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on the cover: Yuna from Square Enix's Final Fantasy X-2.
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DESIGN: TETSUYA NOMURA

Another happy Halloween!

by Jeff Georgeson

Once again fall has struck swiftly and wonderfully, bringing cooler weather and the promise of a good winter and spring ahead, and once again Penumbria starts the season with one of its best articles to date and, appropriately for the Halloween season, stories and poems that scare the hoogles out of even me. (What's a hoogle, you ask? Don't know; I just made it up, spur of consciousness, stream of the moment, and all that.)

Last October we had an interview with the director and one of the writers of *Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex* (which still hasn't bloody made it over here, even though at the time Cartoon Network was supposed to have picked it up ... grrrrr! I say, in their general direction). This October, we return to Japan on a different mission: to find a virtual idol. Well, several, really. What's a virtual idol, you ask? (And what's with all the questions?) If you have read William Gibson's *Idoru*, you know already; if not, a virtual idol is an electronically generated star, typically a singer but also including all other branches of stardom. We look at the current virtual idols in Japan (because, yes, they do exist already) and the potential idols as well, coming from a host of different companies, including most especially Square Enix, whose Final Fantasy characters border on idolhood already (note: and Square Enix just announced at the Tokyo Game Show the release next year of a 60 minute DVD movie telling a tale of the characters in Final Fantasy VII—if well received, this could encourage as many would-be synthespian producers as the unsuccessful [in a monetary sense] *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within* discouraged). We also examine what it takes to make a virtual idol (no, not the programming know-how; we mean “make” in the sense of “making a star”) and Hollywood's frightened reaction to such things.

Then, after this, we frighten ourselves as well, starting and ending with dark poetry by Christina Sng, and in between with tales by John B. Rosenman, Ken Goldman, and Trent Zelazny. To complete our Halloween oeuvre we have comics by Stan Yan and the Hector crew, adding the finishing touches to a rather disturbing experience overall.

Looking forward, in December's or February's issue we will begin a videogame feature; after all, what could be more cutting edge than videogames? (Well, some videogames, anyway.) This will become a regular feature in Penumbria, and if you have any suggestions/comments as to what you'd like to see discussed, let us know on the Discussion Boards.

And in the meantime, enjoy yourselves!

Jeff Georgeson
Managing Editor
October 2k3

*Do you have comments about anything in the magazine?
Click the following: [Comments](#)*

Idol Ideal

You're in the audience, amongst ten thousand screaming fans, waiting for the star, the singer, the idol to appear on stage. And she does—not by walking on, but by simply appearing, one moment nothing, the next, in the spotlight. The music begins, other figures appear on stage as background dancers, and then the idol begins to sing.

And for all intents, she is real. And yet ... she isn't. Or, at least, she isn't any more than pixels are real. But she looks, moves, acts ... very real indeed.

While this scenario is about a step removed from today's technology (the holographics for a live performance aren't up to speed yet), as far as watching a performance on TV, or in the theatres, is concerned, we have reached the moment when the virtual is nearly indistinguishable from the real; yes, the moment that

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continued from *Idols* previous page

William Gibson foretold in *Idoru*, and that Hollywood has used to frighten its children and itself for years, has arrived.

For anyone in Japan, this is nearly a statement of the obvious: Virtual idols have been an experiment in progress since the mid-1990s, with the likes of Hori-Pro's Kyoko Date gracing the covers of magazines and putting out CDs. Those first attempts have long been consigned to the attics of the JF Sebastians of the world, but they weren't the last. Since then several straight-on attempts at VIs, various video game characters, and a feature film have created a movement, and in some cases a viable market, in favor of virtual idols.

The most visible of these in the West was Square Pictures' big-budget feature film *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*. A continuance in some ways of Square's (now Square Enix) highly acclaimed *Final Fantasy* series of video games, FF:TSW was a bold step in CG work, with an entire cast of virtual characters who looked about 95% real—in fact, there were moments when the audience might completely forget that what they were looking at was animation, from the characters to the backgrounds. This was an incredible technical achievement, and while the film itself was not the absolute best in terms of plot and pandered a bit much to Hollywood-style cinema, it should have garnered more praise than it did. As it was, the West wasn't ready to see its actors replaced, and the film did remarkably badly in terms of box office receipts. It was snubbed again at the Acade-

my Awards ceremonies, where Hollywood stuck its head in the sand, ostrich-like, and pretended that the film didn't exist—FF:TSW won not a single award, despite being the most technologically progressive film ever seen.

While this helped put Square's feature film-making division out of business, Square Enix continues to this day to create the most stunning and graphically incredible game cinematics ever seen (not to mention another short film, *The Final Flight of the Osiris*, which has nearly the animation quality of FF:TSW). Its latest addition, *Final Fantasy X-2*, includes a music video-type sequence that drops the jaw: The opening of this article is, in fact, a poor textual recreation of part of the sequence (and the image used is from that game: Yuna, singing on stage). The movements of the lead character, Yuna, are nearly "more human than human," as *Blade Runner* might have had it, and other than being far too smooth-skinned to be a real woman, Yuna could pass for any of the popular "real" idols gracing the pages of *Rolling Stone* and other magazines. If Square Enix had a mind to, they could probably port characters like Yuna out of the games and give them lives of their own in the "real" world.

In the case of e frontier/Blue Moon Studio, Inc., a Japanese company that has several "digital beauties" it uses as models and musicians, it has done just this: taken a 3D model and given her a life of her own. One of the models, Fei Fei, has, in the past, done advertising for Samsung, appearing in ads on the sides of buses, on billboards, and even in a

television commercial. She even has an entire photobook, *A Fragment: Fei Fei Photographs*, and some of the images there are astonishing: In one, she appears with what we presume are real children, and there is no way to tell that she is in any way virtual.

Another Japanese group, Ken-ichi Kutsugi / extage, owns the copyright to another virtual idol, Yuki Terai. Although less stunningly realistic than either Fei-Fei or Yuna, Yuki Terai has everything an idol could want: photo books, a music CD, DVDs, calendars, posters, greeting cards, PlayStation games, and even her own internet browser. In addition, she has further developed a more "human" side to her: According to an article on Akadot, "Even though everyone is clear Yuki is not real, she is still worshipped and cared for due to her imperfections and frailness." She is pictured not only in the types of settings that are standard idol fare (singing, on CD and magazine covers, etc), she is also pictured eating frozen dinners alone, as a painter annoyed with her dog, and even holding a gun to her head.

How to Be a Successful Virtual Idol, Part One

What Yuki Terai has given virtual idols that others will have to have to survive is a human, emotional element, something beyond looking good and moving well. In the same way that an actual robot/repllicant/what-have-you will have to be able to interact with human beings on an emotional level in order to make people care about them, virtual idols must inspire caring feelings in their human audience. How does a

company do this? Really, it is about character development.

As in any good book, or film, the way to make the audience spend its money and read/watch breathlessly is through well-developed characters: Indiana Jones and James Bond are fondly remembered, developed emotionally and humanly, and the characters alone are enough to draw an audience. In the same way, a virtual idol can become beloved not by being an overlogical Mr. Spock-type character but by being a Roy Batty, an emotional emblem of a troubled human being, or at least a being searching for answers within themselves, at least appearing to think about their reactions to the world around them as if they were human. Yuki Terai has achieved this through emotional and heart-tugging photos and quotes; Square Enix achieved this in FF VIII with its expert characterization of Squall Leonheart and Rinoa



fei fei
© e-frontier, Inc./Blue Moon Studio Inc.



FF VIII, the Emotion Engine, and character development

Square's (now Square Enix) Final Fantasy VIII was a turning point in video game history, especially as concerned the non-video game playing public: Its use of realistically rendered characters in incredible cinematic (or full-motion video, or FMV) clips had gamers and non-gamers alike interested in the love story of Rinoa and Squall, far beyond the gameplay itself. Getting to the FMV clips became almost the reason for playing the game.

And what's wrong with that?

The characters in FF VIII are very well developed, and the cinematics, plot and soundtrack tie into this to create some of the most memorable characters ever seen, whether in game or film. The scene depicted to the left of this article became an emblem of the game's emotional impact and, indeed, is used as both part of the introductory FMV and later in the game.

Part of the success of these characters is Square Enix's use of the "Emotion Engine," an element of Sony's PlayStation that allows for finely rendered cinematics. In FF VIII, the Emotion Engine is used to render the characters' facial expressions in detail, giving them just the extra "human" element that made them stars beyond the gamer's purview. This, in addition to the fine character arcs and plotting Square Enix consistently brings to its Final Fantasy series (see especially Final Fantasy VII and the famous death of Aeris), make Rinoa and Squall, and the characters that follow, prime candidates for virtual idolhood.

Heartily, summed up in one of the most stirring cinematic sequences in video game history (see sidebar). (Whether Yuna and her companions in FF X-2 accomplish this has yet to be seen in the US, as the game will not be released here until early December.)

Of course, the look and movement of a character help convey emotions and become a deeper character. Square Enix achieved this in FF VIII using the PlayStation's much-touted "Emotion Engine," which allowed them to render facial expressions with much finer detail in the cinematic portions of the game.

How to Be a Successful Virtual Idol, Part Two

Of course, the second important element of virtual idol creation is marketing, with a big capital M. Without this, the idol isn't noticed, just as a human idol will fall between the cracks without being shown on billboards, buses, and television. More to the point, the idol must be marketed as an idol to really become one: That is, she (or he; there are a few male virtual idols around) must be seen as a person with varying interests, and not just as a 3D model or video game character (see sidebar on Reiko Nagase from Ridge Racer).

