, which was the first thing I didn't understand. Mutations of the amino acids, and talk of her DNA-sequencing being off the mass shell. Anticodon splits induced by a changing gravitational field. Nothing I had ever learned in accounting.

"Let me get this straight," I finally interrupted. "You're saying our son's genetics have left him without weight?"

"Essentially, yes," Ms. Goodall said, pushing her glasses back up her slight nose.

I wondered if they had yet gotten my baby down off the ceiling. "And how, ma'am, do you account for that?" I asked.

"Oh my," Margaret said, softly. "I bet I know."

I REACHED THE SENATOR IN MEXICO CITY, AT A conference of the Organization of American States. It was a bad connection; I was yelling into the phone, and could made out little of what he said. "NASA," I heard near the end, between the crackles.

"Good people."

By then they had let Margaret into the nursery, where she had clamped onto our baby boy like she was fighting for him with the moon. He was smiling still, with dark hair. Skinny, like Margaret and John, but at least you couldn't see through him. "Isn't he something?" she said, with irony only a mother could ignore.

We would probably have to move our nursery up to the second floor and screen in all the windows.

There were tests, of course, and parameters to determine. Buoyancy factors, genetic propagation velocities. They would have turned Margaret inside-out if we'd let them, and wanted six, eight, sometimes ten sperm samples a day. It was tiring, this fatherhood, and we had yet to get the little guy home.

My parents came to the hospital to visit. Not yet ready to explain the levity of their new grandchild, we had a x-ray technician fashion small lead plates from a radiation apron, which we tucked into the baby's diaper. Margaret's mother and father came, straight from the airport. John was beaming and proud, like the mission was finally accomplished. He knew Warring from the

Mercury days; the Senator went on about the new possibilities for capacity-to-thrust ratios, talked about the chances of finally leaving the confines of our solar system.

"Let these NASA people take care of you," he told us more than once. "They'll treat you real nice." I still wasn't sure why they were there.

MARGARET WAS ADAMANTLY AGAINST STRAPS. "He'll grow up thinking he's done something wrong," she said, so we sewed a network of Velcro strips onto little Glenn's pajamas.

He was happy, our baby, in a perpetual state of floatation. Diapers proved to be of limited use. The Senator laughed when he heard. "Same problem they had during the Gemini program," he told us.

The government put a medical lab in our basement, and Leslie Goodall moved into a spare bedroom, to measure and test, poke and prod. She explained to us her theories, the three orbits of *Friendship 7* and how they might have lead to this. No other reports, as far as she knew—but then the g-factors of later launches were not comparable.

"What about me?" Margaret asked once. "Why was I born normally-weighted?"

"It's recessive," Leslie said, quickly. "Apparently." She blinked fast, three times. "We think."

HE WAS SMART THOUGH, MY SON. COOING AT TWO months, talking by ten. "His neural pathways aren't grounded," Leslie said once, to which Margaret raised her eyebrows. We had managed to escape attention, except for a thin but continuous stream of high-placed government scientists and officials. We were elated that the story had not leaked, and prayed that our baby's life would be as normal as… well, as normal as possible. We would be as normal as possible. That had been utmost since Margaret and I had fallen in love, and we still hoped that the hoopla would blow over soon.

"Look at the boy in the bubble," Margaret said once to Leslie. "Who remembers him now?"

"But Sweetheart, this boy *is* a bubble," Leslie said back.

The world did move on, in its way. I went back to work, with congratulations all around. Other fathers called home to see if their baby had yet taken their first steps; I called to make sure mine wasn't pegged against the ceiling. Elvis died, for awhile. The Iranians took over the U.S. Embassy. "If you only knew," Warring said to me shortly after it happened, "what is really going on in Teheran." Pressed, he would only say, "Let's put it this way: Half of the leaders in this world are afraid of your son, and the other half want one for themselves."

