



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS








Extreme Weather Events

Tim Jones

HEADWORX
WELLINGTON





Acknowledgements

Some of these stories have been previously published in the following magazines and anthologies: *Another 100 NZ Short Short Stories*, *Antipodean SF* (Australia), *Aurealis* (Australia), *Elder Signs* (Canada), *Extremes* (USA), *Frame*, *JAAM*, *Other Voices*, *Scheherazade* (UK), *Southern Ocean Review*, *Star Songs Tau Whetu*, *The NeXt Wave*, *The Third Century*, and *What on Earth*.

Thanks to Mark Pirie, and to Russell Chalmers for the cover design

First published 2001

HeadworX Publishers
26 Grant Rd
Thorndon, Wellington
Aotearoa / New Zealand


ISBN 0-473-07387-0

© Tim Jones, 2001

Printed by Publishing Press

HeadworX[®] is a registered trademark
of HeadworX Publishers

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of review, private research, and criticism as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced without written permission from the publisher.





Contents

Maria and the Tree	7
Wintering Over	18
The New Land	33
Flensing	38
The Kiwi Contingent	57
My Friend the Volcano	59
The Pole	81
The Lizard	84
Tour Party, Late Afternoon	92
Black Box	96
The Man Who Loved Maps	102
The Temple in the Matrix	108







Maria and the Tree

Maria poured her neighbour's water ration carefully into her own tank. She felt relieved that her little trick still worked. But she didn't like the new man, or the look the new man had given her.

She was just as careful when watering the tree. She remembered being taught that trees took water out of the soil and drew it up to their leaves for food. What didn't get used by the tree went back into the air, and the air was always hungry. So she poured the water slowly around the base of its trunk, trying to make sure that every drop was put to good use.

The tree had come from the mountains. Maria found it during the special trip that had been laid on for the returning soldiers. They had been heroes then.

They travelled to the mountains in big buses; by then, the military owned all the buses, as well as the remaining cars. Her bus wound out of the lowlands towards the high peaks. "Put your darks on," the driver said, "or the sun will fry your eyes". The tallest peaks had a white coating, like frosting on a cake. It was called snow.

Trees grew in the narrow mountain valleys. In the deeper shade, they were tall and healthy. The air





EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

smelled sweet. Birds flew, chirping. Maria sat on a stump and cried. Some of the others cried, too. A few had no use for the trees; they hit them with dead branches and tried to bring down the birds with rocks, until the sergeant stopped them.

They went for a walk; the sergeant called it ‘a hike’. Maria had met survivors of the jungle wars, and thought they might feel edgy walking through this dark forest. But there weren’t any creepers or swampholes full of leeches to trap you, although you had to watch your footing because of the exposed roots. When Maria stopped walking, her feet were sore and she was as tired as she’d ever been on patrol, but it was a peaceful tiredness, without the jangled nerves and churning gut.

They slept in a hut built back when people drove out to the mountains in their own cars to spend the weekend walking. That surprised Maria, because she’d heard that fumes from cars had helped to kill the trees everywhere else.

Maria didn’t think of taking a tree for herself until they’d hiked all the way back to the buses. She cursed her slowness, because she could easily have slipped off the track for a moment and popped a seedling — that was what the sergeant called them — into her pack. Maria was surprised how much the sergeant knew about the forest and wondered if she’d been briefed about it. Maybe their next mission would be to somewhere with beautiful trees like these.

It’s too late now, she thought. If she got well again they might post her to forested country, maybe further



MARIA AND THE TREE

north where the rebels held out. Till then, goodbye trees. She slipped her headphones on and tried not to think about anything.

Her chance came at the last possible moment. The road down from the mountains was long and twisting, the driver went fast, and one of the soldiers got sick. The bus stopped in a cutting where a few trees grew — different from those in the high mountains, not as healthy, but still trees. Maria, clutching at her stomach, hurried from the bus behind the retching soldier. Nobody asked why her pack was on her back. She staggered behind the bus so that nobody could see her, then prised a sapling and its ragged clump of roots free with her knife.

As soon as they got back to base, she raced home without any of her usual precautions and dumped the sapling in an old pot. In those days, water still came out of taps and there was nothing to stop you keeping nice plants if you could find any.

When the tree reached six feet tall and was threatening to burst through the roof of her apartment, she realised that she had to plant it outside. She knew the perfect place to put it — the enclosed courtyard at the back of the building, now blind to everyone but her. She had access to the courtyard down the fire escape from the apartment, and the old entrance from the street had been bricked up many years ago.

The courtyard was covered in concrete, slowly cracking in the heat. Using what remained of her former strength, she made a big enough hole to fit the contents of the pot. The earth beneath the concrete was



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

dry, and the tree lost some of its branches that year. She gave it a lot of water, stinting herself, and at last the tree recovered and started to grow again.

There was no way to prevent some of the water she poured around the tree's base being wasted. Greedy weeds woke in the damp ground, and she tugged them out with aching fingers. Tired from her labours, squatting on her haunches, she'd stare up at the tree and will it to stretch out fine roots and drink every drop she poured.

As the thirsty tree grew, however, the water supply dwindled. First they fitted all the taps with water meters, then the taps ran dry and water-tanker deliveries started. As the tree's thirst increased, Maria's ration decreased. Families, and the few industries left in the city, took priority.

It's you or me, tree, she thought to herself one night. The next day, water day, the waterman asked why her neighbour wasn't answering the door. "Can't give the old lady any water if she don't come to the door," he said. And she thought as fast as she had in the war, and said that her neighbour had fallen and was laid up in bed and if the waterman gave her the water she'd make sure the old woman got it.

He looked doubtful. "She has to sign for it. I'll wait here while you take this in to her."

Maria's neighbour always locked her apartment, but it didn't take Maria long to work the latch with her knife. She found the old woman in her bedroom, staring at the ceiling while flies crawled from her mouth. She shut the door hastily in case the waterman



MARIA AND THE TREE

noticed the smell. She had no idea what the old woman's signature was like, so she scrawled "E McIntyre" and hoped.

The waterman glanced at the signature, grunted, and handed her the precious container. She waited till he'd gone, then poured all the sparkling water into her cistern. In those days, it could barely contain a double ration.

Later that day, she opened the old woman's window and levered the body over the sill and into the courtyard. She built a pyre out of the old woman's furniture, laid the broken body atop it, and lit the fire at night, when it would be no more than a dim star in a bright constellation. As the fire burned, she muttered some words from long ago in a language she no longer understood.

Maria crossed to the window and stared out into the courtyard. She had been signing for her neighbour's water for nearly ten years now; after a few months the waterman had told her to sign for E McIntyre's supply herself, without bothering to get the old woman's signature. "Can't hang around here all day," he had said. Maria thought he should smile more.

The top of the tree was now level with her window. Down below, she could still see the discoloured patch on the concrete where she had burned the body. A smell rose up in her memory, a smell of burning bodies that reminded her of the war . . .

Maria lies in the brush-filled ravine and watches her friend Ally dying. The two of them had managed to



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

jump free from the truck as it ploughed off the road and nose-dived into the river. Ally damaged her spine and wasn't able to reach cover. Now her life ebbs away through the bullet holes in her chest.

Maria makes one last effort. She crawls to the edge of the scrub and reaches out an arm. She's still five feet from Ally's leg. She leans out a little further. A shot whips across her sleeve and whines off unseen rocks. The enemy are playing with her. "Bastards!" she yells, although they won't understand. Bastards.

Ally's sweat-sheened face turns towards her. From the temporary safety of the bushes, Maria spreads her hands, palms upward. Nothing I can do. Ally draws her hand, wet with blood, towards her head. She points, mimes a trigger. There. Now. Please.

Maria hesitates. Help might come. Maybe their leaders, high above the battle, have spotted this little sideshow and organised a rescue. More likely, they'll both be killed or taken prisoner. Taken prisoner . . . she's heard what that means. Their enemies are brutes, pure and simple. Whatever the war's actually about, she's sure of that.

Crossing herself, she takes out her pistol and shoots Ally twice in the head. Her friend stops moving, but the pain remains on her face. Maria turns away and begins working through the brush to the other side of the ravine. Her own left arm hangs limply, so she improvises a sling and struggles on.

Two hours later she regains the road and trudges up it, a straggler left far behind the great assault. There is no sign of the enemy — maybe they've all been driven

MARIA AND THE TREE

off. Maybe they're all dead.

The road begins to climb more steeply, twitching across the face of the hill. As she rounds a hairpin bend, a dark figure rises from behind a rock and flings itself at her, knife raised high above its head. As it dives upon her, she whips out her own knife and stabs upwards. The man's momentum carries him onto the knife and into her body. Her left arm takes the shock, and she faints in a pool of pain and blood.

She wakes, and lies for a while in close, stinking darkness, unsure of who or where she is. Then she hears a voice. The darkness is lifted from her, replaced by harsh sunlight. Yes, she tells them, she is alive. They raise her to her feet, and she stares down at the body of her enemy. He is all of fourteen.

Maria blinked and looked around her. The image of the knife-wielding boy faded from her mind, replaced by the gathering gloom of evening and the faint noises of life and death in the city. Everything was grey. When she thought about the war, she remembered how good it was to be young, and sharp, and dangerous. That had all faded after she killed the boy. When they saw that she couldn't concentrate, could no longer follow orders no matter how hard she tried, they sent her to the doctor, who asked her lots of questions. He told her she had Post-something, a condition that made your brain fuzz out under too much stress. "You've been very brave," he said. "We'll make sure you're well looked after." They sent her home from the fighting and she went to live in her parents' old apartment.



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

The dust was thick and the windows broken, but over the years she'd made it safe again.

The clouds were heavy tonight and she remembered the look of them from her childhood — the look that promised rain. One wonderful day not long ago, it had rained for hours, pouring from the sky right onto her tree. She was fascinated by the way the drops met the tree. Some ran down the leaves and along the branches; some jumped from branch to branch like children before falling exhausted to the ground. The rain lasted until nightfall. She saved the tree's water ration and gave it a double helping two days later, when the clouds had cleared and the sun once again beat down.

Tonight, Maria grew tired of waiting for the rain. She had settled for the night beneath her worn Army blanket and was drifting down to sleep when she heard boots on the stairs. They were trying to be quiet, but militia boots are not designed for stealth. Maria rose from her mattress and felt under the pillow for her knife.

The boots paused outside her neighbour's door. Thud, crash and the door burst open. Maria remembered the new waterman, a lean, arrogant youth who looked at her suspiciously when she trotted out the old story about collecting her neighbour's water supply. He took her at her word, and gave her Mrs McIntyre's water, so Maria thought that he'd believed her. He must have been suspicious enough to find out how many years Maria had been receiving her neighbour's water.

Maria knew they were hanging people for water theft these days. She pulled on her top and pants, checked



MARIA AND THE TREE

the money in her wallet, then opened the window and fumbled her way down the fire escape, nearly forgetting the two missing steps.

Just as she stepped onto the concrete paving, her door burst open and her room flooded with light and noise. She raced for the entrance to the courtyard and crashed against the tired old wall. The bricks began to topple as the brittle mortar crumbled.

“STOP!” She stopped.

“STAY WHERE YOU ARE. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO RESIST ARREST.” She heard the same voice, unamplified, issuing orders. Guns poked out the window.

“Shit, look at that tree! How the hell? . . .”

“The water! She’s been stealing water to feed a fucking tree!” The face of the new waterman grinned down at her. “Gonna cut your pretty tree down, old woman! Water-stealer!”

The knife had been made for throwing as well as stabbing. It left Maria’s hand and flew through the open window. The waterman had turned to say something to the militia captain and the knife struck his left shoulder instead of burying itself in his heart. He slumped, ashen, to the floor.

Maria leapt at the crumbling wall. They shot her as she clawed her way over. She screamed, fell, lifted her head slowly as if to look at something in the courtyard, then died.

The militia captain looked sourly out Maria’s window. Another cock-up. At least they’d saved themselves the



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

bother of a court case. There wasn't much doubt what the verdict would have been, anyway. Stealing water for nearly ten years, and all for a tree. It really made you wonder.

The waterman pulled himself up from the floor. A militia medic had dressed his wound and his face was white from anger as well as pain.

“What are you waiting for? Cut down the tree!”

The captain shook his head. “Let's leave the tree alone. It didn't steal the water. It'll die anyway now she's stopped watering it, won't it?”

“Fuck the tree,” the waterman snarled. The first chance he got, he'd return to the courtyard and chop it down. Let it burn along with the thief.

The waterman never returned to the courtyard. Within weeks, he was promoted for his vigilance in detecting the theft. He sat behind a desk, giving orders, and forgot about the tree.

Which continued to grow. It was a tree of the desert margins, and soon after Maria planted it in the courtyard, its long taproots had found an underground watercourse. As the city depopulated, so the water-table rose. Maria's devoted attentions had been unnecessary for the last five years.


The rains came more frequently now, driving in on the wind from the mountains. The wind carried pollen to fertilise the modest flowers the tree had been offering for year after barren year. Its seed fell about the court-



MARIA AND THE TREE

yard, and before long its children rose from the crumbling concrete and made their way, cautiously, into the deserted street beyond.





Wintering Over

He was not a strong man. The others knew that and had not been surprised when he left. Perhaps there had been relief on their faces. He said his farewells, opened the flap of the tent, and stepped outside into the whirling snow. The weak sunlight cast his shadow against the tent for a moment, and then he was gone.

After he had walked for a time, in no particular direction, it occurred to him that he might be walking straight back to the tent. He could surprise the others by popping back in for a cup of tea and a chat.

The muscles of his face, struck by the perversity of the idea, tried to raise a smile. The ice on his moustache and beard cracked and refroze instantly as his mouth assumed its new position.

He staggered on another dozen paces before the bright lights hovering at the edges of his vision came together before his eyes. Someone called out to him, a dear voice from the past; he ran towards the voice, stumbled, fell, and lay still.

He awoke some time later to find himself covered in snow. It dimmed but could not obscure the bright light pressing against his eyeballs. It was time to get up. He freed his arms, brushed the snow from his face —



WINTERING OVER

his hands still worked after a fashion, though he dared not look too closely at his fingers — and set about freeing his body. The light had faded now. He stood, and during a momentary lull in the wind his ears picked up a faint humming. It was in the opposite direction from that brilliant light.

He wanted very much to run after the brightness, but some residual instinct for survival told him that he would do better to find the source of the humming. His eyes already narrowed to slits by fresh ice, he moved off towards the noise.

“Anything?” asked Cierpinski.

“Nothing,” Anderssen replied. He had been at the radio for over an hour, trying to coax some spark of life from it. It had been working in the morning, carrying its usual freight of impending doom, but there had been not a whisper this afternoon. Reception varied wildly, of course, but it was unusual indeed for there to be no carrier signals, no call-signs. “Waltzing Matilda” and “Lily Bulero” were both absent from the airwaves today.

Pete Harrington looked at his two companions and thought about sleep. There wasn't much else to do, after all, two months into the Antarctic night. They each made the observations they were paid for — magnetic, atmospheric — took turns at the cooking, and got on each others' nerves. Harrington slept a lot; when he slept, he snored. Mike Anderssen picked his nose and, if you didn't watch him like a hawk, deposited the proceeds on the underside of the table.



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

Kate Cierpinski was prone to complaining — well, they were all prone to that, but the other two tired of her quiet “Oh, *shit*” as she woke up each morning and rediscovered her surroundings: one hut, five metres by three, perched on the Ross Ice Shelf at 81° 47’ S. It was May 1997, and the night and the winter had four months still to go.

Their great defence against the six-month night was the clock, faithfully letting them know exactly what time it was in the London borough of Greenwich. The clock roused them at 6 a.m. to prepare breakfast from the dried foods stashed under the table. Then they drew matches, and the drawer of the shortest match got the privilege, weather permitting, of making the thirty-yard round trip to the food store and the generator, while the other two divided the chores of clearing up the breakfast dishes and monitoring the radio.

They listened to Radio Australia for the personal messages it occasionally relayed from their absent friends, and the BBC World Service for the news. It wasn’t good, hadn’t been good for months, ever since that madman had seized power in Russia and sent his tanks roaring across the shaky borders to his south and west. Now his troops were poised on the borders of Turkey. If they crossed that boundary, the Americans had said they would respond. The Cold War was back with a vengeance, the Russians and Americans had both violated the Antarctic Treaty by establishing military bases on the ice, and the few instructions their little party received added up to



WINTERING OVER

“watch out for yourselves, and don’t bother us.”

A blizzard had been howling for days, but tonight it had eased, and the stars were out. “Look at the aurora,” said Cierpinski, who stood in the doorway preparing for a quick dash to the food store. The other two looked out at shifting pink and green bands, at purple curtains endlessly rising on the diamond stars.

“It’s bright, all right,” said Anderssen.

“Natural?” asked Harrington. Cierpinski shrugged.