Thus far, it seems that companies either start out to create a virtual idol or don't, and the line hasn't been crossed later in the development of the character. Again, there is no reason why a video game character, for instance, couldn't become bigger than the game; few companies, however, would be willing to risk the marketing money to enter, in effect, an



entirely different field. Square tried such an adventure by filming FF: TSW; one wonders whether anyone will be trying anything like that again soon. However, with singers like Yuna already gracing the screens of gamers across the world, perhaps it is merely a fraction of a step before we see just this.

The Advantages of Being a Virtual Idol

There are advantages to having (and being) virtual idols around. For one, they fill a niche that human idols cannot: A virtual idol can be anywhere and everywhere at once, can be anything from your companion as you make

yuki terai
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Ridge Racer and Reiko Nagase

In contrast to the characters from *Final Fantasy VIII*, Namco's Reiko Nagase, the face that launched a thousand virtual grand prix, never quite made it into the hearts (or even the notice) of non-gamers. Reiko is beautifully rendered, is featured in her own calendar, and even has something of a story behind her ... so why didn't she become a bigger item?

For one thing, Reiko never had the marketing that some game characters and all moderately successful virtual idols have had. She has remained tied in to *Ridge Racer* and is not thought of outside of that venue. While Squall and Rinoa of *FF VIII* sometimes take on a life of their own, being mentioned almost before the game, Reiko is subsumed by *Ridge Racer*, to be replaced by another whenever the company wishes without great fanfare (or even notice outside the game community).

For another, while having a strictly game-related story, Reiko's story and character development have never been as deep as that necessary to create a virtual idol. In fact, in terms of character arc, well, she has none—and the game isn't, after all, about her, so it isn't necessary to the enjoyment of the game.

And, while we think Reiko would otherwise be an excellent candidate for a virtual idol, she just never made it onto that broader stage.

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it through your day to a star singing to millions as they drive home from work. Other stars, that is, real idols, can do this by proxy, but for VIs, it is part and parcel of their existence.

Also, a VI doesn't have to pander to the same sorts of tastes as a real idol, say a singer who has to drag themselves from concert to concert, has to resist the temptations of fame and fortune. A VI can remain innocent, or can follow any trajectory she (or her company, or her audience) likes, breaking ground that real stars can only dream about.

Finally, virtual idols can change at a whim, electronically, no special surgery necessary, no dressing room necessary—as Yuna does in concert, her clothes change completely, both color and substance, before our eyes. They are creatures of the electronic frontier, and while not flesh and blood, they have the advantages of being an integral part of the special effects, and can perform in ways no human can.

VIs and Humans

Of course, once virtual idols become less-than-rare, the issue of human-VI interaction

will surely come up, as it does in William Gibson's *Idoru*. In *Idoru*, human singer Rez falls in love with VI Rei Toei and plans to marry her; only the fact of his incredible wealth and well-known eccentricity keeps the plans moving forward, and a part of the plot concerns his fan club and whether they will allow such a thing to happen. The VI is seen with the other characters, given a special projection apparatus so that she may appear and interact with people at, for instance, a dinner party, and she is for all intents a member of society—however, she is also the property of the company that developed her, and thus is

also a piece of intellectual and physical property.

One does not need much imagination to see the sorts of issues we raise by creating virtual idols; they are roughly the same as those presented by creating any form of AI. The differences are important, however. For one, current VIs really do not have an independent intelligence; if they sing, it is with another's voice, and with another's ideas. They can appear in almost any medium, but do not go about on their own, driving through the city or taking their dog for a walk in between modeling sessions. As such, they are not going to be afforded the rights of human beings and are, technically and correctly at this time, the intellectual and physical property of the companies that created them.

As emotional as they can be, as perfectly rendered and heart rending as they can be made to seem, they are still, at this time, merely beautiful puppets. But we can imagine them not to be, and perhaps that is the most important element of all.

Hollywood and Virtual Idols

Hollywood has been afraid of the possibility of "virtual actors" (also called "synthespians") since long before Square Pictures' *Final Fantasy: The Spirits Within*, and with the advent of such films and the ubiquity of computerized special effects (including animals, monsters, and other completely virtual characters) it looks like they may be doing more than just crying "Wolf!" However, given the studios' and actors' monopoly on media coverage and marketing generally, any synthespian-driven film is going to be almost invisible to the movie-going public.

Examples of this multimedia stranglehold abound (the handling of *Princess Mononoke* and *Spirited Away* before it won an Academy Award being glaring instances of this), but FF: TSW is the prime example of Hollywood's nightmares made true, and then squashed like a bug in vitriolic overreaction. The US release of FF: TSW did have a moderate amount of fanfare, especially in science and technical magazines which touted the technology and the realism of the characters, but bombed after release (in part because US audiences seem to be perpetually unready to accept an animated film as adult-level fare). One would have thought Hollywood would have been relieved, but at least give the film its due as one of the great technical achievements of its time—but no. FF: TSW was invisible at the Academy Awards ceremonies, not even given a look in at the newly-formed animation award (which went to *Shrek*) and failing to garner even one technical award. Hollywood seemed to be following an "if we ignore it, it will go away" mentality.

Unfortunately, this will work as long as VIs are so expensive to create and maintain (FF: TSW was monstrously expensive): No company is going to spend the money necessary to create a good product in the face of such hostility. However, in other countries, most notably Japan, such experiments may work, and already we are seeing video of virtual idols such as Fei Fei and Yuki Terai—which, while not on a par with FF: TSW, are indicators that the price of the technology is coming down, and when it reaches a suitable level, VIs will again be seen in films. [NOTE: As we were going to press, Square Enix announced at the Tokyo Game Show a summer 2004 release of a 60-minute film using CG versions of the characters in *Final Fantasy VII*. As far as we know, this will be a DVD-only release. Whether it will be shown outside of Japan is unknown at this time.]

One note about the recent Hollywood film about "synthespians," *Simone*. Besides being a not-so-good film in general, it is definitely Hollywood's way of laughing about the possibility of virtual actors—and is almost a piece of disinformation, for the way to create and maintain one in reality resembles very little the images in the film. Add to this that the synthespian in *Simone* is not even computer-generated (she's just a real actor pretending to be virtual) and that the film is ultimately a comedy, and you have a film laughing nervously about the very idea that it puts forward—that VIs would be possible.

In the Beginning

by Christina Sng

In an ancient tomb
Inside a forgotten city,
A scroll tells of a prophecy:

“Heaven’s daughter, born
Of flesh and fire, will bring
The two realms together.”

*

They called to me
In my dreams,
Led me to this place

Where the beginning and
The end of the world meet
Inside Earth’s tallest peak.

I stand alone at hell’s lip,
Feeling a certain peace
As its fires lap at my feet.

I bend along with the stream,
Letting the lava flow
Immortalize me in gold fury.

In the thick savanna below,
The palm trees wave
Their green banners in cheer.

Each morning the local people
Bring their children
To the volcano’s edge to play.

They believe to live fully
One must learn to play with fire
And learn to run with it.

It is a good philosophy
During these days
When the Earth shakes;

A frightened child
Alone in the dark.
She is still very young.

*

After a hundred seasons
Of evolution and extinction,
When the lands lie buried

In the depths of the ocean,
I rise from the dull echoes
Of the dead, charred giant,

Where the last survivors gather
To bow before me, their savior,
Their resurrected golden god.

The Kissing King

by John B. Rosenman

Dawn had walked a long way from Peru to see The Kissing King, and she was not about to stop now simply because her feet hurt and she had finally reached the equator. She braced her hand against a tree and gazed up the steep, sun-drenched hill toward the white marble temple in which He sat, here at the center of the world. What did He look like? What did He say? Did He smile when one entered His presence, or simply stare into the distance? And the most important questions of all: since she was so terribly miserable, could His kiss transform her heart and mind as it had those of all the other pilgrims who visited Him? Could He, as she so desperately hoped, make her new and wash away all the pain?

Despite many rumors, little was known about The Kissing King. Oh, there was endless speculation and discussion, as well as those who spoke with certainty and claimed to know the truth. Some asserted that The King was the handsomest man alive, or the ugliest; that He greeted them lovingly with their own name, or with sublime silence. As for the change He wrought in each seeker's soul, some said it came from His breath, the shape of His lips, or the precise, mystic manner in which He pressed His lips to those of the person who knelt before Him. There was even one old, wizened woman who insisted that The Kissing King was an ancient hag like herself, complete with warts and halitosis.

Only one thing was known for sure. And that was, when the hundred seekers who were chosen each year in the worldwide lottery came down the hill they had struggled up, they were transformed, changed forever and made anew. Where before they had felt empty and sad, now they were filled with love and joy.

Why now, just this moment, she saw an example of such a change! Hopping down the hill toward her, came a sour curmudgeon Dawn had observed before. His wrinkled, once ugly features were joyous,

and he looked twenty years younger than he had earlier, when he'd protested bitterly his daughter's insistence that he climb the hill. "Such foolishness!" he had spat then. "The only thing I'll get from his kiss is germs!"

Clearly, his outlook had changed. "Yippeee!" he shouted, throwing his arms about. "I feel wonderful, and I love everybodddddd!"

"Do you, Daddy?" his daughter called from beyond the entrance gate. "Do you forgive me for bringing you here? Do you feel better?"

Incredibly, the old man spun around and around as he descended, and did not fall. He held his arms out like a child playing. "Yessss," he laughed, "I'm no longer sad and miserable. I feel reborn! And I love you and feel so grateful. Thank heaven I was chosen this year!"

Up and down the line, pilgrims talked and laughed excitedly. "Do you see?" one woman cried. "His kiss washes all your pain away!"

