

POPULAR STORIES

Illustrated

INSIDE...

Comedy-mystery

Western

Historical drama

Science fiction

Crime

Aussie outback gothic

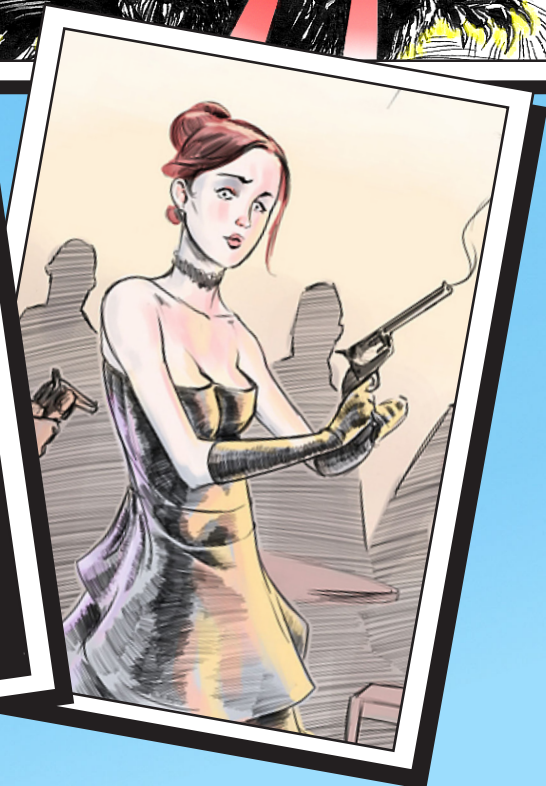
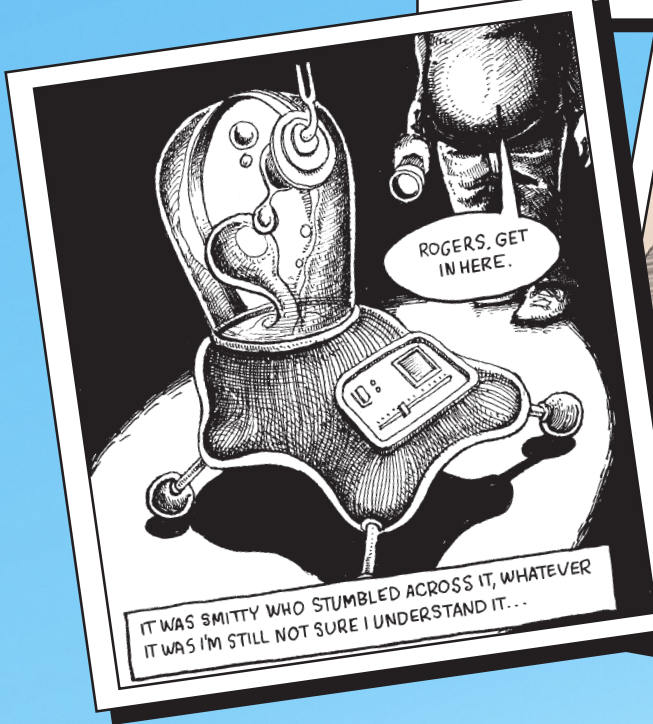
Comic strip detectives

& More...

SAMPLE EDITION

NOT FOR SALE

ALL NEW FICTION!
ALL ILLUSTRATED!
ALL AUSTRALIAN!



Full page space available for advertising and promotion

Vintage Australian Comic Books on CD

Twelve comic books on CD website,
originally published by Frew Publications
between the late 1940s and the early 1960s.

***The* PHANTOM
RANGER**

**SIR
FALCON**

***THE* SHADOW**

- *Runs automatically when inserted into CD drive.*
- *Full on-screen click-button controls for easy viewing.*

- *Includes background notes, history and sources.*
- *Three viewing sizes for each comic book page.*

For free activities, sample web pages & screen shots,
ordering & price details, go to:

<http://www.rmsed.com.au>

Email: info@rmsed.com.au

Postal: Vintage Australian Comics
P.O. Box 50, Preston
Victoria, 3072
Australia



Single-user (e.g. home use) and multi-user (e.g. schools) licences available.

Vintage Australian Comic Books on CD is copyright © R.M. Stitson, 2005.
Copyright permission from Frew Publications.

POPULAR STORIES

Illustrated

Welcome to this sample edition of
Popular Stories Illustrated.

Inside the covers you'll find a selection of
illustrated genre short stories
and a comic strip. More to follow in a full-
sized for-sale edition. Cheers!

Roger Stitson, editor-publisher,
Popular Stories Illustrated.

Sample edition produced, edited and
published by R.M. Stitson,
October 2009.

Not for sale. Pages and contents may
also not be copied, displayed nor
disseminated without prior permission
from the publisher.

Copyright © R.M. Stitson, 2009.

<http://www.rmsed.com.au>
magazine@rmsed.com.au

ABN: 50 870 627 939

RBN: B2105716S

CONTENTS

4	Jongari	Alison Pearce (illustrator Virginia Gray)
9	Incident at the Longbranch Saloon	Hugh Simpson (illustrator Nick Hunter)
16	The Little Yellow Car	Jill Baggett (illustrator Virginia Gray)
19	Salute	Adrian Gibb (illustrator Emanuele Gelsi)
24	The Eleventh Frequency	Daniel Reed (writer-illustrator)
35	Tortoise	Kate Smith (illustrator Nick Hunter)
39	Darkness and Light	Chris Broadribb (illustrator Simon Matthews)
43	Effaced	Pierz Newton-John (illustrator Emanuele Gelsi)
49	The Fallen	Frances Clark (illustrator Robert Scholten)



Detail of illustration by Virginia Gray (p.16)

Jongari

by Alison Pearce



Illustrated by Virginia Gray

A tangy aroma of crushed gum leaves and pine needles wafted on the breeze. Lorikeets, their wings flapping like hand gestures in conversation, chattered in the canopy above the small tour group.

‘Here is the site where American crypto-zoologists supposedly found a yowie nest.’

The tourists stared into a gaping cave mouth almost concealed in the red cliff-face by overhanging rock and ferns. A flurry of whirring

and clicking caused the birds to fly off in alarm as the group took snaps from every angle.

‘Yeah right!’ a shaggy-haired teenage boy drawled sarcastically, not even bothering to look up as his fingers tapped rapidly over his Gameboy.

As one, they shuffled uneasily, and the boy’s mother blushed scarlet in embarrassment. The Murri ranger shot the boy a frosty glance, his dark eyes hard and piercing.

The others were eager to distance themselves from the boy. It was not the first time he'd acted this way as they'd toured the outback. Secretly, they all wondered why his mother, Shirley, continued to drag him along on expeditions he clearly did not wish to be a part of.

Everyone was mopping their faces and plucking at damp clothes sticking uncomfortably to their skin. In contrast, Jongari seemed cool and relaxed. Not a strand of curly, salt-and-pepper hair was out of place. His khaki uniform was crisp and clean. Not a single bead of sweat glistened on his dark skin. It was as though he walked through a different dimension from the rest of them.

'You should be careful, young man,' Jongari cautioned him quietly. 'People around here still believe that the Hairy Man will come for you if you disrespect his home.'

The boy snorted derisively, wings of blonde hair falling down over his cheeks as he kept his head bent over the game, 'And the bogeyman lives under my bed. This is so lame. When are we going back to the resort?'

His mother, trying to ignore the rude outburst, stepped closer to their guide. 'Could you tell us more, Jongari?' she asked hesitantly.

'Yes, please,' a German couple chimed in.

Jongari looked at them all intently before indicating they should sit. He waited as they arranged themselves in a semi-circle around the cave entrance.

'The yowie, or Hairy Man as some call him, is the protector of the land,' Jongari continued, 'Those who have survived to tell the tale speak of a large, hairy, ape-like man who hides in the shadows, flitting from tree to tree as fast as the wind, jumping out and attacking the wicked with long, sharp claws.'

'Is there a way to tell when it is around?' an English woman with a long, pointed face asked in a whisper.

'Of course. Hunters call it The Dread.' His voice dropped to a hoarse, conspiratorial whisper, 'Your stomach feels like it has turned to water, you smell something — something unnatural. He roars! A terrible sound that turns your bones to jelly, and just before he attacks,' Jongari paused, 'you will see his red eyes.'

'Can you stop it?' the American woman asked, turning to see if her son was listening. At first glance she thought he wasn't, but then she noticed that his hands had become perfectly still.

'The only way,' Jongari leaned forward, 'is to yell "Dhim beelung, Ngara!" as loudly as you can.'

'What does it mean?' a tiny, shy Japanese girl asked, cowering behind her parents.

'It means, "We bid you welcome as a friend." It is the only way to show you repent of your disrespect,' Jongari smiled at the girl, 'but none of you have anything to worry about,' he looked over at the boy, 'well, most of you anyway.'

#

'You could at least make an attempt to enjoy this trip, Steven!'

'What for? You see one backward country, you've seen them all.'

Shirley sighed. Every year she saved and saved to take her only child on an overseas vacation. She'd always wanted Steven to experience the world, learn to appreciate other cultures and broaden his mind. Instead, he showed no interest, worse, he showed disdain.

After their disastrous trip to Kenya the previous year where Steven had offended so many people they'd had to cut their trip short, Shirley had decided to give up. But then the opportunity to visit the Australian outback had presented itself. She had been sure this alien environment, caught in an ancient time warp, would finally pique his interest.

Jongari had tried his best to engage Steven, to help him experience an authentic adventure into the living past. Shirley doubted the guide would bother again after today.

'Jeez! They don't even get cable in this stupid place!' Steven exclaimed, throwing the remote to the ground in disgust, 'I'm going out.'

'Don't leave the grounds!' Shirley cried shrilly as he grabbed his blades and headed for the door, 'There are wild animals out there!'

'I'm sooo scared,' Steven taunted over his shoulder, 'I hope the yowie doesn't get me.'

'Don't make fun...' But Steven didn't hear her. He'd already left.

#

Making sure his mother hadn't followed, Steven did a couple of laps around the concrete

paths surrounding the resort complex before rolling over the tightly packed red earth and into the shelter of gum trees. Crouching down between two thin, protruding roots, he kicked off his blades, pulled out a packet of cigarettes and lit one. His eyes searching the shadows between the trees for a moment, he laughed out loud. The sound hung on the air a moment, shattering the silence. The old man's story about the Hairy Man had caught his attention, not that he would ever admit it.

Dragging on the cigarette, Steven mused sourly on his surroundings. He was sick of his mother dragging him all over the world, year after year. He hated every place, every strange custom, every sight and smell. He didn't want to think about some of the weird things he'd been forced to eat. All he'd wanted was to spend his vacations at home in Chicago, hanging out with friends and playing video games. Why couldn't his mother accept that? Why couldn't she understand that he didn't care about anything outside the good old U S of A?

Flicking the butt away into the shadows, he stared as the red ember flared and then smouldered in damp underbrush. Out of the corner of an eye he noticed peripheral movement on the right, like a shadow detaching from another shadow and melding into another. Startled, he stumbled against a tree trunk.

'Who's there?' he called.

Nothing. No sound. No movement. Shaking his head at a lapse of cool, Steven rose to his feet. There it was again! It was to the left of him this time. He swung around in the direction the shadows seemed to be, and peered into the darkness. He opened his mouth to speak again but no sound left his throat.

And then he smelt it. A sickly sweet aroma of rotting vegetables, or was it rotting flesh? Steven gagged. An inhuman roar rose into the night, and he knew then exactly what it was, but could not name it... He turned on his heels and fled through the undergrowth, his clothes snagged on twigs, feet bruised and cut on sharp rocks in his flight. Heavy, thumping footfalls followed him, and over his shoulder into the night he glimpsed an outline of something, a beast, with huge-muscled arms, coarse hair, and viciously clawed

hands, pounding through the forest.

Bleeding, Steven fell and snaked on his belly along the ground into the foliage of a low bush. The air grew still and quiet. Then slowly, some distance above the underbrush, the towering upper bulk of the creature moved into the boy's vision. Face and shoulders of an ape but with little or no neck it stood, swivelling from side to side, brute forelimbs swinging, searching into the darkness.

On his stomach Steven began to crawl further into the shrub, but his foot must have caught an exposed root in the earth. A sharp pain shot through his ankle. Again that smell and horrible roar filled the air, and two glowing strobes of red light swept downwards, scouring the forest floor for him. Bitter, salty tears cascaded down the boy's cheeks.

His attitude and the warning from that ranger, Jongari, earlier in the day flashed through his mind. And out of the blue he remembered the questions that his mother and the young Japanese girl had asked. Jongari's answers rang in his head. But what were the words the guide had spoken, the incantation?

'Dhim beelung, Ngara!' he cried out to The Dread.

All movement and sound abruptly halted. The scarlet orbs were still visible but had stilled. 'Dhim beelung, Ngara!' he cried, 'I'm sorry!'

Blinking once, the red lights disappeared, extinguished so quickly that they could have been imagined, were it not that their imprint had burned themselves into his sight.

Steven lay on his back breathing harshly. He listened, he sniffed the air and his eyes peered warily around him. All signs of the creature had vanished. Slowly, Steven sat up and tried to get his bearings. Only the crescent moon hanging low in the sky allowed him to decipher where he was. Nothing nearby looked familiar. The lights of the resort were nowhere to be seen. He was hopelessly lost in a landscape so vast and alien he doubted he'd ever be found.

Faintly at first, before growing steadily stronger and closer, the sound of boots crunching on fallen grey leaves echoed around the grove of gums and pines. An arc of white light passed nearby.



The tourists stared down with widened eyes, startled by the deep impressions of large six-toed footprints embedded perfectly in the hard dirt.

‘Steven?’ a voice asked as the light fell across his body, ‘is that you, mate? What are you doing all the way out here?’

‘Jongari?’ he cried out in relief as the man with greying curls stepped into the moonlit path. Steven felt his fear fall away. Feeling more like a ten-year-old than sixteen, he scrambled to his feet and hobbled over to the ranger, embracing him tightly.

‘Okay mate! You’re alright now. Sounds like you have a story to tell me while I take you back, hey?’

‘You won’t believe it though!’

‘Try me.’

The following morning the tour group assembled at their usual rendezvous point by the resort’s swimming pool. Steven leant forward on the balls of his feet, amazed at the quick recovery of the injuries he’d sustained the night before,

and looked towards the front of the group curiously. Their Murri guide was nowhere to be seen. In his place was a tanned, pretty blonde, barely older than Steven himself.

He’d wanted to see Jongari so badly. Overnight, his whole life and his perception of the world had changed. Steven saw everything in a new light, and he wanted to share it with the man he attributed it to.

There had been no mention of last night’s adventure from his mother this morning, which he had welcomed, especially as she’d insinuated that he’d been smoking something other than tobacco, but her reaction when he had shown her his healed feet had been weird.

‘I didn’t know you’d injured your feet,’ she’d claimed with a hurt expression. ‘You should tell me these things, son.’ He’d let the comment pass,

for it had been very early in the morning, after all, when he'd bounced into her room to show her, and she had looked very tired.

'Where do you think Jongari is?' he asked Shirley in hushed tones.

She regarded him with confused eyes, 'Who, dear?'

'Our guide. Jongari?'

Shirley leaned over and placed the palm of her hand on his forehead, 'Are you feeling alright, Steven?' she asked, searching his face intently, concern furrowing her brows, 'You're acting very strangely this morning.'

Sherry, their bubbly new guide, treated them all like old friends, Steven included, which only added to his confusion. He was certain he'd never met her before, yet she greeted him a warm camaraderie, 'Hey, Steven! I saw you out blading last night. Remind me to give you a map with some cool places where you can skate around here.'

'Ah, thanks,' he mumbled.

Steven followed along meekly as Sherry led them deep into the bush in search of a billabong that she claimed according to Murri legend was inhabited by a bunyip. The path they were treading looked vaguely familiar to the young American, the difference, he realised, between day and night. Spotting the patch of disturbed forest debris where he'd crawled towards the scrub, Steven stared across the area, trying to distinguish movement in the shadows. The brush seemed devoid of anything more sinister than a loud cockatoo squawking at the human intrusion.

He felt a tug at the edge of his senses, a feeling of dislocation. The disturbed ground proved that he really had been there, didn't it? But what had happened to his guide, the man he'd come to look upon as his saviour? Where was he?

'Everybody, over here!' a burly, bearded

Italian man called out excitedly. He was gesticulating wildly, an expression of wonder on his broad, craggy features.

Moving closer to see what the fuss was about, the tourists stared down with widened eyes, startled by the deep impressions of a large six-toed footprint embedded perfectly in hard dirt.

Following the track, they exclaimed in awe as the footprints tapered down in a line, becoming more humanlike, smaller and with the normal five digits. Further along, those footprints changed as well, becoming clear indentations made by a pair of sturdy boots.

Sherry bent over and studied them all carefully, her khaki uniform already soaked with sweat, 'Looks like Jongari has been here!' Straightening up, she giggled as though she'd made a great joke.

'What?' Steven was not sure he'd heard her properly but suddenly felt the mist that had clouded his mind clearing away. He sensed that he was about to learn something that would change his life...