“Who knows? I’ve seen it this bright before, but we’ve had no warning of solar flares. Something must have ionised the upper atmosphere, and if it wasn’t the sun . . .” She left the thought unfinished, dangling.

Anderssen spent another hour on the radio before giving up in disgust. Still nothing, but who knew what that meant? It was safer not to speculate. They were still alive, they had enough fuel and food, and they would still be there in August when the sun crept back above the northern horizon.

They went to bed at midnight as the weather closed back in. The familiar howl and drone of the wind lulled them to sleep, and none of them heard the first knock on the door. But their visitor was persistent, trying the walls when the door failed to bring result, and eventually Anderssen’s eyes popped open.

He lay still for a minute, unable to understand what he’d heard. The urgent tapping began again. “Pete, shut up!”, he hissed. The snores ceased, replaced by a sleepy mutter.

“What is it?” grumbled Cierpinski.



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

“I thought I heard something. Outside.”

“In this weather?”

“Listen!” Whoever or whatever it was had moved back to the door. Tap-tap. Tap, tap, tap. Then the door-handle moved a fraction.

“Who’s there?” called Cierpinski.

They heard a voice outside the door, but the wind blew the words away. “Sounds English,” said Anderssen. He walked up to the door and shouted “What do you want?” Whoever was outside yelled three words, and this time they were audible: “Let me in!”

Anderssen looked back at his two colleagues. Harrington shrugged, Cierpinski nodded. Anderssen turned the doorhandle again and shoved. No response.

“Frozen shut again,” he grumbled. “Give us a hand, Kate.” As she moved towards the door, Harrington reached for a heavy length of wood.

“We’ll push the door open,” Anderssen called, “so stand back.”

The door came free so suddenly that Anderssen and Cierpinski fell headlong in the snow. They scrambled to their feet just as their visitor stepped into view. He was of medium height, dark-haired, with a beard untrimmed for many days; wore no coat; and was thin, frostbitten, and evidently in severe need of a doctor. He was clearly no threat, and Harrington put his club down quickly, a little ashamed of his suspicions.

The four of them stood in a tight circle, warming up. Harrington was about to break the silence when, without a sound, the man slid to the floor. They lifted

WINTERING OVER

him onto a bunk and confirmed that he was still breathing, if faintly.

“Hypothermia?”

“Yes. We’ll have to warm him up. Let’s bring a mattress onto the floor. What have we got in the kit?”

While Harrington took charge of the medication, Anderssen and Cierpinski laid their guest down and peeled off his tattered clothes, jerseys above and furs below. Once they had given him new clothing, they slid him into a sleeping bag and Anderssen climbed in to donate his body heat to the thawing man. Meanwhile, Harrington and Cierpinski investigated his possessions.

“Real fur! He’s not with Greenpeace, that’s for certain. And wool, not polypropylene. What’s in his pockets?”

“What’s that got to do with us, Kate?”

“A guy turns up in the middle of winter when it’s forty below, in a blizzard, when as far as we know there’s no-one within a hundred kilometres of us. Shouldn’t we find out who he is and where he’s from?”

“He sounds English.”

“Yeah? Jack the Ripper was English.”

Harrington nodded and checked the man’s pockets. “Nothing — no, wait. A pipe, and this.” A letter, badly faded.

“Can you make out the date?”

Two heads bent by torchlight. They peered, straightened, exchanged glances. The letter was dated July 8th, 1910.



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

There wasn't much romance attached to a posting to Antarctica. It was cold and lonely, and you got bored. Alcoholism and drug addiction had replaced frostbite and gangrene as the scars Antarctic veterans bore. But it still wasn't the most commonplace corner of the world, and most visitors felt the urge to read up about the continent's natural and human history. Harrington had brought several books on Antarctica with him. He took a second look at the date, tried to imagine the face on the floor without the beard and the grey, discoloured skin, and hunted a book from his collection.

While Harrington read, the other two were silent. Cierpinski was just about to open her mouth when Harrington looked up, a half-smile on his lips.

"I am just going outside," said Harrington, "and may be some time."

"What?"

"It's from *The Diaries of Robert Falcon Scott*, March 17th, 1912. Can you remember who said that?"

"Yeah, it was . . ."

"Oates. Captain Titus Oates, Royal Army. He was in Scott's party, the team that got to the Pole to find Amundsen had reached it before them. On the way back, he was delaying the other three — Scott, Bowers and Wilson — and they were nearly out of food. He walked out into the blizzard and they never saw him again. Look at this photo."

A man of medium height, dark-haired, clean-shaven, with a long, pensive face. Cierpinski turned to look at their visitor. "You're trying to tell me . . ."

WINTERING OVER

“That this man is Titus Oates.”

“A man who’s been dead for eighty-five years has just walked in our door?”

“Well, if he isn’t Oates, then how did he get that letter? It’s certainly addressed to Oates.”

“Well, maybe this guy found it buried out there in the snow . . . okay, I know that’s not very likely. But if this is Oates, what’s he been doing for the last eighty-five years? He wanders off into a blizzard, gets lost, and spends the remainder of the century looking for a bed. I like it.”

“We are quite near to Scott’s last camp, you know. A bit further south.”

“Oh, come on, Mike. You as well, huh? All of a sudden I’m in a hut with two madmen and a ghost. Nobody could survive in this weather for eighty-five minutes, never mind eighty-five years.”

“Let’s take a look at his feet,” suggested Harrington.

“Why?”

“It was Oates’ badly frostbitten feet that held the party up. His left foot in particular.”

The cold had worked its way into the man’s feet long ago. The swelling and the pain had gone, leaving only blackened scars and runnels in the skin. They were both bad, but the left foot was worse.

“Well, gentlemen,” asked Cierpinski, “what will we say when he wakes up?”

They didn’t have to answer that question for a good twelve hours, and a casual observer might have thought that everything was back to normal. Harrington



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

browsed determinedly through his books; Cierpinski worked her way through another series of measurements; and Anderssen tried to think of something exciting for dinner. The sleeping man looked like he could do with a good meal.

Just as the food hit the table, he woke. “Come and get it,” said the *chef du jour*. The man struggled to rise, fell back with a grimace, levered himself up once more. With Cierpinski’s aid, he made it to the table, watching impassively as Anderssen served up another helping of the steaming stew and placed it before him. “Dig in,” the cook invited.

“I don’t quite know how my stomach will take it. I’m afraid I haven’t eaten in a long while. But it smells very good.” He looked around him, slowly. “I have never seen many of these devices you have. What is your source of light?”

“We run it off the generator. Diesel fuel — no nukes here, you’ll be glad to know.” Cierpinski watched for some reaction to the modern terms, but the man had his mind on other things.

“Excuse me, but — you *are* a woman?”

“Last time I looked, yeah.”

The man coloured. “I didn’t mean to offend you. I wasn’t aware there were any ladies in this wilderness.”

“I suppose you haven’t seen a woman for a while?”

“That’s quite right! For nearly two years. I’m delighted to meet you.”

Cierpinski wasn’t sure how to take this. “Well, since we’re getting friendly, names all around. Kate Cierpinski — Pete Harrington — Mike Anderssen.

WINTERING OVER

And who might you be?”

“Titus Oates. Captain Titus Oates, at your service.”

The three of them looked at one another, then Cierpinski resumed the interrogation.

“Tell me, Captain Titus Oates: what brought you to our door?”

Oates said nothing for a while. When his voice resumed it was slow, puzzled. “I don’t clearly remember. All I can recall is stumbling through the snow, then hearing a noise — a humming noise — and turning towards it.”

“That would have been the generator. But where did you come from?”

“I came out of the snow. I . . . I believe that I slept for a while, and was covered over. Presently, there was a light, and I awoke.”

“Do you remember Captain Scott?”

“Oh, of course! Have you heard from him? I was very worried; they were desperately tired and hungry. Did they make it to the coast?”

He looked around at the three of them, at their silent faces; then he cried. Harrington put his arm around the sobbing man. A man of the ’90s might cry in public, but they were embarrassed by a British officer of the Edwardian era breaking down in tears.

Oates, too, was embarrassed. “Please forgive me. I cared for those men very deeply. What of the rest of our party? Are they safe?”

“Yes, the *Terra Nova* made it back to England. The relief party found Scott’s tent and the bodies in the spring.”



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

“Tell me, how long was I out there? You speak as though it were at least six months.”

“Captain Oates, today is the fifth day of May, 1997. You’ve been out in the blizzard for a little over eighty-five years.”

Oates’ eyes widened in surprise. “I was asleep for a long time, then.”

“No-one sleeps for eighty-five years, Mr. Oates.”

“I’m sorry you’re so suspicious of me, my dear. What can I say to you? I have no explanation for my presence here. When I walked out of that tent I knew that I was walking to my death. There was a great bond between the five of us who formed the Polar Party: Captain Scott, and Evans, and Bowers and Wilson and myself. Each of us would have died for the others, I think, but I was the weakest once Evans had passed away. I was holding the others back, you see. Though they tried to keep me alive, I believe they expected me to do my duty as I saw fit.”

“‘I am just going outside, and may be some time.’”

“Yes, those were my words. They have gone down in posterity, then? How odd. I lifted the flap of the tent and walked out into the gale. The wind was blowing directly into my face. I was very tired.”

“What happened then?”

“I am quite unable to remember. That’s the odd thing. I remember the wind — far worse than it is now. I left the tent, trudged into the gale, and then — a white space. There was no sound, no feeling, but the light grew, brighter and brighter, pressing against my face. I arose and looked about me. I walked towards the

WINTERING OVER

light until it faded and I could follow it no longer. As my senses returned, I heard your generator humming.”

“A remarkable story. How do you feel?”

“Do you know, I’m not the slightest bit tired? And all the pain has gone. You have some powerful medicines. I’m eager to see what great things the march of science has done for the human race.”

“March of science! Bloody hell,” said Harrington.

Oates looked hurt. He picked up the microphone. “What is this contraption?”

“A radio — you might have called it a wireless. It allows us to listen to the news from distant places.”

“They use Morse code, I believe.”

“A few still do, yes. This one receives voices — well, it should. The ‘contraption’ hasn’t been working very well lately. I’ll try it again.”

Harrington switched on the radio and showed Oates the function of the dials and switches. While Anderssen retreated to his latest thriller, Cierpinski watched the two men: Harrington pointing, Oates asking questions, nodding, asking again. She liked the man; he had a trusting spirit. What would he do, she wondered, when he learned that they did not have food for four for the winter?

“Still stuffed, folks. Can’t get anything. I’ve never known reception to go out for this long.” Harrington turned to Oates. “Tell me, Captain, how long did it take you to reach us after you woke up?”

“Not easy to say. No more than half an hour, I fancy. But I took a long time waking. Why do you ask?”

“I was wondering about that bright light you saw. If



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

it was high in the atmosphere —”

“I can see it again.”

“What?”

“The light. I can see it again. Can’t you?”

“There are no windows here, man.”

“Open the door.”

“Kate?”

“Do what he says, Pete. Take him to the door.”

Outside, the snow had stopped swirling, the wind had dropped to an icy breeze, and they could see clear to the northern horizon. The light that Oates had seen was fading now, as the blast of energy dissipated in the thin upper atmosphere. Fierce ionic displays swirled around its periphery, the southern lights putting on one last glorious show. Somewhere up there in the world, electronic equipment was dying, all circuits on overload. In a million homes and factories, people were turning from their radios and TVs, no longer spell-bound by official reassurances and soothing music, waiting for the end.

“There! I told you the light had returned. That must be what woke me up. It is beautiful, is it not?” The fading light played on Oates’ scarred features, making him young again, young and eager. He smiled. “Come on! What are we waiting for?”

Harrington was holding onto the sleeve of Oates’ borrowed jacket. When the explorer pulled away from him, Harrington kept hold of the sleeve but not the man. In pullovers and borrowed boots, Oates ran towards the north, leaping and stumbling over the wind-carved sastrugi. Harrington made to follow, but



WINTERING OVER

Cierpinski and Anderssen held him back.

“What’s the point, Pete? What’s the point?”

They watched Oates dwindle among the sastrugi until the sky filled with another brilliant white flash, and they were forced to shield their eyes. By the time they could look again, there was nothing to see but ice. Anderssen and Harrington turned wordlessly and returned to the hut; Cierpinski stayed where she was for a moment, thinking about her family in Sydney, about the seaside town they used to visit for the holidays, about her sister still at school. Now Melissa would never finish her final year. No need to worry about all those exams now; no need to decide what to wear to the end-of-year formal, or whom you would be with when the dancing was over.

Kate wrenched her thoughts back to their predicament. There wasn’t much they could do about it. When the sun rose, the three of them would have to set out for the coast, to see what remained. Until then, they were at the mercy of the winter.

The wind was rising again, howling across the ice. Brushing at her eyes, she turned and went inside. Harrington was at the radio, searching for signals. Anderssen had returned to his thriller. He was pulling out the pages one by one, and placing them in a neat pile in the very centre of the table.

Oates did not shut his eyes when the second blast came; he stared directly at the source of the light, laughing, waving his arms. Again he heard the



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

forgotten voice from childhood, calling him home across the years. He ran on into the light to meet it. In the spring, when the sun rose above the horizon and the party from the hut set out on their hopeless trek for the coast, they found no sign of his corpse.





The New Land

The new land was discovered on a Thursday. The Prime Minister addressed the nation. “It’s large,” she said, “and damp, and all ours.” An expedition was already nearing its northern shores.

The expedition waded ashore and raised the flag in a moving ceremony. The new land was covered in seaweed, mud, and the carcasses of fish. It had a distinctive smell.

The new land had significant implications for public policy. An inter-departmental working party was set up, with representatives from all affected Crown entities. Change agents were brought in to build a team culture that would be open, proactive, and outcomes-focused.

The Government welcomed tangata whenua participation. Several tribes had fished in the seas displaced by the new land and consultative hui were quickly arranged. The roles of the Maori Fisheries Commission Te Ohu Kai Moana, and other stakeholders in the quota allocation process, were subject to pending High Court action.

With the cooperation of public and private service providers, an intensive effort began to map the new



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

land. Global Positioning System data revealed that it had a total surface area of 385 ± 10 square kilometres, based on best practice assessments. The majority of the new land was only a few metres above sea level, but there was a gradual rise towards a prominent elevation in the southwestern quadrant, which satellite measurements revealed to be some sixty metres in height. A more accurate figure awaited the arrival of a ground party, which promptly left from Base Camp One.

Together with the composition of the All Black midfield, the new land was the prime topic of conversation over the weekend. Callers to talkback radio were unsure of its usefulness, but the general consensus was that it ought to come in pretty handy. Seizing on this mood, a prominent life sciences company suggested that the new land would make an ideal testbed for experiments in plant biotechnology.

On Sunday, the nation was treated to live reports from the party sent to investigate the south-western elevation. The gradual rise previously reported was crowned by a rocky hill, atop which were strewn large blocks of grey stone. The superficial resemblance of these blocks to construction materials excited world-wide interest in the new land, which had previously been largely ignored in key media markets. Both print and electronic media carried a number of ill-considered and poorly researched stories making allusions to Atlantis, Mu, and/or Lemuria. The Skeptics Society responded with a strongly-worded statement.



THE NEW LAND

The Government acted decisively to quell speculation. An exclusion zone, to be patrolled by all three services, was established around the hill in question. Any party wishing to land in the area was required to have government permission and pay a substantial fee. It was announced that samples from the quarantine zone would be sent to reputed overseas laboratories for analysis, and that results were expected in six to eight weeks.

Sharemarket reaction, which had been muted the previous week, was strongly positive when trading opened on Monday, with the tourism, energy, and telecommunications sectors especially buoyant. Fishing industry shares suffered reverses, however, with analysts pointing to the loss of valuable fishing grounds and the uncertain future of several joint venture arrangements.

Other developments on Monday were primarily institutional in character. The Prime Minister announced that an international search would be launched for the new land's naming rights sponsor. Major corporates, breweries, and communications companies had already expressed interest. On a less positive note, plans by the Tourism Board to brand the new land as an eco-tourism destination came under sustained attack by environmental groups.

The new land unexpectedly slipped beneath the sea about 5 a.m. on Tuesday. Loss of life was averted save for two adventurers who had illegally entered the exclusion zone earlier that night and were exploring the so-called "ruins" at the time. Their Zodiac pilot,



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

who escaped, returned with lurid tales of strange lights in the sky and unearthly noises beneath the hill. These accounts were not corroborated, and the Zodiac pilot was subsequently deported to an undisclosed location.

A planned debate on the new land went ahead when Parliament resumed sitting that afternoon, but its character was much altered. The Prime Minister was put on the defensive by persistent questioning and responded with a blistering attack on the Leader of the Opposition. The disappearance was made worse for the Government because subsequent polling showed that the new land had been especially popular in the key North Island 18-45 male demographic.