"Bah!" sneered the man in front of Dawn. "It's all fake—another lie!"

Dawn started to speak but the woman beat her. "Then why are you here? If you didn't want to come, why didn't you let them draw another name for the lottery? They choose so few. It's a sin to waste such an opportunity."

"Don't worry, I won't waste it," the man said. He pointed up at the temple. "The Divine King—huh! I'll expose him for what he is, prove him false!" "But how? And why? The Kissing King asks for no money, seeks no profit. What is there to expose?" Dawn saw the woman's eyes rise to the hill's summit. "Didn't you hear what that man said? The King makes you new!" "Ain't no such thing as new," the skeptic said. "The world's a lie and life stinks. All your friends

betray you and your children forget you.”

“But He gives you a new chance!”

“Bah! Everything’s old and doomed. *Everything*. There are no new chances.” “I feel sorry for you,” the woman said. The man shrugged and turned sharp, hawklike features toward his destination. “Feel sorry for yourself,” he said. “I don’t know how he does it, but this is all a lie, an elaborate con. That fraud up there hypnotizes folks somehow, and makes them believe it.” He stiffened his shoulders. “But it won’t work with me.”

The line advanced a little, then advanced some more. A cloud passed over the sun, and a cold wind made Dawn shiver. As she slowly climbed, she thought of how right the man ahead of her was. The world *was* old, brutal, and empty, and her existence an endless road of lies, slaps, and cruelties. There was absolutely never anything new. By the time she was four or five in her squalid little village, she had already known all there was to know, and the thirty years since then had only been a variation on the same bleak theme. And love, which the charlatan on the hill claimed to offer, was the biggest lie of all. Thinking back over all the cold and selfish men she’d known, Dawn could not recall a single kindness, a single moment of joy or sharing.

Then why are you here? she thought. If you think this King is but another lie, why did you come all this way to climb this cold hill? Don’t you know that hope is a lie too?

But on she struggled, occasionally squinting at the bright, joyful faces that descended the hill. I’m reborn! each one seemed to cry. The Kissing King madame new! Oh, if only he could do the same for her, make her forget her poverty and stillborn children, the men who took from her and gave nothing in return. A lame, extremely ugly woman—cause enough for bitterness—stopped beside them in her descent. “I feel different, so blessed!” she sang. “The King is beautiful, the Lord of Love!” “Really?” someone asked. “What does He *look* like?” Confusion marred her joy. “I . . .” “Bah!” the skeptic said. “Despite what some folks say, no one knows what he looks like.” He glanced up the

hill. “If you ask me, he doesn’t exist at all. ‘The Kissing King’. How silly can you get?” “The King is divine,” an elderly man behind Dawn said. “Yet He must suffer the disbelief of fools like you!”

Stung, the skeptic glared. “No one’s ever even seen him, or can describe him,” he said. “He’s a fiction, a myth created to control us. If he were real . . .”

“Some things you can’t look at directly,” the old man said. “Like the sun, for example.” “No one remembers him,” the other persisted. “It’s all pre-suggestion, like a hypnotist’s trick. Or perhaps a drug in the water we drink. And why don’t we have any pictures of him, not even one?” Exultant, the ugly woman pulled a folded paper from her pocket. “Well, I have a picture. I drew a quick one just after I left His presence!” She unfolded the paper and held it up. “See? Isn’t He beautiful?” Like the others, Dawn pressed forward to look. But all she saw was a blank sheet. “I don’t see anything,” she said. The woman glanced at it and shrugged. “Doesn’t matter,” she said. She touched her mouth in awe. “I can still feel the taste of His lips on mine,” she said softly. “It’s like apples and honey.” Lowering her hand, she tapped her chest. “And the way I feel in here proves The King lives! Maybe He just doesn’t want us to remember the way He looks, ever think of that? Or maybe we can’t see or clearly remember Him ‘cause He’s spirit!”

The skeptic laughed. “He’s spirit all right. Like plain, empty air.”

“I don’t care,” the woman said. “I feel too good to mind what you think.” She started down the hill again, then stopped. “I feel pity for you,” she said. “You don’t believe in anything, do you?”

The man turned away. “Only the truth,” he growled.

The woman left and the line moved again. After a while the sun emerged and warmed Dawn’s skin. The light of truth, she thought, but to her, truth was rotten debris at the bottom of a well, or the cruel words and kicks she’d endured down through the years. Yet the ugly woman had seemed almost beautiful when she’d touched her mouth and said, “I can still feel the taste of His lips on mine. It’s like

apples and honey.”

Finally she reached the two large gates before the King’s glistening white temple. A guard opened the gate on the right and let the skeptic through, then closed it.

The skeptic looked through the gate at Dawn and those behind her. “You wait,” he shouted, shaking an upraised fist. “I’ll get to the bottom of this, expose this charlatan for what he is!” Dawn watched him pass through the temple’s marble columns and disappear through the door. As he did, a cloud passed over the sun and the world darkened.

“He’ll see the truth,” the old man behind Dawn said. “They all do.”

Dawn turned. “How do you know?”

He raised a frail, trembling hand. “He made me new, just like everyone He sees. Thank heaven, I’ve been blessed to win the lottery again and see Him once more.”

“Why do you need to come back?” Dawn asked. “Isn’t once enough?”

As it thundered, the man gazed at the temple with worshipful eyes. “When you see Him, you’ll understand.”

But as she waited, Dawn grew more and more doubtful. She found it hard to believe that the defiant man who’d just entered the temple, could be changed or softened by anything. No, such a man would never be changed. He might even expose The Kissing King as a fraud. What, then, will I do? Dawn thought. Who will save me? “Here he comes,” someone said.

Dawn looked up to see the skeptic leave the temple and walk through the gate to the left. He passed her without a sign of recognition. “Hey,” she shouted. “What happened?”

He stopped and turned around. Dawn gasped. The hard, hawklike face looked soft and young, and the once combative eyes gazed right

through her.

“What happened?” he said. “EVERYTHING!”

His knees folded and he knelt on the hill. Thunder rumbled again, and moments later, it started to rain. Stunned, Dawn watched the man raise his eyes to the temple. “Bless you!” he cried. “Bless you for showing me the truth!”

The gate before Dawn opened. “You may go to see Him now,” the guard said. She tore her gaze away from the kneeling man. “What?”

“You may go to see Him now,” the guard repeated.

She moved through the gate, dimly aware of rain spattering her face.

What had The King in the temple done to the skeptic? He didn’t even look like the same man. When she reached the columns before the entrance, she leaned against one, suddenly afraid to go in, to embrace the new life she had so wanted. She saw herself emerging slack-jawed and limp-kneed in just a few minutes, changed into something totally new. Maybe it won’t even be me any longer, she thought. And if it’s not, if my identity’s gone and I’m something else, then the person I am now will be dead.

Is what you are now so precious? she thought. All the pain, misery and emptiness . . . you want to preserve that? But it’s all I know. It’s who I am. I don’t want to kneel on the ground with rain on my face.

Or do I? She thought of the man’s joyful expression, of how much happier he had seemed. Dawn shivered and glanced back at the faces watching her from beyond the gate. Then she turned and entered the temple. It was cool inside, and the air was strangely limpid, like water she’d seen once in a pond. She passed down an aisle between rows of seats, toward a figure sitting on a carved, wooden throne.

The Kissing King.

She tried to see Him clearly, but for some reason it was hard to make

out His face, though she could tell He was flanked by guards on both sides.

Dawn stopped just before the throne. The King gazed calmly down at her.

“I’m glad you have come,” He said.

His voice was soft and comforting, but straining to see His face, she

found she still couldn’t see it very well. It seemed to be shifting, and to be not one face but many faces, as if it had been formed by the hopes and expectations of all the pilgrims who had journeyed here. In it, she even thought she caught a brief glimpse of the man who had just knelt in the rain.

“I . . . I’m not sure what to do,” she said.

The King held out His arms. “Come to me.” For a moment she resis-



ted. Then she tottered forward and knelt.

“Do I give you something?” she whispered.

He smiled. She knew He smiled, but not whether He was young or old, dark or fair. “I am the one who gives,” He said. “It has always been that way.”

“And y-you can take away my pain? All the hurt and pain? You can make me NEW like the others?”

“Yes.”

“And –”

“Shhh.” He leaned forward then and pressed His lips to hers. It was like no kiss she had ever had, or all the kisses that had ever existed. Erotic, yet chaste, sensuous, yet spiritual—it was all these at once. And while it lasted, Dawn felt a cool, sweet river flow through her soul. All the pain and ugliness she had known faded, to be replaced by bliss. Then the King started to pull back, break contact. No, she thought, it was too soon! Afraid that He hadn’t given her enough, that He was holding something back, she seized Him and fastened her lips to His. He tried to pull away, but she held Him, finding a strength within her she had never known before, a fierce, desperate intensity. No, her mind screamed. I won’t go back to what I was! I need more to be reborn!

The guards shouted and tried to pull her off, but she resisted, clinging to The King with all her being. I won’t be sad and miserable again, she thought. I won’t! Her hands tightened on His skin. Give me all

you are! Give me all your love, every last little bit of it. I must be sure!

The King began moaning deep in His throat. Dimly, Dawn felt one of the guards seize her around the neck, but she only pressed tighter against The King, drinking in His love, sucking it deep inside her. More, she thought, more, more!

Finally, the guard hurled her back. Lying on the ground, she was surprised to find that now she could see The Kissing King clearly. He was a young, pleasant-looking man. Quite ordinary, really!

“Look what you’ve done!” the guard cried.