A week later we were taken to New Hampshire, rushed away in the middle of the night, given a picturesque cabin on the edge of the Whites. It was nothing like Ohio, green mountains instead of the fruited plain, no clipped lawns or suburban strip malls. Run by the same government people in charge of Camp David. "It's all yours, for now," Warring said, sweeping his hand over the woods and fields around us.

"And by the way, you've been classified."

Looking back, it was for the best. There was clean air and plenty of privacy. The Senator choppered in once a month, and Jaronik fashioned a seat belt for the commode. There were families who had it worse, that much I knew. We got Glenn a couple of dogs, and a leash with a clip on both ends. Leslie continued her studies, eventually taking over as Glenn's tutor, and filling the role of his aunt. "Very, very smart," she said of him.

Most sports were out, especially the high jump. Glenn took to chess by mail, and slept with books like Modern Chess Openings.

"On top of everything, huh?" Warring said, smiling, until Leslie and Margaret stared him down.

He picked apples for us, and kept the gutters clean. There were therapies and medications—iron supplements, lead belts, suction cups on the soles of his shoes. We used a tether on windy days, after once chasing him three miles down the valley and plucking him from a large oak. But over years it came to be something like what Margaret and I had wanted, peaceful but full, filled with the unexpected mutations of life instead of the ungrounded visions of youth.

"You'll never believe what Glenn did today," Margaret would often say to me when we were lying in bed at night, and usually I didn't.

Most sports were out, especially the high jump. Glenn took to chess by mail, and slept with books like Modern Chess Openings. When we had cable installed we watched the Ohio State games on television, two generations rooting for the same team, father passing his heritage down to his son.

"Dad," Glenn asked once, "if you carry the ball through the uprights, does that count for three points, or a full six?"

I hadn't ever thought about it that way.

We weathered the Senator's run for the Democratic nomination for president. He had been insistent in the beginning, sure he could keep us under wraps, the old test pilot ready to break new ground. Margaret had asked him

to reconsider, begged him to withdraw, pleaded, one letter after another. You have to think about what this means for your grandson, she told him over and over. But he quickly found that the world had moved past the hero and astronaut, past the glories of the space program and into the wonders of junk bonds, past Chevrolets and into K-cars, the melodies of the Beatles replaced by the bellowing of Bruce Springsteen. Illegal PAC money hadn't helped him any, either. At least he had been able to spend some extra time with us in New Hampshire.

He wouldn't have beaten Reagan anyway. Ironically I sometimes think it was the one thing that might have protected us, Margaret and Glenn and I. The Republicans stayed in power, the President piled deficit upon deficit, vast sums spent on armaments, defense technologies and satellite-based theories. Eyeball-to-eyeball with the Soviets, he threw down two dollars for each of their rubles, and still they couldn't keep up. There were no manned flights to Mars, but the Russian bear was finally declawed, the Cold War over, and cultural exchange again on the horizon. Records began to be released, long-secret information declassified, a lengthy process that would go on for years.

In the process, mistakes were made.

The first rumor showed up when Glenn was eighteen and we were trying to decide what to do about college. It was one paragraph in the back of *Jane's Defense Weekly,* half the facts wrong but half of them right. "Rumors of monkeys born gravitationally-impaired," it said in small print. "Soviet experiments could provide new capabilities."

A week later there was a report that the United States had a program of its own.

Someone claimed evidence of a laboratory accident. Detective Warring doubled our cabin's usual complement of security personnel, just to make sure. I spotted a camera crew in town, with New York plates, and in the permanent media frenzy of the nineties, reporters fed on hair spray and O.J., it didn't take them long to find our front door.

I didn't really believe it myself until I watched Connie Chung on the evening news, standing on the edge of our front meadow, reporting that a no-fly zone had been declared within five miles of the house. (Warring denied it when I asked, but said his foremost concern was always the security of the boy.)

The next day a telegram arrived from Moscow. "Glenn Manney," it said. "It is imperative that we meet. We have much in common."

It was signed, "Natalia Gagarin."