After a week in which the new land showed no sign of reappearing, the inter-departmental working party was disbanded and the consultative hui cancelled. Fish stocks over the area were reported to be severely depleted, and the fishing industry pressed the Government for a compensation package. The National Institute of Water and Atmospheric Research was commissioned to conduct a bathymetric survey of the newly-restored sea floor.

The new land is commemorated by two songs, an *Assignment* documentary, and a projected TV mini-series which has yet to receive New Zealand On Air funding. A book on the scandalous cover-up of dramatic new evidence concerning humanity's place in the Universe is being planned by a leading international author. That, and a series of scientific



symposia, beginning in Christchurch in September,
may yet revive public interest in the matter.





Flensing

The town has been dead for thirty years. Houses that once stood strong have broken under the crushing weight of winter snow. Broken boards and rusted roofs flap and crash in the wind. When the wheeling skuas and the broaching whales call, no-one answers and nothing stirs.

A few buildings have fared better than the rest, sturdier, made with more care, roofed with better tiles: the town hall, the company offices, and two churches. One stands imposingly beside the town hall, with “Anno 1913” in stark black lettering on the facing of its narrow porch. The other, newer, smaller, is by itself on a little knoll overlooking the town. From here, the whole bay is visible.

And now there’s a boat coming into harbour. Not a whaler, not even a schooner; a single-masted yacht with its mast sheared off six feet above the deck. The sound of an engine is loud in the silence of this spring evening. After thirty years, Leith Harbour is about to come to life again.

“What a God-forsaken place,” said Lars Johansen as he steered the *Daniel* out of the shadow of the



FLENSING

headland and into the bay. Erik did not reply. He had taken out his binoculars and was surveying the shore. He had expected to see a couple of huts and a rusting hulk or two; instead, he saw a substantial town. The red roofs stood out against the rock and snow in the background. Apart from the dark green of moss and the lighter green of tussock grasses, it was the first colour they had seen in this bleak land.

Erik's mother emerged from the hatch. "It should hold together now," she said, as she wiped her oily hands on her overalls. Her tall, blond son and her tall, blond husband turned to face her.

"Are you sure?" asked Lars. "The wind's dropping. If it cuts out now, we might not have enough breeze to take us in to shore."

"It'll hold. What do you think of Leith Harbour, Erik?" she asked, slipping an arm round her son's waist. "Looking forward to a bit of exploring?"

Erik pulled away slightly from his mother's grip. He wasn't a kid any more; he didn't need to be sent away while the serious work was done. All the same, there was something attractive about those debris-clogged streets and the long valley that ran back into the hills behind the town. "I could do to stretch my legs," he admitted.

"Fancy a bit of climbing, son?"

Erik didn't reply. Lars looked at Kathy and raised an eyebrow; Kathy shrugged. It would be best if Lars just left the boy alone at the moment, but he insisted on playing the liberal parent. He hadn't been so liberal when he found out about the girl in Capetown,



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

and Kathy knew Erik wasn't about to forgive him for that.

A long grey wharf jutted out into the harbour. They nosed past the ribs of some forgotten whaler and tied up where a lower jetty ran off at right angles. The long southern twilight was fading fast; they had spent most of the day running down the coast of South Georgia before the wind, hoping to make the British naval base at Grytviken, but had run out of daylight. Without detailed charts, they could not hope to sail this treacherous coastline at night.

It could have been worse. The giant wave that had caught them amidships at 4 a.m. had knocked the *Daniel* onto its side, snapped the mast, and broken something vital in the radio, but it might have cast one or more of them overboard or left the engine beyond repair. As it was, all three of them were belowdecks when the wave struck. They had the devil's own job to cut the sodden mass of sails and the broken mast-top free and allow the boat to right itself, but they had managed it without loss of life or serious injury. At daybreak, they rigged the temporary sail and turned to run before the howling wind.

It had been two days later, again at first light, when Erik had spied a darker and more permanent shadow through the heaving waves. The sea and the westerly gale drove them between two frowning masses of rock festooned with millions of nesting birds, and they had time and shelter enough to work out that they had passed between Willis and Bird Islands, just to the north of South Georgia. Twenty miles further south



FLENSING

and they would have been blown against the southern coast, harbourless and houseless, with an epic climb between them and any hope of safety. But their luck had held and they had been able to cruise down the relative calm of the northern coast, past the bays where the whales bred and died and men from the other side of the world had come to hunt them; and so they had come to harbour.

Full night had fallen by the time they tied up to the wharf. After Erik had fixed dinner, Kathy went aft to do more work on the motor. Lars made to help his son with the dishes, but Erik waved him away, and Lars retreated to fret over the radio.

“I’m going ashore,” Erik announced when he had finished.

“Care for some company, son?”

“Oh, no thanks, Dad. I’m just going to stretch my legs. Maybe we could go up to the head of the valley tomorrow?”

“I’d love to, son, but I’ll probably be busy all day with this bloody radio. Don’t let that stop you going, though.”

“I won’t, Dad. Thanks.”

Satisfied that he had kept the loving father and proud parent at bay for at least another day, Erik strode along the wharf. The moon was up, and for once the sky was clear. He picked his way along the warped boards until his feet stood square on land.

There was no sound in the town but his boots crunching on the stone. Wandering the debris-clogged streets, he made his way gradually higher, to where the few



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

tussocks that had begun to recolonise the town handed this responsibility over to mosses and lichen. He emerged from the last row of houses and saw the small white church, with its dark windows and its steeple. Well worth a look.

On an overturned bench outside the church, Erik found lettering carved in the wood: Gunnar, Lena (enclosed in a heart), Tromsø 1936. Tromsø, where his father's father had been born. He wondered about Lena. Had there been women here as well as men, their cries echoing in the darkness? Maybe Lena was only a memory, the name of some sweetheart left behind in Norway, waiting, waiting for her man to return . . .

The door of the church creaked open. In the dimly-lit interior, he could see neat rows of pews still standing and the darker shadow of an altar. There was a smell here, a faint, sharp, sickly smell of blubber. Odd that it should linger so far from the sea.

He turned to look back through the window and was struck by the thick white light that lay on the town and the sea. Was the moon really this bright? The sea appeared to shimmer, as if a false surface now overlaid the true one. The town seemed brighter, too, and oddly lit. Down by the wharf, a lamp began to blink. He watched the blinking, and a pattern formed: E-R-I-

It was his mother, using their best torch as an Aldis lamp, signalling him to return. When he left the church, he heard the faint echo of her voice.



FLENSING

Erik was usually a heavy sleeper, but that night he lay awake for several hours, thinking about the town and the church. Nothing he had seen on his return to the *Daniel* — a return faster than might strictly have been necessary — had been in any way unusual, but the town and the harbour had certainly looked very different from the window of that church.

Why was the church there, anyway? Nearly all Norwegians were Lutherans, especially those from the northern fjords around Tromsø, and the church near the waterfront, flanked by the town hall and the company offices, had clearly been built for them. But perhaps the adherents of another faith had found their way to Leith Harbour, or perhaps there had been a split in the Lutheran community, some fine point of doctrine driving the pure away to found their own church, above the spiritual corruption of the town and nearer, my God, to thee.

Then he was thinking about Anna again. They had lain over for two weeks in Capetown, repairing, re-painting (his job), and re-stocking, and it wasn't until the second week that he had met Anna. Their love affair, his first, had been brief but passionate. He had told his parents that he intended to stay behind with Anna when the *Daniel* sailed across the South Atlantic. He was seventeen years old; he was good with boats; he would find work and a place to live. That Anna's family knew nothing of him and had plans for their daughter which did not involve romances with penniless foreign sailors was something he neglected to mention.



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

His mother sought to persuade him with reason, but his father saw red. He told Erik that to leave the boat was to leave the family. “Don’t expect me to help you out when you call us from Capetown and say you’re starving and want to come home,” Lars had said. He had stood toe to toe with Erik and demanded that he decide immediately whether he would stay with the ship or leave them forever. “For God’s sake, both of you, calm down!”, Kathy had cried from the galley behind them, but neither of them would back down. Erik had pushed his father aside, stormed off the yacht, and gone to Anna’s house, sparking a further confrontation that ended with Erik and Anna parting in tears at the dockside and two angry families glaring at each other across the wreckage. They sailed from Capetown two days early, and Erik was left with memories and rage. He would never forgive his father. Never.

He’d kept Anna’s photo tucked away in a drawer. Now he pulled it out and looked at it for the thousandth time. Cry, rage, masturbate; he’d done them all, looking at that photo. What was she doing now? Was she thinking of him? Fucking parents. They told you to be yourself, taught you to make your own way in life, and then stamped on you the moment you found what you wanted. Well, he’d done a little stamping too. He kissed Anna on that welcoming mouth and put her photo away, then pulled out two more: the photos of Mum and Dad he used to have beside his bed at boarding school, when he still believed in fairytales. Mum was still intact, but he’d



FLENSING

ground the image of his father beneath his heel so that shards of glass had penetrated that smug face and scored that unfeeling body. Thoughtfully, he worked one of the glass slivers free, then used it to stab his father in the face and the chest and the belly. Take that, Dad.

The next day dawned grey but still windless. By the time Erik rose, Lars and Kathy were back at their respective tasks. Erik spent an enthralling morning cleaning and washing, then after lunch went to watch his mother at work. He squeezed into the narrow engineroom — more of an engine cupboard, really — and stood behind her, occasionally passing her the tools she needed. Unlike his father, she didn't lose parts, or knock things, or curse and swear if things went wrong. She turned and smiled at him, and he looked at her fair hair, now streaked with oil, her blackened face, the way her overalls sat trimly on her hips . . .

“I might go out for a while,” he said.

“I'm going to be stuck down here all afternoon. Lars, you want to go for a walk?” she called.

Erik scowled at his mother, who frowned back at him. “Look, Erik, he's ready to apologise. But you know what he's like — he needs to work up to it. Just give him a chance, will you?”

Erik nearly said that he was through with giving the bastard a chance, that the bastard had used up all his chances, but instead he smiled at Kathy and went to ask his father if he'd like to come exploring today. A smug little smile of satisfaction, quickly hidden, played



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

across his father's oh-so-manly face.

“Sure, son. Just give me a minute to clean up, will you? You grab us some food.”

Erik and Lars poked around the streets of the town, their blond heads appearing and disappearing between piles of rusted junk and the spilled guts of houses. Even at its peak, when the whale blood stained the harbour red and the rendering and boiling went on round the clock, Leith Harbour had never been a luxurious town. Greed, greed for blubber, had sent men to this bleak midwinter island, and greed had driven the building of the town, the shoddy houses, the narrow streets, the piles of refuse still barely decayed in the eternal cold.

Only the churches spoke of some higher purpose. The large church near the waterfront had been stripped of all its furnishings. The wind had driven snow through broken windows. “There's another church up the hill,” Erik said, and the prospect of rising above all this desolation pleased them both so much that they bypassed the church and climbed up the slope behind until it narrowed to a ridge too knife-edged for safety. The town and the valley were far below. They could see clear across Stromness Bay. Grytviken was little more than ten miles southeast as the crow flies, but this land was too harsh even for crows, and there were bays, glaciers and a mountain range in between. The view was magnificent, but not comforting.

There still wasn't much wind, but what there was was cold enough to send them behind the lee of a large rock to eat their food — not quite ship's biscuit and

FLENSING

pemmican, but not much better. They shared coffee from the flask that had somehow survived the wreck of the galley and sat in silence for a moment, their feet dangling in frigid air. It's coming, thought Erik, I can feel it coming.

"Erik, about Capetown —"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I don't want to talk about it either! But I want to say I'm sorry. Sorry I got so angry. Sorry I didn't listen."

"You're not sorry I couldn't stay with Anna, then?"

"Oh, no, son, I'm glad you're here with us. In time, you'll find someone, the right someone, and then you'll set up your own life with her. And we'll support you in that, son, support you all the way. Why, I remember when I first met your mother. My parents had always wanted me to go to college . . ."

And he was off, rambling down some well-worn mental pathway, not listening, not feeling, not thinking. Is this me in twenty years, thought Erik, sounding off to some complete stranger about the girl I met in Capetown once?

"It's clouding over, Dad, and I want to check out that other church. Shouldn't we be getting back?"

"You're right, son. Give me a hand, will you? I seem to have got stuck down here."

Brace both feet, pull hard, and pivot, and his father would have two hundred feet of empty air to scream in. And oh, the look there would be on his face . . . Erik contented himself with pulling his father up a little quicker than was necessary, smiling at his



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

father's startled glance, then heading downslope without a word.

Erik walked slowly around the church while he waited for his father to catch up. Strange what good shape it was in — no broken windows, little damage to the roof. Maybe God was watching over it. Lars arrived, a little breathless. “You set a good pace, boy. Growing legs, eh?”

“Growing everywhere, Dad. Let's take a look.”

Erik felt the strangeness as soon as he entered the darkened building. It was stronger this time — a sense of expectancy, as if the church was readying itself for use after a long fallow time. The smell was there, too, stronger. That rancid smell. The daylight should have been pouring in through the windows, but it seemed almost intimidated by the close-held darkness within the church.

Lars didn't seem to have noticed. He was striding around as if he owned the place, moving this and poking that. “Found an old hymn-book . . . wonder what wood they used for these pews . . . interesting altar, don't recognise the style . . .” His words barely carried in the dead air.

“I want to have a look at the steeple, Dad,” Erik called.

“Sure thing, son. Watch your step. I'll come and join you in a bit.”

Erik climbed carefully up the narrow spiral stairs and pushed open the heavy trapdoor at the top. It formed the floor of a small landing beneath the high



FLENSING

window he had seen from the town. When he looked out, the strangeness overwhelmed him. Outside, there were no clouds; a ghost sun shone in a ghost sky, and everything was bright and distinct. It was the season of the great whale harvest and the work was in full swing. The small ships that went out to catch the whales were returning with their bloodied prey lashed alongside. Erik saw one, nosing into the wharf, pass right through the *Daniel*, which was unaffected. The new arrival waited in line while another ship's catch was grappled and hauled up a ramp and onto planking, where the flensing began. Men with poles like medieval pikes slashed through the blubber, peeling it away from the great skeleton. Blood stained the sea. Seabirds gorged themselves on offal, then flapped laboriously across the reeking water. Oh, there was great industry here. Even in this wild place, man had tamed nature, brought it to heel, separated it into blood and blubber and bone.

As he watched, the sun slid from the sky and was replaced by a gibbous moon. Red flares lit the waterfront, and the cutting crews kept working; but now was time for other pursuits, pursuits to keep the emptiness at bay. From the town they came, in ones and twos, unsmiling, grim-faced men, dressed in thick pullovers and sealskin trousers. They entered the church. They began to climb the stairs. Erik stood still.

The arm that slipped round his shoulder was warm and firm. "Welcome to Leith Harbour, Erik! It's not much, but it's home to us. Home away from home,



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

you might say. And how about you? We could see you liked it here. Some people don't, you know. Some people say it's too cold, too isolated, or even that the whole place stinks of blood. But you don't notice the smell after a while, and what's a little cold and isolation when you've got your friends around?"

"But there's one thing we're missing, Erik. Female company. Yes, I know, you miss it too. That girl in Capetown, what a little firecracker, eh? You lucky dog."

Erik fought down his erection and thought about the overturned bench. "Where's Lena?" he asked. "Where are the other women?"

"Oh, there used to be women, boy. Don't think us uncivilised. A God-fearing community, we were. Oh, we used to tremble before Him, down in the old church, when the pastor spoke of hell-fire!" Again the dry chuckle. "But we built a new church, some of us, and the women wouldn't come here. They didn't like the *atmosphere*, they said. Not refined enough. But your mother, now — she's one of these modern women, isn't she? She's not too refined for the likes of you and me, now is she boy?"

"You leave my mother out of this," said Erik.

"If you say so, boy. Let's talk about your father, then. He just doesn't seem to fit in, does he?"

Erik was silent.

"Family loyalty, it's a fine thing, but let's face facts. Your father has been blundering around down there for twenty minutes now, poking into things that are none of his business, picking up this, trying to read



FLENSING

that. He's clever but stupid, you know what I mean? Clever enough to make connections and stupid enough not to know when to stop."

"That sounds like Lars," admitted Erik.

"I knew you'd see it my way," said the voice. "Mind out!" A half-seen arm threw the trapdoor open with a crash. "Does that sound like Lars, too?"

But Erik had never before heard his father scream.

They had bound Lars to the altar with sturdy ropes, but by now he had lost so much blood that these were unnecessary. The sharp flensing knives had sheared away great strips from his flanks and legs, and the trypot was bubbling merrily as his flesh was rendered down. So far, they had left his face untouched, and though it was contorted by pain, his eyes still opened, still focused, still swivelled to look at Erik. The mouth opened, tried to speak. Slowly, Lars held out his hand to his son.