But in her joy, Dawn had turned and didn’t see The King’s face and body start to shrivel, the warm, living flesh grow dry and lifeless, wasting quickly away until He resembled a dummy. Nor did she realize that the soft, full lips she had just kissed had become thin and maggot-white.

The King raised a feeble arm. “Why?” He whispered.

Dawn didn’t even hear him. Rising, she glanced about with glorious new vision, bursting with the need to tell others how beautiful life was and of her infinite love. Why, she loved everybody now, even the mother who had abandoned her and the men who had abused her. Most of all, she loved The Kissing King for what He had given her. She laughed and ran from the temple, eager to celebrate with others His vast and wonderful gift. Skipping down the hill, she was so filled with love that she did not even hear the weeping start behind her.

Kissing Off Amber

by Ken Goldman

*“Hey fiddle-dee-dee
An actor’s life for me . . .”*

—Walt Disney’s “Pinnochio” (1940)

Blessed with the brooding good looks of a matinee idol and a modicum of talent, rising young star Zane St. George allowed no nubile young thing to stand in the way of his destiny. Love never entered into the equation. There were those women who would claim St. George had no idea what the word meant.

“I’m so sorry it has to be this way. It’s been great, really great [add name here], but you see . . .”

He could do this with Amber O’Hara too. Hell yes, he could do this. Like any method actor worth his union card he made himself believe it.

He was an actor, dammit.

All he had to do was stick to the script . . .

Zane pulled the covers from him while Amber lay at his side. She was a light sleeper and she yawned herself awake. The digital read 4:48.

“Sorry,” he said, already half out of bed and sweating despite the room’s coolness. “I didn’t mean to—”

“Got to pee again?” she asked, her words muffled by the pillow.

“No. Got to talk. I mean, now that you’re up.” He switched the light on. Amber turned to him, beautiful even without her makeup. Her hair looked like spilled butterscotch, not a bad catch for a kid who was hacking cabs in L.A. less than a year earlier. He was going to hate this.

[Fuck it. Got to stay focused, like McCaffee says.]

“Christ, Zane, last night was wonderful. But it’s almost morning and yesterday I could hardly walk. Put that thing back in your ’jammies.”

“No. I mean I really want to talk.” His words sounded serious enough to bring the girl’s smile to a full stop. “It’s been a great few months. I wanted you to know that. There’s no other way to say this, Amber. There’s the new pilot, you know, and I have a real shot this time. Maybe you and I ought to slow it down while the networks are looking it over. To keep me focused, I mean. I didn’t want to hurt you, but—”

That much was true. Zane had already completed the pilot for “The World According to Sam,” some Harry Potter rip-off about a 20-something kid who discovers, with full laugh-track accompaniment, that he’s a wizard. St. George personally thought the script was a piece of shit, an obvious Frodo-Meets-Seinfeld stew, but if the new comedic fantasy series deal came through he had performed his last dancing Dr. Pepper commercial. He didn’t need to hear his agent lecturing about the necessity of keeping his female fans’ panties moist, or how he could never allow any young cooz pot to derail him from the fast track. But Max McCaffee, always laboring for his ten percent, had preached anyway about the importance of remaining unencumbered and focused on the prize. St. George didn’t expect Amber to understand any of this, but the model’s understanding was

never a requirement.

“Wait. Hold on here—” Amber interrupted, allowing Zane’s words to sink in. She sat up. “Let me get this straight. I’m here in your bed with your cum drying on my thighs and you’re telling me goodbye? What is this, a joke?”

“Look, I’m sorry, okay? It’s just that—”

She turned from him. “No, *I’m* sorry. Because I’m not going to let it happen, Zane. Not tonight. I’m going back to sleep.” She fell into her pillow, pulling the covers to her chin.

Zane wasn’t certain he had understood the girl correctly. “Amber, did you hear what I—?” Nothing. “Look, you can’t just pretend you didn’t hear me.”

Apparently she could. Except for a cute snort the girl was already gone, sleeping as if she had flat lined. Maybe she was just playing dumb, dismissing what he had told her as if his words had resulted from some bad fish. But a vindictive former lover was no laughing matter for a guy with so much to lose. Zane did not intend his first shot at stardom to be his last.

He remained awake until the alarm sounded. At 6:30 Billy Joel was saying goodbye to Hollywood.

Amber had already commandeered the small kitchen and fixed Zane a cheese omelette with bacon just the way he liked it, even smiled when she placed a cup of steaming coffee before him. She said nothing of the night before. He kept quiet too, conscientiously burying himself behind the new Enquirer, acting absorbed in an article about Britney Spears’ fading career. Possibly Amber believed she had dreamed their conversation of the previous night, deciding to keep any negative energy from disturbing her concentration. She was modeling for some weenie bop magazine later in the morning and maybe need-

ed to keep her spirits up for the shoot. Denial worked a whole lot better than Valium.

“Sleep well?” he finally asked as if their late night conversation never happened.

Amber giggled like he had made a joke. “Weren’t you there?”

He smiled unconvincingly and focused on his eggs. He wasn’t that skilled an actor to pull off good spirits this morning. After ten silent minutes she kissed his forehead. “Give that peacock network hell today.” She headed for the door carrying her overnight bag. “Call me tonight.” She blew him another kiss.

Zane smiled and waited for her to fire up her Mustang, certain he wouldn’t be making that call. Instead he called McCaffee. He didn’t apologize for waking him.

“Max, I think I may need your help . . .”

* * *

At the Green Garden Max McCaffee listened over his second plate of fried eggs, rubbed a thick hand over his bald pate, and gave his client the expected lecture about the disadvantages of thinking with his penis. “So this Amber is going to be a problem?”

“I’m pretty sure she won’t go quietly into the night and I don’t have the stomach for a round of damage control after the fact. Christ, Max. You know what to do. You’re the wizard of Oz, so just fucking do it!”

McCaffee had been through this before with his young and horny male clients who quickly discovered that in the parallel universe of Hollywood, women were a different breed. He didn’t need some vindictive c*** running to the Tattler three episodes into “The World According to Sam” with some story about how St. George couldn’t get it up for anyone without a dick. He pulled out a small black velvet box and handed it to Zane. “Your love life is going to break me, kid.”

The disappointment showed on Zane's face. McCaffee's connections were shady but they were also legion in this town. The man could make things happen, and that included arranging for selected persons to go away. St. George expected a lot more from him than a string of pearls that looked like decayed teeth.

"Jesus, Max, you think Amber's so dumb she can be bought off with a goddamn piece of costume jewelry the fucking oyster was glad to get rid of? She's a model, not a nitwit!" He shoved the junk stones back into their container. "You're going to have to do a whole lot better."

"Not on my salary. Trust me, these pearls are special in ways you can't imagine. You'll see. Hang these babies 'round her neck and that fashion plate will think you're one class act, kiss you tenderly, and wish you luck with your career. By next week you'll be home free while she's screwing some new guy whose ass is squeezed into Calvin Klein briefs on a Ventura billboard."

McCaffee knew how to put things into perspective. A second inspection of the pearls suggested that maybe, if Zane kept the lights low enough, the necklace ploy might work. Of course, it was even money Amber would tell him to take a flying leap at a donut and flush the stones down the toilet.

Max seemed certain enough to reassure him. There was no pitch man in Burbank like McCaffee, and Zane hoped some of the man's talent had rubbed off on him. The agent scarfed down the last of his eggs with a smile. "I'll handle your b***** kitty myself if you're not satisfied with the results. I have a lot invested in you, kid, just for the record. Now, let's get your ass over to NBC and make you famous . . ."

* * *

[— From the pilot script of "The World According to Sam" (pg. 23)]

. . . and cautiously, Sam enters the cave of Old Grindolph the wise

man, whose face is hidden in smoke and darkness. The elder sits in the far corner cross-legged smoking his holy pipe. He has been expecting this young prodigy but reacts with barely a notice, knowing much more than he will be telling. Sam approaches slowly, standing before the aged master without a word, uneasy and fidgeting in the dancing candle light.

OLD GRINDOLPH : "So, we seek a wizard and a wizard is what ye claim to be, lad? Most curious, a wizard th't calls himself Sam, no less. Come . . ."

SAM (*steps forward*) : "I seek Grindolph, the elder whose wisdom might reveal the truth of who I am. He is whom I seek. You are him . . . that is, you are he. I mean . . . **You're the guy!**"

Shrouded in thickening curls of smoke the old man demonstrates the first evidence of curiosity regarding his strange visitor.

OLD GRINDOLPH : "The nearest mountain tram does not travel to this height. There exists no means by which one so inexperienced might complete this treacherous journey alone, yet here ye be. Tell me, young Sam, is it wizardry helps ye climb this remote mountain-top?"

SAM : "Only the wizardry required to follow a map. I hitched a ride on a local donkey leased from some old woman on her way from market. Let me tell you, that trip was murder on the poor ass. And it wasn't much fun for the donkey either."

[Sam, coughing, swaps at the air to clear the smoke screen surrounding the old man]

SAM : "You ought to break the habit, man. That stuff will kill you."

The elder looks at him with no change in his expression or in his smoking.

OLD GRINDOLPH : “I should think your concern would lie with your own well being, young Sam, for my destiny is not as yours. If ye be a seeker of truth, then a true wizard must first learn to separate what ‘seems’ from what ‘is’.”

Something suddenly diverts Sam’s attention.

Old Grindolph’s beautiful young granddaughter, Trista, appears as if from nowhere. She notices Sam staring with interest and shyly averts her eyes.

Sam, clearly forgetting the purpose of his mission, mutters to himself “I’ll show you ‘what is’ old man.” He keeps right on staring at the young girl. Finally he turns to Old Grindolph.

