



FEATURING STORIES BY
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ELLEN KUSHNER
KELLY LINK
KAREN JOY FOWLER
BRUCE STERLING
ROBERT REED
GEOFF RYMAN
JO WALTON
AND MANY OTHERS

THE BEST
SCIENCE FICTION
AND FANTASY
OF THE YEAR

VOLUME FOUR

EDITED BY JONATHAN STRAHAN

**THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION AND
FANTASY OF THE YEAR:
VOLUME FOUR**
edited by Jonathan Strahan

The Best Science Fiction and Fantasy of the Year: Volume Four

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*For Robert Silverberg and Karen Haber, dear friends both,
who were kind and generous when they did not have to be,
with my thanks.*

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The New Space Opera 2

With Karen Haber

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Science Fiction: Best of 2004

Fantasy: Best of 2004

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By my count this is either the thirty-third or thirty-fourth book that I have worked on since the chance presented itself for me to edit my first anthology back in the heady Australian summer of 1996. Astoundingly, to me at least, thirty-one (or thirty-two) of those books were edited between mid-2004 and the end of 2009. Five years, give or take. Not one of those books, not a single one, would have been possible without the support, guidance and friendship of the late Charles N. Brown who died this past July. He was a dear friend and his advice was instrumental in guiding this book to publication.

This year has been a challenging one and getting this book done has been demanding. I'd especially like to thank Gary K. Wolfe, whose advice has been invaluable; Alisa Krasnostein, Tansy Rayner Roberts, Ben Payne, Alex Pierce, Tehani Wessely, Jason Fischer and Sarah Parker from *Not if You Were the Last Short Story on Earth* who were my companions on the journey through the year and provided an invaluable sounding board. I'd also like to thank Howard Morhaim, Katie Menick, Justin Ackroyd, Jack Dann, and Gordon Van Gelder. Thanks also to the following good friends and colleagues without whom this book would have been much poorer, and much less fun to do: Lou Anders, Deborah Biancotti, Ellen Datlow, Gardner Dozois, Sean Williams, and all of the book's contributors.

As always, my greatest thanks go to Marianne, Jessica and Sophie. Every moment spent working on this book was a moment stolen from them. I only hope I can repay them.

INTRODUCTION

Jonathan Strahan

This last year was a good but not exceptional year for short speculative fiction. As was the case in 2008, and for most of this decade really, there were literally millions of words of short science fiction and fantasy published in magazines, anthologies, collections, 'zines, and pamphlets. And, while markets opened and markets closed, there was still enough top notch science fiction and fantasy published to keep any one reader busy, and easily enough to fill several volumes like the one you are now holding.

As is always the case, there were trends that could be readily discerned by any attentive reader. Our fascination with the undead continued through 2009 and looks set to go on for at least another year or two. John Joseph Adams' remarkably successful 2008 anthology *The Living Dead* was followed by several less-interesting books by other hands. Literary mash-ups, of all things (!), gave us the runaway bestseller *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, and way too many similar books seem set to follow. The other major trend was a passion for the retro-futurism of steampunk. While Nick Gevers' *Extraordinary Engines* investigated some of the possibilities of the subgenre last year, and Jeff VanderMeer and Ann VanderMeer's fine *Steampunk* laid out its past, 2009 saw major novels like Scott Westerfeld's *Leviathan* and Cherie Priest's *Boneshaker* published which, along with a passel of short stories, made it clear steampunk is here to stay. It's not brave or particularly prescient to suggest we'll be dealing with both of these trends for several years yet. A perhaps longer-lasting trend, though, is our growing interest in the technology of reading. While the enormous, and frankly ominous, Google Book Settlement case continued, it seemed we became more and more interested in electronic book readers. What once was either clunky or dull had, by year's end, become sexy and cool, and was increasingly tipped to become the new iPod. Certainly the 2009 revamp of the Kindle was well received, as was Barnes & Noble's nook, which debuted late in the year. It remains to be seen, though, whether either of these devices, or some as-yet-unreleased competitor, will finally make eBooks a widespread and popular reality.

No single publishing news event dominated the year; instead, people interested in the industry focused on cutbacks and losses, and pondered the future. At various times things began to look grim indeed. *Asimov's Science Fiction* and *Analog Science Fiction and Fact* changed their physical format with their December 2008 issues, which suggested that they would publish less fiction and might even be in some kind of financial difficulty. Then in January Sovereign Media announced that it was ceasing publication of *Realms of Fantasy*, a stalwart of the field since 1994. All of the doomsayers probably felt that the science fiction magazine apocalypse was truly upon us when in April publisher Gordon Van Gelder announced that he was moving the venerable *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* to a bi-monthly schedule, producing double issues that would be slightly shorter than two of their monthly predecessors.

And yet, as the year moved on it became clear that while every magazine was facing challenges (mostly arising from changes to postal charges), things were not as bad as we feared. Throughout the year, at various times, publishers made spirited attempts to make it clear that, while things were tough, they were still doing okay, assertions that were borne out by the fact that at year's end *Asimov's* and *F&SF* had published pretty much exactly the same amount of fiction they had in 2008 (though *F&SF*'s decision to publish a series of classic reprints did mean they published fewer new stories in 2009), with only *Analog* publishing a significantly smaller volume of fiction than in previous years.

Then *Realms of Fantasy* was suddenly and unexpectedly resurrected by the enterprising Warren Lapine, with Shawna McCarthy remaining at the editorial helm, and ended up missing just a single issue.