"He's calling for you, boy, can't you hear? Wants to see his own flesh and blood one more time. I'd have thought he'd had enough of it by now. He's strong, boy, got to give him that — most men would have passed out by now. What'll you tell him, boy? I'd tell him to rot in hell!" The voice chuckled. "Come on, son, time's a-wasting." The arm around his shoulders propelled him towards the shambles on the altar. As he approached, one of the apparitions pressed a long-handled, sharp-bladed knife into his hand. "Present for you, son. Wouldn't want you to miss out." Erik came closer — three steps, two steps, one.

Lars Johansen, his flesh bubbling in the trypot, held



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

out his one good hand and whispered “Son . . .”

“This is for Anna, Dad,” said Erik.

Kathy straightened in the hatchway, pressed her hands to her aching back, and peered anxiously at the town. There couldn’t be more than an hour of daylight left. Erik and Lars had been away too long. She wanted to test the engine with a quick trip around the harbour, but she wasn’t going anywhere without her family, and it was time they came home. If you could call this boat home. She hadn’t yet said as much to Lars, but she’d had enough of this trip and her only ambition was to get the boat seaworthy — which meant getting the radio fixed — and sail back home.

There was nothing for it. She would have to go and find them. She left a note in the cabin in case they came by a different route, then put on her outdoor gear and set off into the town, calling as she went. She hadn’t paid much attention to the town while the engine was out of action, but she had to confess that the place gave her the shivers. It was silent, for one thing, and her voice seemed to travel no further than the next bend, the next pile of rusted metal. She should have found out exactly where they were going. What if they’d fallen in the hills?

Quickening her pace, she trudged uphill until only the small white church was ahead of her. Erik was interested in the place, she remembered; she would have to check it out. She called one more time as she approached, and her voice startled a cluster of skuas feeding on a carcass off to the left of the church. She



FLENSING

couldn't make out what the bloody scraps of flesh had come from; some confused seal, perhaps. Here, her voice echoed from the hills, but still there was no answer. She walked up the steps of the church and pushed open the door.

In the gloom, she could just make out two sets of footprints in the dust. They had been here, then. There was a smell in here, an ancient smell but somehow unpleasant. The place needed a good airing; apart from that, it was in remarkably good shape.

The smell seemed to be strongest near the altar. There was nothing to be seen when she looked directly at it, but when she turned her head away, there seemed to be movement, smoke . . . This wasn't a good place.

She was near the window when she saw them. They had filtered into the church while she was examining the altar, and now they were surrounding her, some undressing, some already naked, hands to their groins. They grinned and reached for her, and she dived at the window. The glass was still intact, but glass gets old, and in the forty years since the pane was installed, it had thinned at the top and pooled at the bottom. By the time they had reacted, she was through, hands protecting her face, and landing painfully on the rocky ground outside. As the first of them poured like oily smoke through the broken window, she was up and running.

The carcass on the ground was almost her undoing; she tripped over a bone and fell, her hands going full in the bloody mess. It was only as she ran on that she



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

realised what she had seen: the skull, the scalp, the scraps of clothing. She had found what was left of her husband.

She would cry later. Right now there was only rage, rage and fear. She could hear them calling her slut and whore and bitch; one clutched at her jacket, and to free herself she had to shrug it off. She found herself in a narrow alley between two decaying factories, with pipes running between them which she had to scramble over or under. By the time she reached the end of the street, there was a mob of them in front of her.

“You know what we want, don’t you, bitch?”

“You’re not going to get it.”

“Oh yes, we will. One way or another.”

“Where’s my son?” She edged towards the left, her hands reaching for a pipe.

“Around somewhere. But he’ll have to wait his turn.”

They had seen her in action once, but they still didn’t get the idea. She picked up the pipe and swung it at them, and they gave back: here, further away from their spiritual home, the spectres were more like ghosts and less like men. They wavered under her assault, and she was able to push her way through them despite the clutching hands and the tripping legs. She got a glimpse of the water, and redoubled her pace. Not far to the yacht now. If she could only hold them off that far —

Then Erik was standing at the entrance to the wharf, holding an iron bar in his hands. “Mum!” he said. “Get behind me! I’ll hold them off!”



FLENSING

“What happened to Lars?”

“Later! I’ll tell you later! Just get on the boat!”

She stood and looked at her son for a moment — smeared with blood and soot, clothes torn, eyes not meeting hers — and wondered what he had done and what he might still do. But the ghosts were gathering at her back again. She ducked round Erik and ran for the ship, hearing him run behind.

“What’s this, boy?” came a voice in her mind. “Not going to share her with us?” Then she tumbled through the hatch, and the voice cut off. “Cast off!” she called to Erik. She could hear him moving around up there as she powered up the engine. It coughed, caught, started. Thank God. Thank God.

Erik clattered through the hatch and slammed the cover down beside him. “We’re cast off, Mum!” Unanswered questions stood between them. What had happened out there? But there was no time to ask now: she had to get on deck and navigate out of this harbour. “I’m going to take the wheel,” she told him. “You stay here and make sure this engine keeps running, no matter what.”

From the deserted church above the town, long-dead eyes watched the yacht as it sailed out of the harbour in the thick white light. It lost speed at one point, and looked as if it might drift onto the rocks, but then the motor caught again, and it disappeared round the headland and out to sea.

The newest member of the congregation felt an arm around his shoulders. “You’re well rid of them,” said



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

a voice. “Sharper than a serpent’s tooth, eh? And as for her — she’ll be spreading it for those Navy boys by nightfall.”

Some residue of feeling stirred in the new ghost’s tattered breast. “She’s a good woman,” he said.

“Ah, they’re all the same,” said the voice. “We don’t need them here. Look!” The arm indicated the harbour, the vessels, the flesh and blubber and blood. “The moon is full, and the trypots are bubbling. Why are we standing around?”

Out to sea, the wind was rising, but in Leith Harbour, the night was still. The voices of men at work echoed across the shining water.





The Kiwi Contingent

The ninety-third woman into space was also the first New Zealander. Kate Charteris was a soil scientist with the first colonising mission to Mars. She lived in Utopia Planitia for two years under conditions of incredible hardship, diligently taking samples of the thin red dust. One day, a robot digger she was directing broke through the crust, toppled, and crushed her. So there was never much of a Kiwi contingent there.

By the time of the precious metals boom in the asteroids, a sizeable number of Kiwis had filtered out into space, taken on by the big combines on the strength of their engineering knowledge or starting up in a small way by themselves. The big metals smelters were on the Moon by then, and if you were in one of the lunar bases on business you were sure to hear those flattened vowels and rising terminals off in a corner of some bar, downing a few cold ones and discussing iridium futures or the ABs' chances against Nike or the Pepsi Panthers. And if you made it to Europa, you'd find Kai Tahu fishing the frozen oceans.

When Fleischmann and Himmelman came up with their equations, the Solar System was beginning to feel





EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

crowded. There's only so much you can do on Mercury or Pluto, and whenever a few of us got together, it was to talk about the great generation starships that were being planned, to travel for hundreds of years, slower than light, to the planets of the nearest stars. You'd never step onto those planets, but your great-great-grandchildren might. Fleischmann and Himmelman changed all that, and soon you could jump from star to star like sheep over a gate.

So those of us with the money or the know-how boarded the new ships and took off. You'll find us all over now: skimming Epsilon Eridani's corona, building the Dyson Sphere round Vega, herding brown dwarfs together to make new suns. And here, at the centre of the Galaxy, orbiting the massive black hole that holds the whole thing together, we helped to build the Hub Station, the waypoint for travellers, the base for the next step: to travel between the galaxies.

We've got a bar called Earl's, down on the tenth level, not far from the docking rings. You'll find us there most nights, a mixture of hardened old campaigners like me and new blood straight from Home, who can tell us how the kiwifruit crop is doing in Otago and the latest on the Cook Strait Bubble. There's aliens on the Station now — twelve foot tall, five legs, nine eyes, all fluting voices and delicate gestures. Some people say we humans should forget our differences, but the Kiwi contingent down at Earl's has talked it over, and we say: bugger them.



My Friend the Volcano

It's funny what catches your eye; I'd been sitting within two feet of her for half an hour, but I didn't spot her bright red hair until we started talking about the mountain.

I had come to New Plymouth to visit my friend Vincent, and to break the usual day-long haul up the island to Auckland. He'd told me to watch out for the mountain on the long road west from Wanganui, but all I could make out in the gathering murk was an indistinct rise in the land. I turned inland at Hawera, bleak houses under bleaker skies, and as the road rose across the mountain's curve I began to appreciate its size and strength. When I could lift my eyes from the wet and narrow road, I caught glimpses of snow and rock gleaming through rifts in the clouds, and at last, as I was coasting down the motorway into the city, I had one brief vision of the peak from tip to toe, green and brown and white. Then a traffic light turned red and the moment passed.

Vincent made me dinner, and with parochial pride in his voice offered to show me round the city centre. I was ready to be disappointed, but discovered that New Plymouth was well supplied with art galleries,





EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

parks, pedestrian malls, and the other urban requirements. We tried a pub, retreated from the band's interminable cover of "Knocking on Heaven's Door", and finally found a quieter bar. We talked like men who don't yet know each other well, and at length I turned the conversation round to the mountain: how impressive it was, and what it felt like to live in its shadow. "Is it extinct?" I asked; Vincent didn't know, and that's when she turned around.

"Probably not. We're not sure when it last erupted — quite possibly within the last two hundred years. I wouldn't be fooled by that tranquil appearance! Hope you don't mind the interruption, but Taranaki is my specialist subject, and I'm always encouraged when other people show an interest." And I learned that Taranaki was a young volcano, the latest in a series that had risen up and fallen away at quarter-million year intervals, and that her name was Sandra, she was doing a doctorate on its volcanic processes, she worked at the visitor centre part-time, and why didn't I drop by tomorrow?

Driving out to the National Park the following day, I could see the remnants of the earlier cones lying discarded to the west of my route, and imagined the beauty I saw before me crumpled away while another cone towered in place of Kapuni and Hawera. But I was not yet accustomed to thinking in such intervals, and put the image behind me as I pulled into the carpark. The visitor centre was impressive, though I could have done without the pictures of volcanic fury considering I was standing atop the results.

MY FRIEND THE VOLCANO

I found Sandra preparing a slide-show for tourists. At 11.30 a.m. sharp, a coach pulled up outside and a gaggle — or is it a flock? — trooped in. They sat and watched Sandra's presentation, and, having looked through the slides, I sat and watched Sandra as she spoke. She had done this many times before, yet I could hear a surprising passion in her words, and realised that Mt Taranaki meant much more to her than an academic study or a part-time job. Had she had been born in its sight?

The tourists left for their lunch. "I really enjoyed your lecture," I told her.

"Did you? I think it's pretty boring myself, but we aren't allowed to frighten the tourists."

"Well . . . I could tell you love the mountain."

"Could you?" and she shot me a sideways glance. It's hard not to glance sideways at someone standing beside you, I suppose. "You must have been listening carefully, then. Are you doing anything this afternoon?"

Auckland, Schmauckland. "No, not really."

"I'm leading some of the more adventurous tourists part-way around the mountain in half an hour. Want to come along?"

Auckland I can do without, but lunch is rather more indispensable, so I was glad when she pointed me at a sandwich. We ate in a poky back room while the tourists roughed it, eating packed lunches on the bus or on the grass outside. Then we lined them up two abreast and set off to the round-the-mountain track. (I suppose I shouldn't be sounding so superior about these tourists. Though I'd arrived in a car and they in



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

a bus, I from hundreds and they from thousands of kilometres, were we really so different?)

My mild antagonism was soon dispersed by the glistening life of the bush, the joy of walking, and the pleasure of listening to Sandra and throwing in the odd query or comment. The more I heard, the more impressed I became, and I got the chance to talk with her while the tourists made the best of a particularly scenic photo opportunity.

“Why does the mountain mean so much to you?”

“It’s funny . . . I grew up on a farm just over there and could never understand why no-one else seemed to feel its presence. My parents would talk about its effect on the weather — they called it Egmont in those days — or what they’d do if it erupted, but it was always just a *thing* to them. They weren’t alive to it, but I always have been. Isn’t it marvellous?”

“Yes, I suppose it is.”

“I *know* it is. Ever since I was small, I’ve known that I wanted to devote a part of my life to the mountain. I guess that gave me the options of artist or scientist, and I’ve always inclined to science.”

“Would you be offended if I said it sounds like you’ve found your God?”

“Not offended, no; I’ve heard worse. But I feel uncomfortable at the idea of appropriating a Maori god. Maybe it’s my destiny I’ve found?” She smiled a little at that, like a montane Mona Lisa; I laughed, perturbing the leaves, and asked what she planned to do when she’d finished her PhD.

“Get a research post here, I hope.”

MY FRIEND THE VOLCANO

“Won’t you feel like a bit of a break? See the world, meet people . . .”

“Fall in love, have kids, and settle down, huh?”

“No, no, I didn’t mean that. But . . . shift focus for a while.”

She smiled again. “This camera has only one F-stop, I’m afraid.”

By this time, cameras with a wide variety of focal lengths had captured the scenes laid on below, and we were back on the track. I had little more opportunity to talk with Sandra; when we got back to the visitor centre, she had another slide show, and I had to find a phone, make my excuses to Auckland, and set off on a difficult drive over unfamiliar country with a bad habit of falling down on your car. We exchanged smiles, addresses, promises to keep in touch.

“There’s lots of volcanic rock where I live,” I reminded her as I stepped into the car.

“Ah, but can you feel it breathe, Brian?” And I watched her scrunch across the gravel and disappear.

In a Christchurch September some three years later, I sat in my St Albans flat wondering if any of my friends had recorded the Channel 1 news. I had come in late and tired from work, huddling by the heater to bake the chill of evening from my bones, and caught only the tail of the item:

“. . . research project. Dr Sandra Watson says it represents a unique opportunity to gain a rounded picture of the volcano.” — and there was Sandra,



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

frown-faced outside another low brown building with a clutch of papers in her hand. The camera cut away for a panoramic view of the foothills and the distant sea, and back we went to the studio. “Rather her than me,” said the female to the male presenter, and they carried on to the sports news.

I called five people. None of them had taped the news. Only two had seen it, and only one remembered the item. “Something about telep, wasn’t it?” she asked doubtfully.

Nothing on the radio, nor on the late news, much occupied by the controversy over the latest AIDS vaccine. I spent the next day pestering co-workers and clients, and looking through Taranaki phone listings and an old diary that had fallen down the back of my desk. She no longer lived at the number I’d jotted down there, but through it I found her current flat. Feeling like an eighteen year old on Registration Day, I rang the number. Beep-beep, beep-beep, beep-beep, “hello, yes this is Sandra Watson, look if you’re a journalist I’m not interested, who? No I don’t remember — oh, Brian! Well, this is a nice surprise! After I got no reply to my birthday card, I thought you’d forgotten all about me! What — they can’t have forwarded it, then. You should have sent me a C.O.A. But it’s great to hear from you.”

She told me she’d been plagued by crank phone callers and journalists (often hard to tell apart) since her TV appearance, and was wishing she’d never agreed to appear. In telling me why she had, I got a potted herstory of the last three years.



MY FRIEND THE VOLCANO

Her PhD had been on the difficulty of achieving a total picture of a volcano's activity. Seismographs, strain meters and photography could all be used to gain partial information, and the data from these could be integrated by computers. But processing reams of raw data and knowing what a volcano was going to do were two very different things. Computer models of volcanic activity still weren't sophisticated enough to predict long-term behaviour, and having people monitoring each significant seismic area would be prohibitively expensive.

"So I put the volcano inside my head."

"What?"

"In your line of work, you must have heard something about the bio-chips that have been coming out of Japan lately. Did you realise they could be interfaced directly with the human brain?"

"And you've stuck one inside your skull?"

"Not yet, but I soon will have. Linked to a bigger, conventional computer by radio. The first step is to use it as an alarm system when the mountain shows significant activity — like a warning bell that rings inside my head. But these chips are being developed to the point where they can access human memory. That would mean I could go about my business while the computer used my knowledge of volcanoes. Pretty amazing, eh?"

"Oh, wonderful. Having a machine controlling your mind."

"Come on, Brian, I don't need this sort of thing from you as well. It can't change my thoughts without my



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

consent. It's not a parasite — we'll be in a symbiotic relationship, each helping the other.”

“You can't blame people for being sceptical.”

“I can cope with them being sceptical. It's when they start denouncing me as an inhuman monster and harbinger of the Antichrist that I get upset. I knew going public at this stage was a bad idea.”

“Why did you do it?”

“Money. The project is chronically short of it. The rest of the team thought me posing for the cameras would be a great way of opening the public purse. Nothing to do with me being a woman and them all men, of course. Now, we'll probably get our funding cut off because the politicians get lots of outraged letters. ‘How dare she challenge God's ordained order,’ signed Apocalypso of Bulls. ‘Her jacket didn't match her shoes,’ signed Standards of Raumatī South. When are you coming to visit me?”