SAM (*whispers*) : *Psst! Old guy!* You got a breath mint?

* * *

McCaffee earned his paycheck later that morning. “The World According to Sam” was typical sitcom tripe but the NBC brass loved the tape, even were interested in a call-back within the week because those money grubbers over at “Friends” were finally into their last season. The four studio suits seemed especially taken with Zane’s performance in the lead, the sole woman among them suggesting the actor had a smart ass quality with a dark edge, “like the bastard son of Michael J. Fox and Leona Helmsly.” One guy seated at the far end of the long table even gave the young hopeful the eye. St. George figured, if that’s what it takes to land the series he might even let Mr. Big believe he had a chance. He smiled right back at him.

Smiling handshakes were exchanged all around, the equivalent of a verbal contract in Studio City.

Later he and Max shared a liquid lunch on Glenoaks Boulevard and clinked their martini glasses with high hopes. McCaffee reminded him the day’s success made the necessity of Amber’s graceful exit even

more urgent. St. George tapped the necklace inside his sportscoat to assure him the deed was as good as done.

Zane made the call he swore he wouldn’t make, performing the best of his acting repertoire in his conversation. The t.v. pilot looked like it was a ‘go’, he told Amber; she told him his success required a celebration, suggesting a candlelit dinner at her place. He offered to pick up a bottle of cabernet; she offered him the best oral sex in Santa Monica.

Zane revealed nothing of his intentions. Hell, he wasn’t ending it with her completely, not really. He saw no reason they couldn’t get together now and then, that’s how he would explain it to Amber, although it seemed prudent to tell that to her after the blow job.

He had never been to her place, but it was as he imagined it, a tasteful garden apartment along the trendier section of Wilshire with windows everywhere so sunlight washed each room during any time of day. The lush couch was framed with swivel glass accent tables and the living room low lit with Fuente floor lamps. One wall remained completely blank lacking any pictures, plants, or cumbersome book shelves. Definitely L.A. minimalist chic. There were mirrors everywhere, of course. Models rarely strayed far from their own reflection.

They ate a fantastically cooked duck l’orange. They drank some very good wine. And they fucked right there on her luxuriously upholstered couch. Twice.

Amber was slipping into her jeans when Zane approached behind her and handed her the black velvet box, thankful for the dim lighting. “I wanted you to have this,” he said. He considered kissing her, but she could have easily misinterpreted that. He felt vaguely idiotic just standing there.

Amber grinned, clearly surprised but pleased.

“What’s the occasion?”

Well, babe, the occasion is I'm going to be tipping my hat for awhile

...

“I saw it and thought you should have it.” Simple. Clean.

Amber looked inside and her expression changed that instant. For one horrible moment Zane feared she might turn to him and deliver a hay-maker right across his chops. Instead her lip quivered as if she were about to burst into tears.

“Zane, you shouldn't have done this. These must have cost a fortune. Where did you find something so beauti—?” And then she *did* cry.

St. George never could deal properly with a sobbing woman, but at least for now her tears were happy ones. Her reaction touched something inside him, something unfamiliar and mildly disquieting. He didn't have the heart to go through with the rest of his planned speech, not feeling like this.

“Aren't you going to try them on?” he asked instead, dispensing with his carefully planned kiss-off. He had to hand it to Max. Somehow those pearls now looked like a million bucks, nothing like the uncomely boogers he had seen inside the Green Garden. A neat trick, but entirely up to snuff for Maxwell McCaffee. Before a mirror he helped slide the jewelry around Amber's delicate neck, and with a face glistening with tears she looked at his reflection behind her.

“They're beautiful,” she said.

“And so are you.”

She turned to him.

Amber *was* a goddamned knock-out even wearing simple jeans and a bra and with her makeup smeared. The pearls added something, some indefinable quality Zane hadn't seen before. He had no idea what that quality was, but his heart felt like a runaway train. Screw Max McCaffee and his red flags. He was going to kiss her, and he was going to do it right now, kiss her hard and kiss her long, because this girl was

something special. This girl was . . .

. . . *She was gagging??*

She was trying to scream!

“What the -?”

Amber, choking for air, gasped while the necklace tightened like a coiled snake around her throat, twisting itself with elongated canine incisors until her tendons darkened like thick veins. The string of teeth drew blood, chewing into the soft flesh of her neck.

“I can't breathe! I can't—!”

He tried to unhook the necklace but the catch had welded shut. Tugging at it made it worse.

“Uuuurg—gghhh!!”

“Shit! Shit!!”

Amber's face went pale, her eyes flickering wildly like something inside had shorted out. A thick stream of spittle drooled from her mouth.

[Trust me, these pearls are special in ways you can't imagine.]

Max! Damn him!! The prick must have known all along.

Amber fell limp in Zane's arms.

“I'll kill the bastard! I'll cut his fucking throat!! I'll cut his - -”

“—CUT!!”

Amber shoved Zane from her with a sudden fury, putting as much distance between them as she could. A heavy set woman appeared from

nowhere and rushed to hand the girl a glass of water. Amber gulped a good deal of it down, then spun back towards St. George spitting her words at him so that only he could hear.

“What kind of gorilla are you? You practically broke my neck in that scene, ass hole!”

The empty wall Zane had noticed earlier no longer was there. Instead, he saw an entire crew of people, a technical staff of dozens, milling about behind the array of behemoth television cameras with the NBC logo. The floor was littered with the familiar studio cable rigging from assorted sound boards and mixers.

“That was great, Amber, just great,” a male voice called from behind one of the cameras, but Zane could not make out a face. “I really believed that struggling. Sam, you were a little wooden. I need more anger during that scramble to remove the necklace, okay? We’ll go one more time.”

Zane watched the girl storm off while he squinted at what appeared before him. He could determine some shapes but nothing distinct or familiar.

“Who are you people? What’s going on here?”

No one answered, but activity continued all around Amber. The heavy set woman approached him with a swab of powder. He swatted her away.

“Spray those goddamned mirrors, Eddie!” another voice called out. “We’re getting too much glare from Camera Three!”

“Listen, I don’t know what the fuck is happening!!”

A large figure stepped from behind one of the cameras, thick beads of sweat dotting his bald head.

“Max! What are you doing here? Jesus, Max, will somebody please tell me what—?”

McCaffee put an arm around Zane. “Relax, kid, okay? You’re making

an ugly scene. Calm down before you blow it.” He handed Zane a folder. Tugging some pages from it St. George read.

Blessed with the brooding good looks of a matinee idol and a modicum of talent, rising young star Zane St. George allowed no nubile young thing to stand in the way of his destiny. Love never entered into the equation.

He flipped through the pages to a brief scene in bed with Amber. Again to another scene over breakfast with his agent. Later the scene with the necklace.

“Max, this is a script?”

Max pulled him aside as if sharing a secret. “Of course it’s a script. A manufactured television prime time soaper churned out by a half dozen paid monkeys, like a thousand other horse shit television scripts! What else would it be? Christ, Sam, get it together and stick to the dialogue that’s written, will you? This is the third time this week you’ve pulled this shit. They’re already talking about replacing you with Matt LeBlanc.”

“Why is everyone calling me Sam? Sam is the character I’m playing for the pilot! I’m Zane! Zane St. George! You’ve known me for a year!”

Max turned toward the fourth wall to address the camera crew. “Listen, guys. Can we take a few minutes here. Sam’s a little confused. Just five minutes, okay?” He returned his attention to his client, speaking low and managing to keep a lid on his anger. “Listen to me and try to take this in, kid. Zane St. George is the character you’re playing in ‘Amber’s World.’ Got that straight, Sam? Amber O’Hara’s show, her series, her ball game. Not yours. She calls the shots here. Now cut this shit out and let’s get back to work.”

“But you were with me, Max! You were there just this morning. You gave me that necklace. We had drinks! Don’t you remember? Jesus, has everyone here gone fucking crazy?”

A voice called from behind the cameras. “Time is money, McCaffee!”

Tempus Fugit! Is your boy ready to go, or what?"

"One minute, Aaron, okay? Just one minute."

"I'm counting, McCaffee. Joey Lawrence is a phone call away. What's it going to be, kid? Ten . . . Nine . . ."

"Sam, please . . . just get back to the script, okay?"

"I'm not Sam! Max, I swear to God I don't know what the hell is going on!"

"Six . . . Five . . ."

Amber returned to her mark and she wasn't smiling. "Joey Lawrence, ass hole. One phone call. Just wait and see. You'll be forgotten by next week!"

"Stick to the script, Sam. I'm begging you, kid . . ."

"Max, I'm telling you, I don't —"

". . . Two . . . One . . ."

". . . ACTION!"

Sam approached the old man slowly, standing before him without a word, uneasy and fidgeting in the dancing candle light. Knowing much more than he would be telling, Old Grindolph blew smoke curls from his pipe even as he spoke.

"So, we seek a wizard and a wizard is what ye claim to be, lad? Most curious, a wizard th't calls himself Sam, no less. Come . . ."

The old man delivered the lines expertly with a crispness that would have made anyone believe the guy really was a wizard himself. That was the cruel irony of Zane St. George's career. Following years of

unemployment checks here he was in the role of a lifetime as the wise elder, Grindolph, and he was too much of an old fart to reap the real rewards of his craft. Christ, was there anything as pathetic as a forgotten elderly actor?

The new kid delivered his lines.

"I seek Grindolph, the wise one whose wisdom might reveal the truth of who I am."