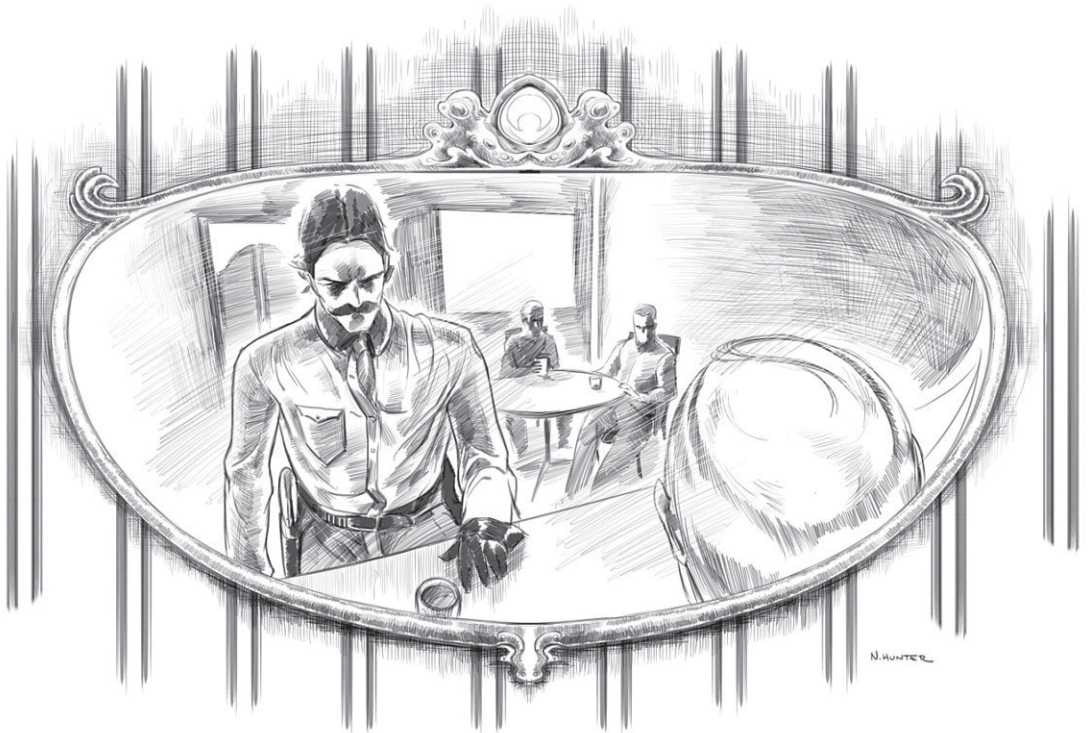
'The Jongari, the protector of the forest,' she told him, impressed by the avid interest she'd been unable to impart to him before that day, 'You may have heard of the yowie?' He nodded slowly, and she went on, warming to her subject, 'The yowie is not a creature of our world, or our time. He comes when he is needed and disappears back into the shadows of the dreamtime when his work is done. There are many different names for him, but here, he is simply called Jongari.'

Steven watched her intently for any signs of deception, and when he realised how serious she was, a chill ran down his spine. 'Of course,' she added, 'the most interesting thing about yowies, which many people don't know, is that they are shape shifters.'

The End

Incident at the Longbranch Saloon

by Hugh Simpson



Illustrated by Nick Hunter

‘Do you believe in guardian angels?’
Shepherd asked.
‘What?’

‘Guardian angels.’

‘Can’t say I’ve given it much thought,’ Yates said.

The old man and the sheriff sat at a table in the corner of the Longbranch Saloon, observing the comings and goings of the clientele. Shepherd had a tumbler of beer in front of him, Yates had a whiskey. Both men leant back against the wall.

Above them was a sign: ‘Don’t forget to write to mother. She is thinking of you. We furnish

paper and envelopes free, and have the best whiskey in town.’

Shepherd thought the sign misleading and told William McCain, the proprietor, every opportunity he got. He couldn’t find fault with the envelopes and paper but he had a lot to say about the whiskey. Having travelled a lot in his fifty years Shepherd considered himself something of a connoisseur where alcohol was concerned. He didn’t rate the whiskey in McCain’s establishment very highly.

The old man wanted the sheriff to arrest the proprietor for misleading the good citizens of Sweethaven. Yates always refused. He pointed

out that the saloon was the only one in town and as it was the only place to get whiskey the sign couldn't possibly be misleading. This never went down well with Shepherd. The old man would sulk for a good half an hour.

Beside the sign was a picture advertising Cyrus Noble Whiskey. It showed a number of men involved in a high-stakes faro game. Other brewery advertisements sat side-by-side on the walls with a host of inspirational art works, most of them containing scantily clad women.

Skinny, a small, plump middle-aged man in a crumpled suit, sat at the piano, bashing away at the keys. His battered bowler sat precariously on top of his bald head, dancing to and fro to what passed for music.

A stranger entered the saloon and sauntered up to the mahogany bar. He was covered in dust from head to toe. A Peacemaker .45 was strapped to each hip. They were a matched set: engraved, ivory-handled, in embossed holsters. Expensive. The stranger rested a boot on the railing at the bottom of the counter and ordered a whiskey. Yates watched him in the large mirror that hung over the bar.

Shepherd took a long drink from his tumbler.

'Your momma,' he said, stroking the froth from his moustache. 'She was a guardian angel. I'm sure you'd say she was a saint but I ain't talkin' about saints. That's a conversation for another time. Let me explain myself.' He took another drink of beer. 'You see, your momma she looked after you when you was a boy. She kept you out of harm's way. The woman watched over you. That's what angels do. They watch over us. So in a way, when you was a boy, your momma was your guardian angel.'

'You sure do like hearing yourself speak, don't you, old timer?'

'Someone has to,' Shepherd said.

They sat in silence while the piano player murdered one tune after another.

A sense of anticipation emanated from the crowd gathered around the billiard table. A cowboy lined up his shot. The force behind the cue sent the white ball soaring across the table where it clacked against the black. The black ball ricocheted off the cushion and thundered noisily down a corner pocket. A jubilant roar

erupted from the onlookers. A beer was thrust into the hands of the winning cowboy. The balls were racked, cues chalked and a new game begun.

Four well dressed men were at a table near the door playing a game of poker. They were big time gamblers from back east who had arrived yesterday afternoon on the stagecoach to Virginia City. They liked the look of Sweethaven and decided to stay the night and try to get up a game. Now they were biding their time until the next coach could get them out of town. A large bundle of cash was in the pot and heavy cigar smoke hung in the air.

'Mister,' one of the card players yelled at Skinny. 'So help me if you don't stop that racket I'll shoot you dead!'

The piano player stopped his bashing.

'You go right ahead,' another card player said. 'I find it soothing.'

'I can't concentrate,' the first man said.

'No. You can't play cards. Now stop your griping and bet.'

Skinny continued his playing. So as not to offend any of the customers, or get himself shot, he bashed a little softer.

The swing doors flapped open. Two boys wearing dirty dungarees and work boots stood in the doorway looking around. Their eyes fell on the card players then on the two men in the corner. The boys looked uncomfortable, as if they'd be caught doing something they shouldn't.

'Isn't that Robert Post's boy?' Shepherd asked.

'Yep,' Yates said.

'What he's doing off the farm?'

'I ain't his Pa.'

The boys hurried to the bar and ordered a bottle of whiskey – the cheap stuff – then took it to a table and started drinking.

'How old you say those boys was?' Shepherd asked.

'No more 'an sixteen.'

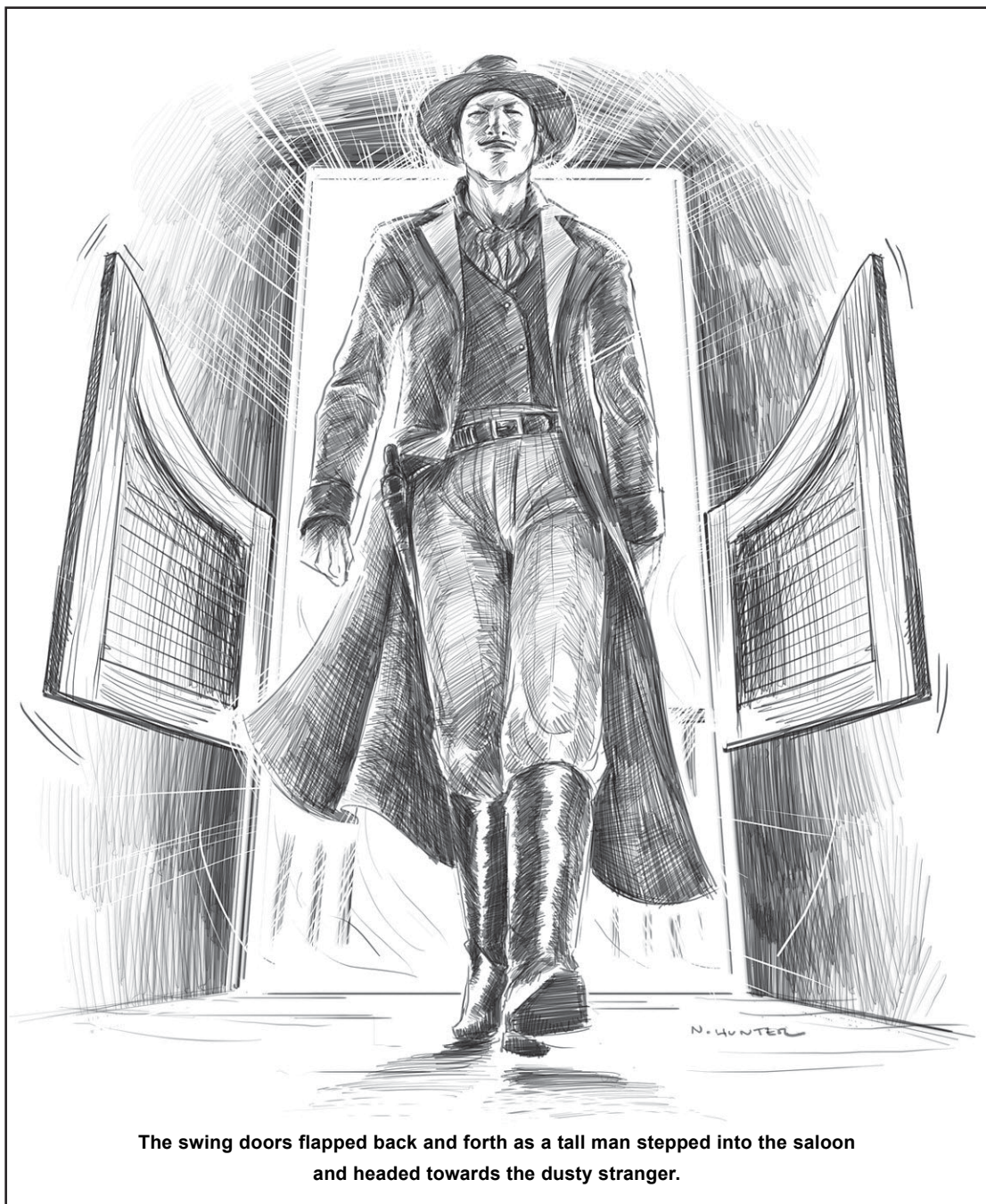
'They seem to be building up some courage.'

'Seem to be.'

'That could be a problem.'

'Could be.'

Three burly woodsmen crashed through the



The swing doors flapped back and forth as a tall man stepped into the saloon and headed towards the dusty stranger.

doors and stomped up to the bar. One of the men grabbed a girl as she passed by.

‘Hey honey,’ he laughed. ‘How’d you like to show me a good time?’ The girl struggled to get free but the man’s huge arm held her tight.

‘I don’t think she likes you Bob,’ his companion said.

‘Course she does,’ Bob said. ‘She’s just got

spirit, is all. How about a little kiss, sweetheart?’

Bob received a slap on the face. He released the girl and she ran off.

‘Hey,’ Bob called. ‘I was just trying to be friendly.’

‘We don’t want no trouble here gentlemen,’ the barkeep said.

‘And you shall receive none,’ Bob chortled.

'It was just a misunderstanding. I thought I knew her from Tucson.'

'What'll it be?' the barkeep asked.

'We'll have us three beers.' Bob slapped some coins onto the bar.

'How come you're so interested in angels all of a sudden?' Yates asked.

'Just talking, is all,' Shepherd said.

'You ain't thinking of dying, are you?' Yates teased.

'Hadn't crossed my mind.'

'If you are you better let me know so I can make arrangements for the coffin. I want Moses to whip up something special. Something you'd be proud of.'

'I got a lot of good years left in me yet, Samuel. You'll probably be shaking hands with the maker long before I do.'

Bob leant back against the bar, resting his elbows on the counter top. He slowly looked around the room, his gaze resting on the two men in the corner. Yates' jacket had fallen open revealing the star pinned to his chest.

'Well, lookie here, boys,' Bob whispered. 'That's Samuel Yates. Some say he's the fastest gun in these parts. Faster than Hickok.'

The woodsmen stood staring at the sheriff.

'How fast you think he really is?' one of woodsmen whispered.

'I don't intend to find out,' Bob said, turning back to the bar. His comrades joined him. 'Only way I'd face Yates, is if he had his back to me and I already had a gun levelled at him.'

'We could take him.'

'Well, no one's stopping you, Cletus.'

Bob and the other woodsman looked expectantly at Cletus. Cletus looked nervous. He cleared his throat and used one of the brass spittoons that sat behind the bottom railing of the bar. The barkeep slapped three beers in front of the men.

'Might have me a drink first,' Cletus said.

'Course you will,' Bob laughed.

The swing doors flapped back and forth as a tall man stepped into the saloon and headed towards the dusty stranger. The newcomer was dressed in black. Black boots, pants, shirt, waistcoat, cravat, over coat and hat. The gun at his side was sitting in a black holster. He was

well-groomed and clean.

'Mr Randall?' the newcomer asked.

The stranger slowly turned his head and looked into the piercing blue eyes of the man in black.

'Mr Paladin?'

'We have business to discuss, sir.'

'You're late.'

'I am. My sincerest apologies.'

The newcomer ordered another whiskey for Randall and a Stone Fence for himself: a shot of rye and a twist of lemon in a glass of cider. The two men moved to a table to discuss their business in private.

'Custer asked me to scout for him once,' Shepherd said. 'Now I've never been sick a day in my life but on the morning old George set out with the seventh, my stomach was givin' me all sorts of troubles. I sent for the Doc but he couldn't work out what was wrong with me. So, Custer tells me to rest up and join him when I'm able.' Shepherd picked up the tumbler and finished his beer. He sat in silence for a second remembering his old friend. 'I never did catch up with him. Day after Big Horn I'm as right as rain. Never been sick a day since.'

Shepherd signalled to the barkeep for another beer.

'You got a point, Joshua?' Yates asked. 'Or are you just trying to bore me to death?'

'I believe an angel was looking out for me that day.'

'I guess Custer didn't have himself an angel that day,' Yates said.

'Not that day,' Shepherd agreed. 'Was just his time.'

'You think Indians have angels?'

'They got all sorts of spirits looking out for them.'

'Not doing a very good job are they?'

'Not that I can tell.'

One of the girls placed a beer in front of Shepherd.

'Thank you, Lorelei, sweetheart,' Shepherd said. He took her hand and dropped a couple of coins in it. He closed her hand around the coins and kissed her soft white fingers.

'I believe you have a guardian angel looking out for you, Samuel,' Shepherd said. He took a

drink, smacked his lips and stroked his moustache.

‘How do you figure?’ Yates asked.

‘Well, the amount of scrapes you’ve gotten yourself into and still come out alive makes me believe someone is watching over you.’

‘It’s called skill.’

‘It ain’t no skill. Those Quimby boys had the drop on you, and you still walked away without a scratch. Two dead, three in custody. That’s more than skill.’

‘Luck, then.’

‘From what folks say it weren’t luck.’

‘Folks exaggerate.’

‘That is true. Folks are apt to embellish after the fact. I’ve been known to do it my own self sometimes.’

‘I’ve known you to do it.’

Shepherd ignored the comment.

‘Ten people ain’t going to exaggerate the same story though, are they?’

‘Maybe they had a meeting.’

‘Samuel, you’ve made yourself a lot of enemies over the years, justifiably or not, I’m not one to say. But it means you’re always on edge. You’re always having to look over your shoulder in case some young buck tries to make a name for himself. Luck and skill do come into play, I ain’t saying they don’t, but there’s something else you’ve got. And that, my friend, is a guardian angel.’

Yates watched the man in black and the dusty stranger bent over their drinks, mumbling quietly to each other so that they wouldn’t be overheard.

‘Hell, Samuel,’ Shepherd groaned. ‘You can’t even sit down and have a nice drink and a quiet slice of conversation without having to be aware of everything that’s going on around you.’

‘Comes with the job, Joshua.’

‘Yep, that’s what Bill used to say. Didn’t help him though. Man walks up behind him while he’s playing cards and shoots him in the back of the head. I’d hate to see that happen to you, old friend.’

‘I don’t play cards.’

‘You know what I...’

The two farm boys rose unsteadily to their feet. The Post boy staggered towards the card players. He pulled out an old Colt Navy .36 from

inside his dungarees and pointed it at the man who had threatened to shoot Skinny.

‘...Trouble,’ Shepherd said.

Cowboys ducked for cover. Skinny tried to push his porky frame behind the piano, realised it wouldn’t fit then opted to hit the floor instead.

‘Son,’ Yates called.

The boy swung around and levelled the gun at the sheriff. The card player reached inside his jacket and pulled out a small pistol. Before he had a chance to aim at the boy he saw Shepherd out of the corner of his eye pointing a revolver at him.

Shepherd shook his head. The gambler returned the pistol to his jacket. The boy swung his gun onto Shepherd, noticed where the cowboy was aiming, then swung around to the card player.

‘Son,’ Yates called, again.

‘He cheated my pa,’ the boy yelled. He tightened his grip on the trigger.

‘I ain’t no cheat, boy,’ the card player said. ‘It was a fair game. I have witnesses.’

‘If I was you, sir,’ Shepherd said, ‘I’d keep my mouth shut and let the sheriff do the talking.’

‘It ain’t worth it, son,’ Yates said.

‘He cheated him, Sheriff,’ the other boy said. ‘My pa was there. He saw it all.’

‘You hush your mouth, boy,’ the card player said. ‘You goin’ to take the word of two dirt farmers...’