“Erm . . . I hadn't really planned . . .”

“Well, plan! Look, it would be really nice to see you again. You're about the first person outside of work who's had something friendly to say to me. I could do with a friend at the moment.”

“I do have some time owing at work. I could take a week, but I'll have to give them a fortnight's notice. How about I aim for October the 3rd?”

It should have been a good omen. For a moment, as the plane banked to land at New Plymouth airport, I saw the mountain whole, impossibly white against blue sky and green-grey sea. Then we were landing, and



MY FRIEND THE VOLCANO

the sense of foreboding which had gripped me more and more as this day approached dropped back into place. Getting in too deep . . . becoming too involved . . . this litany, my downfall many times before, tape-looped inside my mind. But a shock of red hair waited at the entrance gate and it was too late to turn back now.

We faced each other, smiling cautiously. Sandra whipped out a scalpel. “They’ve decided I’m too valuable to risk in a chip implant. We’re making you the guinea-pig,” she announced. I cracked up, and we walked arm-in-arm to the baggage claim.

After lunch, we drove out to the lab. I absorbed the pattern of brake, corner, gear-change, climb; I watched her movements, swift and sure and purposeful; I bit my tongue and crossed my legs. We drew up outside the low building, as seen on T.V., and Sandra ushered me inside. It was full of computers, plotters, divers devices which Sandra tried to bring down to my level. Technical types moved between the machines with their distinctive air of abstracted competence. I felt totally out of place, and was relieved to sit down beside Sandra and watch her work on her computer model of Taranaki.

“Will you see all this inside your head?” I inquired, as the 3-D models danced around the screen. She expected she would, as the chip would be stimulating her visual cortex. “I don’t know whether the mountain will be superimposed on my normal view, or whether I’ll be blind to the outside world,” she added, and I shuddered a little at the ready alienation her attitude



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

implied. I had spent two of my teenage years immersed in role-playing games, forgetting acne, poverty and even masturbation as I battled my way through troll-scourged tunnels and demon-haunted woods. But I had been shy, gangly and scared. Maybe Sandra still felt that way inside, even if the world saw her vivacious, confident and beautiful.

Tongue untied by wine, good food and much easy chatter, I let my fears for her show as we waited for our dessert at dinner. Sandra was unconcerned, pointing out that she could control whether the model impinged on her consciousness, that she was the boss. “The most you can say is that I’ll be bringing my work home with me,” she laughed, and for the present I let it go at that.

Walking home, she slipped her arm around my waist, and on her wooden porch I bent my head to hers. Fingers knotting fiery hair, I sensed the moonlit volcano gleaming above her head, but did not look up. We went inside to her room, and in the gasping darkness I felt the fires banked deep within her swelling to the surface, and let myself be drawn into the heart of the mountain.

At the end of my week with Sandra, I returned to Christchurch, eager to hand in my notice and get on with the job of arranging my move north. I had already found a flat in New Plymouth and nosed around after a job; I still wasn’t sure what had hit me, but it had certainly got me on the move. I endured with calm



MY FRIEND THE VOLCANO

stoicism the surprise of my workmates and the reproaches of my friends and family. None of them actually called Sandra a brazen hussy, or warned me it would all end in tears, but several came close. Telling myself I could always come back, knowing I wouldn't, I went.

Sandra and I soon fell into a routine of long night walks, weekend rambles, late nights out and salty mornings in. I found a job with the Railways (driving financial models, not trains); I met her friends, made some of my own, and in summer moved from my flat to hers.

Our love helped take her mind off the frustrating delays in her project. She and the computer were ready, but the surgeons in Melbourne were still learning their way around the implant procedure. She grew restless at my repeated suggestions that she put off the operation until the technique was better understood, and her relief was palpable when the date was finally set. I accompanied her across the Tasman, and despite my anxieties enjoyed myself, exploring the tramways, the Dandenongs and the restaurants. They cut open her head, dropped the chip in, wired it up, and at length verified that it had taken root successfully; she said thanks and we set off home. The hard part lay ahead.

They'd got used to me up at the Lab, and were happy to let me stand with Sandra as she made a last check of her link-up. I had imagined the throwing of some great switch, a flash of lightning and crack of thunder,



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

but she simply pointed and clicked on some menus, opened a command file, then hit ENTER with a flourish.

“Well?” I enquired.

“Nothing, yet. The link is still subconscious, but it’s showing up on the computer. I’m going to ask it to go visual . . . now. There we go — God, that’s weird! It’s superimposed on my normal vision. Someone turn the lights off? . . . That’s better, looks good now. Sunglasses would help.”

“Do you feel like a volcano yet?” I muttered as we drove home.

“Of course not, Brian. I’ve barely opened myself up to it yet. Are you *jealous* of that mountain?”

“Jealous of a mountain?!”

“Because I could understand it if you were.”

“It’s just that it’s unnerving to think of something else sharing your mind.”

“Mmmm . . . I turn the link off when I’m with you, you know. I’m doing my bit for safe sex, really, because if I didn’t turn it off the mountain might blow its top when I come!”

And she laughed, but I didn’t.

During the weeks that followed, Sandra gradually gained control over the chip’s many functions, to the point where she could ‘see’, ‘feel’, and even (so she claimed) smell and hear her model of the mountain. Her communications with the computer and experiments on the model were becoming increasingly subtle. She had always enjoyed and worked hard on her research, but after the implantation monographs



MY FRIEND THE VOLCANO

and articles flowed from her fingers. The Melbourne media had been interested in the implant, and the local paper ran a couple of stories around the time of activation, including a feature on Sandra in which I got a mention before they got round to requesting her favourite recipes:

‘Sandra isn’t just interested in volcanoes, however. She plays the clarinet, is a keen jogger and trumper, and enjoys relaxing with her bloke Brian, who moved here from Christchurch to be with her. We hope for Brian’s sake that Sandra’s temper isn’t as fiery as her hair!’

All the news that’s fit to print. But the stares on the street and the unsigned letters died away again, and the closeknit months rolled by, and the mountain slumbered on.

On my cooking nights, Sandra usually worked late at the lab, timing her return just as the food made it to the table. So I nearly anointed her with a pot of cooked brown rice when she burst through the door a good hour early. In mid-complaint, I was grabbed from behind, gagged with her sweet right hand, and had a printscreen thrust before my eyes.

“Look what I got in my mailbox! I printed it off specially to show you.”

“Hang on, hang on, I haven’t had time to read it yet. Where’s it from . . . Iceland! I didn’t know your computer was hooked up to Iceland.”



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

“We’re not, directly. It came via GeoNet. But look at what it *is* — an invitation to speak at this year’s International Vulcanological Congress! ‘Considerable interest shown in your work’ . . . ‘impressive application of new techniques’ . . . it’s The Big Time! And guess what?”

“What?”

“I’ll put up half if you want to come too.”

Sandra prepared for the Congress with a mixture of nervous energy, determination, and occasional lapses into doubt and disbelief through which I coaxed and reassured her. I continued to do my job, earn my pay, go to the pub on Friday for an hour’s drinking with my workmates; but my own career was incidental, my real concern Sandra’s well-being and success. Was I growing too dependent? I sometimes wondered what had happened to the bold young buck of a year ago, but I did not miss his sterile existence.

Sandra was prepared to do a lot for me, but I had soon learned that her work came first, and she would not be swayed from her course. I limited myself to suggestions that she slow down a little, rest more, use the mountain as a platform for looking out rather than in; but I had never lost the fear that we were living in a temporary state of grace. By now, biochip implants were no longer big news, and only unusual applications were news at all; but I still could not bring myself to like them.

Sandra’s presentation at the Congress was a great success. Linked to a computer and a set of giant screens, she demonstrated how the model worked, what



MY FRIEND THE VOLCANO

it looked like, how she could run experiments on it. She handled the questions (how did you achieve —, I wonder whether you could enlarge on —, as my learned colleague Dr — has commented . . .) with aplomb and earned prolonged applause. At a rowdy party thrown by a rambunctious American who clearly fancied himself the Indiana Jones of the fault and graben, I'll swear I heard the words "Nobel Prize" breathed moistly into my ear.

During our fortnight away, Sandra had of course been out of direct contact with the mountain. "Not sure if I can pick it up on the plane," she remarked as we climbed out of Tullamarine Airport; she toyed with her food and fiddled with her Personal In-Flight Entertainment Package while I devoured it all shrink-wrapped. Half an hour from Mangere, her distraction changed to concentration; she held up her hand for silence. Minutes passed; she frowned.

"I don't like this, Brian. Something's changed."

"Not just the plane and the distance?"

"No, no. Something's about to happen. Damn it! The contact's fading out again. I must call from Auckland."

And such was her urgency that she convinced even the normally somnolent Auckland Customs to check us through at the head of the queue. Her colleagues in New Plymouth could find nothing wrong, but promised to check again, and there was little we could do until we got there. Sandra was tense and irritable. I shut up, watching her face, seeing it transformed by absorption and gathering fear as we neared New Plymouth. She stood at the front of the queue to leave



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

the plane, and as soon as she reached the tarmac she was running for the terminal, crying, running to threaten and to warn.

By 11 p.m. that evening, the rising pressure was also showing up on conventional instruments, small foreshocks had been felt, and Sandra's call for a meeting at the mountainside laboratory was at last heeded. They let me follow Sandra through the door, despite my lack of official status, because they had accepted me as her shadow and confidant. A couple of Civil Defence people had flown up from Wellington, and some grizzled south-westerly faces showed that the local county councillors had also been called in.

The meeting opened with a quick summary from the lab personnel. As bitter cups of coffee were passed from hand to hand, the scientists and technicians correlated and interpolated, building up a picture of a minor to moderate eruption, the effects of which should be well contained within the unpopulated National Park. Sandra seemed to be taking little notice, and I could see simulations of the volcano flickering across the screens of her computer. When the meeting had just about convinced itself that there really wasn't much to worry about, she spoke.

"It's going to be a lot worse than you think. There's a hell of a lot of pressure building up down there, a big volume of magma trying to escape. I think we're looking at a major eruption, and we should be planning the evacuation of the nearby farms and villages. Maybe Inglewood for good measure. With the



MY FRIEND THE VOLCANO

amount of snow up there, we've got to worry about lahar flows as well."

A year ago, the prospect of 'lahar flows' would have left me blissfully undisturbed, but life with Sandra had given me a working knowledge of the more lurid volcanic effects. I vividly remembered asking her about curious rounded hummocks beside the road from New Plymouth to Inglewood, and being told that these were the remnants of lahars — great floods of mud, rock and water caused by melted snow and ice flowing off the mountain. A giant, aqueous avalanche; one of them had killed 151 people when it washed away a rail bridge, moments before a crowded express train reached it, at Tangiwai under Ruapehu.

I was shocked by Sandra's prognosis, but if her fellow scientists were likewise affected they hid their fear behind a barrage of hostile questions. How did she know? What evidence did she have? Surely she realised the disruption — feelings were all very well — scarcely a time to rely on unproven methods —

Sandra sat there patiently, waiting for the noise to die down. When she did reply, it was with the force of conviction.

"You all know about this project. Most of you have been involved in it. You've endorsed the work I've produced, you've been pleased by my progress, you proposed me for the Iceland conference. But, when it matters, you're not prepared to believe I know what I'm talking about. Well, this isn't just a *feeling* — it's what that machine tells me, what my mind tells me, and what the mountain tells me. Just look at the



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

simulations.”

They watched, subdued, as ash and water flowed and spread; they asked for repetition and expansion. The strain grew on Sandra’s face; I touched her arm and suggested she take a break, but she insisted on continuing until their doubts were answered. Eventually, one of her bosses called a halt, and summed up the choices. “I have to admit she’s got me worried. But we’ve got to balance the risks: of sounding the alarm and starting a panic, or doing nothing and risking a catastrophe.”

“We could take a middle course. Move the closest people out, warn some more to be ready, move transport into place around Inglewood,” suggested one of the Civil Defence functionaries. And, as middle courses tend to do in long, tired meetings, this suggestion won out. Those necessary for the operation of the laboratory decided to stay on; the rest left, to watch or ward as their roles demanded. Sandra double-checked her equipment, talked to the technicians, seemed ready to stay the night; but she could do just as much at home, and at length she agreed to come with me.

My friend enjoyed driving, but tonight she yielded up the keys without protest and slumped into the passenger seat. We were about halfway home when she sat upright, pressed her hand weakly against her forehead, then slumped against my arm. “Stop the car?” I queried, and she nodded yes. I pulled over; still she said nothing, but fumbled open the door and staggered across the verge. I tried to lead her back to



MY FRIEND THE VOLCANO

the car, but she resisted, keeping her face to the mountain.

We were standing atop a small bluff above a rocky stream, and the snow-white cone seemed to float towards us over moon-washed trees and fields. When the earth began to tremble, she let me draw her back from the edge, and I felt her tremble too, a spring leaf disturbed by the first drops of a summer storm.

The trembling stopped for a moment. With a cry and a roar a gout of flame and ash burst from the crater, crowning the sky with lightning, crushing the snow with fire. Her face was frozen in pain or joy, and her limbs were locked in the ecstasy of an orgasm that might never break. I half-dragged, half-carried her rigid form back to the car and drove to beat the roils of steaming mud cascading down the mountain.

I took her to the hospital, and knew nothing of the world that night but Sandra's still, pale form, the flashing lights on the monitors, and the puzzlement of the medical staff who came and went. Despite her immobility, the EEG showed furious activity for nearly four hours. Then, near dawn, the hyper-activity stopped, as though a knife had flashed through the tangle of wires leading from her head . . . yet, now and again, ghostly echoes of the former hubbub flickered across the screen. Some two hours later, even the echoes died away, and I raised my head from her pillow to see if my fears had come true.

"She's sleeping — peacefully, it appears," said the nurse. I rose from the bed and went to the window to look at the mountain. Heavy cloud covered its flanks,



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

but I could see two grey-brown tracks gouged out of the lower forests. “How bad was it?” I asked a passer-by, and she said “Not too bad. I gather your friend’s got a lot to do with that. Now go and get some rest.”

Sandra slept six long hours beyond my waking, and by the time she was alert enough to talk I’d pieced together a passable picture of events. As she sipped her statutory cup of tea, I sketched in the details.

“You were right, dear, but they took enough action to blunt the worst of it. As far as I know, only two people lost their lives — a farming couple who delayed too long over their stock. It’s mainly an ash eruption — and not quite over yet — and, just as you predicted, a couple of lahars flowed down towards Inglewood. They’ve made a mess of the bush and the paddocks, but only a few houses were destroyed.”

“How about the lab?”

“No permanent damage, but the power was cut off around 6 a.m.” I paused for a moment, unsure how to proceed. “What do you remember of the night?”

“Knowing we were going to blow . . . feeling the magma rising, flooding the ancient chambers . . . bursting into the air, falling back, spilling out again, gradually dying away . . .”

“But you lost consciousness as soon as the eruption started!”

“No, I was conscious . . . just hard to reach. Were you worried?”

“Oh, Christ, yes, Sandra, I thought you weren’t coming back!”



MY FRIEND THE VOLCANO

We both cried a little then, our tears moistening the pale pink hospital pillow. Still snuffling, I told her what the lab director had, disbelievingly and grudgingly, told me. “One of the main reasons so few lives were lost is that your computer simulation carried on running until the power to the lab was cut off — even though many of the sensors were destroyed in the original eruption. None of their other monitoring equipment was telling them anything useful, so the Civil Defence people simply worked off your screen. Even though they reckon your computer shouldn’t have been receiving enough information to work with either, your model was almost completely accurate. And there’s something else, too . . . even *after* the power went off and your computer went down, fragments of the model kept flickering across the screen! I’ve checked with the hospital staff, and the times of these manifestations correspond to the activity peaks on your brain scan record. You’ve got some power in that head of yours.”

“Have the media heard about all this?”

“No, I don’t believe so. It’s being lauded as a cooperative effort —”

“That’s good, Brian. I don’t want any more personal publicity.”

“Are you going to leave that thing sitting in your head?”

“Yes. There’s a lot more to do. We don’t know why this eruption occurred or whether there’s more on the way. And I need to confirm that the computer has conducted itself with dignity.”



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

“You came very close to death last night.”

“I was living dangerously — but it was worth it. This is what my life is about, Brian; this is what I’m for. I can’t change direction now. Can you live with that?”

I think about that question. I thought about it as we left the hospital, it crosses my mind as I stare out the window at work, it echoes as she tells me of the progress she’s making each day at the lab. The volcano is again quiescent, and Sandra’s work is explaining why. But, early this morning, returning to our bed, I saw her moving deep in dreams and felt the faintest tremor in the floor beneath my feet.





The Pole

Amundsen and Scott approached the Pole from opposite directions. They halted when they were each about ten feet from it. Their men, who had been following warily behind, joined their leaders, and two semi-circles of tired, hungry, dirty explorers glared at each other through the drifting snow.