Here the aged Grindolph's attention was supposed to focus on this handsome upstart playing Sam, the character who apparently had wizardly powers of his own. But instead St. George couldn't take his eyes from the fresh and adorable actress in the role of his beautiful young granddaughter. She was dressed in flowing silk and her breasts peeked right through the sheer material like ripened pomegranates. He wondered if she liked the pearl necklace he had left inside her dressing room with the unsigned note : "I saw it and I thought you should have it."

The stones were a little seedier than St. George would have preferred, but it was all he could afford. In the script the girl's name was Trista, and she was the loveliest creature he had ever seen. Zane knew how unseemly it was to gawk at her like this, that somehow he would have to turn off this ridiculous and foolish adulation. Christ, in "The World According to Sam" he was supposed to be the girl's grandfather!

He could do it. He could forget this nonsense and be the actor he knew he was. Just not today, not right now, not while all these heated emotions stirred. A short while ago he had felt certain those long lost feelings had died, and that made them mean so much more to him now.

No fool like an old fool, wasn't that the way the saying went? Well, then, he would be a fool, the biggest fool that ever was.

Because from the moment Zane St. George first saw that magnificent young girl, the venerable performer could think of nothing else but the budding television actress Amber O'Hara.

Opportunity Knocks

by Trent Zelazny

“So what good is a closed business going to do for you?”

Jared switched the phone from his left ear to his right. “Hopefully it’ll open,” he said. He had to admit there were certain advantages to being unemployed, such as being able to sleep as late as he wanted and not having to answer to anyone—at least not since Monica left. Taxes had gone up so he was saving on what the government would be taking away, and no more dreaming about work, only to wake up and find that he had to get ready and go to work. These were a few of the perks to being laid off, but Jared didn’t want to stay in this rut forever. The bookstore was a place to start, and a chance for him to get back on his feet. As much as he hated that his uncle had taken his life Hemingway style, what he left behind was quite possibly the blessing he had been hoping for.

“Have you talked to Monica?” Rob asked.

The taste of Jared’s next words were bitter. “Not since she called to tell me she wasn’t coming home.”

A pause. Then, changing the subject, sensing he’d touched upon a sore spot, Rob asked him what he was going to do with his newfound opportunity.

Jared shrugged at the phone as if Rob could see him. “Guess most of the inventory is still in there. Need to get more of the new releases, of course, but I wanna check it out. Take a look around and see what needs to be done if I wanna get the place up and running.”

The next pause was so quiet Jared heard the clock ticking on the wall. Then Rob said, “How you doing? I mean, other than ... y’know.” “I’m doing fine, Rob, thanks.” He didn’t bother to mention his strug-

gle the night before in the bathtub, actually holding the razor blade in his hand and touching it to his wrist before changing his mind and agreeing to give himself one more try. “How are you doing? How’s Mary?”

“She’s doing well. Six months along now.”

“That woman’s gonna pop before you know it.”

Rob chuckled at that, then said, “Listen. You want me to go down there with you? I know that place might hold some weird memories.”

“Yeah, that would be great, thanks.”

Two years earlier, it hadn’t been the first time that Jared’s Aunt Karen had locked up the bookstore only to discover a customer still lurking in one section or another. The store itself was not huge, though there were enough little nooks where people could tuck themselves away without being noticed. Authorities figured that’s what had happened. Either that or someone she knew had stopped by and she’d let them in, having no idea what was in store for her. Whoever it was, they had been kind enough to leave the key in the bolt when they left, after rapping her and stabbing her with a pair of scissors.

* * *

Jared turned the key in the lock and opened the creaky door to the dark place that had once been a successful independent bookstore. All things considered, the store was in good shape. The thick layer of dust could easily be wiped away, and the boxes could either be packed or emptied and moved out.

Jared flipped a light switch and the fluorescent bulbs on the ceiling

crackled, then crept to life. “Man, those things last forever,” said Rob, running his finger along the edge of a shelf and checking the dust buildup. “Jeez, they hardly touched anything when they shut down.” Jared walked slowly through the aisles, taking in the different categories, authors and titles, many he’d read, more he’d only heard of, and even more he hadn’t. It was true. The place was practically untouched, almost like it had never closed down. He pictured himself sitting behind the counter, reading a book and only setting it down to give assistance or to ring up purchases. If indeed he got the place going, it would be his business and he could do it however he wanted. Not all the perks of being unemployed would be gone. He’d probably hire a couple people, most likely college students, and leave a lot of the usual day to day stuff for them. At first, though, he would want to be around as much as possible, figure out the best way to do things and see if this was something he could really pull off.

“It smells like my grandfather’s garage,” Rob said.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Weaving through the aisles, Jared saw a spider skitter across the floor. For now he let it go. He’d get an exterminator before too long. No point in doing unnecessary harm, he told himself, which was something he’d said to himself the other night—No point in doing harm when something good might be waiting right around the corner. Something he had told himself before. Possibly the one thing that kept him going. Only this time it had been true. This time opportunity knocked.

Hearing Rob remove and replace books from the shelves, Jared made his way to the back room, where two years earlier his Aunt Karen had been found sprawled in a pool of blood with a pair of scissors in her mouth. Now all that remained was dust and the occasional spider and randomly fallen book. Some of the books had been nibbled by mice which on first glance didn’t appear to be a problem. He crouched down to pick up a chewed copy of Moby Dick when a chill raced through him. For a brief moment he thought he saw his own breath, but wrote it off as imagination and went back out to the front of the store, leaving the book where it was.

The chill lingered.

Rob noticed right off. “You okay, man? You look pale as hell.”

“Is it just me, or is it cold in here?”

“It’s a little cool,” Rob said, “but I’m all right. Is there something you can put on? You got a sweater or anything in the car?”

There wasn’t anything like that in Jared’s car but he didn’t really mind. The chill would pass. He rubbed his goosebumped arms and went to the counter, where the empty register sat open next to a jar full of pens and pencils. Half the pens had Disney characters printed on them. Jared remembered how Karen always insisted on using them instead of the others because it, quote, “makes writing this kind of stuff a little more fun.” Karen had been odd that way and it was a part of her personality that Jared had loved so much. The same kind of oddities and quirks he’d later found in Monica. Beneath the counter were rolls of register tape, paperclips, rubber bands and a variety of other office supplies.

“So what do you think?” Rob asked, then scratched the back of his head. “Sweep it up, rid of a few bugs, add some more current titles to what you’ve already got here—place will probably be looking pretty good. Ready for business in no time.”

“Yeah, well, there’s still all the paperwork to go through. Not really looking forward to that part of it.” But he was going to go through with it because he needed this. Goddammit, he needed this. He was given an opportunity to get himself together again and he didn’t want to blow it. No more nights like the one in the bathtub, and so many others before. It was time something good came to Jared Richter, and he now had the interest to keep it going.

“Well,” Rob said, “I don’t know much about that end of it, but if you want some help cleaning this place up, I’m more than happy to give you a hand.”

“Thanks, Rob.”

“No thanks necessary.”

Rob had a heart of gold and a lovely wife to match. Rob and Mary were the perfect couple in every way as far as Jared could see. No lack of affection between them, always supporting and encouraging each other in everything they wanted to do, both together and as individuals. More in love than really seemed possible. And now, as another product of that love, they were going to have a baby together. In some ways Jared couldn't help being envious. It was one of the main things he wanted in life: a good relationship—but he'd messed that up again. He wished he could have done things differently. He'd gotten rid of Monica. Now he wished she would come home. He'd do his damndest to change if she would be back at his side. But she never would. He hated facing reality like that, but he knew it wasn't going to happen—not the way things had been at the end.

“Well,” Rob said. “You up for starting now?”

“Huh?”

“We brought the brooms and vacuum and all that cleaning stuff. Wanna have a go at getting this place ship-shape?”

Jared looked around, feeling the emptiness left by thoughts of Monica, then feeling loss at the memories of Karen. He and Aunt Karen had been close. Not blood relatives, but it often seemed like they were brother and sister, rather than Karen being a woman who had married his father's brother. It was strange to be in the bookstore again knowing that Karen wouldn't be coming out of the back with an armload of books, or that she wouldn't be sitting behind the counter doodling on a notepad or ringing up purchases. Jared hadn't been here since he'd last seen Karen, and he hadn't seen Karen since he'd last been here. Over a year now, and yet it felt like yesterday.

“What do you say, Jared?”

“What?” Jared had been completely lost in his thoughts.

“Should we start cleaning this place up, or what?”

Before he could answer the front door opened and Mary's voice rang with a “Knock-knock?” She stepped in, a fast food bag in her hand. Her belly was big and round and she wore her smile on her face as naturally as she wore shoes on her feet. Her auburn hair was tied back in a ponytail and it looked to Jared that carrying another human being inside her hadn't altered the rest of her slender body in the least.

“Hey, sweetie,” Rob said. “What are you doing here?” He planted a kiss on her lips and she giggled like it was the first time.

“You said you guys might be here awhile, so I brought you both something to eat.” She held the bag out to Rob, who took it and paid her with another kiss. Like before, Mary giggled, then turned to Jared and said hello.

“Hi, Mary. You look great. Haven't seen you for some time.”

She agreed, thanked him for the compliment, then placed her hands on her round belly and told him that the baby just started really kicking three days ago, “and now it doesn't want to stop.” She moved to Rob and snuggled against him and Rob wrapped his arm around her, kissed her cheek, then asked Jared to excuse them for a moment. He handed Jared the bag and told him to go ahead and tear into it. Mary added that his was the one with the sticker on the wrapping because she knew he didn't like pickles, so she made sure to get him one without any.