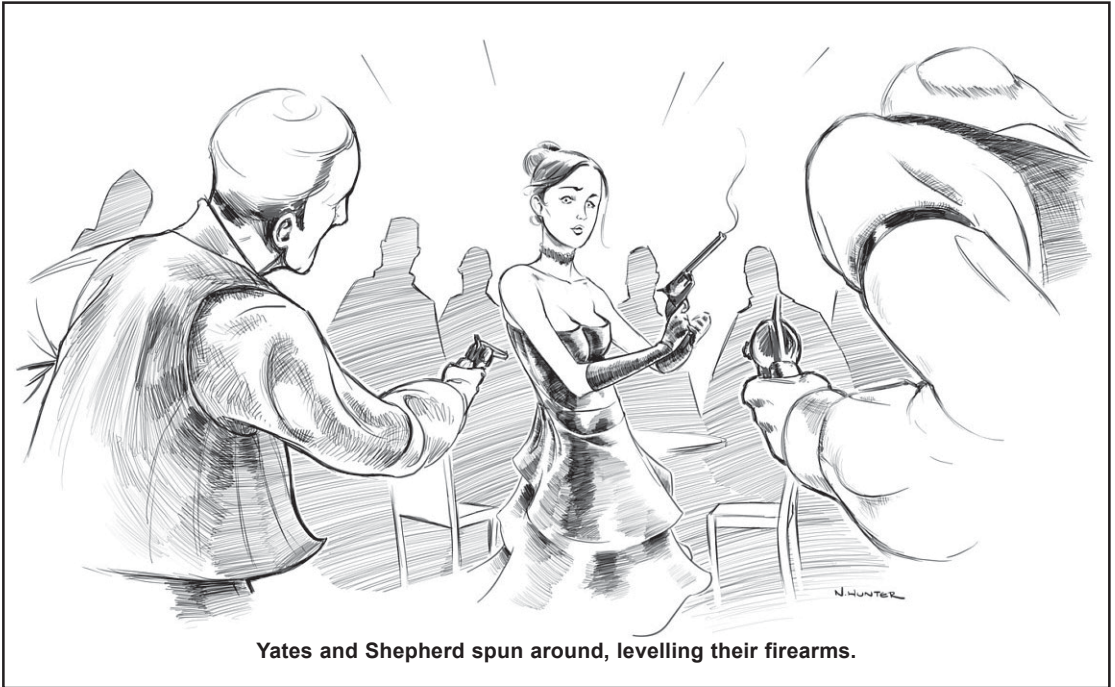
‘Some folks just don’t listen,’ Shepherd mumbled to himself. He got to his feet and made his way to the card players. The boy swung his pistol around to cover Shepherd; the old man ignored him. The card player was still spouting his wisdom when Shepherd reached the table.

The old man brought his revolver down on top of the gambler’s head. The unconscious card player sprawled across the table, sending cards and money toppling to the floor.

‘Sheriff has this under control,’ Shepherd told the other gamblers.

The barkeep came up from behind the bar holding a shot gun. The boy spun around to face him. The three woodsmen crouching at the bottom of the counter flattened themselves onto the floor, placing their hands over their heads.

‘Take it easy, Pete,’ Yates called. He got to



Yates and Shepherd spun around, levelling their firearms.

his feet and moseyed over to the boy. 'No need to get all excited.'

The barkeep slowly placed the shot gun on the counter, raised his hands and stood back.

'How much did he take?' Yates asked.

'Sir?' the boy said.

'How much money?'

'Twenty dollars, sir.' Yates ambled over to the card players and scooped up some notes.

'You can't do that, Sheriff,' one of the gamblers said.

'You want I should hit him too, Samuel?' Shepherd asked.

Yates ignored the men. He stuffed the money into the boy's hand.

'Go home, son,' he said. The boy lowered his gun and placed it on a table.

'I don't - ' the boy began.

'Go home,' Yates said. The two farm boys raced out of the saloon.

'If I ain't mistaken,' Shepherd said to the gamblers, 'you made some comment about your friend here not being a very good card player.' He grabbed the unconscious man's hair and lifted his head off the table. He examined the face. 'Don't look like much of a card player. Well?'

'He wasn't the best,' one of the gamblers said.

'Well then, I'd say those farm boys have the

benefit of the doubt, wouldn't you?' Shepherd dropped the gambler's head onto the table. 'If your friend has any problems when he comes to, he knows where to find me.'

Yates heard movement behind his back. He spun around, drawing his pistol. The man in black and the dusty stranger froze. They raised their hands in the air.

'Easy, sheriff,' Paladin said. 'We'd just like to head on out ourselves.'

'Apologies, gentlemen,' Yates said. He returned his gun to its holster.

The two men nodded their acceptance of his apology and headed out of the saloon. Yates and Shepherd stood at the saloon doors watching the men get on their horses and ride out of town.

'Those boys could be up to some mischief,' Shepherd said.

'As long as they ain't up to it here,' Yates said.

'Amen to that. Bounty hunters, you think?'

'Wouldn't like to speculate.'

The Wells Fargo stagecoach came rolling into town, kicking up the dust. It rattled to a halt outside the company's office.

'Ten minutes to stretch your legs,' the driver called down to the passengers.

'I suppose we should give those gamblers a hand to carry out their friend,' Shepherd said.

‘It’s the least we can do.’

‘I didn’t hit him,’ Yates said.

A loud explosion echoed around the saloon, followed by a cry. Yates and Shepherd spun around, levelling their firearms. Lorelei stood in the centre of the room holding the smoking Colt Navy .36. Skinny held a pistol in one hand, his stomach in the other. Blood poured from the wound, staining his waistcoat, shirt and hand. The pistol tumbled to the floor with a thud. Skinny followed. His bowler hat skidded across the room, coming to rest at the foot of the piano.

‘He was going to shoot you, sheriff,’ Lorelei said. ‘He was going to shoot you in the back.’

Shepherd eased the gun out of the girl’s trembling hands.

‘Pete!’ he called. ‘A good strong drink over here.’ He sat Lorelei down at a table.

‘Man’s dead,’ a cowboy said. He rose from Skinny’s body.

‘Why Skinny?’ Shepherd asked. Yates shook his head. ‘You kill one of his loved ones?’

‘He didn’t have any family,’ Yates said.

‘That you know.’

‘That I know.’

Shepherd checked the rotating chamber of the Colt.

‘My god,’ he exclaimed. ‘This pistol should have blown the girl’s head off.’ He handed the gun to Yates. The sheriff checked the chamber. ‘Those old Colts are unstable. Boy’s daddy must have brought it back with him from the war.’

‘Roll-your-own ammunition,’ Yates observed.

‘It’s not very well rolled,’ Shepherd said. ‘Or loaded.’

‘It’s not.’

‘It should have detonated the other rounds. That pistol should have misfired.’

‘Should have.’

‘Those guns were always misfiring. I guess that’s why they discontinued the model.’

‘I guess.’

The old man and the sheriff stood in silence, each lost in his own thoughts, each thinking about what could have happened. The rest of the saloon returned to normal. Shepherd finally broke the silence. He looked to the heavens, a huge smile on his face.

‘Samuel,’ he said. ‘Someone up there is certainly looking out for you.’

Yates handed Shepherd the antiquated firearm.

‘You’re assuming it was me he was going to shoot,’ Yates said.

The sheriff sauntered back to their table leaving the old man to ponder on what he had just said. Shepherd’s smile faded, to be replaced by a look of consternation.

‘I never even knew the man,’ he cried.

Yates and Shepherd sat at a table in the corner of the Longbranch saloon leaning back against the wall. They watched in silence as Moses the undertaker and a couple of men carried Skinny’s body out of the establishment. They watched the gamblers hoist their semi-conscious comrade out of his chair and across to the stagecoach. They watched pool balls racked and cues chalked. They watched Bob, Cletus and the other woodsman boisterously order another round of beers. They watched the barkeep pour drink after drink to the thirsty cowboys lined up at the mahogany bar. They watched the general comings and goings of the clientele.

Just another day at the Longbranch Saloon, Sweethaven.

The End

A note from the editor...

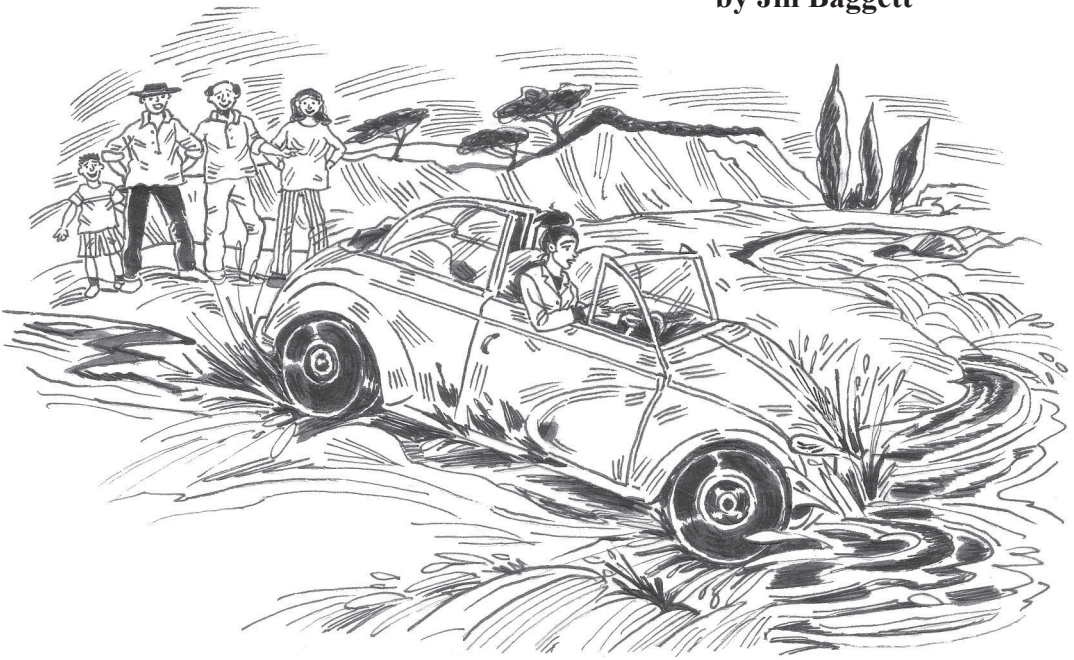
Who was Paladin?

Paladin was a gentleman gun for hire from San Francisco, played by actor Richard Boone in a TV western series called *Have Gun – Will Travel*.

The series ran for 225 episodes, from 1957 to 1963.

The Little Yellow Car

by Jill Baggett



Illustrated by Virginia Gray

We never found out where Irma came from. She came into our lives for a brief few hours and left a legend behind.

A sleepy creek rolls through our farm. It snakes its way down from the mountain and crosses the road by means of a causeway at the bottom of our drive. It's a beautiful creek, crystal clear, it bubbles busily over rocks and forms pools with sandy bottoms that beg you to swim in the glistening water. It runs along happily in front of our house and disappears round the bend past the big hole where the redfin live.

Did I say our creek is sleepy? It is until we have a few days rain, then it becomes a raging monster, frightening in the force it musters to sweep large trees and unwary animals along in its maniacal torrent.

On a day such as this I was standing on the high side of the causeway waiting for the school bus to deliver my six sons safely to our gate. Our driveway is on the town side of the creek

but several neighbouring farmers were stranded and watched helplessly as the waters rose, cutting them off from their properties further along the road. Their heavy 4WDs and trucks were no match for the swirling water.

Experience told us their wait would involve several hours and I called to them that I'd put the kettle on once the school bus had delivered its precious cargo. I knew there'd be no spare beds in our house tonight. These floods always resulted in impromptu sleepovers till the waters receded, much to the young ones' delight.

Then Irma made her entrance.

Along our dusty gravel road at breakneck speed came a nifty little yellow car. Driving it was an attractive thirty-ish woman, dressed in a green tailored suit, hair done in a fashionable coiffure.

The largely male audience looked at her with interest, then amazement, as she drove past the row of waiting farm vehicles, waving gaily to

their occupants, before driving straight into the raging torrent across the causeway.

‘Hey Love, what you doing?’

‘Stop, yer mad sheila!’

‘What the hell’s she doing?’

‘Gunna drown ’erself, that’s for sure.’

The shouts followed her and I think realisation of her situation dawned as the car stalled in the middle of the causeway. The school bus pulled up just in time for its noisy occupants to see the car slide sideways off the causeway and disappear into the six-meter hole known as The Plunge.

The adults watched in horror, the children in gleeful amazement and the bus driver said, ‘That just beats all.’

No-one knew quite what to do, it all happened so fast, but a great cheer went up when the stranger’s head bobbed to the surface. The current pulled her quickly towards the bend but she managed to grab an overhanging branch and cling there catching her breath. Willing helpers ran to her assistance.

‘Don’t worry, Love, we’ll get you.’

‘Here, grab my hand.’

‘Who yer be, Miss?’

The children were cheering and running up and down the bank.

‘I’m Irma and I’m all right. I’ve got to save my car,’ our heroine called above the sound of the water. To everyone’s astonishment she ignored the outstretched hands and dived under the muddy water.

‘Crikey!’

‘Did ya see that?’

‘The sheila’s mad, plumb loco.’

I found myself holding my breath and trying to stop my boys getting too close to the treacherous water.

The head bobbed to the surface back where the car had been swept in. She’d actually managed to swim against the current or maybe pull herself through the bottom debris. She took a breath and dived below. This time she bobbed up further downstream again.

‘Get a rope,’ she yelled to the gaping bystanders.

‘Blimey, she’s not going to give it up.’

‘Wait’ll I tell the Missus ’bout this.’

‘I’ve never seen the likes. Crazy bird.’

‘Hey, Irma, give it up, it’s not worth it.’

‘I’m not leaving my car. Get a rope.’ Her tone as she clutched the overhanging branch allowed no arguments.

My children ran and fetched a rope from our shed and threw it to Irma’s determined outstretched hand. She clenched one end in her mouth and dived again.

The atmosphere by this time had taken on that of a party. Each dive and head bob was greeted by cheers and laughter. The thought of the water claiming her life had vanished from everyone’s mind. It wouldn’t dare.

‘I’ll get my tractor, just in case she manages it,’ said our neighbour from the high side of the creek. He’d heard the commotion and come to see what the fuss was about.

He soon came chugging back down the road, just as Irma surfaced again and called, ‘I’ve done it! It’s tied to the bumper bar!’

The water swept her down towards the bend again with the children chasing along the bank calling advice.

Irma had hold of the rope though and managed to pull herself back to the car. Grasping the overhead branch she threw the rope to the tractor’s incredulous owner. On the third attempt he caught it and tied it to the tractor’s drawbar.

Irma’s stamina finally wilted. She dropped from the branch and disappeared under the water. Panic gripped the spectators.

‘Start the tractor! Pull the car out! She might be holding onto it.’

The tractor kicked into life and slowly, painfully, noisily, the force exerted pulled the little yellow car to the surface.

An enormous cheer broke out as it surfaced and we saw the determined Irma straddled across the roof clinging desperately to the frame.

‘Pull her in! Pull her in!’ she gasped.

Disaster! Suddenly the bumper bar pulled off, rope firmly attached. The car slipped back beneath the swirling water.

Irma was picked up by the current and swept crying in frustration to the bend. This time a group of farmers were there to pluck her from the water as she swept past.

‘Give it up, Lass.’



Irma didn't speak, but sank thankfully into an exhausted sleep on the couch.

‘You can’t do it.’

‘Water’ll go down in a couple o’ days, we’ll get yer car out then.’

I took her home and gave her some dry clothes and a cup of tea. She didn’t speak but sank thankfully into an exhausted sleep on the couch. I covered her with a blanket and looked forward to hearing her story of who she was and where she was going in the morning.

The children spent the evening speculating on our adventurous visitor and why she’d been so determined to save her car.

‘She’s a mad woman escaped from an asylum.’

‘She’s on the run from the police. There’s a body in the boot.’

‘She’s an Olympic swimmer on the way to an important secret rendezvous.’

She was gone when we woke up in the morning. A neighbour told us she’d arrived back down at the causeway at daylight, barefoot and bedraggled, just as the water became passable. He’d driven her to the crossroads where she was going to catch the early morning bus to the city. He’d given her money for the fare.

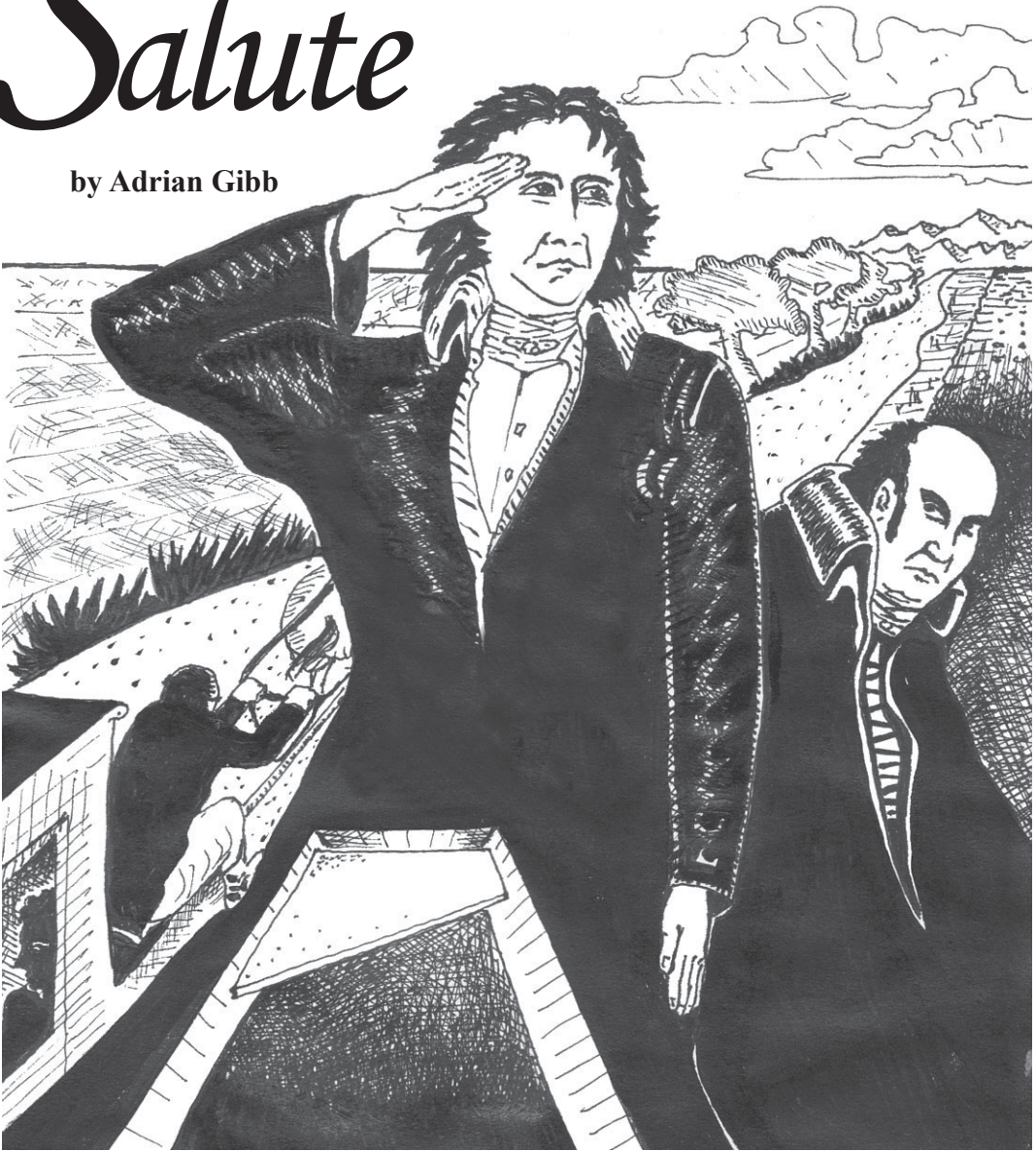
A couple of days later the creek was again its crystal clear, sleepy self and we could see the battered little car glistening under the sunlit water. A tow truck arrived to pull it out and tow it away.