But while things weren't as bad as we feared there still were some genuine losses. In August the publishers of *Jim Baen's Universe*, one of the highest paying short fiction markets in the field, announced that they would discontinue the magazine because of problems finding sufficient subscribers, then *Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show* also announced cutbacks, which was followed by the news that venerable SF media magazine *Starlog* and newcomer *Death Ray* would both be ceasing publication. Even the buoyant anthology market saw cutbacks, with editors Lou Anders and George Mann walking away from their "Fast Forward" and "Solaris Book of New Science Fiction" series to focus respectively on their publishing and writing commitments.

And what of the fiction? Well, as has been the case for the last decade, a lot of excellent fiction was published, and in ever more diverse locations. The seemingly beleaguered major print magazines all had solid if unspectacular years, with *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction* continuing to set the standard amongst the digests with fine stories from Geoff Ryman, John Kessel, Ellen Kushner, Alex Irvine, Robert Silverberg, Elizabeth Hand, and others. Almost as good was Sheila Williams's *Asimov's*, which published strong work by James Patrick Kelly, Robert Reed, Nancy Kress, Kristine Kathryn Rusch, Damien Broderick (making a welcome splash with some fine new stories), Holly Phillips, and Rudy Rucker & Bruce Sterling. Williams deserves special note for publishing some challenging newer writers like Sara Genge who had two strong stories in the magazine this year. *Analog* continued very much as it has in recent times, very much being seen as representing an old core kind of science fiction regardless of what it actually published, and featuring excellent stories by Stephen Baxter and Steven Gould. Rounding out the "Big Four" print magazines, if there really is such a thing anymore, was the resurrected *Realms of Fantasy*, which published some solid work by Adam Corbin-Fusco, Cat Rambo and Richard Parks. I remain a little disappointed with it, though, and continue to hope it might be more adventurous. *Interzone* has sat just below the "Big Four" for the last several years, steadily publishing beautifully designed issues (it's easily the best looking fiction magazine in the field), and is a reliable source for good fiction. This year it was a little less impressive than it was last year, but they did publish an excellent story from Bruce Sterling amongst some other good work. There were many, many other print magazines published during the year—far too many to mention here—but I would single out Ann VanderMeer's *Weird Tales* as being especially worthy of your attention. If the magazine can re-establish a regular publication schedule and maintain its high editorial standards it will stand with the "Big Four" within the next few years.

We probably make too much of the difference between print and online magazines: print and online are after all only mediums of distribution and a magazine is a magazine. Under the capable editorship of Patrick Nielsen Hayden, *Tor.com* has very quickly established itself as the best and most reliable source of excellent short fiction on the web, publishing terrific stories by Michael Swanwick and Eileen Gunn, Rachel Swirsky, Kij Johnson, Charles Stross, and others. The only criticism I have of *Tor.com* is that I wish they'd publish *more* stories. Sitting only slightly behind it is Neil Clarke's *Clarkesworld Magazine*, which I think along with *Weird Tales* is one of the most improved magazines in the field. Although it mostly publishes quite short stories, what it does publish is of a very high standard with especially good work this year from Catherynne M. Valente, Kij Johnson, and Gord Sellar. And then there's *Shadow Unit*, an intriguing reader contribution-funded website where writers like Elizabeth Bear, Emma Bull, Sarah Monette, Holly Black and others regularly publish episodes for an unproduced television show, the eponymous "Shadow Unit". The writing is uniformly excellent, the stories intriguing and several of them would definitely be in this volume were they only shorter (almost all of the stories are quite long novellas).

As has been the case for the past four or five years, anthologies continue to be an excellent source of great short fiction. It doesn't seem appropriate for me to say too much about the anthologies I edit myself, so I'll simply note that *The New Space Opera 2* (co-edited with Gardner Dozois) had strong stories by Robert Charles Wilson, Peter Watts, John C. Wright, Cory Doctorow, Bruce Sterling and others, while *Eclipse Three* had good work from Karen Joy Fowler, Nicola Griffith, Caitlin R. Kiernan, Ellen Klages, and Ellen Kushner, amongst others. The two best science fiction anthologies of the year were Nick Gevers and Jay Lake's *Other Earths*, which featured outstanding stories by Robert Charles Wilson, Gene Wolfe and others, and George Mann's *The Solaris Book of New Science Fiction Volume 3*, which had good work by Daniel Abraham and Alastair Reynolds. The best fantasy anthology of the year was Sharyn November's *Firebirds Soaring*, which included outstanding work by Jo Walton, Margo Lanagan, Ellen Klages, and Marly Youmans. It was very closely followed by Jack Dann and Gardner Dozois's excellent *The Dragon Book*. Any theme anthology is best dipped into, but this strong outing contained a real diversity of high quality work by Diana Wynne Jones, Cecelia Holland, Andy Duncan, and others. I also admired Dozois and George R.R. Martin's *Songs of the Dying Earth*, which also was a book that you had to dip into rather than read straight through. The stories by Dan Simmons, Neil Gaiman, and Lucius Shepard were particularly good. Ellen Datlow continued to show why she is one of our best editors in 2009, publishing no fewer than three fine anthologies. Her *Poe*, *Lovecraft Unbound*, and *Troll's Eye View* (with Terri Windling) were all outstanding and stories from each of them are reprinted here. Peter Crowther and Nick Gevers' *Postscripts* magazine morphed into a quarterly anthology series in 2009. The best volume was *Postscripts 20/21* which had several excellent stories, but the standout *Postscripts* story of the year was Daniel Abraham's "Balfour and Meriwether in 'The Adventure of the Emperor's Vengeance'" from *Postscripts 19*. And finally one or two really interesting books were published back home in Australia this year. Twelfth Planet Press published Peter M. Ball's strong novelette *Horn*, and Tansy Rayner Roberts' highly enjoyable "Siren Beat", which appeared as a double book with World Fantasy Award winner Robert Shearman's "Roadkill", and Deborah Biancotti's excellent debut collection, *The Book of Endings*. All are recommended. Particularly noteworthy, though, was Keith Stevenson's *X6*, an anthology of novellas that is genuinely one of the year's most interesting books. It features an excoriating piece of work from Paul Haines, "Wives", and a terrific fantasy by Margo Lanagan, that make the book well worth seeking out.