Jared thanked her and opened the bag, then watched them exit the store, arm in arm. Seeing them together, seeing Mary with her belly so full of the love she and Rob shared enhanced the emptiness already inside him. Even Monica, after a year and a half, couldn't remember that Jared didn't like pickles. Mary had known without having to ask. She just knew. When he thought about it, Mary knew him better than Monica ever had, and he didn't like the subtle shift of feelings this thought raised inside him. From emptiness to longing. A fine line to cross but he noticed, and couldn't help feeling ashamed of himself. Mary was Rob's girl, and Jared didn't feel he had any right to even think the thoughts he was. Of course, he'd been down that road before. It wasn't the first time he'd felt something for someone else's

girl.

Setting the bag on the counter, not quite hungry yet, he looked around the place again, hoping to find something to distract him from the thoughts swishing in his head. The coldness came back. It had never entirely gone away. He walked to the nearest section of books, Self-Help & Inspiration, reached out and pulled one from the shelf at random and dropped it as a cold electrical charge shot up his arm. He shivered, tensed his shoulders. Then, once over the worst of it, he looked down at the book he'd dropped: All the Power You Need, All the Power You Want. He couldn't help laughing at the irony. Here he was feeling powerless, thinking thoughts he didn't want to think, shivering because it was so cold; and the book he'd chosen from the shelf was exactly the kind he would have picked had he been consciously looking for self-help and inspiration.

A small laugh that didn't sound like his own escaped him. He crouched down to pick it up, thinking that maybe he should take it home and give it a look. Halfway down he stopped and straightened at the sound of someone sliding a row of books along one of the shelves then flopping one to the floor. From where he stood, Jared couldn't see anything unusual. He called out a courteous hello, then took a few steps around the Self-Help section and looked down the next aisle. No one there and nothing out of place.

"Rob?" he said, wondering if his friend had gotten inside and was sneaking around. Despite his heart of gold, there was a tendency in Rob to have a poor and childish sense of humor sometimes.

No, impossible. Rob couldn't have gotten into the store without Jared noticing. The only way in was the front door, which Jared would have easily seen from where he was standing—practically right next to the damn thing. And even if he'd somehow managed not to see it, he would have heard the creakiness of the door.

Moving to the next aisle he saw a single book lying on the floor halfway in. Another laugh slipped from inside him, more his own than before. All the stuff in this place had been untouched for two years now, then he and Rob came in and started poking around, dis-

turbing the settled placement of everything and kicking up dust where it had been still. No surprise that a book would fall from the shelf. It happened in just about every store he'd ever been in, some precariously placed object that finally can't hold on any longer.

The paperback on the floor was lying face down with a blank cover. The same feeling of icicles spidering up his arm came when he picked it up, but this time he didn't let go. The ice crept into his neck and shoulders and head, then crawled down his back. Jared almost lost the book from all his shivering but held on to it, turned it over and saw the title, Karen, written across the top in raised red letters. No cover art, no author, just one simple name that called up many odd and uncomfortable feelings. The cold extended from the tips of his fingers all the way down to the ends of his toes. His lips quivered and his teeth chattered as he opened the book to the first page and read.

A cold day in June—strange that it would be so cold that time of year, even in Maine—when I was fourteen I saw my father for the last time. Being a fisherman, his primary resource was lobster. It was thanks to the lobster that we had a roof over our heads.

Karen had spent the first seventeen years of her life in Maine. Jared looked up from the book and read the sign at the top of the shelf: Biographies. The coldness in his body took on an excessive amount of weight, particularly in his stomach and chest. Turning to a random page halfway through he read a little about Karen meeting Uncle Ted, Ted in the process of starting up his own bookstore.

He was the last person I ever though I'd get involved with. Kind of a mousy man, and neurotic. Not as bad as Woody Allen, but he could be frustrating. And yet, there was something about him. He had charm beyond what I thought possible. And that charm had no ulterior motive. Maybe that's why he wound up being such a good businessman.

With every word Jared read the book grew colder. He half expected to see frost. The thought hadn't even occurred to him that his aunt had never written a book. Poetry from time to time—she'd published a few pieces in local literary journals—but never an entire book of any sort.

He flipped further in, his fingers numb, and suddenly the cold inside him turned to icy fear.

Ted's nephew, Jared, was a very nice boy, if not a little strange. But then again, Ted's brother was strange. Every afternoon Jared came to the store, hardly ever bothering to look at books. I have to admit it was cute to see this young man infatuated with me. He helped with everything, always wearing a smile on his face...

Jared closed the book. Intrigued as he was, there was something very wrong about it all. Something unnaturally wrong that frightened him. The book was now too cold to handle, and not sure he could read any more of it, he placed it back on the shelf just as the front door opened and Rob and Mary entered, giggling.

"Jared, where are you?"

"I'm here," he said, noting that his voice sounded strange. He rubbed his arms then joined his friends up front and saw Rob placing All the Power You Need, All the Power You Want back on the shelf. Next to the door there was now a broom and a dustpan, a bucket filled with cleaning products, rubber gloves and rags.

"The vacuum's still out in the car," Rob told him. Then, "You haven't started eating? The stuff's gonna get cold." He opened the bag and removed two wrapped cheeseburgers, handed the one with the sticker on it to Jared, then reached in again and pulled out two cardboard containers of French fries. "You didn't get anything for yourself, honey?"

"I already ate," Mary said, then looked at Jared and smiled.

Jared smiled back but it was a strain on his face. He did not feel like smiling. What he felt was a mixture of icy fear and lonely desire, as he watched Mary place her hands on Rob's shoulders. As she gave her honey a massage, Jared felt his own tension, his muscles, tight and knotted and throbbing in agony. Cold fire flared in his lower back and shot up into the base of his skull.

Another shiver. A big one, large enough to chatter his teeth again and

attract Rob and Mary's attention. They turned and looked at him. Jared was pale and chilled, trying to unwrap the cheeseburger in his hands.

"Jared, you okay?"

"Fine."

"You look like you might have a fever," Mary said.

"I'm fine, really." After a few deep breaths, the chills subsided. He removed the burger from the paper and took a bite.

"You sure?" Rob asked. "I mean, we can do this another time. There isn't really a rush, is there?"

"I'd like to start today, if it's all the same to you."

Rob hesitated, then nodded and said okay. "Let's just finish eating." Then he stuffed a French fry into his mouth and turned to Mary. Mary was watching Jared like she might watch a cripple trying to get up a flight of stairs. Sensing an uncertainty in her, Rob reached out and took hold of her hand. After all, it was only Jared. Maybe a little under the weather, possibly a bit weirded out by being in a place with so many memories attached to it. But still only Jared. His hand seemed to comfort her, because her smile returned and when it did, Jared thought she was the most beautiful woman he'd seen in some time.

Quickly finishing his burger and nibbling a few fries, Jared took the rubber gloves, a rag and a bottle of Pledge from the bucket. "I'm gonna get started," he said. "Take your time." Then he chuckled. "You're right. There isn't really a rush."

Cleaning utensils in hand, he made his way back to the section he'd been in when Rob and Mary came in. Searching as he slipped his hands into the rubber gloves, he located Karen's book, removed it from the shelf, and couldn't shake the cold feeling rushing throughout his body. It was still cold, even with the gloves on, but nothing like

before. Though it was hard turning the pages with flimsy rubber at the tips of his fingers. He heard the mumbling of Mary and Rob's conversation. Flipping through the pages, Jared located a random spot close to the back. He was compelled, had to know more about what this book said, and had to know now.

Mary giggled somewhere off in the distance and a lump developed in Jared's throat as he read from a page near the end.

I closed the store alone last night. I wasn't often alone at this time because Jack was usually closing up with me, but some nights it was just unavoidable. The last customer I had was a shady character buying erotic novels. He kept looking at me, grinning, his demeanor like some sort of psycho beneath dark curly hair and a pale complexion, as if he hadn't seen the sun in years. His look was very different from the way Jared looked at me. Jared's goofy look was always rather cute. This man's was anything but. This man was scary, and I wanted him out of the store.

Ring up his purchases I saw the man lick his lips and then slide a hand over his crotch. My heart pounded. At that moment the only thing I understood was fear—and I understood it very well. The store

had no alarm, so unless I could manage a phone call to the police—which was very unlikely—I was stuck.

Fortunately, I hadn't yet locked the door. Just as I felt myself on the verge of panic, Jared walked in. The man at the counter changed his attitude instantly, paid for his books, and not wanting a bag, took them from the counter and rushed out. Thank God.

Jared felt the coldness hardening around him like a shell. The lump in his throat swelled and his muscles ached. He heard Mary giggle again, then he continued with the words on the page.

I passed the keys over the counter and asked Jared if he would lock the door and as he did, I told him about what had just happened. He nodded from time to time but I got a sense that he wasn't really listening to me. This sense was confirmed when I'd finished my story because the first thing he said was that he was in love with me.

I didn't say a word. I opened the register and removed the cash drawer and walked into the back, uncomfortable and confused. I guess maybe I should have seen it coming but I hadn't. I never thought it would actually get to a point like this. And on this night of all nights,

Misclassified Romance

by Stan Yan



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after the creepy guy I'd just had to deal with. This was certainly something I didn't need just then, but sadly we don't get to pick our times for such things. They happen whether we want them to or not.

Setting the drawer down between the adding machine and a jar with pens and pencils and a pair of scissors in it, I felt Jared's presence looming behind me. I turned around and there he was, staring at me with a blank expression on his face. In an odd monotone he told me that he'd been in love with me for years. Said seeing me with Uncle Ted drove him crazy ... Absolutely crazy. He was tired of it. He wanted me, and I think it was when he removed a small square package from his pocket that I came closest in my life to throwing up solely out of fear.