In the weeks that followed the boys found several dollars in notes scattered along the creek bed, a bag with nothing in it and a white stiletto heel shoe caught in a tree branch. It’s still hanging there.

The End

Salute

by Adrian Gibb



Illustrated by Emanuele Gelsi

‘Private di Andouins!’ shouted the colonel in his usual gruff manner.
‘Oui, Colonel!’ I said in my best gushing and sycophantic tone.

‘His Majesty’s carriage will be arriving shortly. They will change carriages here and make their way across the border, hopefully before dawn. Their disguise is still intact; they

are only to be addressed by their false identities. Is that understood?’

‘Oui, Colonel!’ I managed to squeak.

‘We only want them in this provincial little shit hole for a few minutes, just enough time to change into the new carriage with fresh supplies. They will transfer over quickly, straight from the one to the other. I want you to stand and shield

any inquisitive passers-by from getting too close a look. Is that also understood?’

‘Oui, Colonel!’

‘Good man! Do this well, and the king will no doubt reward you once he is safely in Austria.’

‘Merci, Colonel,’ I said with a small smile and bow.

Almost exactly as the colonel finished speaking the royal family’s carriage rattled into the small village of Varennes’ central square. It was obvious the horses had been pushed to their limits as there was a ridiculous amount of foam on their flanks and the drool was dripping from their bridles like a tap.

I had wondered briefly why this little town had been chosen for such an important event, but when I saw the horses and the exhausted state of the occupants of the carriage as they slowly climbed out, looking fearful and watchful, I realized that it was, in a sense, perfect for our purposes. It was such a backwater that nobody would think of placing a guard here for the royal family, if indeed their escape had been discovered in Paris already, and it was so close to Austria that some risks could be taken with only six miles to run in case of emergency. In any case, the horses could not continue, that was obvious, and a change of carriage was imperative!

‘They are here!’ said the colonel in a whisper. ‘We cannot fail in this! They have six miles to go, they have travelled from Paris without incident, and we must not fail!’

‘We won’t, Colonel,’ I assured him.

The colonel moved to the other side of the square and began talking to the disembarking parties. ‘Welcome to Varennes, Monsieur Grenouille. I trust I find you well?’ he said in a low voice.

‘As well as a spring shower, Monsieur,’ replied the portly man I recognised almost immediately to be the king of France.

‘Very good, sir!’ the colonel said before leaning closer to “Monsieur Grenouille”. ‘The fresh carriage is ready, sir, you just need to transfer over.’

‘Are we well protected from prying eyes?’ asked the king while scanning the square. ‘We have come far, Colonel; I do not wish to return

to Paris now!’

‘Most of the village is still asleep, sir, and I have my best man to shield you as you make your way to the new carriage.’

‘All my instincts are telling me we should not have stopped, but the horses could go no further...’

‘Indeed, sir. I can assure you, no one will see you change over,’ said the Colonel.

‘Very well! I wish for my children to go first. If we are stopped, and they are already inside the new carriage, I order you, or whoever is closest, to take the carriage with all speed into Austria.’

‘But, sir...’

‘I expect you to obey me, Colonel! My life is forfeit anyway without my throne, but my children must reach Austria. Is that understood?’

‘Y-yes, sir!’

‘Good! Let’s begin. Louis, Theresa, I want you to follow this officer. It is perfectly safe! Soon we will be in Austria with your Mama’s family. So come now, let’s make a start.’

‘Private di Andouins, are you ready?’ asked the Colonel.

‘Yes, sir!’ I replied in a voice much more steady than my emotions.

As each occupant of the old carriage walked across to the new, I did a perfect job of obscuring any vision of the transferring passengers. I timed each of the journeys with a carefully choreographed march which I conducted, as if on sentry, between the first and second vehicles. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the king walked over and climbed in, again scanning the surroundings, showing a protectiveness towards his family which I found very touching.

‘There you are, Monsieur Grenouille’, said the colonel with a smile, ‘I trust you enjoy the rest of your journey.’

Now, at this moment — and I point this out for completeness rather than any attempt to justify what I did next — the colonel leant in and whispered, ‘Vive le roi.’

‘Thank you, Colonel,’ said the king.

The colonel nodded silently and turned to leave, summoning me to his side with a small flick of his finger, but we only took four steps. ‘You there!’ said the king, pointing at me.

‘Uh...oui, Monsieur?’

‘Thank you, too, for risking your life for us’, he whispered. ‘In a few weeks, come to Vienna, where you and your colonel will be justly rewarded.’

‘Merci, Monsieur!’ I said, my chest puffed with pride.

The carriage heaved forward and began what was meant to be its short final journey to safety. In my joy at being spoken to by the king, I had not noticed a weedy-looking man walking across the square showing only a slight interest in the carriage that was now cantering away.

And this is the moment! I think back on it now and it seems so fateful, as though time and history had stopped. Without thinking, brimming with patriotic zeal, I stepped back from the rear wheel of the carriage as it moved away — and saluted!

The weedy man stopped in his tracks. He stared at the carriage disappearing out of the village, then marched over to where I was standing and twice stabbed me in the shoulder with his bony finger. ‘Who was in that carriage?’ he asked in a disgusting, provincial drawl.

‘And what business is it of yours?’ I replied. I looked around for the colonel but found only an empty square.

‘I am the postmaster of this village, and a member of the people’s municipal council. I repeat, who was in that carriage?’

‘It was - it was Monsieur Grenouille and his family.’

‘An Aristo?’ the postmaster asked with a sneer. ‘No.’

‘No?’ He stepped closer until his fetid breath was in my face. ‘Then why did you salute that carriage?’

I turned away, but he grabbed my arm and snarled, ‘We don’t salute Aristos! Who was in that carriage?’

‘Get out of my way!’ I pushed the man aside and exited the square as quickly as I could.

Behind me that little weed, Monsieur Jean-Baptiste Drouet, the postmaster of Varennes, blew a whistle. The drum roll which soon resulted was a call to arms of the local militia, with their muskets and pitch forks. They caught up with the carriage before it had even left the

village boundaries, and turned it back towards Paris. Within months the king was executed on the guillotine. But this was not enough: my inadvertent gesture at Varennes was to claim further royal lives.

You may think I am doing myself an injustice, that I am taking the weight of these events upon my shoulders. You may say the royal carriage would never have reached Austria, that the fates had determined the end of the Capetian line and that, if I did play a role, it was merely as a pawn of destiny. No! My own colonel, the officer who abandoned me in the village square that chill morning, made it clear to me the following day just who was to blame.

‘You have brought shame and dishonour onto this regiment!’ he screamed into my ear in front of all my fellow infantrymen. ‘Your instructions were simple. Your stupidity has cost this country her rightful king. In my eyes, you are no longer a brother soldier!’

By the time the colonel stopped shouting I had lost all dignity, condemned from my rank as a loyal soldier of the king to nothing more than pond scum. As for the rest of the royal family, my salute had condemned them, too, to many torments.

After the king’s death, the queen lost her senses, lost weight and begun to suffer from melancholy. It is said that when the commissioners came to take the Dauphin away from her, and to house her children in separate cells, she held on to the boy for two hours as he cried hysterically. Even upon being threatened with death, she refused to move. It was only when they threatened to kill her daughter, the Princess Marie Therese, that she finally gave him up, and never saw either of them again. She was paraded around and subjected to jeers and assaults for an hour before being executed.

As for the Dauphin... It is his fate that still, these many years later, brings tears. For two years after the death of his father the Dauphin was held in the Temple Prison just a floor below his mother. It is rumoured that on the rare occasions he had free time to roam, he would leave messages and plucked flowers from the outside yard for his mother on the staircase leading up to her room. These messages continued after she



To decipher the tiny lettering I fell down to my knees on the cold stone slabs of the cell, and as I read the childish writing, huge gusts of breath rose out of my chest.

had been moved to the Conciergerie and executed, something that was neither conveyed to him nor his sister. He was eight years old, forced to drink filthy alcohol between beatings, and made to swear oaths of hatred towards his parents and the royal system. There were also stories of him being replaced with a deaf street

urchin so that he may escape. A doctor once told me he had visited the Dauphin during that time and he felt that the boy was indeed deaf, as he remained silent, timid and almost fearful when spoken to. But I fear this rumour of escape was wishful thinking. A comrade of mine helped bury the boy, dead at the age of ten from neglect. The

body was covered with scabies, and the bones, deformed because the guards refused to allow the growing boy a change of clothes, were knots of twisted skeleton and tumors.

Marie Therese survived Temple Prison, Lord have small mercies. When the reign of terror began to subside she was allowed to leave France in exile. And where did she go? To Austria! Austria, the sanctuary she would have found with her parents and brother had I not raised my hand that terrible morning.

Since that day in Varennes I have slept little, seen too many mornings in a drunken haze, and pushed away every person I have loved, or who has loved me. I occupy a small, filthy corner in Clichy, one of the great throng of lost souls who, for whatever reason, prefer the streets of Paris to their former lives. I still often dream of travelling to Marie Therese, of throwing myself at her feet, openly revealing my identity. But even if I were allowed an audience, I cannot. I am disgusting, and fear I will weep in front of her.

I did, once, venture to write to her, not long after she had reached Vienna and I knew she was safe. I informed her of everything I knew, of my dishonour, my discharge from the army, my existence and my excursions from it to mass and to confession. A few months later I was kicked awake by a young man in livery who dropped a small letter with a wax seal upon my leg before remounting his horse and speeding away. As the sun rose over the river and I could hear the merchants begin to shout their wares, I opened the letter with a shaking hand and read but two brief sentences:

Beneath the window, in my cell at the Temple, I scratched a message as a miserable girl. I would still scratch it today, and I hope it sets you free!

It took much time and negotiation for me, a street beggar, to be allowed into the Temple Prison, and to read that message. Much of the

prison had been destroyed to stop Royalist sympathizers from visiting, but the area where Marie-Therese's cell stood was still, thankfully, there. An old comrade was one of the guards and, taking pity on me, allowed me entry to Marie Therese's cell. She had scratched many messages, plaintive cries: 'Marie-Therese is the most unhappy creature in the world', and, 'She can obtain no news of her mother; nor be reunited to her, though she has asked it a thousand times'. My tears began to well, and I was on the verge of leaving when I noticed something scratched underneath the window, as Marie Therese had said there would be.

I wiped my eyes on the filthy rags I wore, and slowly moved towards the window. To decipher the tiny lettering I fell down to my knees on the cold stone slabs of the cell, and as I read the childish writing, huge gusts of breath rose out of my chest as I released the sin, the condemnation of the years.

Marie Therese's scratchings have not set me free, as she had hoped, but they have allowed me to survive, to carry on living. I stayed on my knees underneath the window that day until my old comrade lifted me up and gently took me outside.

I no longer attend the mass and confession. I go back to that prison cell when I am able. For I am a regular now and the guards expect me to spend an hour there, kneeling beneath the window, drawing into myself the words of the young girl whose life was shattered.

What is the message? Come to Paris, visit the Temple Prison, and read it for yourself. You may find me there, still. But you will forgive an old man his occasional bout of tears, or the reverence he places on that one scratched line on a cell wall...

'O my God! Forgive those who have made my family die.'

The End

The

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED
BY DANIEL REED

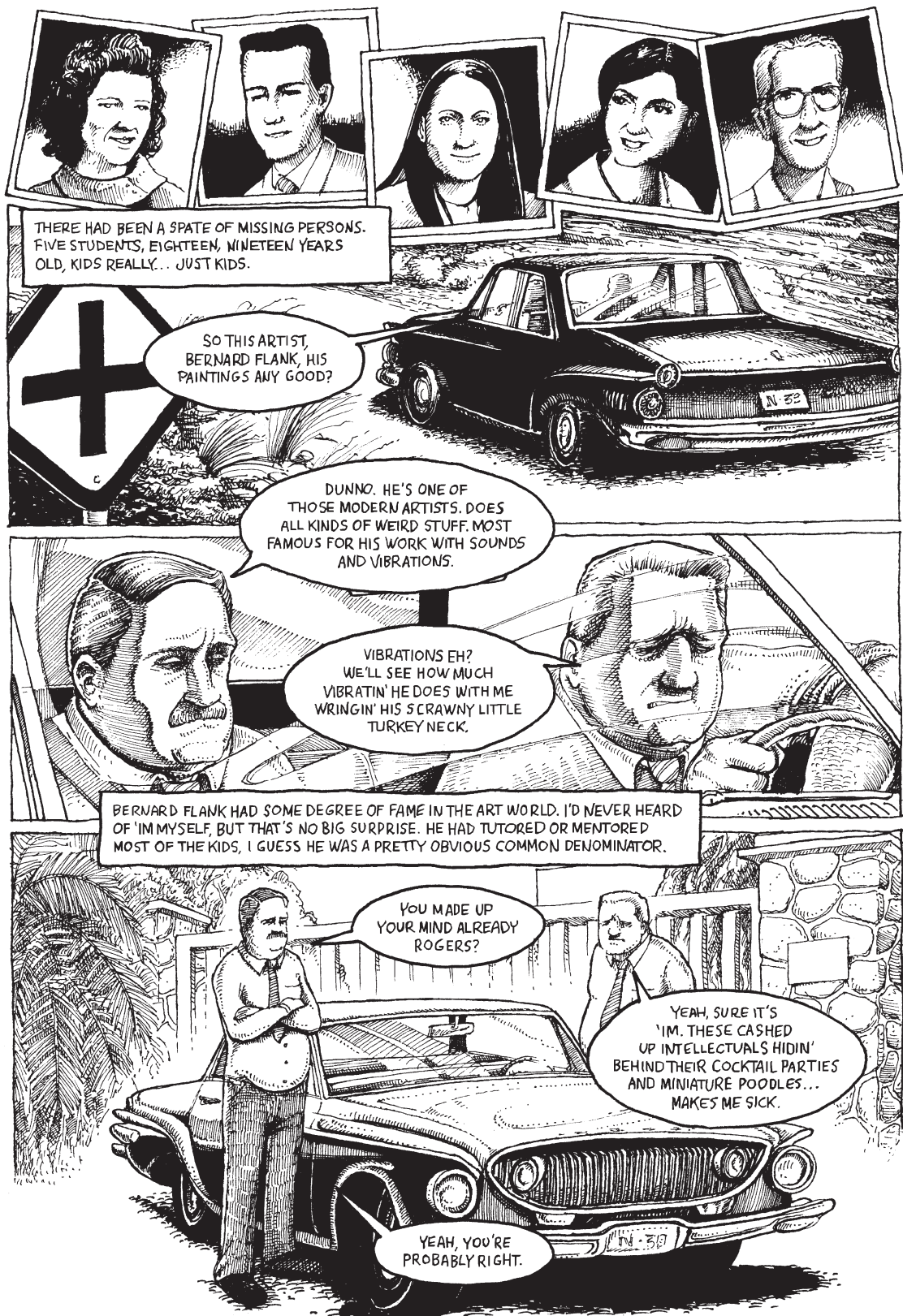
ELEVENTH FREQUENCY

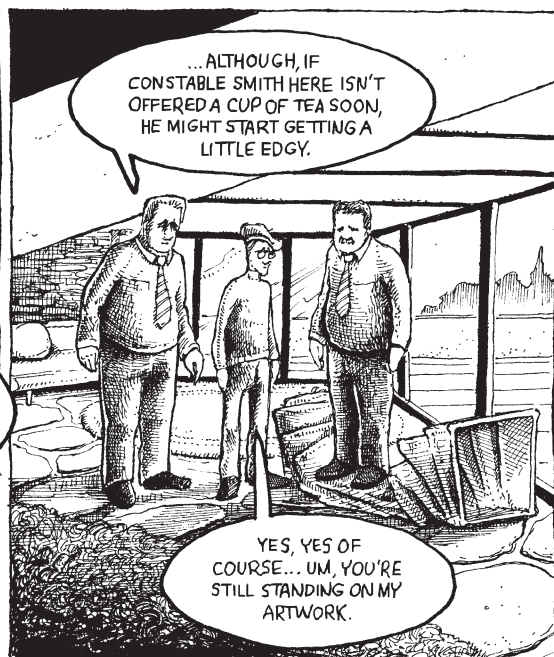
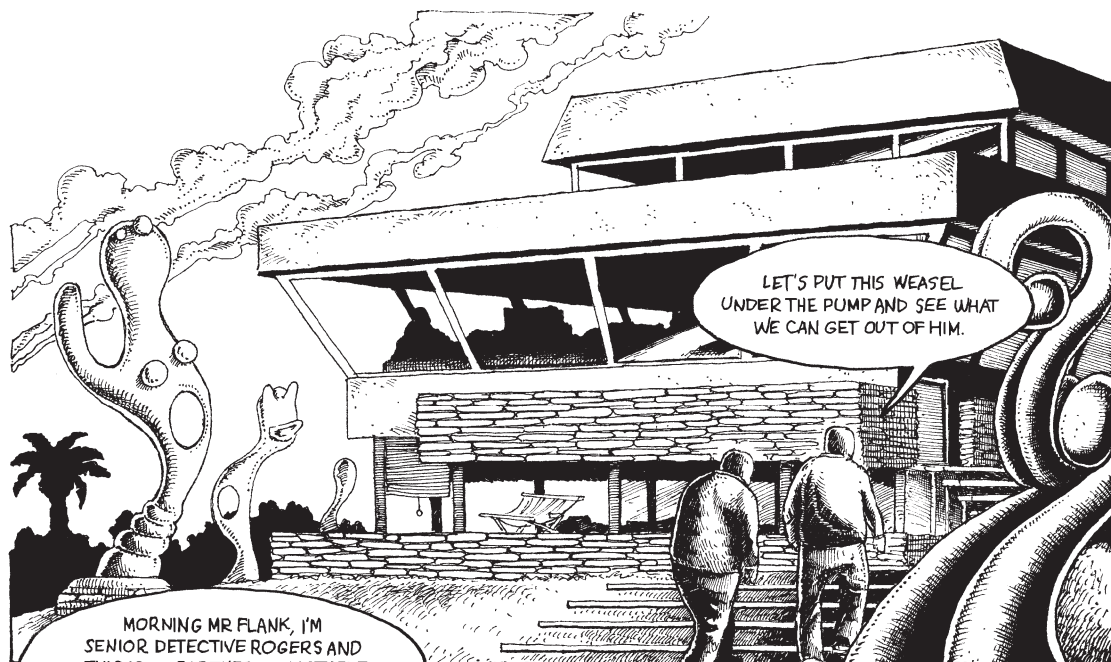
YOU KNOW I JOINED THE FORCE THINKIN' I COULD MAKE THIS TOWN A BETTER PLACE. MAYBE EVEN A GOOD PLACE FOR DECENT FOLK TO RAISE THEIR KIDS. LOOKIN' BACK, THAT'S A PRETTY ADMIRABLE INTENTION...