It shouldn't be surprising, given the quality of short fiction in recent years, that this was *another* good year for short story collections. It's never easy to pick the best short story collection of the year, but Ian McDonald's *Cyberabad Days*, Greg Egan's *Oceanic*, Gwyneth Jones's *Grazing the Long Acre*, and Charles Stross's *Wireless* all stand amongst the best science fiction collections of recent times, while Peter S. Beagle's *We Never Talk About My Brother* was easily my favorite fantasy collection of the year. A number of excellent retrospectives were published during the year: standouts include *The Best of Gene Wolfe*, *The Best of Michael Moorcock*, and *Trips* by Robert Silverberg. NESFA Press also published the outstanding six-volume *Collected Stories of Roger Zelazny* and two fine volumes of *The Collected Short Works of Poul Anderson*. All of these books deserve your attention.

Finally, a personal note. On July 12, 2009, *Locus* co-founder and publisher Charles N. Brown died in his sleep on his way home to California from a science fiction convention in Boston. I first met Charles in the North American summer of 1993 where we made absolutely no impression upon one another. I did, however, spend time romancing his managing editor, which meant he agreed to suffer through a dinner with me the following year. He was *almost* interested. And yet, because of his managing editor, we both persevered. He let me work for him and eventually, possibly because we spent a lot of time eating dim sum and buying CDs together, he became one of my dearest friends. His advice colored every project I've worked on and his support helped make each and every one of them

possible in some way or another. He was, I think, science fiction's best and truest advocate. His passion for the field was deep, profound and perspicacious. He influenced me greatly but he influenced the field he loved far more. When I say you wouldn't be reading this book without him, I say it not just because he influenced me, but because he influenced the field so greatly that the stories here would be different had he not lived. The science fiction field will miss him more than it realizes while I am only beginning to come to terms with how much I miss him.

And now, on to the stories! These were the ones that I enjoyed the most during the year, or found to be the best and most delightful. I hope you enjoy them as much as I did.

Jonathan Strahan
Perth, Western Australia
November 2000

IT TAKES TWO

Nicola Griffith

Nicola Griffith is a native of Yorkshire, England, where she earned her beer money teaching women's self-defense, fronting a band, and arm-wrestling in bars, before discovering writing and moving to the US. Her immigration case was a fight and ended up making new law: the State Department declared it to be "in the National Interest" for her to live and work in this country. This didn't thrill the more conservative powerbrokers, and she ended up on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*, where her case was used as an example of the country's declining moral standards.

In 1993 a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis slowed her down a bit, and she concentrated on writing. Her novels are *Ammonite* (1993), *Slow River* (1995), *The Blue Place*, (1998), *Stay* (2002), and *Always* (2007). She is the co-editor of the *Bending the Landscape* series of original short fiction. Her short work and non-fiction has appeared in a variety of print and web journals, including *Out*, *Nature*, *New Scientist*, and *The Huffington Post*. Her awards include the James Tiptree, Jr. Award, the Nebula Award, the World Fantasy Award, and the Lambda Literary Award (six times). Her latest book is a limited-edition, multi-media memoir, *And Now We Are Going to Have a Party: liner notes to a writer's early life*.

Griffith lives and works in Seattle with her partner, writer Kelley Eskridge, they run Sterling Editing, helping writers improve their work. Her own works-in-progress include a short story collection, an essay collection, and a novel about Hild, a pivotal figure of the seventh century. She takes enormous delight in everything.

It began, as these things do, at a bar—a long dark piece of mahogany along one wall of Seattle's Queen City Grill polished by age and more than a few chins. The music was winding down. Richard and Cody (whose real name was Candice, though no one she had met since high school knew it) lived on different coasts, but tonight was the third time this year they had been drinking together. Cody was staring at the shadows gathering in the corners of the bar and trying not to think about her impersonal hotel room. She thought instead of the fact that in the last six months she had seen Richard more often than some of her friends in San Francisco, and that she would probably see him yet again in a few weeks when their respective companies bid on the Atlanta contract.

She said, "You ever wonder what it would be like to have, you know, a normal type job, where you get up on Monday and drive to work, and do the same thing Tuesday and Wednesday and Thursday, every week, except when you take a vacation?"

"You forgot Friday."

"What?" They had started on mojitos, escalated through James Bonds, and were now on a tequila shooter-with-draft-chaser glide path.

"I said, you forgot Friday. Monday, Tuesday—"

"Right," Cody said. "Right. Too many fucking details. But did you ever wonder? About a normal life?" An actual life, in one city, with actual friends.

Richard was silent long enough for Cody to lever herself around on the bar stool and look at him

He was playing with his empty glass. "I just took a job," he said. "A no-travel job."

"Ah, shit."

They had met just after the first dotcom crash, at a graduate conference on synergies of bio-mechanics and expert decision-making software architecture or some such crap, which was wild because he started out in cognitive psychology and she in applied mathematics. But computers were the alien glue that made all kinds of odd limbs stick together and work in ways never intended by nature. *Like Frankenstein's monster*, he had said when she mentioned it, and she had bought him a drink, because he got it. They ran into each other at a similar conference two months later, then again at some industry junket not long after they'd both joined social media startups. The pattern repeated itself, until, by the time they were both pitching venture capitalists at trade shows, they managed to get past the required cool, the distancing irony, and began to email each other beforehand to arrange dinners, drinks, tickets to the game. They were young, good-looking, and very, very smart. Even better, they had absolutely no romantic interest in each other.