There were protocols to be observed on such occasions. “Pony-butchers!” yelled Helmer Hanssen.

“Dog-killers!” replied Wilson. This wasn’t really fair; the English had killed their dogs, too, but the difference — an important difference to all right-thinking Englishmen — was that this had been the result of incompetence rather than design.

“Disorganised rabble!” True enough.

“Cheats!” This was the Englishmen’s greatest complaint. Everyone knew Scott had first dibs on the pole, yet this arrogant Norwegian had tried to beat him to it.

Insults go only so far. It may have been Evans who scooped up the first handful of icy snow; soon, the air was filled with missiles, little packets of misery bound for neck or chest or face. The activity released something in them; they danced and capered,



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

bending and straightening, hurling challenges when they were not hurling snow, their ranks dissolving into a fluid ballet of man and ice.

But it was cold, utterly cold, and they were tired. Scott and Amundsen (who had kept themselves largely aloof from the frenzy infecting their men) looked at each other, brushed the snow from their clothes, then motioned for silence. Each leader walked forward, step for step, until their hands could clasp.

“Welcome to the Pole, Captain Scott.”

“Welcome to the Pole, Mr Amundsen.”

They shook hands again. Then they moved to one side and repeated the handshake for the cameras, and it is Bjaaland’s photograph we have seen so many times, the two leaders, hoods thrown back, smiling at each other, there at that desire of all true hearts, the Pole.

After the handshakes were over, after the exchange of gifts between the men, they returned to the Pole itself. Whoever had made the cairn that stood there had built well, but there was no clue to their identity, nor to how they had brought the rock from some distant outcrop. It took the best part of an hour to dismantle the cairn, bury its rocks a suitable distance away, and smooth over the snow.

When the site had been cleared, they stood two ski poles upright in the snow, lashed on the Norwegian flag and the Union Jack, and took a further round of photos. After the British had gorged themselves on the Norwegians’ food — for the British were half-starved, while the Norwegians had more than they



needed — each party left the Pole behind, with many a final glance at the two flags fluttering bravely together in the wind, and began the long trek home.





The Lizard

There were six of them. Three boys, three girls, my Peter second in line, holding his bare head high. My Peter. Though he does not know me, I still love my son.

As the children formed their circle, I turned from the window in response to a stilling of voices and movement. The priests had more chanting for us to do.

I glanced at my neighbour. His skin was cracked and peeling; evidently he'd arrived from Outside only recently. "Know your lines?" I asked him.

"Think so. Will they notice if I make a mistake?"

"Better not to give them the chance."

The ritual droned on. We parents had a larger part to play than most of the community, but even for us it was mostly dead time. I divided my gaze between the scene outside and the faces of those around me. Closed faces with averted eyes; maybe they were lost in thought, maybe they all wanted the priests to think they were deep in prayer. On this of all occasions, you wouldn't want to give the priests the idea that your faith was wavering.





THE LIZARD

The children sat in their circle, and behind them the clouds were yellow. I was old enough to remember clouds that billowed grey with rain, and streams of water that ran on the ground, and could even be tasted if you had the stomach for it; but none of us had seen such things since they moved us into the domes and caverns. Every drop of moisture we tasted had been used a thousand times, and the priests laboured tirelessly, with their dials and computers, their altars and fires and knives, to keep the air pure and the gods placated. We lived, for as long as the gods spared us; and the price was our children, who sat in their circle, golden eyes unblinking, outside the window, where dust swirled over sand and stone, and there was no such word as rain.

Yet there was still life out there. A lizard, perhaps the length of my arm, scuttered out of the rocks at the limit of vision. It paused for a moment, its tongue tasting the air, then advanced a few cautious feet at a time. Now it neared the ring of children; now it had entered the circle.

I nudged my neighbour in the ribs. “Look out the window,” I said. “This will be worth watching.”

The lizard, watchful, aware of other presences, had stopped suddenly in the middle of the circle, one leg raised. Perhaps growing tired of the heat and the furnace wind, it moved forward, across the circle, heading between Peter and his neighbour, Diana.





EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

The girl reacted faster. Her hand flicked out and caught the lizard by the left front leg. It dangled, tail thrashing, as she drew it to her mouth. She bit into it just behind the head, ripping free a dainty chunk of flesh. Lizard juice dripped on the dry ground. Its mouth closed and opened, its tail whipped, as she passed it to the boy on her left. He inserted calm fingers into the wound and extended it back into the animal's vitals. The next child detached the hindquarters, the fourth the head, the fifth stilled the last flutterings of its heart with her little teeth. Peter was last in line, and to the sixth go the entrails and the bones. He walked over, placed these remnants in a neat pile at the centre of the circle, walked back to his place. The children sat immobile as the wind blew sand into their waiting faces.

Engrossed in the rite, I had paid little attention to my neighbour. Now I saw that he was still staring out the window, face paler than before. "Something wrong?"

"They . . ." He waved his crusted hands. "The lizard . . ."

'Were you expecting a snake?'

And people say I've got no sense of humour.

There was more chanting to do then, and I didn't have an opportunity to probe my neighbour further until ten minutes had passed, and the priests had joined, head bowed, in a silent invocation of the Ancestor. I turned to him and wiped imaginary sweat off my brow. There was real sweat on his.

THE LIZARD

“How much longer will this go on?”

“Are we boring you?”

“No, no, but I don’t . . . I haven’t got used to your way of doing things yet, that’s all.”

“Yes, I thought you were from Outside somewhere. Better air where you come from?”

“Sometimes.”

“What brought you here, then?”

“I had a little trouble with the priests. Religious differences.”

“Oh, we’re very tolerant here. We all do our best to get along . . . Where did they put you?”

“Red Two.”

“Better than nothing, eh? I’m lucky — after I had Peter, they moved me to Green One.”

His eyes flicked to the children, outside, immobile, waiting.

“Out there?”

“Over on the far side, facing towards us.”

“He’s —”

“A lovely boy?”

My neighbour dropped his gaze.

“We need them though, don’t we?”

“Sorry?”

“The children. We wouldn’t get by without them.”

I nodded. “That’s what the priests tell us. They’re our protection, our shield against whatever’s out there. Suffer little children, that’s what they say, isn’t it? Suffer little children so that we may live.” I had picked up the phrase in my childhood, but I had a feeling my neighbour had heard it more recently. He was ripe for



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

the picking, all right.

He lowered his voice, leaned towards me. “Don’t you find it hard — your own flesh and blood, growing up into . . .” He gestured, obliquely, to the window.

I lowered my eyes. “It hasn’t been easy,” I said.

“Why don’t you do something?” he hissed.

“Do what, exactly?” I indicated the people sitting around us, put my hand on his arm, squeezed reassuringly. “Let’s save all this talk for later. Over dinner, perhaps?”

My squeamish acquaintance didn’t have much more of the ceremony to endure. The priests had been readying their burning bowl, and now one of them, dressed in an atmosphere suit positively reeking of blessings, went out through the airlock. Those of us close to the window watched as the priest made his way to the centre of the circle, exhumed the lizard remains from their shroud of dust, and brought them back into the room.

The remains were duly burned in the bowl, to the accompaniment of rapid muttering by the priests. They went around the room, giving us each a portion to eat, giving us the lizard’s strength and its unblinking, unfeeling patience. Mine tasted awful — toasted tail — but I ate it anyway. As for my neighbour . . . he chewed, but I didn’t see him swallow.

Now tension began to build in the room. Those who had previously participated in the ritual sat up a little straighter in their seats, stopped chattering, craned to see out the window. Those who did not know what was



THE LIZARD

to come looked around uneasily, bracing themselves against unpleasant surprises.

It always took a while. Sometimes nothing happened; on those occasions, there would be trouble among the priests, perhaps even the thrust of a poisoned dagger, but we ordinary folk would be spared. The delay had been long enough for the tension to lessen and the chattering to resume, but I kept my eyes on the scene outside.

A shadow took shape amid the swirling clouds of dust. I may have been the first to see it, for the conversations around me took some time to falter into silence.

This lizard was impressive. Twice the length of our tallest men, it advanced on armoured legs, tongue testing the murk. Yellow eyes stared at the children, and saliva dripped from its mouth.

The children neither moved, nor gave any sign that they had seen the great beast approaching them. It put its great head almost over Diana's shoulder, then withdrew. Peter was next — I felt my breath catch, phantom hairs rise along my spine. He alone had not eaten —

“Sweet Jesus! The children! Do something!” My neighbour hadn't taken long to crack. Leaping and whirling, he pounded on the window. With a groan — after all, the mechanism had lain dormant for a year — it opened. As he hesitated, looking back at our grim faces, those of us nearest pushed him over the sill and slammed the window down. The children turned to stare at him, and the lizard (which had passed



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

by Peter as quickly as by Diana) turned towards him too. We crowded to the window to watch.

The man banged on the thick glass as if he thought we might be willing to let him back in. He must have heard the advancing claws, for he turned and ran as the lizard struck. The dripping jaws brushed his hand.

He ran straight at the children, and at last they moved. Peter — how proud I was! — sprang to his feet and threw himself at the pumping legs, bringing the man crashing to the ground. As Peter watched, the fool struggled to rise. He had almost regained his feet when a claw swiped him down.

They usually go for the stomach. The great jaws drove in, past the man's protesting hands, to rip at the easy meat within. He screamed, though we could not hear him, screamed as the beast ate its way through the loops of intestine, blood and mucus dripping from its jaws. Then the poisons in the lizard's saliva took effect, and he could no longer scream, only stare until the light faded from his eyes. He was, perhaps, three metres from the window.

The lizard withdrew, and then it was time for the children to feast. In their accustomed order, they moved to finish what the lizard had started. Their heads rose and fell, their small, sharp, pointed teeth ripped and tore at scraps of flesh. When Peter had eaten his fill, he rose on spindly legs, and for a moment I could have believed that his golden eyes looked straight into mine; but he had forgotten me years ago. The lizard stalked off into the wilderness that had once been called the Canterbury Plains, and the children followed, dust



THE LIZARD

coating their chitinous skins, Peter still last in line. They had taken him from my womb, and all I had left was his name. I murmured it as he turned and disappeared from view.

So I was safe, safe for another ceremony, another year. And we parents were entitled to some privileges. I would commandeer a bottle of wine — from the High Priest himself! — and take it to my lover, and we would get drunk and fuck all night, and never think of the lizard, or my son with the golden eyes.





Tour Party, Late Afternoon

The woman at the corner is frozen as she steps off the pavement. One foot hovers a couple of inches above the grey surface of the road. In her right hand, she holds a plastic shopping bag with “ULTRA” printed on it. As you can see, there is something in the bag; we believe it to be clothing. Sir, may I remind you that we’re not allowed to interfere with the inhabitants’ personal effects? Thank you.

Why is the woman squinting? She was looking directly into the sun. Remember, it was late in the afternoon, in summer. A few seconds after 4.35 p.m.

Some other points to note. Two doors down, a foot is inserted in a door, its owner a pattern of shadow behind glass. Be careful, madam, not to hit your head on the bird. If you turn to your right, you can observe the impatience on the faces of the drivers who are waiting for the lights to change. To wait all this time and still to be stopped at the lights!

I agree it is frustrating, to look and not to touch. It’s true that the scientists are allowed greater access, that they can poke and prod as they please; but we are merely tourists, spectators at an ancient tragedy, and must do as we are told. The terms of my contract, and

TOUR PARTY, LATE AFTERNOON

yours, are most specific. This way, please.

We are coming to one of our most popular attractions. Down this alley — yes, it is perfectly safe. Here, on the left.

In a city of this size, it is of course likely that several acts of violence were taking place even at 4.35 p.m., but the restrictions we are under mean that this is the only one we can observe directly. An assault is in progress. The gentleman on the left has been cornered by an assailant and is being given, to quote what I believe to have been the phrase, “a good kicking”. See how the toe of the attacker’s boot is stained with the victim’s blood. The victim’s eyes are shut, but his mouth is open, perhaps in an unheard plea for mercy. If you gather round and look closely, you will see droplets of blood frozen as they fell. Quite remarkable! Please do not disturb them in any way; they may be of scientific importance.

Now to balance hate with love. Our tour continues past more pedestrians, some of whose poses you may find amusing, and up these narrow steps. I realise that some of you may not be in the best of health, and although the temperature and humidity have been controlled for your comfort, we will take this ascent slowly.

Our goal lies off the steps, across this narrow strip of green, and through the trees on the other side. Notice how the branches move aside as we push through them, then return to their original positions — yes, as far as we can tell, their exact original positions. Here, of course, we have our most popular



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

sight of all: two people joining in the act of love. We may regret that their lovemaking has not reached its peak, but who can fail to be fascinated by the hand that reaches eternally for the woman's breast, her fingers that caress his belly, the mounded flesh, the parted lips, the bodies straining to unite? Here these lovers came to find privacy, and instead they have found a form of immortality. Perhaps we should feel ashamed of ourselves; at least we can be sure that neither of the lovers will raise any voice of disapproval.

When you have seen your fill, join me in climbing to the top of the steps. Sir, do you require assistance? There you are.

Take a moment to enjoy the view. Here the citizens gathered to gaze over their city, to watch ships in the harbour and cars on the motorway. Perhaps they even glanced in the windows of nearby houses. How odd the city would look to them now! In all this vast expanse, nothing moves but ourselves, and all is silent. Not one bird, not one cellphone.

Our tour is almost over, and we must return to our own world of life and movement. There is surely an explanation for what has happened here, but for all their efforts, our scientists have not yet discovered it. We have no guarantee the same will not happen to us one day, that we will not hang suspended between moments to become the talk of the idle and the plaything of the rich. At times I fear that life has not entirely ceased for these unfortunate people, and that, behind their unseeing eyes, a form of mental activity continues, slow and tearing as the scrape of finger-



TOUR PARTY, LATE AFTERNOON

nails down some endless blackboard . . .

Yes, of course. You are quite right. It does no-one any good to dwell on such things. Our transport home awaits us, and we must leave the city to its silence.





Black Box

An early morning in late summer. Reflected sunlight streamed from the windows of the BNZ Building to shine on the breakfast menu of a restaurant a kilometre away. Cranes began their daily work of re-weaving the skyline. Workers from the eastern suburbs streamed from red buses all along Lambton Quay, dividing and recombining to flow through portentous CorpCorp doors. The river of grey halted for a moment, then those faster and braver detached themselves to ride, human salmon, up the groaning lifts.

The black box appeared at 9.32 a.m. Glancing up at the high blue sky, an analyst in futures saw air one eyeblink, box the next. She gasped, called out. Others crowded round. Phones rang, hands clenched, deals were lost and fax machines left untended. There were worried frowns in boardrooms, and on the street more and more faces scanned the darkened heavens.

These city animals were used to constant change, but few were able to believe that this was simply a new and less earthbound crane. The area directly underneath the black box emptied, first the streets, then the offices with windows, then the offices





BLACK BOX

without. The commercial heart began to fail.

The authorities had not been idle. The Beehive was at a safe viewing distance, and hurried enquiries were made: might it be an experimental aircraft? an installation escaped from the Festival? a sport of wild weather? It might not. Civil Defence staff ordered measurements from the ground and dispatched an overflight.

These efforts provided information but no insight. The box was one hundred metres by one hundred metres at its base, twenty metres high, one hundred by one hundred at its top; a perfect square prism. It floated some two hundred and fifty metres above the ground. It could not be seen directly, being of a blackness which absorbed all light; it was visible only as an absence. It had no noticeable effect on aircraft or pilot; was neither hot nor cold; emitted no radiation. Ground-mounted cameras recorded a gull flying towards it; the bird disappeared as it met the side of the box and never re-emerged.

Roads and phone lines, meanwhile, clogged and jammed. Local authorities, affected businesses, the media, worried members of the public: all wanted advice and reassurance. A statement was released; it spoke of unusual circumstances, prudent precautions, command and control. The area beneath the black box was cordoned off and checked for inhabitants. Scientists of various stripes were consulted; an attempt was made to reach Arthur C Clarke in Sri Lanka, but his number was unobtainable.

A junior clerk suggested checking whether similar



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

phenomena had occurred elsewhere in the country — they had not — or elsewhere in the world. Did an obsidian anvil hang above each of the world's capitals? It took time to get the diplomatic service on board — they were, after all, ambassadors not birdwatchers — but as third secretaries and trade attachés around the globe trickled outside to scan the skies, they found nothing but the patient smog.

So the day passed in stalemate. The sun angled westwards; many responsible actions were taken, none of which produced the slightest result; and the box stayed in place. It was still there that night, and the next morning. The front page of the *Dominion* featured a photograph which veiled it in a grey matrix of dots. A few brave or eager souls who ventured to go back to work in the shadowed buildings were turned away by grim-faced police.