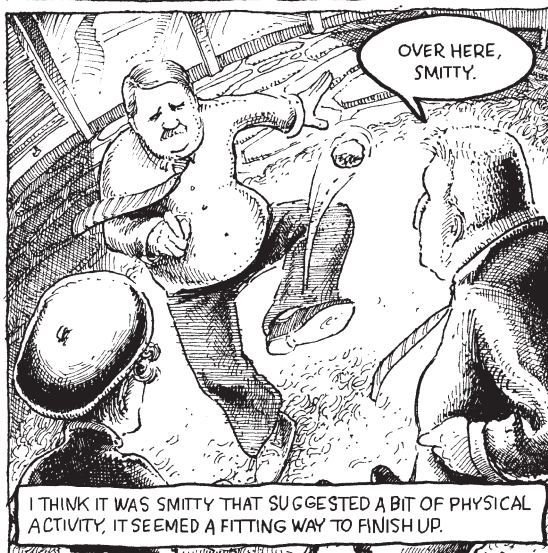
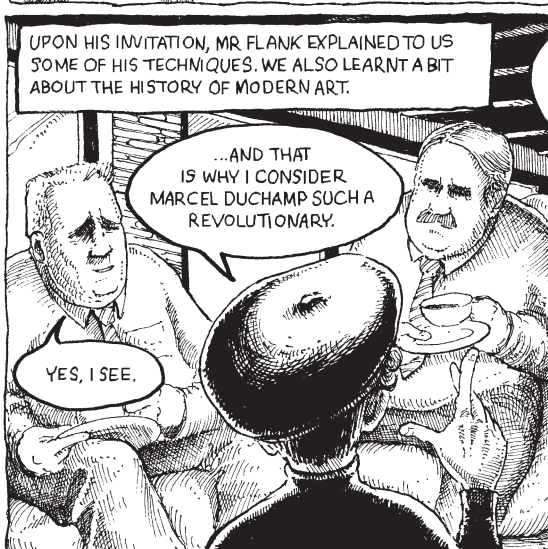
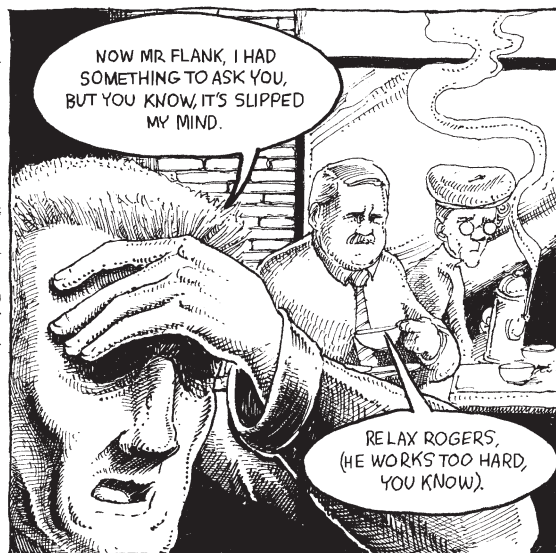
...SEE, WE WERE HARD NOSED COPPERS, ME AND SMITTY. WE'D SEEN THE WORST SOCIETY HAD TO OFFER, IN FACT WE DEALT WITH IT ON A REGULAR BASIS. IN HOMICIDE YOU LOSE YOUR SENSITIVITIES PRETTY QUICKLY OR YOU DON'T LAST. THAT'S IT.

ANYWAY, THAT SEEMS LIKE A LIFETIME AGO NOW. SO MUCH HAS CHANGED YOU CAN'T BEGIN TO IMAGINE, ALTHOUGH I FIGURE YOU'LL BE FINDIN' OUT SOON ENOUGH.

SEE, IT WAS THIS ONE CASE THAT TURNED EVERYTHING ON ITS HEAD...







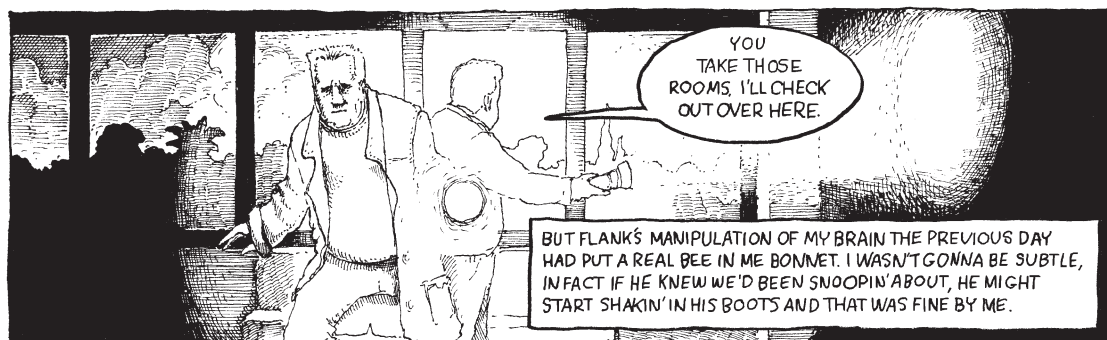




IT WASN'T UNTIL THE FOLLOWING NIGHT THAT FLANK TOOK OFF SOMEWHERE IN A BIG HURRY. WE HAD A COUPLE OF THE YOUNGER LADS FROM THE STATION FOLLOW HIM, KEEPIN' TRACK OF HIS MOVEMENTS.

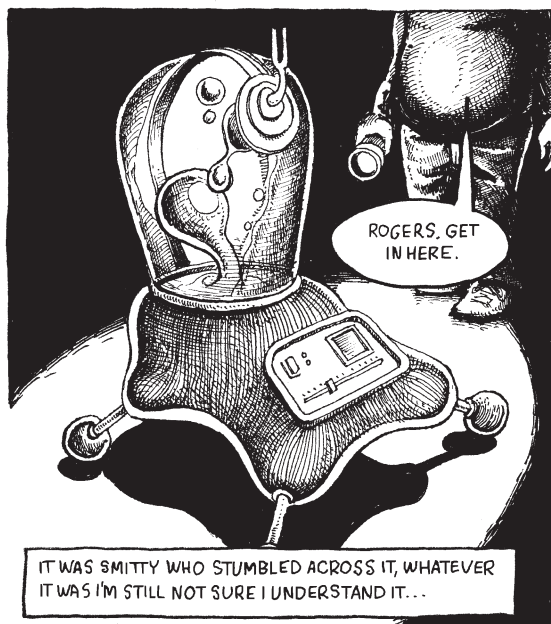


BEIN' IN THE FORCE AS LONG AS WE HAD, YOU PICK UP ALL SORTS OF 'TRADE SECRETS'. THINGS LIKE HOW TO BREAK AND ENTER WITHOUT LEAVING A TRACE, STUFF LIKE THAT.



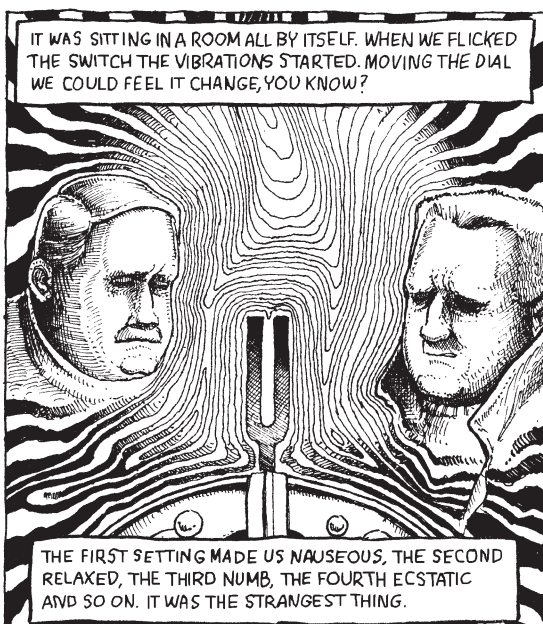
YOU TAKE THOSE ROOMS, I'LL CHECK OUT OVER HERE.

BUT FLANK'S MANIPULATION OF MY BRAIN THE PREVIOUS DAY HAD PUT A REAL BEE IN ME BONNET. I WASN'T GONNA BE SUBTLE, IN FACT IF HE KNEW WE'D BEEN SNOOPIN' ABOUT, HE MIGHT START SHAKIN' IN HIS BOOTS AND THAT WAS FINE BY ME.



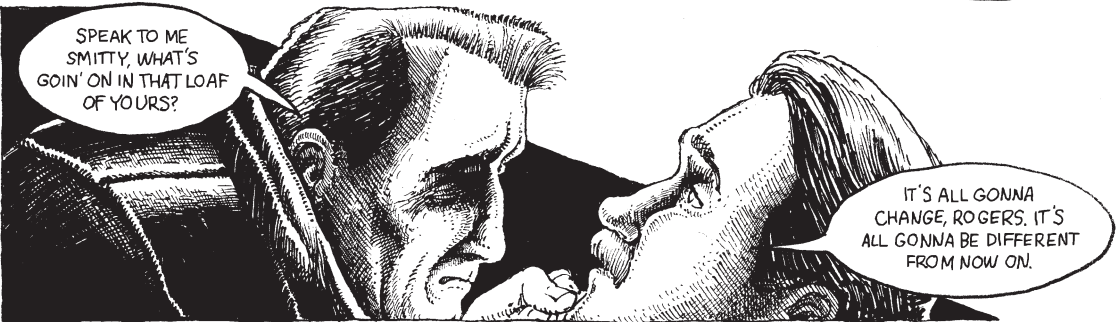
ROGERS, GET IN HERE.

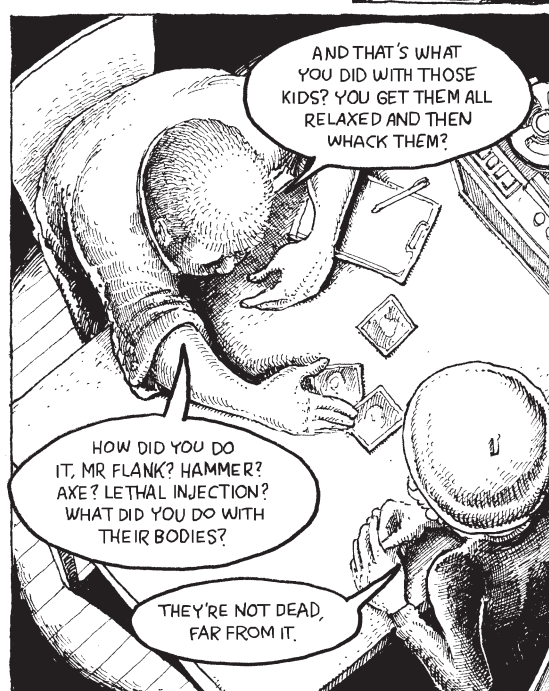
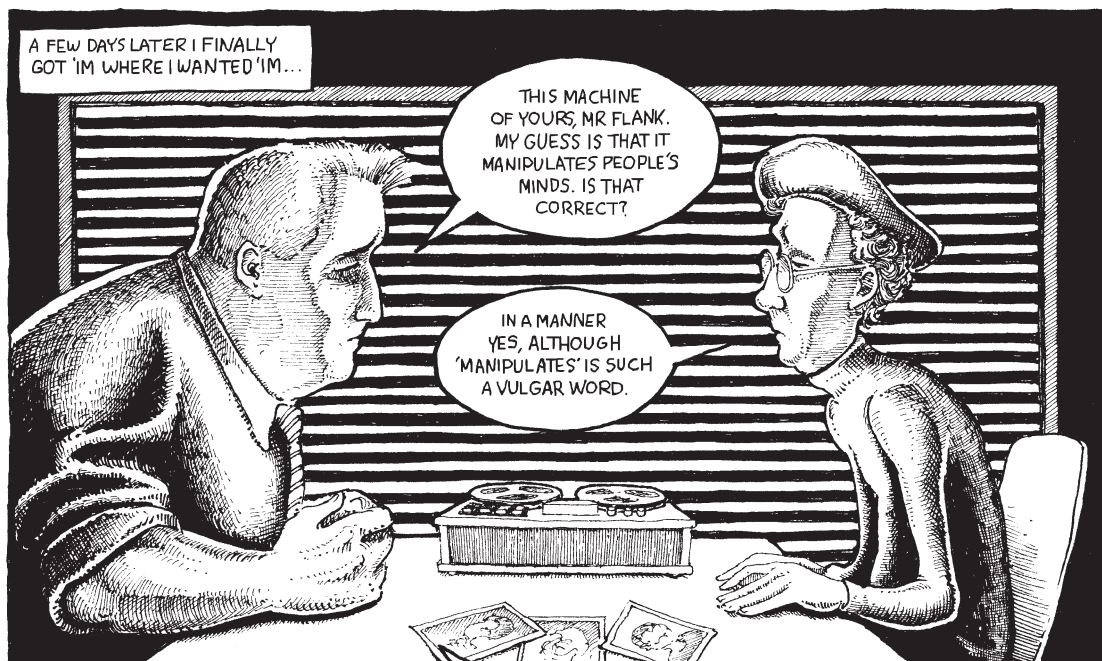
IT WAS SMITTY WHO STUMBLED ACROSS IT, WHATEVER IT WAS I'M STILL NOT SURE I UNDERSTAND IT...



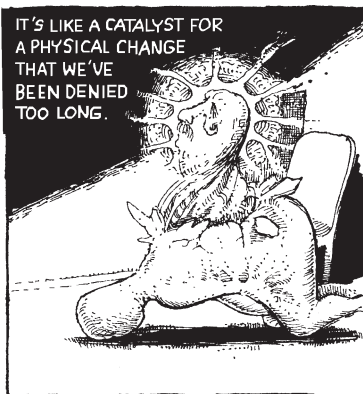
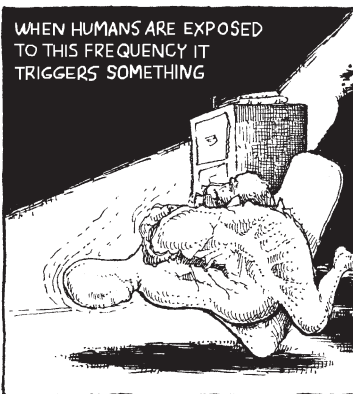
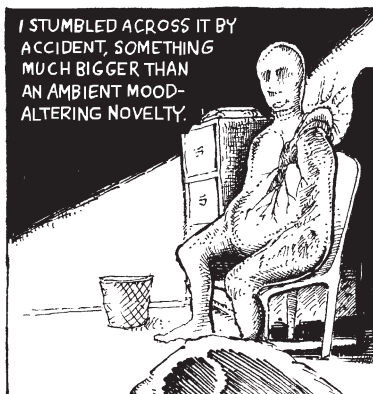
IT WAS SITTING IN A ROOM ALL BY ITSELF. WHEN WE FLICKED THE SWITCH THE VIBRATIONS STARTED. MOVING THE DIAL WE COULD FEEL IT CHANGE, YOU KNOW?