Now when they met it was while traveling as representatives of their credit-starved companies to make increasingly desperate pitches to industry-leading Goliaths on why they needed the nimble expertise of hungry Davids.

Cody hadn't told Richard that lately her pitches had been more about why the Goliaths might find it cost-effective to absorb the getting-desperate David she worked for, along with all its innovative, motivated, boot-strapping employees whose stock options and 401(k)s were now worthless. But a no-travel job meant one thing, and going back to the groves of academe was really admitting failure.

She sighed. "Where?"

"Chapel Hill. And it's not . . . Well, okay, it is sort of an academic job, but not really."

"Uh-huh."

"No, really. It's with a new company, a joint venture between WishtleNet and the University of North—"

"See."

"Just let me finish." Richard could get very didactic when he'd been drinking. "Think Google Labs, or Xerox PARC, but wackier. Lots of money to play with, lots of smart grad students to do what I tell them, lots of blue sky research, not just irritating Vice Presidents saying I've got six months to get the software on the market, even if it is garbage."

"I hear you on that." Except that Vince, Cody's COO, had told her that if she landed the Atlanta contract she would be made a VP herself.

"It's cool stuff, Cody. All those things we've talked about in the last six, seven years? The cognitive patterning and behavior mod, the modulated resonance imaging software, the intuitive learning algorithms—"

"Yeah, yeah."

"—they *want* me to work on that. They want me to define new areas of interest. Very cool stuff."

Cody just shook her head. Cool. Cool didn't remember to feed the fish when you were out of town, again.

"Starts next month," he said.

Cody felt very tired. "You won't be in Atlanta."

"Nope."

"Atlanta in August. On my own. Jesus."

"On your own? What about all those pretty girls in skimpy summer clothes?"

The muscles in Cody's eyebrows felt tight. She rubbed them. "It's Boone I'm not looking forward

to. Boone and his sleazy strip club games."

"He's the customer."

"Your sympathy's killing me."

He shrugged. "I thought that lap-dancing hooker thing was your wet dream."

Her head ached. Now he was going to bring up Dallas.

"That's what you told us in—now where the hell was that?"

"Dallas." Might as well get it over with.

"You were really into it. Are you blushing?"

"No." Three years ago she had been twenty-eight with four million dollars in stock options and the belief that coding-cowboy colleagues were her friends. Ha. And now probably half the geeks in the South had heard about her most intimate fantasy. Including Boone.

She swallowed the last of her tequila. Oily, ugly stuff once it got tepid. She picked up her jacket.

"I'm out of here. Unless you have any handy hints about landing that contract without playing Boone's slimeball games? Didn't think so." She pushed her shot glass away and stood.

"That Atlanta meeting's when? Eight, nine weeks?"

"About that." She dropped two twenties on the bar.

"I maybe could help."

"With Boone? Right." But Richard's usually cherubic face was quite stern.

He fished his phone from his pocket and put it on the bar. He said, "Just trust me for a minute," and tapped the memo icon. The icon winked red. "Whatever happens, I promise no one will ever hear what goes on this recording except you."

Cody slung on her jacket. "Cue ominous music."

"It's more an, um, an ethics thing."

"Jesus, Richard. You're such a drama queen." But she caught the bartender's eye, pointed to their glasses, and sat.

"I did my Atlanta research too," he said. "Like you, I'm pretty sure what will happen after you've made your presentations to Boone."

"The Golden Key," she said, nodding. The sun rises, the government taxes, Boone listens to bids and takes everyone to the Golden Key.

"—but what I need to know from you is whether or not, to win this contract, you can authorize out-of-pocket expenses in the high five figures."

She snorted. "Five figures against a possible eight? What do you think?"

He pointed at the phone.

"Fine. Yes. I can approve that kind of expense."

He smiled, a very un-Richard-like sliding of muscle and bone, like a python disarticulating its jaw to swallow a pig. Cody nearly stood up, but the moment passed.

"You'll also have to authorize me to access your medical records," he said.

So here they were in Marietta, home of the kind of Georgians who wouldn't fuck a stranger in the woods only because they didn't know who his people were: seven men and one woman stepping from Boone's white concrete and green glass tower into an August sun hot enough to make the blacktop bubble. Boone's shades flashed as he turned to face the group.

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. And Jill," with a nod at Cody, who nodded back and tried not to squint. Squinting made her look like a moron: not good when all around you were wearin

sleek East Coast summer business clothes and gilded with Southern tans. At least the guy from Portland had forgotten his shades too.

They moved in a small herd across the soft, sticky parking lot: the guy from Boston would have to throw away his fawn loafers.

Boone said to the guy from Austin, "Dave, you take these three. I know you know where we're going."

"Sure do," Dave said, and the seven boys shared that we're-all-men-of-the-world-yes-indeedy laugh. Cody missed Richard. And she was still pissed at the way he'd dropped the news on her only last week. Why hadn't he told her earlier about not coming to Atlanta? Why hadn't he told her in Seattle? And a university job: what was up with that? Loser. But she wished he was here.

Boone's car was a flashy Mercedes hybrid in silver. He opened the passenger door with a Yeah-I-know-men-and-women-are-equal-but-I-was-born-in-the-south-so-what-can-you-do? smile to which Cody responded with a perfect, ironic lift of both eyebrows. Hey, couldn't have managed that in shades. The New York guy and Boston loafers got in the back. The others were climbing into Dave's dark green rental SUV. A full-sized SUV. Very uncool. He'd lose points for that. She jammed her seatbelt home with a satisfying click.

As they drove to the club, she let the two in the back jostle for conversational space with Boone. She stared out of the window. The meeting had gone very well. It was clear that she and Dave and the guy from Denver were the only ones representing companies with the chops for this contract, and she was pretty sure she had the edge over the Denver people when it came to program rollout. Between her and Dave, then. If only they weren't going to the Golden Key. God. The thought of all those men watching her watch those women and think they knew what she was thinking made her scalp prickle with sweat. In the flow of conditioned air, her face turned cold.