Things began to happen as the city's pigeons were gearing up for lunchtime. At 11.35 and some seconds a.m., a bored observer at the Carter Observatory noticed a shimmering in the air beneath the box. This grew in intensity until it seemed that a curtain of light — a square curtain 250 metres deep — hung from its underside. The curtain thickened from gauze to lace to velvet, and stayed smooth and impenetrable for some considerable time.

Then the box and the curtain vanished. Just as the mind registered the continued existence of the bastions of corporate endeavour hidden by the curtain, they too started to disappear.

But they did not fall, as those watching soon



BLACK BOX

realised. Their top stories simply began to evaporate, disappearing from view at a stately rate. The four buildings affected didn't all go at once; AZCorp House, a bare six months old, was first, and when it was down to three stories EZCorp across the way started to unravel. Arkham House, which had been standing a full two years, still stood when its three neighbours were dust and cabbages; but, as a smaller building suddenly sprang to life on the AZCorp site, Arkham also returned to rubble.

The process speeded up. The smaller office blocks gave way to factories and warehouses, then to hotels and houses; old houses, with gables and tiles; older houses made of untreated timber. Other things stood out for milliseconds: a horse, a carriage, two women washing. They flickered as though captured on an old newsreel whose stock had decayed. The houses vanished into pasture, then scrub, then forest writhing in a frenzy of vegetation.

The end was sudden. The flickering stopped. Intrepid observers on the ground saw a fantail flit out of a tree on the right, cross an indistinct path, and fly off to the left. It flew to the edge of the wooded area, but did not cross the boundary into the streets of central Wellington. Wherever the corporate towers had gone, what had taken their place appeared to be a window, and the window was securely closed.

None of this was of much comfort to the property developers and finance houses so severely inconvenienced by the loss of their head offices. Two went bankrupt; one redefined its corporate image and



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

shifted to Lower Hutt; and the fourth secured temporary accommodation in a local art gallery with which it had enjoyed a mutually profitable relationship.

After the initial enthusiasm from physicists and philosophers had subsided in hurt bafflement, it was the ornithologists who showed most interest in what went on in the small stretch of bush. The bird life was of a variety and profusion scarcely to be imagined, but the early hopes of the anthropologists that some human figure might appear along the tantalising suggestion of a path came to nothing. Passers-by on the Terrace and Lambton Quay soon gave the window little more attention than any other deconstruction site. After a few stones tossed at it vanished without littering the forest, the window became best known as a handy alternative if you couldn't make it to the rubbish tip.

But Wellington is a large city, and it is not surprising that there were some people for whom the window exercised a continuing fascination. One was a young student who could not rid himself of the desire to see what lay outside the frame. To most intents and purposes, the legacy of the black box was simply a small square patch of native forest, a miniature reserve in the heart of the city; the only evidence to the contrary was the mysterious ability of objects to leave the bush without appearing in present-day Wellington. He became obsessed with this mystery, and would stand close to the window for hours in the dead of night, waiting for revelation.

One such night, he was sitting huddled in a great-



BLACK BOX

coat, drinking from a thermos flask of coffee — he was by now well prepared for such vigils — when he realised that something in his immediate vicinity had changed. It took him some time to understand what it was: the bush was beginning to recede. The sign on the carpark wall which had said ‘RESER’ ever since the window opened now said ‘RESERV’, and another ‘E’ appeared as he watched. Furthermore, the forest appeared to be fading, losing definition. What to do? He tossed the cup from his thermos towards the ‘path’ — and saw it appear, gleaming faintly in the starlight, on the other side. The window was open.

Not letting himself think about the consequences, he stood up, walked to the edge, and jumped. He felt a fractional crawling of his skin, then landed in a drift of leaves. It was dark. Thousands of stars shone from an obsidian sky. There was no sign of 1992; the trees stretched away into the silence. He was cold; he crawled into a hollow of roots and slept.

The morning was well advanced when he woke. He walked up the path — it *was* a path, if overgrown — and found himself climbing into what would become Kelburn. From a rocky outcrop, he could look out onto the surrounding land. Far away, a faint blue smoke stained the sky; it came from a place he would later try to reach.

Something glinted white in the harbour, coming nearer as he watched. It was a ship; a small but sturdy ship, with tiers of white sails. When it hove to in shallow water, a cutter set out for the shore. There were men on board with plans.





The Man Who Loved Maps

The man who loved maps lies sleeping, and his eyelids do not flutter. His room is narrow, high-roofed, and cold, his mattress worn, his blankets ancient, but he does not care. He goes to sleep each night with the satisfaction of a job well done, and the silence of Mrs Menzies' boarding-house is never disturbed by his dreams.

He wakes, rises, and pulls back the curtains on fine weather. It is too early for breakfast downstairs, but he has food in his room: bread, jam, and butter, the spoils of last night's expedition to the supermarket carpark. He eats his breakfast and watches the sun rise.

Time for work. He tugs his gray pullover over the T shirts he wears to bed, pulls on the brown trousers his former landlady, in some rare moment of charity, once patched for him. He searches his room again for the maps he no longer has, picks up the duffel bag he purchased from the St Vincent de Paul Society some years ago, then leaves to catch the bus. When it arrives, he goes to the back seat, sits in the left-hand corner, looks out the window until it is time to get off. He is part-way through tracing the streets of St Kilda. It's easy work here on the flat, and he sets to with a





THE MAN WHO LOVED MAPS

will. He walks to the furthest point he reached yesterday, then begins, striding past the small, neat houses with their frosty lawns.

And the locals look at him and think: what's he doing in our neighborhood? You expect crazies in the middle of town, walking around with their strange grins and their collapsing footwear, sitting down beside you on buses when they know you can't escape, scurrying from rubbish tin to rubbish tin with plastic bags full of the day's treasures. They sleep in the Salvation Army shelter at night, and come out in the daytime, pleased as Punch. Well, that's bad enough in town, without coming across them in St Kilda! Put them all back in Cherry Farm, say the locals, twitching at their curtains.

The man who loved maps takes no notice, for he has his method. He picks a point to start from and keeps turning left at each corner, until he is about to re-cross his path, at which point he turns right and doubles back. That way, in the end, he will trace both sides of every street in the city. He has worked his way from the top of Pine Hill in the north to the middle of St Kilda in the south, and in another few weeks he will have walked all the streets of Dunedin. Next, he will start on the roads and tracks of the surrounding hills, until he has covered every one, and then he will receive what his maps have promised him.

Soon it's lunchtime. He pulls what's left of his sickness benefit out of the duffel bag. Maybe he could catch a bus back into town and go to the Mission, where they have cups of coffee for 50c and rolls for a



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

dollar, and people leave you alone, and it's right next to the Octagon, handy for the buses. But he hasn't got much money left, and he still has some bread in his bag. Save the Mission for another day. Besides, there's a park at the end of this street, and it's still sunny, though the clouds are beginning to roll in from the south. Early morning, that's the best time in Dunedin.

The park benches have almost dried out from the frost, and he sits in the left hand corner, tearing hunks off his bread and stuffing them in his belly. Two kids are playing on the swings while their mothers sit and talk in the sunshine. One woman looks up, sees him, points him out to the other. They sweep up their protesting children and leave. The park is deserted. If he still had his maps, it would be safe to bring them out now.

He had kept his maps in three rolls, one for the city, one for the country, one for the world. Each roll was secured by two rubber bands. In his old room at Mrs Loney's, he would spend hours unpacking them, smoothing each one in turn, looking at the legends and the straight and wavy lines. He would trace the paths of tracks and highways and railroads, and at night, while he lay waiting for sleep, he would recite the names of maps in his deep, soft voice. "Tutoko", that was in Fiordland, a welter of bush and mountains. "Dutch East Indies": ink-blue sea, and islands, and towns with names he liked to roll around on his tongue. "Dunedin". He had collected several maps of Dunedin: the street map he looked at every



THE MAN WHO LOVED MAPS

day, old valuation maps done out in lots, maps that showed the city as a cluster of black squares and white lines amid the tangled hills. Topographical, cadastral, political, relief: he had them all in those three rolls, and each night they watched over his sleep from the top of the wardrobe. And if he had one wish, it was to be the Surveyor General, in whose authority so many maps were made.

When the Department of Lands and Survey became DOSLI, the price of maps went up. Previously, he had been able to buy a new map each day his benefit came through; now he had to save up, and choose carefully. So, when he saw in Mrs Loney's big Saturday paper that the Geography Department at the University was giving away surplus and outdated maps, starting on Monday morning, he was so excited he told the others when he went down for dinner. When he returned from his Sunday walk, his room had been cleaned, as usual, but his maps had been taken from their place of refuge, where no-one but he had ever touched them.

He burst into Mrs Loney's sitting-room while she was Entertaining Guests and demanded to know where she had put his maps. She refused to talk with him, and he refused to leave, so that eventually she was forced to come out into the corridor and tell him that she had no idea what he was talking about, that she hadn't seen any maps, that she would have taken no notice of them if she had, and that if he was going to take that attitude he could pack his bags — “or, in your case, bag” — and be gone come 10 a.m. Monday.



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

He searched his room again and again; he searched the rubbish bins by the back gate; at dinnertime, he stood up and asked who had taken them.

When met with silence, he accused his fellow boarders of plotting against him. They replied with blank looks, averted faces, and old Norrie babbling in the corner; but old Norrie always babbled in the corner. He left that night, after piling up the rubbish in the hallway and setting a match to it. The policemen caught up with him at the Salvation Army shelter, and by the time he was before the judge, the Geography Department had given all their maps away. The judge said he was lucky no-one was killed or seriously injured, and asked him if he had anything to say for himself. "I want my maps," he said.

Prison was darkness. He sat in the darkness and ran over his maps in his mind till the roads and houses and rivers were engraved on his forebrain and he no longer needed paper. When he got out, they put him in Mrs Menzies' boarding house and told her to keep an eye on him. He knew what that meant, and never bought a map again.



A dark blot untouched by the sun, the man who loved maps sits in the park and eats his stale bread. Around him, trees grow and birds sing, but he does not see them. His work is calling. He flings his crust on the grass and rises abruptly, setting off around the park, turning left then left again. He will walk until the sun goes down and then a little longer, striding silently past the workers returning home and the children



THE MAN WHO LOVED MAPS

being called in for dinner. Then he will make his way to the nearest bus-stop, and ride back to Mrs Menzies' for supper and sleep a dreamless sleep, until the sun rises and he returns to his task. He will walk all the streets of St Kilda, then start on St Clair, all gracious houses and locked gates. Up the hill, past the golf course, out to the motorway, heading south. Out to Mosgiel; that could be tricky with the buses, but he'll manage somehow. As the weather gets warmer, he will move to the Peninsula, turning left past albatross and penguin. By autumn, he will have walked both sides of every street on the map.

And then the earth will be ready to receive him. His legs will stretch to lie beneath the northern suburbs; students will stroll to their lectures across his belly; Hanover Street and St Andrew Street will be his ribs, so that the sharp heels of businesswomen and the wheels of skateboarders will scrape the flesh from his bones. Stuart Street will trace the line between his shoulders, and the traffic will roar down his neck to the Exchange, where his head will echo to the footsteps of the newly redundant as they trudge from Social Welfare to Employment Service and back again. And his hair will fan out and spread along every street of the city, so that he will feel every step that falls there, and every wheel that rolls. The land will groan beneath him, but he will stop up his ears and be satisfied, until the sea rolls in to wash all maps away.



The Temple in the Matrix

The teeth! Struggle as I might, the hideous creature that Cousin Jedekiah and his shambling crew had called from the pit drew me ever closer to its drooling mouth. The great jaws opened, I passed beneath the scabrous upper lip, the jaws began to close —

— and someone pulled the chip from the slot behind my ear. The creature vanished, and its worshippers with it. I was in my room, slumped in my coffin, and Miko was bending over me.

“You sure pick your times,” I grunted. She laughed, harsh and short, the way Miko laughs. It was her, all right, or the best simulation Ninsei has ever come up with.

“What’s the matter, T— ? You were just about to score, is that it? I pulled you out of Frolics in Zero G?” If she’d had any hair, she would have tossed it back about then.

“You saved me from the damnedest creature. It was just about to chew me up and spit me out. What do you want me for this time?”

“Nothing. I just want to talk to you. You were screaming. Whatever.”

“Yeah, well, thanks for looking out for me.”



THE TEMPLE IN THE MATRIX

“You spend too much time with that crap slotted into your brain, anyway. What’s this one?”

“Just some light entertainment — at least, that’s what it’s supposed to be.”

“Hmmm.” She turned the chip over. “Unregistered. You shouldn’t use this knock-off junk. You never know when you’ll get a bad one.”

“Zuma got it for me. She said it was just a little diversion. I trust her.”

“Yeah, but who does she trust?” She chucked me on the chin, her Ozawa muscleware turning it into a respectable punch. I bounced off the padded coffin floor, grabbed her, pulled her in with me. “Take those mirrors off, deck-jockey,” she chuckled. “I want to see your eyes.”

She left half-an-hour later, ordering the sensors back on as she walked towards the door. “*That’s* what I wanted you for this time,” she said when she was half-way through. I threw my Tentacles™ at her, but they missed.

I levered myself up and struggled over to the window. Dawn was coming somewhere and the sky was the colour of freshly spilled blood. I felt sorry for sailors.

I turned back to my collection of chips. These days, I felt lost without them. Maybe Miko was right. Maybe I should take it easy. There were always the drugs . . .

I grabbed the unregistered chip. I meant to slip it back into its case, but before I could stop my fingers they had slotted it back into my head.



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

I was back in the cavern beneath my cousin's house, lying on the rough rock floor, with Jedekiah and the whole unholy crew standing around me. There was no sign of the creature — except for a thick trail of slime on the floor — but I felt as if the thing had spat me out, without bothering to chew me up first.

“. . . so, Cousin T—,” Jedekiah was saying, “you see that we can be merciful as well as stern. Will you not join us? Will you not aid us in our great task?” The monsters in the background started up a little chant, like they were the Pips and Jedekiah was Gladys Knight. “Join us . . . aid us . . . join us . . . aid us . . .”

I did my best to sneer. “Task? What task?”

Jedekiah's face assumed an exasperated expression. “You really haven't been listening, have you, Cousin? Our task is to restore the days of glory, before Man came to believe he was the true ruler of this world, when . . .”

Jedekiah's voice droned on, but I wasn't listening any more. From the darkened stairway down which I had first been dragged into this infernal pit came another sound: a soft, irregular squelching, as if something with tentacles instead of legs was trying to walk on tiptoes. I knew I didn't want to stay around to find out what sort of creature that might be.

Fortunately, somewhere in my head was a little corner that resisted getting drawn in to this madness. “Pull the chip out!” it screamed, if a whisper can be a scream, and I did. I was back in my room. Dawn was crawling closer. I held the tiny piece of silicon up to the light and turned it over in my shaking fingers.

THE TEMPLE IN THE MATRIX

‘Little diversion’, hell. What *was* this thing?

Sometimes, they say, you’ve got to be cruel to be kind. If that was true, then Zuma’s bodyguard was the kindest man alive. After he finished bouncing my head off the hallway’s concrete wall, he made to start on my cohabitation tackle. I doubled over to protect myself and wished Zuma would call her bulldog off.

And she did. Great, I thought, I’ve been living in a fairy story all along and I never knew it. “Hans, that’s enough,” she said in that prim-and-proper voice that must have cost more credits to acquire than I could ever dream of. Hans backed away with obvious reluctance. He looked as though he couldn’t wait for Round 2. I wondered why Zuma now felt the need to employ such crude muscle.

I looked at her with reproach. “Did you tell that ape to work me over?”

“Oh, don’t act so offended, T—. Hans didn’t recognise you, that’s all, and he doesn’t take kindly to strange men. Now, do you want to talk, or are you just going to slump there groaning?”

I trailed into her office, wincing as always at the strobe lighting. Eyes shut, I explained about the rogue chip that had caused me so much trouble. “You promised me a little chip karaoke — ‘You Be The Star! More Hits of the Seventies’, wasn’t it? — and instead I get the Thing from The Crypt. What gives?”

Zuma held out her hand, and I handed her the chip. “I got this from my usual supplier. He’s always been very reliable. Are you sure it was this that caused your



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

problem?”

“You don’t believe me? Try it yourself. Better still —,” a smile spread across my features like an oil-slick across an ice-floe — “try it on Hans.”

Zuma nodded. “Come here, Hans,” she said. He came, not looking happy. “Bend down, dear.” He bent, and she slipped the chip into the slot behind his cauliflower ear. He straightened, his eyes became even more devoid of intelligence, and he began to chant. I’d heard it all before: “Join us . . . aid us . . . join us . . . aid us . . .”. All that was missing was the dance steps and the shoo-wop-de-whoops.

Zuma leaned confidentially towards me. “He’s such a darling, isn’t he? I got him from —”

But I never learned where Zuma got Hans, because he cried something unintelligible (but I swear he cried it in Cousin Jedekiah’s voice), ripped out the chip, turned, and jumped out the window. By the time we reached it and looked down, there was nothing left of Hans but a ripple on the dark surface of the river.