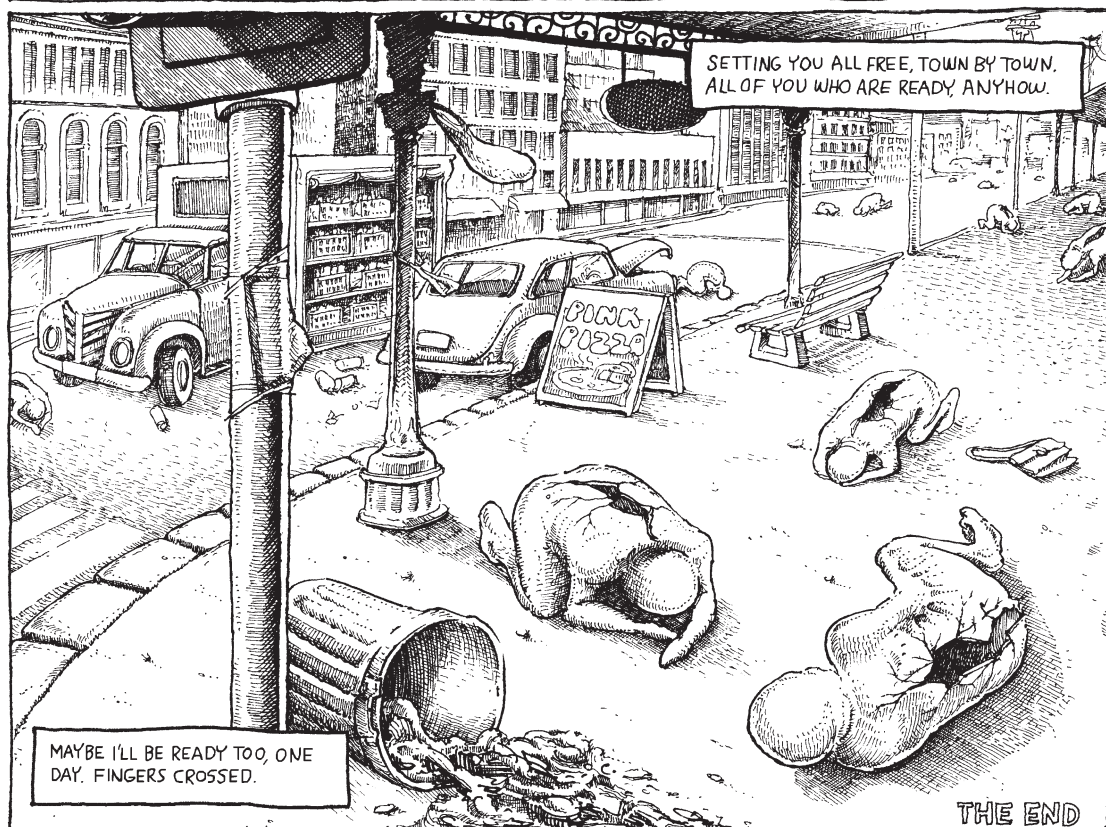
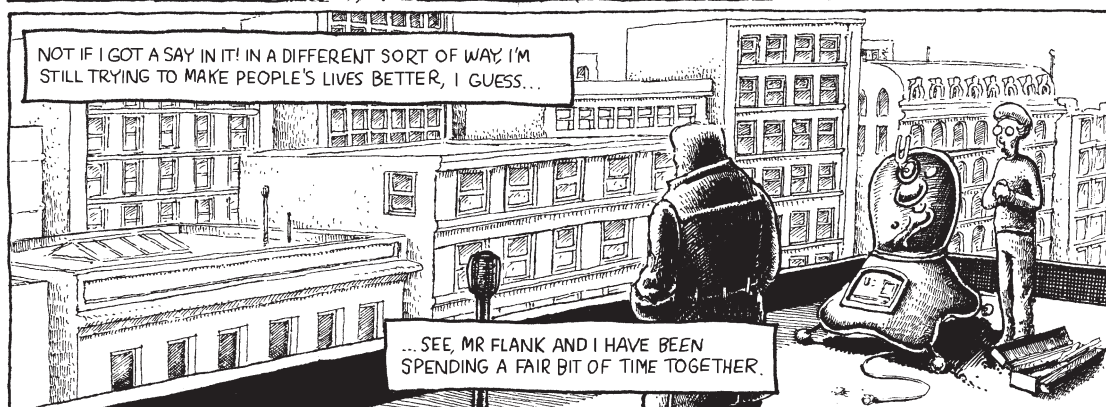
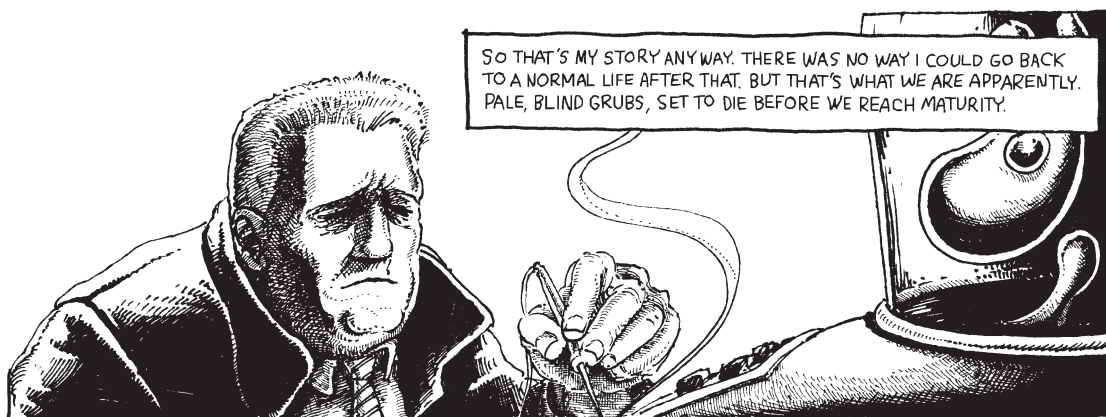
THE FIRST SETTING MADE US NAUSEOUS, THE SECOND RELAXED, THE THIRD NUMB, THE FOURTH ECSTATIC AND SO ON. IT WAS THE STRANGEST THING.





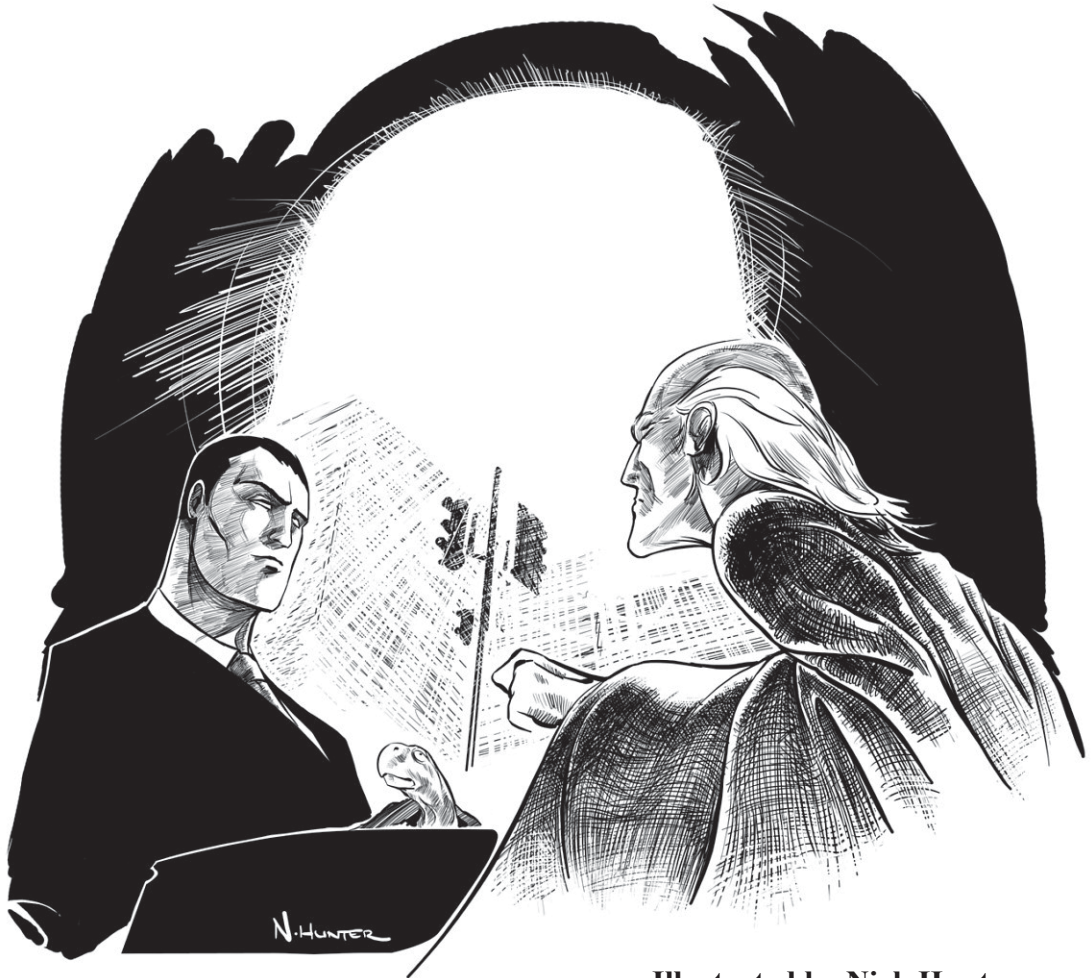






Tortoise

by Kate Smith



Illustrated by Nick Hunter

There is a whole world tucked away under the colonnades of Blue Zephyr Street and it has a *Year of the Cat* atmosphere. Blue tiled walls, patchouli, hidden doors and long shadows; the perfect place to contemplate a crime.

Now zoom in on the table framed by the second last arch on the westward side.

The table has a raised rim. It's all that prevents Omm the Long-necked Swamp Tortoise from discovering if she can fly. That, and the hand

that picks her up and turns her round, the hand attached to the arm of Eggman, the mostly accurate oracle.

He taps reprovingly on her shell and leans in until he and the tortoise are eye to beady eye. 'Trust me on this, you wouldn't look good in pieces.'

Omm weaves her long neck side to side like a cobra. Eggman hisses and lifts his hand. She trundles like a mobile meat pie for the other side of the table.

‘Nothing quite so bloody-minded as a tortoise on a mission.’ Eggman reaches for his sweating glass. He might dress like a Jedi knight but he lacks the Zen quality. He’s also whiskery and irascible and unaffected by time.

Alex Quinlan, seated opposite, is all too aware of his watch. He’s fidgeting. He’s dancing in his chair, flicking back his cuff to look at the device that rules his life, twisting his espresso cup round on its saucer.

‘Sa sa, this is a good one.’ Eggman settles in his chair, balancing his glass on his stomach.

Quinlan sits forward.

‘This street, now this street is a marvel.’ Eggman’s voice drops into a lower register, into master storyteller mode. ‘It’s a street of truth, a street that created its own name. By geographical and architectural coincidence it’s always lightly breezy and somehow transforms the strongest gale into an air movement as gauzy as a belly dancer’s veil. A permanent zephyr lives here. As for the blue part, well, I don’t know what the street crew was drinking that day, but something made them experiment with tinted concrete. Woad, indigo, lapis, a cyanide compound: something found its way into the mix. And when the council members and shop owners were standing around, scratching their heads, calculating the costs of ripping it all up and replacing it, a voice from the back of the crowd was heard to mutter *I kinda like the blue*. It’s been the street of Blue Zephyrs ever since.’

Quinlan waits, he quivers, any moment now there will be a relevant point... His eyebrows bunch. ‘That’s it?’

‘Nah, but it’s a good story.’ Eggman winks. Then his hand lunges across the table and grabs Omm before she can hurtle into space.

Quinlan rejects subtlety. He shoves his sleeve up, taps the face of his watch. Then he consults his mobile phone. Compares phone time to watch time. They match, right down to the synchronized split seconds. He’s such a busy man.

‘Latest model?’ Eggman balances Omm on his hand at chin height. He moves his hand in a slow sweeping arc. Omm’s legs paddle, showing off the folds of skin at her hips that look like parachute material. Her head is fixed on the horizon, as though if she strains she can defy

both gravity and sense.

‘Yes, actually.’ Quinlan reins in his sibilants and makes an effort to lower his tone. ‘Microthin, GPS, blue screen, camera and scanning functions, water resistant, voice recognition program with optional AI in contralto and tenor personalities. It’s slick, it’s secure, it’s a complete office suite in your pocket and even interacts with your car and entertainment system.’

Eggman scratches his head with a spare finger. ‘Ha. Tortoises are better familiars. Cheap to run, given to hibernation, and never ever interrupt at delicate interpersonal moments.’

The phone clatters onto the table. ‘Okay, it was a great story, but can we get on with it?’

‘Have you heard the one about not rushing a miracle man or you’ll get sloppy miracles? Well, it’s the same for oracles.’

Quinlan’s smile is grim and toothy.

Eggman sets Omm free to investigate the phone and closes his eyes. He starts to hum.

Quinlan coughs.

Eggman hums louder.

Quinlan clears his throat.

Eggman opens an ice-blue eye.

Quinlan finishes his third espresso for the day.

Eggman’s eye shuts. His hands sweep up to shoulder height. He brings them palm together in front of his nose, taps index fingers to nose twice, then sweeps his hands apart and down. His eyes open and he reaches for his glass, draining the pineapple-based drink completely.

Eggman delicately spits out the mint garnish and strokes his pointed beard, considering Quinlan. ‘You ready?’

‘Go.’

‘Look to the little green men. Coo coo ca choo.’

A precious minute slips by before Quinlan realizes Eggman has finished. ‘Excuse me?’ A muscle in his jaw twitches.

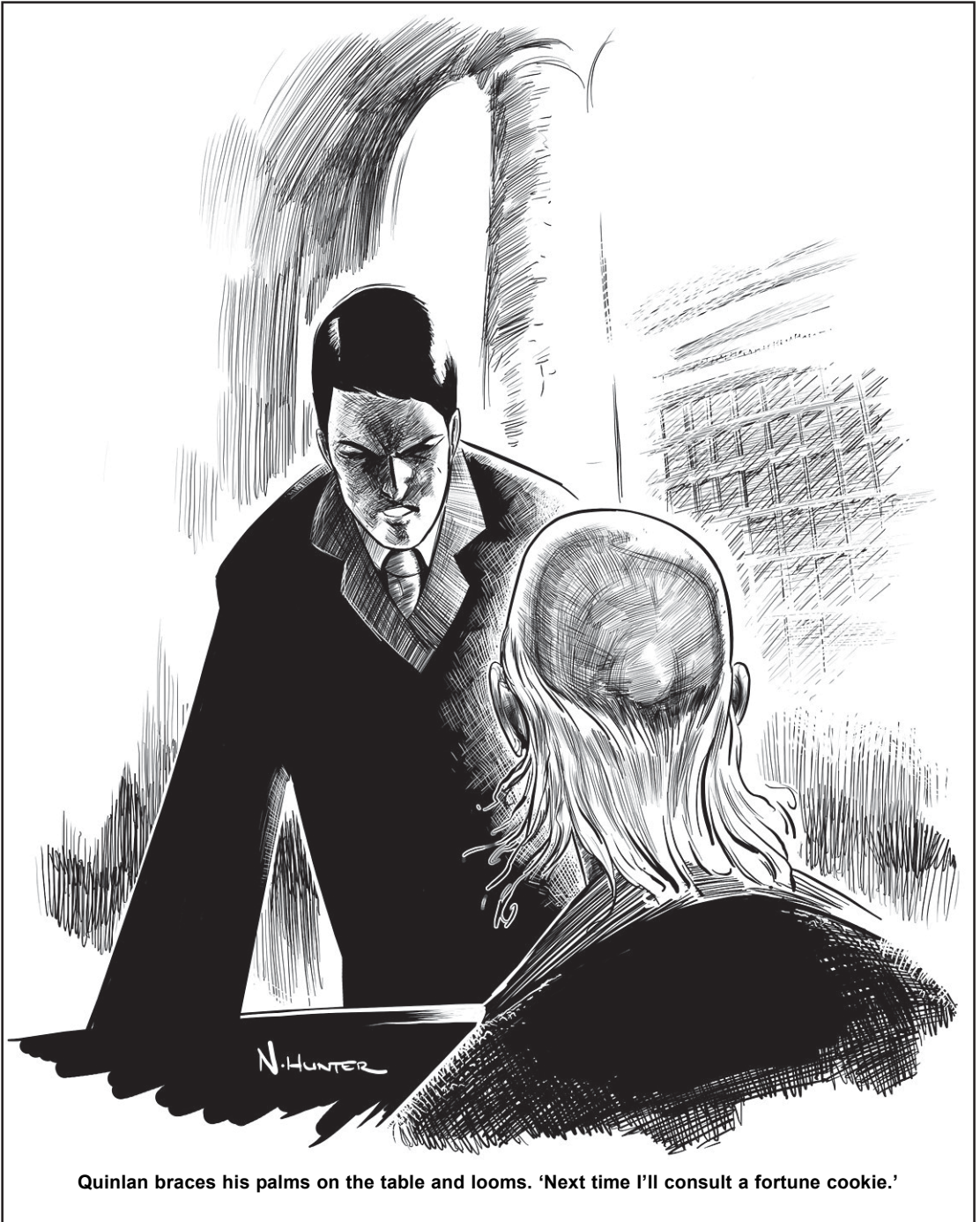
‘What? You wanted a *you will meet a dark and attractive stranger before you embark on a journey* kind of prophecy? Sorry, boy. Oracles are cryptic and mysterious and damn annoying.’

‘It didn’t even rhyme!’

‘Hear that, Omm? He wanted a *rhyme*.’

Omm sneezes.

‘My sentiments exactly.’



Quinlan braces his palms on the table and looms. 'Next time I'll consult a fortune cookie.'

The twitch is joined by slitted eyes and gritted teeth. 'Green men as in aliens?' Quinlan almost chokes on the words.

'I only deliver oracles, I don't do the interpreting. That's up to you. It might mean you shouldn't eat green jelly babies, then again it might not.'

'Thank you so much for your valuable assistance.' Quinlan jams his phone into his pocket and stands abruptly, sending his chair *skreeeeeing* away across the tiles to slam into the base of the fountain. He braces his palms on the table and looms. 'Next time I'll consult a fortune cookie.'

Eggman inclines his head. ‘It is always your choice.’

‘*Merde.*’ Quinlan stalks up the street, the soles of his hand-stitched shoes slapping the cobalt surface. An abrupt hard left takes him out of sight.

Omm pauses in her quest for flight. Her neck extends to its full length. Slowly her head swivels and her eyes fix on the space Quinlan has just vacated.

A screeching protest of high-performance engine and brakes slices through the morning followed by a damply emphatic *thud*. There is a moment of awful silence that stretches cobweb-fine until it shatters into disjointed fragments of stillborn sentences.

Omm whips into her shell.