Two days before she left for Atlanta she'd emailed Vince to explain that it wasn't her who would be uncomfortable at the strip club, but the men, and that he should at least consider giving Boone a call and setting her presentation up for either the day before or the day after the others. She'd got a reply half an hour later, short and to the point: *You're going, kid, end of story*. She'd taken a deep breath and walked over to his office.

He was on the phone, pacing up and down, but waved her in before she could knock. He covered the receiver with one hand, "Gotta take this, won't be long," and went back to pacing, shouting, "Damn it, Rick, I want it done. When we had that meeting last week you assured me—Yeah. No problem, you said. No fucking problem. So just do it, just find a way." He slammed the phone down, shook his head, turned his attention to her. "Cody, what can I do for you? If it's about this Atlanta thing I don't want to hear it."

"Vince—"

"Boone's not stupid. He takes people to that titty club because he likes to watch how they behave under pressure. You're the best we've got, you know that. Just be yourself and you won't fuck up. Give him good presentation and don't act like a girl scout when the nipples start to show. Can you handle that?"

"I just resent—"

"Jesus Christ, Cody. It's not like you've never seen bare naked ladies before. You want to be a VP? Tell me now: yes or no."

Cody took a breath. "Yes."

"Glad to hear it. Now get out of here."

The Golden Key was another world: cool, and scented with the fruity overtones of beer; loud, with enough bass to make the walls of her abdomen vibrate; dark at the edges, though lushly lit at the central stage with its three chrome poles and laser strobes. Only one woman was dancing. It was just after six, but the place was already half full. Somewhere, someone was smoking expensive cigars. Cody wondered who the club paid off to make that possible.

Boone ordered staff to put two tables together right by the stage, near the center pole. The guy from New York sat on Boone's left, Dave on his right. Cody took a place at the end, out of Boone's peripheral vision. She wouldn't say or do anything that wasn't detached and ironic. She would be seamless.

A new dancer: shoulder-length red hair that fell over her face as she writhed around the right hand pole. She wore a skirt the size of a belt, and six-inch heels of translucent plastic embedded with suggestive pink flowers. Without the pole she probably couldn't even stand. Did interesting things to her butt, though, Cody thought, then patted surreptitiously at her upper lip. Dry, thank god. Score one for air conditioning.

New York poked her arm. He jerked his thumb at Boone, who leaned forward and shouted, "What do you want to drink?"

"Does it matter?"

He grinned. "No grape juice playing at champagne here. Place takes its liquor seriously."

Peachy. "Margarita. With salt." If it was sour enough she wouldn't want to gulp it.

The dancer hung upside down on the pole and undid her bra. Her breasts were a marvel of modern art, almost architectural.

"My God," she said, "it's the Hagia Sophia."

"What?" New York shouted. "She's called Sophia?"

"No," Cody shouted back, "her breasts . . . Never mind."

"Fakes," New York said, nodding.

The drinks came, delivered by a blonde woman wearing nothing but a purple velvet g-string and a smile. She called Boone *Darlin'*—clearly he was a regular—and Cody *Sugar*.

Cody managed to lift her eyes from the weirdness of unpierced nipples long enough to find a dollar bill and drop it on the drinks tray. Two of the guys were threading their tips under the g-string: a five and a ten. The blonde dropped Cody a wink as she walked away. New York caught it and leered. Cody tried her margarita: very sour. She gulped anyway.

The music changed to a throbbing remix of mom music: the Pointer Sisters' "Slowhand." The bass line was insistent, pushing on her belly like a warm hand. She licked her lips and applied herself to her drink. Another dancer with soft black curls took the left-hand pole, and the redhead moved to centre stage on her hands and knees in front of their table, rotating her ass in slow motion, looking at them over her shoulder, slitting her eyes at them like a cat. Boone, Dave, all the guys had bills in their hands: "Ooh mama, I've got what you need." The redhead backed towards them in slow motion, arching her spine now in apparent ecstasy—but not so far gone as to ignore the largest bill at the table: Boone's twenty. She let him tease her with it, stroking up the inside of her thigh and circling a nipple before she held out the waistband of the pseudo-skirt for the twenty. They probably didn't notice that she plucked them of their bills in order—Boone's twenty, Dave's ten, the two fives. Then she was moving to her right, to a crowd of hipster suits who had obviously been there longer than was good for them: two of them were holding out fifties. The dancer pretended to fuck the fifty being held out at pelvic level. She had incredible muscle control. Next to Cody, New York swallowed hard, and fumbled for his wallet. But it was too late. The hipster was grinning hard as the redhead touched his cheek, tilted her head, said something. He stood and his friends hooted encouragement as he and the redhead

disappeared through a heavily frosted glass door in the back.

~~"Oh, man . . ." Dave's face was more red than tan, now. He pulled a fifty from his wallet, snapped it, folded it lengthways, and held it out over the stage to the remaining dancer. "Yo, curlyhead, come and get some!"~~

"Yeah!" said New York in a high voice. Portland and Boston seemed to be engaged in a drinking game.

Boone caught Cody's eye and smiled slightly. She shrugged and spread her hand as if to say, Hey, it's their money to waste, and he smiled again, this time with a touch of skepticism. Ah, shit.

"Sugar?" The waitress with the velvet g-string, standing close and bending down so that her nipples brushed Cody's hair, then dabbed her cheek.

Cody looked at her faded blue eyes and found a ten dollar bill. She smiled and slipped it into the g-string at the woman's hip and crooked a finger to make her bend close again.