“Jared?”

He approached me. There was nowhere I could go. He blocked the only route of escape. I told him to stay away but he kept coming, his fingers tearing away at the condom's packaging.

“Jared, what you doing back there?”

“What? Nothing.” His voice sounded like a child's. His head spun and his eyes hurt and he was so cold. So goddamn cold. But he had to keep reading, as though he didn't have a choice. All the words printed in the book were mind boggling. Unbelievable. Insane. An overriding force kept him going, though, held his eyes on the pages. He hated it. But he couldn't stop.

Finally I spoke my first word. It felt like I'd never spoken before in my life. My voice sounded distant and muffled, like my face was buried in a pillow. “Jared,” I said, and there was a long and tense silence between this word and the next. “No.”

His expression did not alter. Saying this did not seem to effect him. I think that had I said yes right then his blank face still would not have changed. It was as though he was being controlled by some power stronger than he could handle—but I guess that's what jealousy and lust do when experienced without caution.

He had not touched me yet. Just stood there with the condom in his hand, staring at me with hollow eyes. Then, disregarding what I had said, he told me to take off my clothes.

That's when I reached for the scissors...

A hand touched upon Jared's shoulder and startled him. He dropped the book. Rob and Mary were standing beside him. Jared felt silly crouched down like he was, reading a book, shivering and wearing rubber gloves. He must have looked like the craziest man alive.

Rob looked down at the book on the floor. His eyes narrowed and he said, “Jared, are you sure you're ... maybe we should do this another time. You're shivering like a madman. You should probably just go home and get in bed.”

“I'm fine. Really. I'm sorry. I don't know what's gotten into me. But really, I feel fine.” He picked up the book and rose, trying to conceal the title but Rob saw it, and as he did his face cracked up into a smile.

“Didn't know Calhoun could get you so uppity.”

Baffled, Jared looked down at the book in his gloved hands. John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union, by John Niven. Flipping through the pages he couldn't find any of what he'd just read. Like the cover now said, it was about John C. Calhoun. He put the book back on the shelf, embarrassed, then looked at his friends before looking back at the book, which was still a biography of Calhoun.

“You know,” Mary said. “No offense, Jared, but if you're getting sick, I don't wanna risk catching anything. Especially at this time.” She placed her hands on her stomach, as though trying to protect it.

“Yeah, sweetie,” Rob said. “Why don't you run along. No sense in risking that.”

Jared agreed, though he insisted that he was fine. He thanked her for the food and offered to reimburse her but she refused, and said in

exchange she would just use the bathroom. Jared pointed her in the direction and when she closed the door behind her and the bathroom fan switched on, Rob turned to Jared.

“Okay, what’s gotten into you?”

“Huh?”

“Jared, you’re sort of freaking me out. Not just me. Mary too. If you’re not sick then something’s got you wigged. I mean, really wigged. So spit it out.”

“I’m fine, Rob.”

“Is it just being here, in the bookstore?”

“Maybe. No, it’s...Look, just drop it, man. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine.”

“I’m fine, Rob, so why don’t you just leave me the fuck alone?”

Rob hesitated, then his head nodded, he said fine, and told Jared he was going to go get the vacuum out of the car. “I’ll stick around and help, if you want. But I’m getting this feeling you wanna be alone.” The two of them walked to the front. Rob stepped out to get the vacuum. Just as the door closed Jared heard the toilet flush. A moment later Mary came out, looked around, smiled, and then asked where Rob was.

“He’s out getting the vacuum,” Jared told her, and with no chance to stop them, the feelings bit into him like a million sets of teeth. Looking at Mary, he wanted her now more than ever, almost to the point of insanity. The thing that kept him from doing or saying anything about it—the only thing—was his sense of right and wrong. The value system that still lingered somewhere inside him. The only thing that prevented him from taking action. He knew it was wrong. He’d known it when Mary had first shown up, and he knew it now. That road was paved with hell, and there was enough hell in his life without having

to look for more.

Monica flashed before his eyes, her tongue lolling, eyes rolling into her skull. He hated the feelings he was having because that was the kind of thing it led to. Loss of control. The value system gone and everything else exploding.

The front door opened. Rob fumbled his way in, vacuum cleaner commanding both hands. He set it just inside the door, then straightened up and regarded Jared and his loving wife.

Seconds passed like minutes. Unspoken words flowed between all three of them. Then Mary nodded her head. “Right,” she said. “I’m gonna get going.”

“Thanks again for the food, Mary,” Jared told her, fighting against the voices in his head telling him to take her. You want her so take her. Get rid of Rob and get rid of that fucking baby and take the thing you want.

“I think I’m gonna go with you, honey,” Rob said, then turned to Jared and raised his eyebrows. “That okay with you, Jared? Maybe tomorrow or next week?”

Jared nodded, fighting the chills, fighting the voices, the screaming voices in his head. “Yeah, that’s fine. Thanks for your help.” But the voices told him that he couldn’t let this happen. He couldn’t stand by and watch her leave with the man she loved. It drove him crazy, seeing them together, how much they were in love. He struggled to hold on to that value system, though, and hurried them out as though the place was on fire, touching Mary on the shoulder as he did. And as his hand touched upon her he experienced, in complete contrast to all else he was feeling, extreme warmth. Heat, snuggling and comforting, and he hated it more than the cold, more than the chills, more than what he’d read in the book only five minutes ago. He hated it. He wanted them gone.

And a moment later they were. Jared closed the door and turned the bolt, drew in a deep breath and cursed under it. He saw Karen again

behind his eyes, saw her as she begged him, as she pleaded, tears running down her face. And then it was Monica. Jared brought his gloved hands to his eyes and rubbed, hoping it would all go away.

Something in front of him dropped to the floor. Removing his hands he saw a book lying face down. He half expected it to move, but after a moment when it did not, he approached it and picked it up, turned it over and looked at the cover. All the Power You Need, All the Power You Want. Maybe he hadn't noticed before, or maybe it was different. He didn't recall much in the way of pictures on it, but now there was a single razor blade on the cover, sparkling like a gemstone. The

book was colder than the other one—the coldest thing he'd ever touched, even with gloves on. But the oddest thing about it was that the author credited on the front was himself. He flipped it open to a random page and saw the same sentence written over and over again:

Time to say goodbye, Jared.

He closed the book, dropped it on the floor and, leaving everything where it was, left the store, not bothering to lock it up. It didn't matter. None of it would matter ever again.

That Evening

by Christina Sng

Your head is in my lap,
As it is always, after our nap.

I stroke your soft black hair
And sing you Marlborough Fair.

Why do your dark eyes stare,
My dear headstrong young mare?

Is my singing no longer fine?
Once you thought it to be divine.

Darling, you look pale and tired.
Suitably, after a day of being wired.

My sweet fireball of lumber,
It is time now for your slumber.

Patting your soft sullen face
Lying so angelic on my mother's fine lace,

I rise from the old sunken couch
In my stiff slow lazy crouch,

Letting your head roll from the lace
And into the screaming fireplace.

Contributors' Bios

Ken Goldman

Previous high school English and Film Studies teacher (Horror and Science Fiction in Film and Literature) at George Washington High School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Member of the former GWA, the Genre Writers Association. Member of HWA, the Horror Writers Association.

John B. Rosenman

John Rosenman has had fiction published in *Weird Tales*, *Starshore*, *Treachery & Treason*, *Whitley Streiber's Aliens*, and more.

Christina Sng

Christina Sng, human, resident of the world, lives on the Equator with her husband and their three cat-children. She is the author of poetry collections *The Darkside of Eden* (Allegra Press, 2002), *Angelflesh* (Sam's Dot Publishing, 2002), and in collaboration with Sarah Guidry, *Dichotomies of Light and Dark* (Hartman Press, 2003). Her poetry has appeared in numerous venues including *ChiZine*, *Flesh & Blood*, *Penumbra*, *Space & Time*, and *Wicked Hollow*, among others. Most recently, her poems "The Marvel of Flight" and "Crimes of Our Youth" received Honorable Mentions in the *Year's Best Fantasy and Horror 2002*. Visit her online at <http://www.mephala.com>.

Stan Yan

Stan Yan is a Denver-based, self-published comic artist whose credits include "Only Chaos," "OC2: Eugene the Queen," and "The On-Campus Crusader"—

all available through www.squidworks.com, where Stan exerts his dictatorial power over his creative peers. Stan has also notably contributed cover and story work to "Potlatch: Comics to Benefit the CBLDF." Currently, while he's not whoring himself out to the corporate world, he's working on a new series entitled, "The Wang."

Trent Zelazny

Trent Zelazny's publishing credits include "Hope is an Inanimate Desire," published by Chameleon Publishing in the anthology *Cemetery Sonata*, 1999; "Harold Asher and His Vomiting Dogs," published in *Scavenger's Newsletter*, taking second place in the annual Killer Frog contest, 1999; "Chicken Strips," published in *Delirium* magazine, 2001; "The Disappearance of Experimentation," published in *Shadow of the Marquis*, 2001; "Lunatic," Published in *Shadow of the Marquis*, 2001; "Lovely Day for Beating an Old Guy," published by Catalyst Books in the anthology *RAW (Random Acts of Weirdness)*, 2002; "Competition," published in *House of Pain*, 2002; "Caught in Etcetera," published in *Psrhea*, 2002; "The Ten-In-One," published in *The Swamp*, 2002; "Acupuncture," published in *Shadow of the Marquis*, 2002; "The Music," currently up at Horrorfind.com; "End of the Rainbow," at The-Swamp.net; and "A Dead Man's Burrito," at House-of-Pain.com.