Eggman winces. ‘And he should have chosen to turn right. Or at least slowed down enough to look both ways before crossing the street.’ He tugs on his beard. ‘Ahh. Crossing the street... waiting for the walk signal... waiting for *the green man.*’

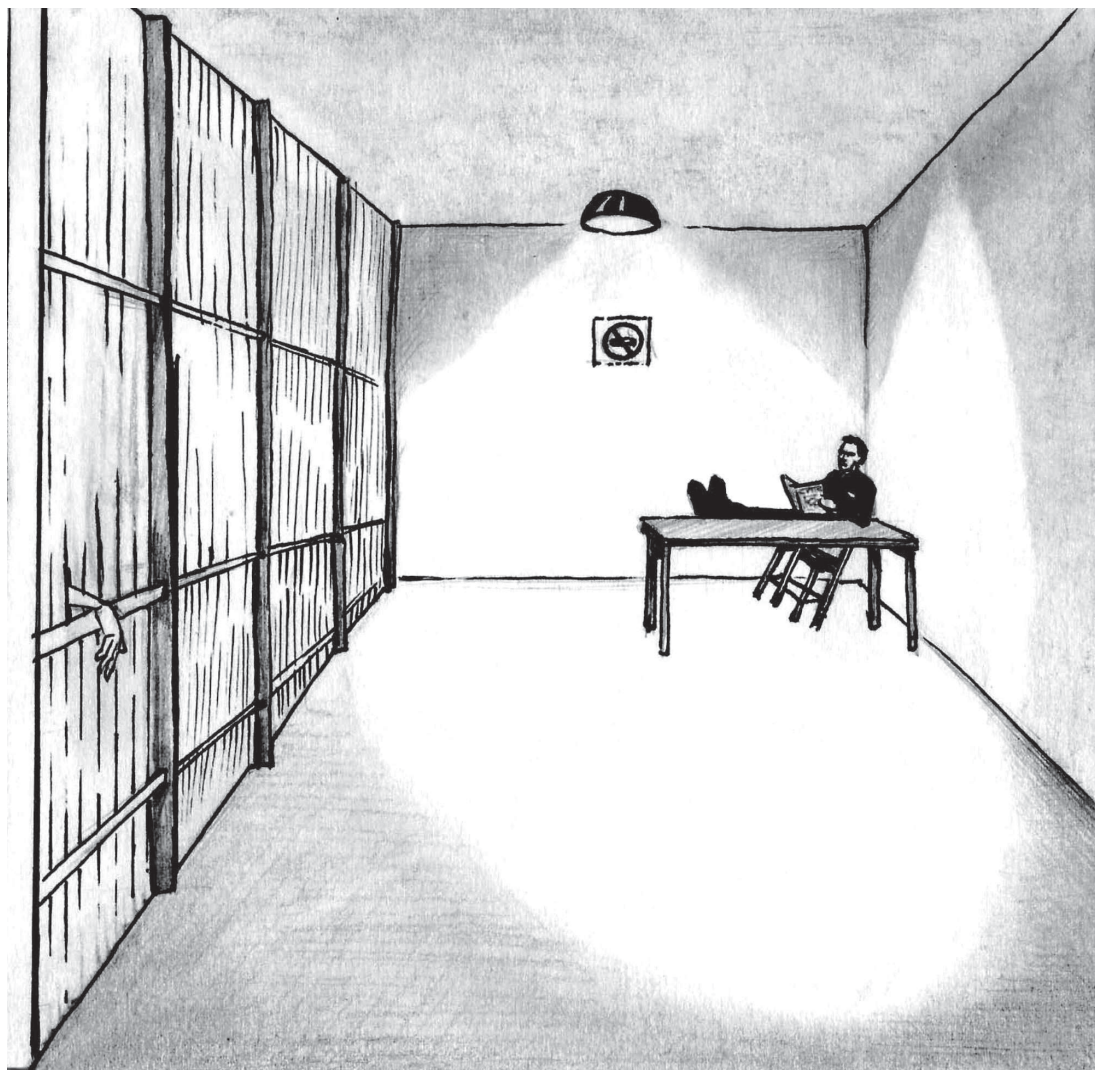
The permanent zephyr steals a whiff of burning rubber and bounces it down the length of the blue street.

Eggman sighs deeply before dragging a chair closer and propping his feet on the seat. ‘Guess he hadn’t heard the one about the hare and the tortoise either, eh, Omm?’

The End

Darkness and Light

by Chris Broadribb



Illustrated by Simon Matthews

‘I can’t believe this is happening,’ Rick says. He clutches the bars of his cell, staring at me, his curly hair outlined in the dim light. ‘What are we going to do, Joe?’

I sit on my bunk huddled in a scratchy blanket. It’s cold, and I’m only wearing a T-shirt. The shadows on the floor move as the light flickers. Somewhere in the distance, water drips. Two

men are muttering to each other in cells further down the corridor, but I can’t make out what they’re saying. Somebody else keeps coughing.

I had things planned for tomorrow. Wash my car. Go to Centrelink to look for a job. Meet a friend for lunch at his place. I can’t do any of that now.

‘Sam’s going to be mad,’ Rick says.

Sam's one of his flatmates, a new guy who moved in a few weeks ago. He dresses like a bikie even though he doesn't own a bike and, since he's a dole bludger, probably never will. He keeps a gun in a shoebox under his bed. He told Rick about it.

'Have you got a lawyer?' I ask Rick.

'As if. Why would I?'

'Maybe we can apply for legal aid,' I say. I don't see how either of us can afford someone otherwise. Rick's on the dole too, although in his case it's by choice.

'How's a lawyer going to help us?' he says.

'That's their job. They'll think of something.'

The cop who's been guarding everyone returns, trudging back along the corridor carrying a cup of coffee and a magazine. He wears a thick black jacket. He looks young, probably only a couple of years older than me.

'Hey, what time is it?' Rick asks.

He doesn't answer, but whacks Rick's hand with the magazine as he walks past.

'Ow!' Rick lets go of the bars and rubs his fingers.

The cop sits down at the desk at the end of the corridor, underneath the flickering light bulb. He reads his magazine while drinking coffee. It's about racing cars.

'What time do you think it is?' Rick asks me.

'Don't know.' It feels like I've been here for hours. I know I should sleep, but I can't relax. I keep thinking about all the things that happened tonight.

'Are you two brothers?' I'm startled as the man in the cell opposite us suddenly speaks. He's been standing there staring at us for a while. He's heavily built, has a shaved head and wears a nose ring. He's a lot older than us. 'You look like brothers.'

'We're cousins,' says Rick.

'Don't talk to him,' I say.

'You're too young to be in here,' the man says to Rick. 'How old are you? Sixteen? Seventeen?'

'Nineteen,' he mutters.

'You're just a kid. You ought to be at home with your mummy. What did you do, anyway? Steal some lollies?'

'None of your business.'

'Leave him alone,' I say.

'You'd better watch out. Some of the others like young guys like you,' the man says.

Neither of us say anything. The man stares at us for a while, then gives up and flops down onto his bunk. The cop puts his feet up on the desk and pulls a packet of cigarettes out of his pocket, ignoring the 'No Smoking' sign on the wall above him.

Something scurries across the floor in front of the cells and Rick jumps. 'Hey, that's a rat. I hate rats.'

'What do you expect me to do about it?' I say.

'I remember that rat,' says someone further down the corridor. 'I see it every time I come here.'

'I'm going to eat it,' someone else says.

'Leave it alone! It's my pet,' the bald-headed man says.

The rat scurries back a minute later, heading towards the cop at the desk. He throws his cup at it and it darts away.

'They shouldn't let rats run around in here,' Rick says.

Some of the men in the cells nearby snigger.

'If you think this place is bad, wait 'til you get to Silverwater,' the bald-headed man says. 'The rats are real big there.' He laughs loudly.

I could spend years in jail with people like him. It's a depressing thought.

'We could have got away, Joe,' Rick says. 'If you hadn't been so stupid.'

'It was all your fault!'

'I didn't do anything.'

'Listen to them blubbing,' the bald-headed man says. 'Dumb brats.'

Time passes. It's becoming colder now. It must be getting very late. People are arguing in the cells down the corridor - something about drugs. Water drips slowly in the distance. Rick's sitting on his bunk fidgeting nervously. If only I hadn't listened to his stupid ideas.

'I hate it in here,' he whines. 'What are we going to do, Joe? What's going to happen?'

'You kids are in a lot of trouble, huh?' says Bald-head. 'Your mummy isn't going to get you out of this one.'

'Shut up,' I say.

'You should've stayed home tonight. This ain't no place for you boys.'



'We've had a report of a robbery tonight by two young males. A man was shot', says the cop.

'If you're so smart, how come you're in here?'

'I like it here. I come here whenever I'm bored.' He starts whistling loudly.

The cop at the desk gets up. He walks over and kicks the door of the man's cell hard, making

the bars rattle. The man abruptly stops whistling. Everyone else goes quiet. The cop returns to the desk. I shiver and watch the cockroaches scurry around on the floor...

The two cops who arrested us questioned me

afterwards. The old, fat one is Senior Constable Turner. The younger one is Constable Meeling. He has fair hair and a permanent scowl.

‘We’ve had a report of a robbery at Ashfield Video Centre tonight by two young males armed with a semi-automatic weapon. A man was shot during the robbery. Do you have anything to say?’ Turner asks.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ I sat with my arms folded, staring at the video camera.

‘We found \$325 in a green sports bag in the back seat of the car you were driving tonight. Where did the money come from?’

‘I don’t know anything about it.’

I wonder what Rick’s doing in the other room down the hall.

‘We also found a leather jacket which appears to be stained with blood. Is the jacket yours?’ Turner asks.

I don’t answer.

‘Where did you get the gun?’ Meeling asks.

‘What gun?’

‘The Colt .45 pistol you used in the robbery.’

‘Do you know what DNA testing is, Joe?’ Turner asks.

‘Yeah. I’ve seen it on TV.’

‘We’re going to have that jacket tested to see if the blood on it is from the victim. Perhaps we’ll find traces of your DNA on it, too.’

‘Why did you shoot him?’ Meeling asks.

I don’t answer.

‘He’s in hospital now. He’s having an operation tonight. The doctors say he might not survive,’ Meeling says.

‘If he dies, we’ll charge you with murder,’ Turner says. ‘And your mate...’

The cells are quiet now. Nobody’s talking anymore, not even Bald-head, and the water’s stopped dripping. Rick’s slumped against the wall and looks like he’s asleep. In maybe a couple of hours it will be dawn outside. I lie on my bunk and stare at the cracks in the ceiling. Soon I’ll find out if that guy died.

The End

EFFACED

by Pierz Newton-John



Illustrated by Emanuele Gelsi

I see my sister's face on television sometimes. Smiling, smiling, and spinning vainly in front of the cameras to make sure they catch every angle. I used to feel sick seeing it, a bolt of electricity to the guts, but with time, that is fading. The face I once knew has been — what is the word? *Colonised*? It's no longer her at all, not even superficially, and somehow that makes it easier to bear.

I've lived on the estate all my life. Or I had until recently. Now of course we have money and we've been able to move into a real house in a nice suburb. No more running the gauntlet of pushers and muggers just to get to your own

front door. No more lying awake sweating on summer nights when the whole block baked like a giant kiln. Nights when tempers frayed and you could enjoy the erupting domestics in true surround sound, from five different directions at once. Vomit and used fits on the concrete stairs. Suicides dropped on the lawns in their dressing gowns, all twisted like discarded puppets, as if the Punch and Judy show on the balcony had been rudely interrupted. The smell of Mrs Truong's boiled cabbage mingling with the reek of body odour, marijuana and the thin, harsh smell of lives run to a dead-end. 'The warehouse for excess humans,' Dad used to call it, and I

don't think he was speaking metaphorically. It was, when it comes down to it, just a place to store the faceless surfeit of people who would otherwise clog the gutters and alleyways and disturb the commuters.

The government, in its infinite wisdom, had seen fit to install webports in every unit. It was part of their policy of providing 'opportunities for participation', although whether they had in mind participation in online drug syndicates and the pornography industry is a moot question. Dad hated that webport. Most of all he hated that other people whom he couldn't see could look through it. 'It's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, I'm telling you. Big Brother.'

'You are *Nineteen Eighty-Four*!' Siana would shoot back at him. 'Don't be such a phobe.'

'I'm not a phobe, Siana. I don't mind you using it. Just remember to turn off that goddamn eye. It gives me the heebies.'

But of course she never did. And the truth is, I think she liked it. I think she got a kick out of that growing watchers count at the bottom of the screen. Of course she blocked incoming contacts, so she wouldn't have to suffer their wolf-whistles, obscene suggestions and lame attempts at seduction. One time when I wandered past I saw the watchers' count had hit four figures.

'Sis, for god's sake. Dad's right. We've got half the world's population of sickos peering into our living-room. Can't you pull down the blinds?'

She flashed me that amazing smile, ten megawatts of pure charm. 'They're harmless, Jacko. I don't care if they look.'

'Siana, they're only harmless because they can't crawl through the screen.' I shook my head. 'You're as sick as they are, you know that?'

That was Siana's pulling power. You couldn't deny it. Lovesick notes under the door every other day, heavy breathing phone calls on an almost continual basis, blokes hanging out on endless 'smokos' at the end of our corridor in the hope of catching a glimpse of her when she stepped out the door.

I once asked her if she ever felt scared. There were some seriously scary dudes among our neighbours. 'Nuh,' she said, like it was the world's dumbest question. I looked at her

quizzically, shaking my head. 'I'm the safest chick on the estate,' she declared breezily, turning away with a toss of her glossy blonde mane.

The penny dropped when I saw the look one of her admirers gave her — a hard man with the telltale cobweb tattoos of an ex-prisoner on his elbows — when she passed him on the stairs one day. Adoration, worship. No, let's cut the crap: it was love. Sure, it was only the kind of busted up love that a man like that is capable of, the kind of love that longs to prove itself by breaking a jawbone, but hey, that's the kind of love keeps you safe on the estate. And Siana was surrounded by it: the silent, watchful protection of countless lonely, hard knuckled men, gazing at her from behind darkened fly-wire windows.

Both Mum and Dad worked at the omnimart — irregular shifts, long hours, crap pay. Dad took on more and more work, believing against all available evidence that if he worked hard enough, he could save the money to get us off the estate. Years of stacking shelves and lifting boxes had ruined his back, and he was in constant pain, but he refused to slow down.

Ours was a pretty bad situation, but at least we knew how to look out for one another. When Dad staggered in at two a.m. after a fourteen-hour shift, Siana would get up to make him a cup of tea and give him a back massage before putting him to bed. If Mum was working, or I thought she looked tired, I'd make dinner and Siana would do the dishes. Even old Mr Cronkly, our battle-scarred, tailless tomcat, did his bit. He seemed to have an amazing radar for distress, and never failed to offer his slobbery but loving head-butts to anyone who seemed out of sorts. Sometimes it seemed like a big thoughtfulness competition, as if we were striving to outdo one another in our personal sacrifices. You first, no *you* first — that was an ongoing family joke. And despite the tiny space into which we were forced to compress our lives, despite the paper thin walls that transmitted every intimate noise, despite the heat and the cold and all the stresses of poverty, we rarely fought. Perhaps we simply couldn't afford to.

How much money is your face worth? Take our biometric test NOW! I'm not sure if we received that ad at random, or if it had something

to do with the number of watchers Siana was racking up every time she surfed the port. The ad went on to explain that beauty could now be mathematically quantified with ninety percent accuracy 'both in aesthetic and monetary terms', and that their online test could evaluate the commercial value of your good looks free of charge, instantly. Now it's true that I've never seen my watchers' count climb above three, but I still consider myself not a bad looking kind of guy, so out of curiosity I clicked the link, and followed the instructions, turning my face to and fro in front of the webport to show every angle. There was a brief pause as the remote software did its calculations, then the results came in. I was more attractive than 58.60% of the population, and my face had a commercial value of nil. Thank you for taking the test.

'Hey sis,' I called out to Siana, who was trying to paint her toenails in the bathroom despite Mr Cronkly's persistent affections. 'Come and check this out. I think I've finally found a test you'll do well on.'

She trotted in and checked out the screen, laughing at my results. 'Too bad, mate. You're ugly as sin. Let me try.' She settled herself in front of the port, pouting at the screen. She reactivated the test and a few moments later, the results screen appeared. *You are more attractive than 99.99% of the population. Your face has an approximate commercial value of \$1,455,000. Please wait for a consultant.*

'Didn't I bloody tell you!' I shouted, capering around the room. 'You can be a model! You can make a fortune!' She looked at me with huge eyes, her hands clapped to her face, laughing and gasping with astonishment. Then suddenly her hands fell to her lap. 'It's a scam, Jacko, for sure. Never believe this internet shit...'

Then a man's face in the webport coughed politely. 'I can assure you this is not a scam...'

When poor Dad got home from the omnimart at eleven that night, we just about mugged him as he walked in the door. We were both so incoherent with excitement, jabbering over the top of one another, that he must have thought we'd gone nuts. At last he managed to calm us down enough to get it out of us: Siana had been offered a modelling contract over the net, it could

be worth over a million dollars, they were paying to fly her up to Sydney... *next week!* We stood in front of him expectantly, our faces blazing with excitement. He looked from her face to mine a few times. Then he exhaled heavily.

'I *told* you kids to turn off that damn eye!'

'But Dad!' Siana protested.

'Honey, it doesn't add up. They've seen you once through the webport and now they're offering you a million bucks? Come on! It's a scam.'

'It's *not*, Dad!' I put in, though how could I really know? 'They have this test that measures how good looking you are, and Siana was *off the scale* the bloke reckoned, and anyway, he wasn't actually offering her a million dollars, he just said that if everything worked out and she decided to sign the contract, it could be as much as a one and a half mil, and...'