"I'd take it as a personal favor if you brought me another of these wonderful margaritas," she said in the woman's ear, "without the tequila."

"Whatever you say. But I'll still have to charge for the liquor."

"Of course you do. Just make sure it looks good." Cody jerked her head back at the rest of the table.

"You let me take care of everything, sugar. I'm going to make you the meanest looking margarita in Dixie. They'll be amazed, purely amazed, at your stamina. It'll be our little secret." She fondled Cody's arm and shoulder, let the back of her hand brush the side of Cody's breast. "My name is Mimi. If you need anything, later." She gave Cody a molten look and headed for the bar. The skin on her rotating cheeks looked unnaturally smooth, like porcelain. Cosmetics, Cody decided.

Curlyhead had spotted Dave's fifty and was now on her back in front of their table. Cody imagined her as a glitched wigglebot responding to insane commands: clench, release, arch, whip back and forth. Whoever had designed her had done a great job on those muscles: each distinct, plump with strength, soft to the touch. Shame they hadn't had much imagination with the facial expressions or managed to put any spark in the eyes.

Breasts swaying near her face announced the arrival of her kickless drink. She slipped a ten from her wallet and reached for Mimi's g-string.

Mimi stepped back half a pace, put her tray down, and squeezed her breasts together with her hands. "Would you like to put it here instead, Sugar?"

Cody blinked.

"You could slide it in real slow. Then maybe we could get better acquainted." But like the wigglebot, her eyes stayed blank.

"You're too hot for me, Mimi." Cody snapped the bill into her g-string and tried not to feel Mimi's flash of hatred. She sipped her drink and took a discreet peek in her wallet. This was costing the company a fortune.

Boone watched Dave and New York with a detached expression. Then he turned her way with a speculative look. An invitation to talk?

She stood. And turned to look at the stage just as a long-haired woman in cowboy boots strode to the center pole.

For Cookie it was all routine so far, ankle holding up better than she thought it might. The boots helped. She couldn't remember when she'd written that note to herself, *Cowboys and Indians!*, but it was going to be inspired. She flexed and bent and pouted and pointed her breasts on automatic pilot.

Should she get the ankle x-rayed? Nah. It was only a sprain. Two ibuprofen and some ice would fix it.

~~Decent crowd for a Tuesday night. Some high spenders behind the pillar there, but Ginger had taken them for four lapdances already. Well, hey, there were always more men with more money than sense. She glanced into the wings. Danny had her hat. He nodded. She moved automatically, counted under her breath, and just as the first haunting whistle of Morricone's "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly" soundtrack echoed from the speakers she held out her hand, caught the hat, and swept it onto her head. Ooh, baby, perfect today, perfect. She smiled and strutted downstage. A woman at the front table was standing. Cookie saw the flash of a very expensive watch, and for no particular reason was flooded with conviction that tonight was going to go very well indeed. Cookie, baby, she told herself, tonight you're gonna get rich.~~

And with that catch of the hat, that strut, just like that, Cody forgot about Boone and his contract, forgot about being seamless, forgot everything. The dancer was fine, lean and soft, strong as a deer. The name *Cookie* was picked out in rhinestones on her hat, and she wore a tiny fringed buckskin halter and something that looked like a breechclout—flaps of suede that hung from the waist to cover front and back, but not the sides—and wicked spurs on the boots. She looked right at Cody and smiled, and her eyes were not blank.

Part of Cody knew that Boone had seen her stand, and was now watching her watch this dancer, and that she should stop, or sit, or keep walking to Boone's end of the table, but the other part—the part that liked to drink shots in biker bars, to code all night with Acid Girls pounding from the speakers and the company's fortunes riding on her deadline, the part that had loaded up her pickup and left Florida to drive all the way to the West Coast on her own when she was just nineteen, that had once hung by her knees from a ninth floor balcony just because she could—that part cared about nothing but this woman with the long brown hair.

The hair was Indian straight and ended just one inch above the hem of the breechclout, and the way she moved made Cody understand that the hat and spurs were trophies, taken from a dead man. When the dancer trailed her hands across her body, Cody knew they held knives. When the male voices began their rhythmic chanting, she could see this woman riding hard over the plain, vaulting from her pony, stripping naked as she walked.

The music shifted but again it was drums, and now Cookie swayed like a maiden by a pool, pulling the straps of her halter off her shoulders, enough to expose half her breasts but not all, and she felt them thoughtfully, and began to smear them with warpaint. When she had painted all she could see, she pushed the buckskin down further, so that each breast rested like a satsuma on its soft shelf, then she turned her back on the audience, twisted her hair over one shoulder and examined the reflection of her ass in the water. She turned a little, this way and that, lifting the back flap, one corner then another, dropping it, thinking, stroking each cheek experimentally, trying to decide how to decorate it. Then she smoothed the buckskin with both hands so it pulled tight, and studied that effect. She frowned. She traced the outline of her g-string with her index finger. She smiled. She stuck her butt out, twitched it a couple of times, hooked both thumbs in the waistband of her g-string, and whipped it off. The breechclout stayed in place. She was still wearing the halter under her breasts.

And the little dyke liked that, Cookie could tell. She smiled smooth as cream, danced closer, saw the stain creeping up the woman's cheeks, the way her lips parted and her hands opened. Professionally manicured hands; clothes of beautifully cut linen, shoes handmade. The men in the room faded to irritation. This was the prize.

One of the men at the table reached out and slipped a twenty between the rawhide tie of her

breechclout and her hip, but Cookie barely took her eyes from the woman. Twenty here or fifty there was ~~small change~~ compared to this. ~~For you, she mouthed and turned slightly, and tightened down in~~ a mushroom of skin-sheathed muscle, took off her hat, and reached back and pulled the flap of her breechclout out of the way.