HIS GRANDFATHER FLEW IN THE NEXT DAY TO explain, happy to be leaving a raucous session on the 1999 budget.

"Must be Yuri's daughter," he said as soon as he read it.

"Granddaughter, probably," Leslie said.

"Whatever. Son of a gun." His eyes began to shine with the reflection of earlier times. "He only got one orbit to my three, but still they beat us by almost ten months… I remember the…"

"Dad, later," Margaret said. "What about Gagarin—where is he now?"

"Dead," the Senator said flatly. "A huge fireball in an early test of the Soyuz program." He looked up at us while reaching for his handkerchief, and blew his nose loudly. "I've always admired him for that."

Later, Warring took me aside. "Of course, Craig," he whispered, "we've known all along." He quickly looked around and then continued. "Didn't you ever wonder why we were waiting at the birth?"

"Yes, but…" and he held up a hand to stop me. A quick finger across his throat, and that was all.

It turned out Natalia was nineteen years old, conceived by Gagarin's only daughter and born in '77, one year before Glenn. She had been hidden away in a bunker in the Urals, her parents no more sure what to do with her than we were with ours. Glenn wrote back immediately; she sent him a picture. She was beautiful, slim, and light-boned. She had taken to weightlessness as a fish to water, like a bird to air.

My son was smart, but he had led a sheltered life, that much I knew. And he was eighteen years old, full of things I could only vaguely remember.

Senator Glenn pulled in every favor he had, and the Air Force offered to fly my boy to Sverdlovsk in a modified C-14 transport. Glenn left on a warm day in June, tall and still growing, weighted down with a new pair of lead boots. (Thighs the size of a horse, that boy had.) I wanted to laugh, I wanted to cry. I wanted him to stay and I wanted him go, to fall in love on a sunny autumn day all his own. He was ecstatic about it all.

"Promise me you'll write," Margaret said to him in a hug.

"I will, Mom."

"And promise me you'll keep your sheets tucked in tightly at night, OK?"

And then he was gone, jumping onto the turbulent winds of the world.

THEY HAD THEIR COMING-OUT PARTY IN Amsterdam, after informing us of their decision. Glenn and Natalia were an instant sensation, bigger than Michael and Lisa Marie, and married three months later atop the Eiffel Tower. *Time* has just named them Man and Woman of the Century, and Margaret is busy writing a book. Darlings of the worldwide media, our son and his wife are

followed around the globe by a medium-sized city of fans, admirers and not a few kooks. Some think they are angels. Some think them to be callous experiments of a New World Order. There are many who believe they represent the Second Coming on the cusp of the new millennium. Glenn and Natalia smile and laugh and treat them all with respect.

"They're just people," Glenn said to me once on the phone, "and they're just looking for some hope." He gives inspirational speeches, floating over the outstretched arms of the crowd. "And besides, dad," he said, "it's fun."

Leslie has left New Hampshire now, traveling with them to take care of their medical needs, writing papers speculating on their reproductive expectations. A permanent group has taken over our front yard, camped in perpetuity, waiting for Glenn to visit home, hoping to glean something from the place where he was raised. We've tried to have them removed, but it's of no use. The Church of Scientology has a swollen membership and new headquarters down the road, and the recently-formed Gravitationalist Party preaches that the end of the world is near. We have quiet dinners, Margaret and me and Detectives Warring and Jaronik (who actually is capable of speech), and the Senator, reelected again and more certain than ever of his ultimate destiny, could not be happier. I stand at the front door some nights, taking it all in, my wife by my side, still slim and petite. I'm lucky to be married to the former Margaret Glenn, if somewhat confused by it all, lucky to have her in these run-down, messed-up days of the late nineties, lucky to have a son who has also found someone special. And who knows—maybe the two of them can make a difference.

"Look," someone shouted from the crowd last night, pointing at us. "It's Mary and Joseph, come anew."

I turned out the spotlight over our garage and tried to get some sleep.

DAVID APPELL

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