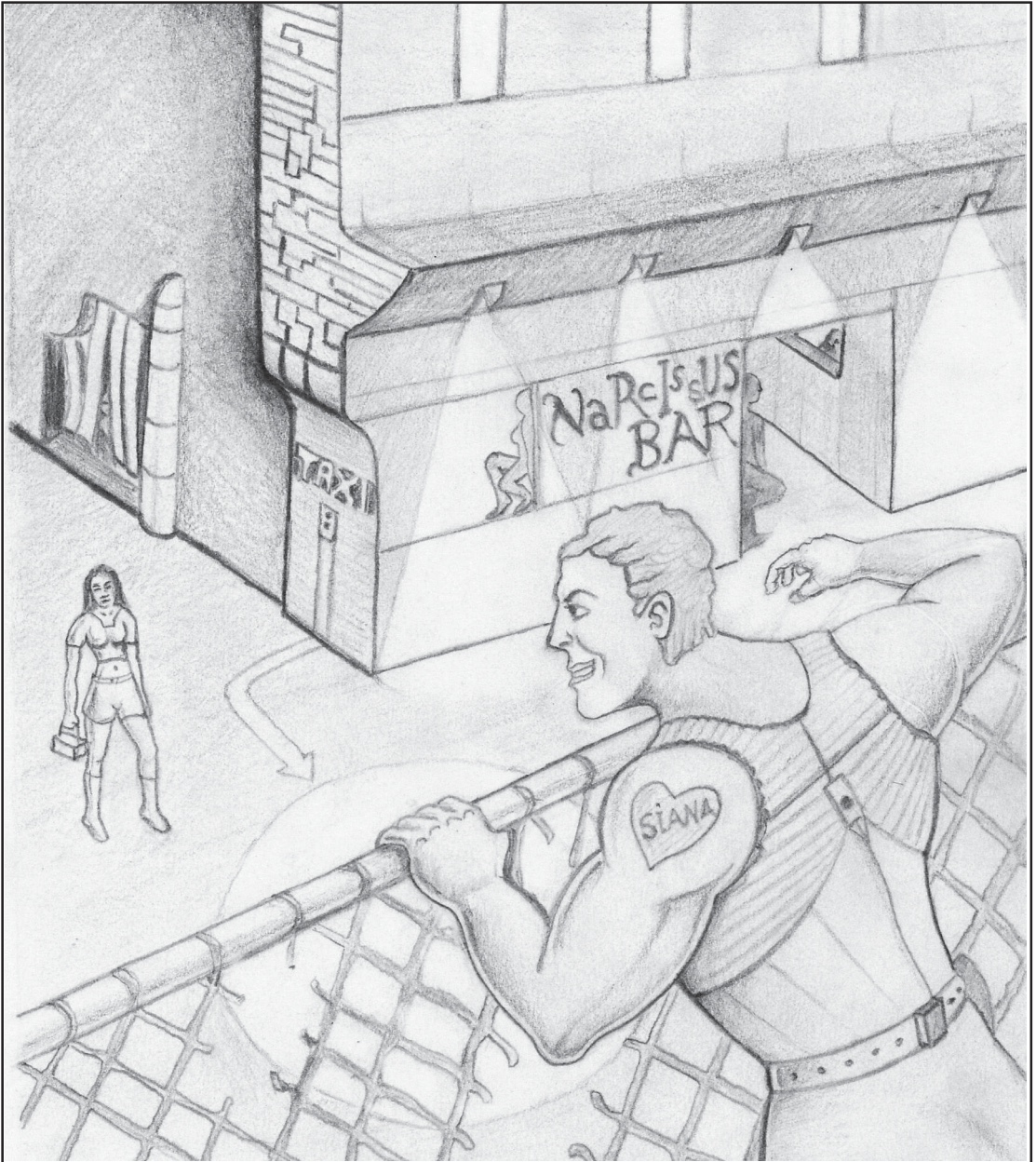
'Mil?' said Dad. 'So now we're talking about "mils" are we?'

I hung my head. 'You've got to let her go, Dad.'

'I'll talk to your mother,' he said, though he looked anything but happy. He cast an evil glance at the webport. 'Oh for God's sake, Siana, you haven't left that thing on again have you?' There were 243 watchers.

As it turned out, Mum was on our side. She'd been beautiful, too, in her day, and had dreams of being a model or a dancer, but early pregnancy had put paid to all that. She wanted Siana to have the chance she'd missed out on. She suggested that Dad go up to Sydney with Siana, but when we spoke to the agency, they said he was welcome to come, but that unfortunately their policy did not permit them to pay for his ticket as well. Of course that meant he couldn't go. So a few days later, despite Dad's misgivings, Siana became the first person in our family to travel in an aeroplane.

She came back two days later, smiling, with five hundred dollars for Mum and Dad in her pocket. It was 'pocket money' the agency had given her to spend during her stay, which she'd stashed away for them. They couldn't believe it, and even Dad forgot about his suspicious broodings for a while as they argued good-naturedly about whether and how to spend their



Siana was surrounded by the silent, watchful protection of countless, lonely, hard-knuckled men.

windfall. But I knew something was wrong. Siana was smiling as they took the money, but there was something in her eyes.

When my parents quizzed her about the contract, she was evasive. Nothing had been decided yet, she said.

‘So when will you know?’ my mother asked anxiously.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Well, I don’t understand what the hold-up could be,’ said my mother, looking at Dad. ‘I mean they’ve met you...did they audition you or anything?’

‘No Mum, it wasn’t like that.’

I could see my dad’s scepticism narrowing his features, but I guess with all those nice, bright

orange notes sliding coolly between his fingers, it was harder for him to say anything. 'Did they at least tell you when you'd hear?' he asked.

'Look, I'm tired and I need to sleep,' said Siana, cutting off the conversation and disappearing into our room, followed by Mr Cronkly. When I went to bed later, I could hear him in the darkness purring like an idling bulldozer, and it worried me, because he usually only did that when someone was crying. Was she lying to us? I wondered. Maybe they'd rejected her and she didn't have the heart to tell us.

Over the next few days, we hardly saw her. She said she needed time to herself, and was always out somewhere with friends or on her own, God knows where.

Four days after she got back from Sydney, I was surfing the webport when Siana's 'personal consultant' popped up. 'Hey Jacko,' said the immaculately professional face, 'How's it going?'

'It's John,' I said. 'Only Siana calls me Jacko.'

'Sorry mate - is your sister in?'

'No.'

'Well you can be the lucky guy who gets to pass on the good news. We have found a client and we are able to offer her a contract, an even more generous one than we thought.'

I couldn't believe my ears. 'Even more generous?'

'Well, the details are confidential, as I'm sure you understand. But I can say it will be several hundred thousand dollars more than we originally proposed.'

'What, two million?' I could barely contain my excitement.

'Possibly. I can't disclose the figure. But please ask her to let us know her decision as soon as possible.'

'Of course, no worries.'

'Thanks Jacko,' said the face, then blinked out.

My parents were just about beside themselves at the news. All Dad could talk about was how he'd be able to afford to pay for his back operation. The years of pain would be over at last. We were all still dancing around the kitchen when Siana walked in. She took one look at our

faces and knew.

'They've offered me a contract,' she said flatly.

'Two million smackaroonies! Dad can have his operation, and we all get to move out of the estate!' I grabbed her in a tango, but she pushed me away.

'Cool. That's fantastic.' I watched as she wrestled a smile onto her pale, stony features.

'Jesus, sis! You're going to be a super-model, and you look like you've just been found guilty of murder or something.'

'Yeah well, whatever, you know. Maybe I'm not so keen on my new life as a model okay?'

My parents let out a derisive snort in perfect unison. 'So now being a bloody model isn't good enough for you?' said my mother. 'Well, I'm sure there's a job down at the bloody *omnimart* if you want it!'

Siana just turned on her heels and left the apartment.

At the airport it was tears all round. My little sister was off to a new and glamorous life, probably jetting around Paris and New York, attending fancy parties where she'd clink cocktail glasses with movie stars and handsome playboys who'd sweep her off her feet. We were losing her, and we'd never understood it until then. But when I hugged her, the sobs that shook loose from inside her were like seismic tremors. She was bawling.

'It's okay little sis,' I reassured her. 'You're going to be fine. You're going to be happy. And you'll have the money to come home to see us any time you like.'

She took my face in her hands and pressed her forehead against mine. 'Jacko?' she said. 'What if I - change?' She held my face away from hers so that she could look into my eyes, searching them desperately for something, a reassurance, that wasn't there.

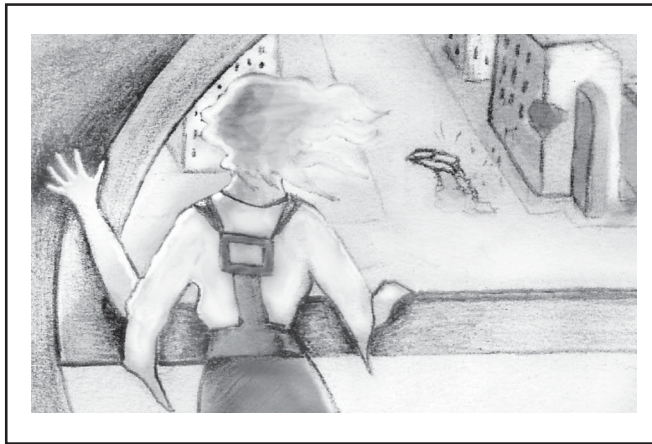
I started to protest and say that she'd always be my little Siana, that fame and fortune could never do anything to change that, but she silenced me with a kiss on the lips. Then she hugged Mum and Dad, and stepped away through the departure gates...

The thing I will remember forever was the night she came home, this dark-haired, plain-

faced stranger claiming to be my beautiful sister. I screamed at her, I punched her in the stomach and winded her. Then she tore open her blouse and showed me the familiar birthmark on her breast. She put the cheque on the kitchen table and sat down like she was exhausted, like she'd just walked a thousand miles. My mum and dad stared at her, their expressions numb with horror. Siana put her hands down near the floor and spread her fingers. 'Mr Cronkly, here

puss...come here...' she called. But Mr Cronkly wouldn't come. He just sat blinking indifferently in the doorway, while the tears poured down her expressionless face.

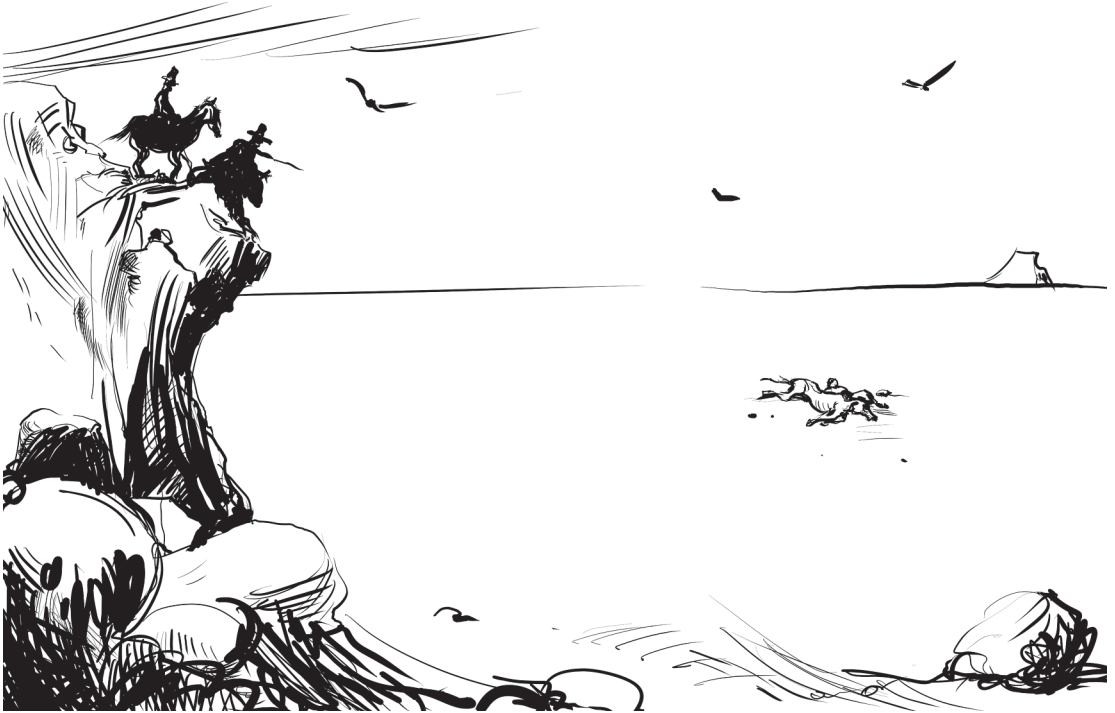
We're out of the estate now, even if the cost of surgery to fix some of the problems with the transplant ate away more of the money than we might have hoped. Dad got his back fixed, not that he seems any the happier for it. And we often see Siana's face on TV. She's such a big celebrity.



THE END

The Fallen

by Frances Clark



Illustrated by Robert Scholten

Circling silently in the summer heat, the vultures alerted the two passers-by to the grisly scene below. A horse, its neck broken, lay crookedly across the stranger's body.

Julio held the reins of the burro and mule as he watched Miguel Gonzales clamber down the steep slope.

Through the tall cacti and thorn bushes, Julio glimpsed a flash from his companion's knife. He watched as Gonzales cut away saddle bags, bedroll and water bottle and tossed them over his shoulder then proceeded to strip the victim of valuables.

Gonzales climbed back up and rested by the trail's edge to catch his breath. He opened the stolen water bottle and swigged, wiping the back

of his dirty hand across his thick lips. With grubby fingers he began to rummage through the saddle bags.

'What have we here?' said Gonzales, pulling out a leather folder.

He undid the tie and leafed through the papers, his beady eyes suddenly widening in his pock-marked face.

'Amigo, we are rich! Rich!' He glanced up at Julio and noticed his friend's disapproving look. 'What is wrong Julio? The owner will no longer need them.'

'It is not right to steal from the dead,' said Julio, crossing himself.

Gonzales tucked the papers away and stood up. 'You would rather I left them to rot?'



In his alcohol-clouded mind Gonzales thought he was seeing a ghost.

‘No Miguel. We should hand them to the authorities. What are they anyway?’

Gonzales walked to his mule and tied the stolen items to his saddle.

‘Claims to a silver mine. Here, near Real Del Monte. Sanchez is his name, and from his fancy clothes I’d say he comes from Pachuca.’ Gonzales took the mule’s reins and swung into the saddle. ‘Come, Julio. It is getting late and I am hungry.’

Julio glanced back as they rode away. The vultures were still circling. Usually the scavengers would fly down to feed if left undisturbed. Surely now that they were far enough away... A sudden thought struck him.

‘Miguel, was the man dead?’

‘Dead or alive, does it matter?’

‘Yes, it matters. Was he dead?’

‘I don’t know. If he wasn’t he soon will be.’

Julio looked across at Miguel. They had stolen and cheated before but this was different. To leave a man to die was wrong. The smirk twisting

the side of Miguel’s mouth now repulsed him.

‘Miguel, we must go back.’

‘Don’t even think about it Julio,’ growled Miguel. He drew his knife and sliced the air savagely across his throat in warning.

Julio gulped and looked away. He had never seen Miguel like this before.

Miguel stuffed the remaining beans and tortilla into his mouth and threw his metal plate at Julio. He drained his coffee mug and tossed it too. Belching loudly, he reached for his tequila then relaxed back against his saddle.

Eying Miguel, Julio cleaned their plates and mugs with sand. He knew his companion would drink till he slept.

Not wanting Miguel to wake, the young man built up the fire. He had plans.

Goading his burro into a trot wasn’t easy. The journey in the moonlight was slow. Julio’s mount was naturally stubborn but hearing coyotes nearby had made it nervous.

Tethering his burro to a sapling, Julio

scrambled down to the dead horse. Noise in the bushes told him coyotes had already sniffed out the carcass.

With no light but the moon, it was difficult to tell if the man was still alive.

‘Señor, are you alive?’

He heard a groan. Julio felt for the man’s hand. Suddenly fingers tightened on his own.

‘I am here Señor. I will try to release you.’

Julio grabbed a hind leg of the horse and with herculean effort tugged till the rear of the animal rolled away. Only then did he realise the man was firmly wedged between two large boulders. Boulders that had supported the horse’s weight and had saved the man from being crushed.

Julio grabbed his water bottle and, opening it, poured a little onto the man’s dry lips.

‘Señor Sanchez, can you hear me?’

Julio took off the man’s expensive boots and began to rub his legs. Apart from a broken arm and sore head the man seemed to be alright. Julio helped him sit up and gave him more water.

‘Señor, I am so happy you are alive.’

‘Gracias,’ said the man at last. ‘You have saved my life. You called me by my name. You know who I am?’

‘Sí Señor.’ Julio told him about Miguel and felt ashamed. He apologised at taking so long to come back to help.

‘But you did come back.’ The man smiled. ‘So, what is your name? I must know who you are.’

‘I am Julio, Señor.’

They talked till Sanchez felt stronger. Julio helped him with his boots and bandaged his head and arm with strips from his torn shirt. He found Sanchez’s hat and when he was ready, slowly helped him up the rocky incline.

‘I have only a burro, Señor, but he will be happy to carry you to the camp.’

Sanchez patted the burro’s neck. ‘I am grateful he is here to help.’

The fire was still burning when they arrived back, and Julio helped Sanchez dismount.

‘Miguel has your things. He is over there near the fire asleep. I will see to the burro then get you food, Señor.’

Walking to the sleeping outlaw, Sanchez trod on a dry branch. Its snapping woke Gonzales. He looked up, shocked to see Sanchez leaning over him. Clad only in red long johns, he threw off his blanket and scrambled backwards in the dirt.

In his alcohol-clouded mind he thought he was seeing a ghost.

‘Get away from me!’ he yelled, backing away. ‘Get away from me!’ Panicking he stood up and began to run.

Seeing Gonzales disappearing into the darkness, Julio called out, ‘Stop Miguel! Stop!’

He knew what lay beyond the camp. But it was too late.

Sanchez and Julio watched in shock as Gonzales tripped and fell headlong into the abandoned mine shaft.

As the echoing scream suddenly stopped, the coyotes began to howl.

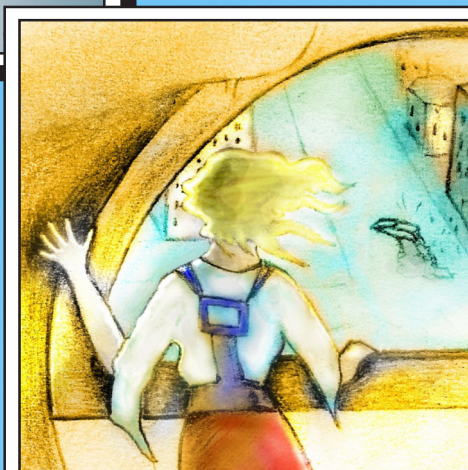
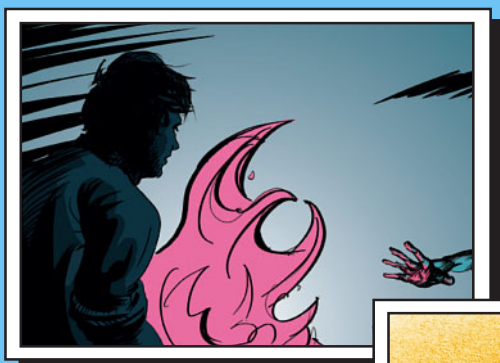
The End



This page is available for advertising and promotion

POPULAR STORIES

Illustrated



Front and back cover
illustrations by
Virginia Gray, Daniel Reed,
Nick Hunter, Robert Scholten
and Emanuel Gelsi.