She was aware of some shouting, the tall guy with the red face and the fifty but she kept her eye fixed on the woman.

And then the music changed, and Ginger was back from her lapdance, and she saw Christie was hand in hand with a glazed-looking mark, about to leave for the backroom, and it was time for her to put some of her clothes back on and work the floor.

Five minutes, she mouthed to the woman.

Cookie, Cody thought, as the dancer flicked the suede flap back in place, stood gracefully, and put her hat back on. Cookie. She watched as Cookie left the stage and took all the heat and light with her. She would come back, wouldn't she? Five minutes, she had said.

"Cunt!" Dave shouted again, "my money not good enough for you? Goddamned—No, you get off of me." He pushed Boone's hand from his arm, then realized what he'd done. "Shit. That's—It's just—You know how it is, man. But fifty bucks . . ."

"Hell, Dave, maybe she knew it was counterfeit," Boone said jovially.

Dave forced a laugh, thrust the bill in his pocket. "Yeah, or maybe she just doesn't understand size matters." Boone laughed, but everyone at the table heard the dismissive note.

"Maybe it's time to call it a night, folks."

But Cody wasn't listening because Cookie was standing before her: no hat, buckskins and g-string back in place.

"Okay guys, looks like we lost Cody." Boone laughed, nothing like the laugh he'd given Dave. "Hey, girl, you make sure you get a cab home, hear? Mention my name to the doorman. Come on guys, we're outta here."

"Cody. Is that your name?" said Cookie, and took her hand. Cody nodded dumbly. "I'm Cookie. It's so good to find another woman here."

Another nod. *How are you?* Cody wanted to say, but that made no sense.

"Would you like to dance with me? Just you and me in private?"

"Yes."

"We'd have to pay for the room."

"Yes."

"I love dancing for women. It gets me going, turns me on. I understand what women want, Cody. Would you like me to show you?"

"Yes," said Cody, and was mildly amazed when her legs worked well enough to follow Cookie to the frosted glass door.

Midnight in her hotel room. Cody sat on the bed, naked, too wired to lie down. Streetlight slanted through the unclosed drapes, turning the room sodium yellow. The air conditioning roared, but her skin burned. Cookie. Cookie's lips, Cookie's hips, Cookie's cheek and chin and belly. Her thighs and ass and breasts. Oh, her breasts, their soft weight on Cody's palms.

She lifted her hands, turned her palms up, examined them. They didn't look any different. She unsnapped her watch and rubbed her wrist absently. Cookie.

Stop it. What the fuck was the matter with her? She'd gone to a strip club and had sex for money

It was a first, okay, so some confusion was to be expected, but it was sordid, not romantic. She had been played by an expert and taken for hundreds of dollars. Oh, God, and Boone . . . She had made a fucking fool of herself.

So why did she feel so happy?

Cody, you're so beautiful, she'd said. *Oh, yes, yes, don't stop, Cody. Give it to me, give me all of it.* And Cody had. And Cookie had . . . Cookie had been perfect. She had understood everything, anticipated everything. What to say, what to do, when to cajole and goad, when to smile and be submissive, when to encourage, when to resist. Like a mind reader. And she had felt something, Cody knew it. She had. You couldn't fake pupil dilation, you couldn't fake that flush, you couldn't fake that sheen of sweat and luxuriant slipperiness. Could you?

Christ. She was going mad. She rubbed her eyebrows. Cookie was a pro, and none of it was real.

She got up. The woolen carpet made her bare feet itch. That was real. Her clothes were flung across the back of the chair by the desk; they reeked of cigar smoke. No great loss. She'd no idea why she'd chosen to wear those loose pants, anyway. Hadn't worn them for about a year. Hadn't worn that stupid watch for about as long, come to think of it. Cookie hated the smell of cigars, she's said so, when she was unbuttoning—

Stop it. Stop it now.

She carried her pants to the bed and pulled the receipts from the pockets. Eight of them. She'd paid for eight lapdances, and the size of the tips . . . Jesus. That was two month's rent. What had she been thinking?

We have to pay for the room, Cookie said, *but I'll pay you half back. It's just that I can't wait. Oh please, Cody. I want you again.*

"God damn it!" Her ferocity scared her momentarily and she stilled, listening. No stirrings or mutterings from either room next door.

Give me your hotel phone number, Cookie had said. *I'll call you tomorrow. This has never happened before. This is real.*

And if it was . . . She could reschedule her flight. She'd explain it to Vince somehow.

Christ. That huge contract gone, in a flash of lust. Vince would kill her.

But, oh, she'd had nearly three hours of the best sex she'd ever had. It had gone exactly the way she'd imagined it in her fantasies. I know just what you want, Cookie had said, and proved it.

But Cody had known too, that was the thing. She had *known* when the hoarse breath and clutching hands meant it was Cookie's turn, meant that Cookie now wanted to be touched, wanted to break every single personal and club rule and be fucked over the back of the chair, just for pleasure.

Cody stirred the receipts. She couldn't make it make sense. She had paid for sex. That was not romance. But she had felt Cookie's vaginal muscles tighten, felt that quiver in her perineum, the clut and spasm of orgasm. It wasn't faked. It hadn't been faked the second time, either.

Cody shivered. The air conditioning was finally beginning to bite. She rubbed her cold feet. Cookie's feet were long and shapely, each toe painted with clear nail polish. She'd twisted her ankle, she'd said. Cody had held the ankle, kissed it, stroked it. Cookie's smile was beautiful. *How did you sprain it?* Cody had asked, and Cookie had told her about falling five feet from the indoor climbing wall, and they had talked about climbing and rafting, and Cody had told her of the time when she was seven and had seen Cirque de Soleil and wanted to be one of the trapeze artists, and that led to talk of abdominal muscles, which led to more sex.