The lift got all the way to the ground floor and then refused to open. “We’re trapped in a lift. Together. Alone,” I observed to Zuma.

“You know I wouldn’t respect you in the morning, T—.” She crossed to the doors and casually pulled them open. Enough daylight showed to squeeze through. We did.

The street was deserted by everyone except the rats and the trashtasters. The river was even more deserted. It would have stripped a fish to the bone in seconds.



THE TEMPLE IN THE MATRIX

Hans might have lasted a minute.

“I fear we’ve lost the poor dear,” said Zuma. “Ah well, there’s plenty more fish in the zoo. Let’s go home.”

I grabbed her by the point at issue. “About your arms. Do you do a lot of bodybuilding?”

She shook her head. “Spinach, clean living, and this.” She rolled back her sleeve and flexed her muscles. “Carbon-fibre implants. I like throwing my weight around.” She picked up a stone and tossed it clean across the river.

“That’s—,” I began, and then the sound hit us. It was a deep sound, and a strong sound, and an angry sound; in it was the tramp of many marching feet. The sound rounded the corner as we ran for the building. It resolved itself into faces and voices, banners and makeshift shields. It caught us up and swept us along.

“A protest march!” I heard Zuma say from somewhere in front of me. “How sweet!”

And then a feeling of dreadful familiarity grew on me as I paid attention to the crowd’s hoarse chanting. In it were the same twisted, ugly syllables Jedekiah and his malformed minions had chanted to raise their nameless pet from the pit. “Iä! Shub-Niggurath!” and more, none of which I understood, but which clearly had plenty of meaning for them.

What horrors the crowd might have raised had the chanting continued, I never found out. It ceased suddenly, to be replaced by a silence and a screaming. I dropped to my knees and made for the side of the road as the bodies fell around me. A strong



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

arm grabbed mine and pulled me into cover. We watched as the protesters fell beneath the scythe of SecCor's fire. What did they want? What desperation spurred them to action? I hoped I would never know. All the same, I decided, it was time to find out.

By the time I got to Phoenix, she was waking. "Give me a minute," she called; those wings of hers are the devil to unfurl.

I'd spent the afternoon trying to find out what the strange chant might mean. I got nothing helpful out of Zuma except some sprayskin for my cuts and bruises, and exhausted the "Disorganised Religion" section of her database without success. What to do? Go visit your local priestess. So I made the trek to the better part of town, to the swanky apartment she maintains with all the shekels her worshippers give her. While she carried out her pre-flight checks, I looked at the furniture and thought about the benefits of faith.

"Phoenix."

"T—."

At least we remember each other's names. "How's life in the empyrean?"

"Sempiternal. What happened to your face?"

"I had an argument with a gorilla."

"What happened to the gorilla?"

"He went bananas."

"Enough of the snappy dialogue. I'm due at the temple in half-an-hour. What did you want me for?"

I had a few ideas on that score, but now wasn't the



THE TEMPLE IN THE MATRIX

time or place. “Religions, odd, unusual, or new. Does the name ‘Shub-Niggurath’ mean anything to you?”

“In part. Take a look at this.” She handed me a scrap of paper, creased and stained, but still bearing fragments of words I heard all too recently — “Shub-Ni— . . . ngai . . . ygg . . .”, and a symbol I hadn’t seen before: it looked like an octopus crossed with a dragon.

“Where did you get this?”

“Found it under a pew. Make any sense to you?”

“I keep hearing about this ‘Shub’ character, but the pretty picture’s new to me.”

“That’s strange. It was the picture that made me keep it.”

“How come?”

“It’s the symbol of a new player in the Matrix. Haven’t you been jacking in recently?”

I started to tell her about the unfortunate side-effects of my little disagreement with Inco’s corporate defences the last time round, but she waved me to silence. “Well, when you get it together, go looking for this mob. They’re new, they’re rapidly getting bigger, and no-one seems to know what they want. Maybe they don’t themselves. But be careful: it’s not that they don’t take any prisoners, more that you wouldn’t like to see what happens to the prisoners they take.” And with that warning, she unfurled her wings to their fullest extent and flew out of her opened window, not plummeting like Hans but skimming between the decaying skyscrapers, riding the thermals towards her distant temple.



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

It was a month before I felt ready to plug myself and my deck into the Matrix again, a month in which I'd skulked in my six square metres of rented space, looked out of my solitary window at the continuing disturbances in the streets below, sifted the wind for news of new cults, and wondered whether there'd be any credit chips at the end of all this. I kept the scrap of paper Phoenix had given me beneath my dusty deck, and every few days pulled it out to look at it again. A scrawled symbol, some fragmentary words, and a stain that looked like blood. It wasn't quite the standard of information — or payment — I usually required for a run, but I knew I'd have to try eventually, just to prove I still had what it took. The unlicensed chip that had started all this trouble was still sitting in my jacket pocket, but I hadn't even thought about slotting it again. Honest.

It was a Tuesday when I finally felt ready. That's the day I usually choose for my most difficult runs. Did you know that less people have sex on a Tuesday than on any other day of the week? Go figure.

Normally I work at night, but something told me I wouldn't want to deal with this mob during the hours of darkness. I even waited till the sun was shining before I jacked in.

The Matrix didn't seem to have changed much since last time. Maybe it was a little more crowded, maybe everything moved a little faster, but I found I could still keep up. I cruised around for a while, checking out the scene, before I fed the symbol into my search programme. I hovered high above the red



THE TEMPLE IN THE MATRIX

cuneiform shape that represented Ninsei's corporate HQ; I wanted to start my search from the Matrix's equivalent of the city centre, although I suspected I would end up in the warehouse district.

I wasn't surprised when my search algorithm returned a big fat zero: it was my standard one, barely modified from the type Janette and Joe Citizen would use to get information on ornamental armourplate for the front door or the level of radioactive contamination in this week's nutrimeat supplies. It was time to get serious and employ the tweaked software I'd been given for the Inco job — whatever had happened afterward, that software had got me into Inco when nothing else would. I floated a little further away from Ninsei, just in case their security was on the prowl, and launched my search, which took the form of bloodhounds snuffling away into the distance.

After the six bloodhounds vanished from sight, I was kicking my heels. I thought about leaving a marker for them and doing a little freelance nosing about in the meantime, but my experience with Inco had made me a more cautious man, and I set myself to wait. Time is hard to measure in the Matrix, but it felt like a good ten minutes before I made out one of the bloodhounds limping towards me, its virtual coat streaked with virtual blood. It touched my hand with its muzzle and winked out of existence. I was instantly transported to a section of the Matrix that was new to me. I was hanging in a cavernous space lit dimly from above. The building below me seemed to drink in



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

what little light there was, but as I floated towards it I saw furtive movement around its doors, and above the carven lintel the symbol Phoenix had shown me, the dragon with the tentacles of an octopus around its gaping mouth.

Going in through the front door didn't seem like a lifespan-enhancing idea. Keeping well away from those gaping doors, I drifted around the building until I saw a pipe emerging from the ground and entering the building through a duct — probably, in reality, a data conduit. The pipe looked old and disused; it was possible the owners of this facility hadn't guarded it as well as they might. Only one way to find out. I prepped my anti-ice programmes and squeezed into the duct.

I had barely passed through the outer wall when bat-winged nasties swooped to the attack. My defence programmes dealt to them easily enough, but I had a nasty feeling at least one of them had managed to get a message off before it died — at least, it gave a guttural, polysyllabic cry before my defences got to it. Still, nothing else stirred as I made my way across what appeared to be an ancient, disused boiler room and — with a little twist of my lock-pick software — into the room beyond.

The scale of the place was staggering. The room in which I now stood was many times my height, with the roof and walls covered in gloomy and fantastical carvings which showed a variety of improbable creatures — a black she-goat suckling uncountable young, an earthworm the size of a maglev train, and a



THE TEMPLE IN THE MATRIX

larger version of the tentacled thing on my sheet of paper. This latter monstrosity stood directly opposite me, astride another door, one round which I could see the flicker of data. Well, the direct approach had worked so far. I picked my way across the floor, which was covered in shapeless, gooey masses I didn't really want to recognise as animal or human remains, and approached the door.

There was an inscription above it, and I looked up in the hope I might be able to read it. The script was strange, but at least I knew the language.

“In . . . darker,” I puzzled out. “Hmmm. In darker —”

“— eons death may die,” added a familiar voice. “Well met, Cousin!” And there, beneath the lintel of that strangely-carven door, stood my cousin Jedekiah, looking as elegant as ever, and as disdainful.

“For one who has claimed no desire to join our noble cause, Cousin, you continue to be remarkably persistent in your endeavours to find us — but most worshippers prefer to use the front entrance. Come,” he said, taking my arm in his cool and faintly scaly grip, “since you have expended so much effort in getting here, the least I can do is show you around.”

Net-running isn't a profession to choose if you're easily frightened, and I don't scare easily. All the same, after twenty minutes of trudging through dank, cavernous rooms filled with bizarre statuary, shambling worshippers, and the occasional despairing scream, while Cousin Jedekiah's patient, reasonable voice explained the arcane significance of



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

this monstrous statue and that perverted rite, my nerve was close to breaking. I turned to Jedekiah and held his fathomless eyes with my gaze. “OK, OK. I’ve put up with your stories about beings from the gulfs of space and Earth’s long-forgotten rulers for long enough. Even if they did rule the Earth once, why the hell would anyone want to see them back? And what’s in it for you? Or me?”

Jedekiah smiled, and I noticed that his teeth were long and yellow. “You really haven’t been listening, have you, Cousin? What’s in it for me — and you, if you join us — is power! When the preparations we are undertaking are complete, when the streets belong to our worshippers, when the mightiest corporations on the planet are under our sway, then we will begin the great rite. Those statues and carvings you have seen here are merely the symbols or idolons of the Great Old Ones themselves. Your mind, unprepared, would have shattered had you encountered one in the shuddering flesh. But when the rite is complete, then they will walk among us again, and return to claim their true dominion. And then” — and as he smiled at me, the red light of madness filled his eyes — “those who have been their faithful servants will be rewarded beyond measure. Gold! Power! Women! Money! Whatever you desire shall be yours, so long as you have served them faithfully. Together, Cousin, we could stride this world like the kings of old. I ask you for the last time: will you not join us?”

“What’s the alternative?”



THE TEMPLE IN THE MATRIX

“Surely you already know the answer. The alternative is death, and it will not be swift.”

Gold, power, women, and money. They had a certain appeal, together or even one at a time. But the funny thing was, I didn’t think Jedekiah was interested in any of them. Power, yes, but it was incidental to his real desire: to meet the hideous beings he worshipped in the flesh, and scream his welcome as they flayed his wits from his mind and set out to do the same to the rest of us.

“Well, Cousin Jedekiah, when you put it that way —” and I punched him in the stomach and ran. It took him a moment to recover his wind, and by the time he screamed “Kill him!” I was halfway towards the nearest exit. I tried to access my compass utility, but it wasn’t working: perhaps this strange construct had a damping effect. I reached the doorway, ducked beneath some barely-glimpsed thing that let out an endless, unhinged giggling, and ran onwards, hearing Jedekiah’s flapping footsteps in pursuit. His repeated orders that my life be terminated with extreme prejudice hadn’t had much effect so far, mainly because there was no-one about to carry them out, but the next room I entered was filled with black-clad worshippers, watching an altar at which priests were doing things I quickly decided I didn’t want to watch too closely. Despite their rapt attention, a few of the worshippers turned to look at me as I ran past them, and in their eyes I saw the same blankness I had seen in the eyes of the protesting crowd. There must have been ten thousand of them in the room, and I realised



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

— but hang on, this was the Matrix. What did they represent? I had to remember not to think literally, but to —

A hooded man stepped in front of me, a hand like a side of synthibeef swung round, and just before it connected with my jaw in a highly literal manner, I recognised the man as Hans.

When I came to, I was tied to the altar, and I was naked. I've never been big on personal modesty, but I had the sudden urge to cover my embarrassment, preferably with something solid. This could have been because the priestess who was drawing strange designs on my chest and belly with a very sharp knife was gradually moving downwards. I felt relieved when she stopped at my navel until I heard a long-drawn-out 'aaaaaah' from the crowd. They and the priests were all looking upward, and I looked upward too. There, descending towards me from what seemed an infinite distance, eclipsing as I watched a background of alien stars, was a shapeless black mass. Shapeless, I say, and yet it bubbled, and it glowed, and there were mouths, and eyes, such eyes . . . closer now, reaching for me . . . the mouth, and the terrible, burning eyes —

— and someone pulled the chip from the slot behind my ear. The creature vanished, and its worshippers with it. I was in my room, slumped on the floor, and Miko was bending over me.

“You never learn, do you?” she asked, waving the chip at me in a reproving way. “I thought you'd sworn

THE TEMPLE IN THE MATRIX

off this stuff.”

“Hey,” I said, “I didn’t slot that. Last I knew, I was jacked into my deck.” I flexed my extremities, suddenly conscious I had bruises all over my body. “What the hell have you been doing?”

Miko took offence at that. “Saving your mind!” she said, flexing her fingernails a little. “Why is the place in such a mess?”

Good question. I was lying on the floor, a good six feet from my deck — or, more precisely, my ex-deck, because someone had smashed it into metallic pieces and strewn it around the floor. The same went for all my furniture — OK, there hadn’t been much of it to smash, but they’d done a thorough job on it all the same. The same went for me, except whoever was doing the beating had stopped short of actual dismemberment. It might have been kinder if they hadn’t.

“So what have you been doing? Sleepwalking?”

I gave her a quick summary of my adventures. “Someone must have traced me back from the Matrix and decided to put a stop to it — and me, it looks like. But, for some reason, they didn’t finish the job.”

“Yeah, but how do you know you were in the Matrix at all? The whole thing might have come straight out of here.”

I took a closer look at the chip. It was unmarked, but I’d looked at it so many times I could recognise every little scratch on the casing. For all I knew, they might have burst into my room the moment I jacked in, slotted the chip, and smashed my deck and me for



EXTREME WEATHER EVENTS

good measure — nothing short of death will disturb you once you're jacked or slotted in. Had the whole thing been just another happy chip adventure? I didn't think so — but there was no way I could prove it.

That's almost the whole story. When I could walk again, I did the rounds of my friends to see if they could tell me anything. They couldn't. Phoenix hadn't had any more mysterious notes slipped under her temple door and Zuma still maintained her ignorance. When she heard of my plight, though, she did offer me a job: as a replacement for Hans. So far, it's working out quite well. I don't have Hans's physical presence, but I make up for it with sarcasm. I still suspect that Zuma knows more than she's letting on, but she's a good boss, and if I keep working hard and saving my pennies, one day I'll be able to buy another deck and climb back into the Matrix, if I've still got the guts.

And if that was really the whole story, I'd be back home sleeping in my coffin, maybe with Miko if she's in town, and not working late into the night at this crummy public terminal, recording the whole story on a machine so ancient it's still called a computer, and looking around every five minutes to see if they've come for me yet, and wondering where I can store this so the wrong people won't get their hands on it and the right people will.

Because last night, after I'd finished my stint with Zuma, I decided to turn on the vid for a while and see what was happening in the world. There was a story about the biotoxin cleanup in Nuevo Havana, and



THE TEMPLE IN THE MATRIX

another on the gerontology drugs scandal, and I was reaching for the kill button when they moved on to a political story. “New face on Presidential Council,” said the vidcaster and her six simultaneous translators. “After his success in quelling the street disturbances which have stretched the resources of corporate security in several of our major cities, President Guzman has announced that Special Envoy Jed Blake has been added to the Presidential Council. Mr Blake will take special responsibility for public order.”

And then they showed a clip of Blake being welcomed to the Octagonal Office, and he turned to face the camera. It was Cousin Jedekiah, of course: tall, well-dressed, and disdainful as ever. He was saying something about the need to restore meaning to people’s lives and the importance of faith in today’s Godless world, and Guzman smiled and nodded. I wondered how much, or how little, the President knew. I turned off the vid before the announcer could say anything else, and made my way down here, changing maglevs three times, and now I’m going to save this in a directory with a deadman’s switch and buy a gun and a plane ticket to Washington. It’s time I caught up with my cousin again.







HEADWORX

Series Editor: Mark Pirie

New Poetry

Nothing to Declare Harry Ricketts
Salamanca Vivienne Plumb
Sweet Banana Wax Peppers Jenny Powell-Chalmers
The Century Tony Beyer
Pingandy Harvey McQueen
Unmanned Stephen Oliver
Earth Colours L E Scott
Talking Pictures Riemke Ensing
Hats Jenny Powell-Chalmers
Rhyme Before Reason Scott Kendrick

Pocket Fiction

baby is this wonderland? Jeanne Bernhardt
The Diary as a Positive ... Vivienne Plumb
Extreme Weather Events Tim Jones*