She padded into the bathroom, still without bothering with the light. When she lifted her toothbrush to her mouth, the scent on her fingers tightened her muscles involuntarily. She dropped the

toothbrush, leaned over the sink, and wept.

A blue, blue Atlanta morning. Cody hadn't slept. She didn't want breakfast. Her plane wasn't until four that afternoon.

She'd lost the contract, lost a night's sleep, lost her mind and her self-respect, and flushed two months' rent down the toilet. She would never see Cookie again—and she couldn't understand why she cared.

The phone rang. *Cookie!* she thought, and hated herself for it.

"Hello?"

"Your cell phone's off, but I called Vince back in Frisco and he told me you were at the Westin. Boone. She shut her eyes.

"Plane's not til four, am I right? Cody, you there?"

"Yes. I'm here."

"If you're not too tuckered out, maybe you wouldn't mind dropping by my office. We'll give you lunch."

"Lunch?"

"Yep. You know, food. Don't they do lunch on the West Coast?"

"Yes. I mean, why?"

He chuckled. "Because we've got a few details to hammer out on this contract. So should we say oh, eleven-thirty?"

"That's, yes, fine. Good," she said at random, and put the phone down.

She stared at her bag. Clothes. She'd need to change her clothes. Was he really giving her the contract?

The phone rang again. "Hello?" she said doubtfully, expecting anyone from god to the devil to reply.

"Hey, Cody. It's me."

"Richard?"

"Yeah. Listen, how did it go?"

"I don't . . . Things are . . ." She took a deep breath. "I got the contract."

"Hey, that's great. But how did last night go?"

"Christ, Richard, I can't gossip now. I don't have the time. I'm on my way to Boone's, iron out a few details." She had to pull it together. "I'll call you in a week or two, okay?"

"No, wait, Cody. Just don't do anything you—"

"Later, okay." She dropped the phone in its cradle. How did he know to call the Westin? What did he care about her night? She rubbed her forehead again. Food might help with the contract. The headache, she meant. And she grinned: the contract. She'd goddamned well won the contract. She was gonna get a huge bonus. She was gonna be a Vice President. She was gonna be late.

In the bathroom, she picked up the toothbrush, rinsed off the smeared paste, and resolutely refused to think about last night.

Cookie dialed the hotel.

"This is Cody. Leave a message, or reach me on my cell phone," followed by a string of numbers beginning with 415. San Francisco. That's right. She'd told Cookie that last night: San Francisco with its fog and hills and great espresso on Sunday mornings.

That might be okay. Anything would beat this Atlanta heat.

Boone didn't want to talk details so much as to laugh and drink coffee and teach Cody how to eat a po' boy sandwich. After all, if they were gonna be working together, they should get to know each other, was he right? And there was no mention of strip clubs or lapdances until the end when he signed the letter of intent, handed it to her, and said, "I like the way you handle yourself. Now take that Austin fella, Dave. No breeding. Can't hold his liquor, can't keep his temper, and calls a woman name in public. But you: no boasting, no big words, you just sit quiet then seize the opportunity." He gave her a sly smile. "You do that in business and we'll make ourselves some money."

And somehow, with his clap on the back, the letter in her laptop case and the sun on her face while she waited for the car for her trip to the airport, she started to forget her confusion. She'd had great sex, she'd built the foundations of a profitable working relationship, she was thirty-one and about to be a vice president, and she didn't even have a hangover.

The car came and she climbed into the cool, green-tinted interior.

She let the outside world glide by for ten minutes before she got out the letter of intent. She read it twice. Beautifully phrased. Strong signature. Wonderful row of zeroes before the decimal point. If everything stayed on track, this one contract would keep their heads above water until they could develop a few more income streams. And she had done it. No one else. Damn she was good! Someone should buy her a great dinner to celebrate.

She got out her phone, turned it on. The signal meter wavered as the car crossed from cell to cell. Who should she call? No one in their right mind would want to have dinner with Vince. Richard would only want all the details, and she didn't want to talk about those details yet; he was in the Carolinas, anyway. Asshole.

The signal suddenly cleared, and her phone bleeped: one message.

"Hey. This is Cookie. I know you don't go until the afternoon. If you . . . I know this is weird but last night was . . . Shit. Look, maybe you won't believe me but I can't stop thinking about you. I want to see you, okay? I'll be in the park, the one I told you about. Piedmont. On one of the benches by the lake. I'm going there now, and I'll wait. I hope you come. I'll bring doughnuts. Do you like doughnuts? I'll be waiting. Please."

Oooh, you're different, ooh, you're so special, ooh, give it to me baby, just pay another thousand dollars and I'll love you forever. Sure. But Cookie's voice sounded so soft, so uncertain, as though she really meant it. But of course it would. That was her living: playing pretend. Using people.

Cody's face prickled. Be honest, she told herself: who really used who, here? Who got the big contract, who got to have exactly what she wanted: great sex with no complications, and on the expense account no less?

It was too confusing. She was too tired. She was leaving. It was all too late anyhow, she thought as the car moved smoothly onto the interstate.

A woman sitting on her own on a bench, maybe getting hot, maybe getting thirsty, wanting to use the bathroom. Afraid to get up and go pee because she might miss the one she was waiting for. Maybe the hot sweet scent of the doughnuts reminded her she was hungry, but she wouldn't eat them because she wanted to present them in their round-dozen perfection to her sweetie, see her smile of delight. She would pick at the paint peeling on the wooden bench and look up every time someone like Cody walked past; every time, she'd be disappointed. This one magical thing had happened in her life, something very like a miracle, but as the hot fat sun sinks lower she understands that this miracle, this dream is going to die because the person she's resting all her hopes on is worried she might look like a fool. Or doesn't want to admit she had used a woman for sex and then thrown her away.

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