

# *Business Secrets from the Stars*

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To Democracy

You were the best

## One

*It was on a lovely spring day in the Rockies, as I sat in meditation atop a fourteen-thousand-foot peak, that Lukas of Aldebaran first came into my mind and spoke to me soul to soul.*

— *Business Secrets from the Stars*

Actually, Malcolm's great idea came to him after lunch at a Mexican restaurant.

The waitress was not as young and pretty as the fantasy Chicana on the cover of the menu, but she came close enough in Malcolm's view and his present mood.

Not that she seemed interested in Malcolm's opinion. Although the restaurant was almost empty, she was distant and inattentive. She put the bill on the table, smiled mechanically, and asked, "Do you want anything else?"

Malcolm and the friend he was having lunch with thought the same thing, but both said no.

For a moment, Malcolm had the odd feeling that the waitress knew what he was thinking and was about to slap him. She looked at him coldly and turned her attention to another table. The two men watched her walk away and muttered to each other abbreviated versions of the something else they wished they had had the courage to ask for.

Both men were approaching forty, both were divorced, and both were lonely. Neither had seen his life work out as he had once thought it would.

Steve Golden, Malcolm's companion, and a fellow Western Bell employee, scanned the bill, then threw down six dollars. "Wish it was five o'clock already," he said.

"Yeah. Wish it was five o'clock ten years from now, and I was free and successful."

"Well, if you're wishing," Steve pointed out, "why wish it was ten years from now? Why not wish it was now, and you were already free and successful?"

"Right, right. After all, Shirley Maclaine says we make our own reality. God, what crap. I've been wishing for years, and reality still hasn't changed."

They walked from the restaurant and down the street discussing the unfairness of Shirley Maclaine's making vast amounts of money peddling New Age nonsense. The sky was cloudless, the sun was fierce, the Gypper was in the White House, and drunks littered the sidewalk. Malcolm and Steve were too engrossed in their conversation to think about the heat, and they stepped automatically around the splayed legs of the drunks. This area near downtown contained a lot of the sort of local color the Chamber of Commerce neglected to advertise.

"She churns out that bilge," Malcolm complained, "and the yahoos snap it up. While I write good, serious novels, and I can't even sell the damned things. Life isn't fair. But you already knew that."

"It's not just her," Steve said. "It would be bad enough if it was. But there're others doing the same thing. The bookstores are full of the stuff, and those guys are giving workshops and charging people a fortune to attend." He shook his head. "It just goes on and on. I guess we're writing the wrong sort of stuff."

"Maybe so."

"It's not just non-fiction," Steve said. "Fiction, too. Angels. Indians. Hell, I don't know, novels dictated by aliens. Maybe I should try writing under a pseudonym. Running Eagle Horsefeathers, or something."

"You're part Indian?"

"Everyone's part Indian. Just about every American is part Indian and part black. Anyway, it doesn't really matter, does it? You can just say you are. You can make up all the Indian stuff. No one knows what's real and what isn't. Or cares."

“You think that would work?”

Steve sighed the sigh of the eternally defeated. “No.”

After a while, Steve said, “Fakes. We’re a country of fakes. Style over substance. Mythology instead of history. P. T. Barnum was the quintessential American. There’s a sucker born every minute.”

“But you can’t fool all of the people all of the time.”

“You don’t have to. You only have to fool a majority for long enough to get into office or become a zillionaire.”

Malcolm had heard all this before. It was Steve’s one obsession. “Heavy, man.”

“Yeah, damned heavy. This is a nation of people who live in cities and are descended from immigrants but think they’re cowboys and like to be told by television commercials that their grandparents live on a farm in Iowa. One of our most popular movie stars was a guy who couldn’t act, had never been a cowboy, had never been in uniform, but he played cowboys and war heroes, and everyone thought he really was a cowboy and soldier-warrior. One of his buddies, another bad actor who played the same kind of roles, is now our Figurehead in Chief. We have a guy in the White House who chuckles and drools and wears a cowboy hat for his publicity photos even though he never was a cowboy, and the public swallows it and loves him. He’s the lovable, braindead, cowboy grandpa they like to pretend they all had. Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world like a Colossus-shaped helium balloon.”

“On the bright side,” Malcolm pointed out, “it’ll never get any worse than this. The Gypper is the nadir. We’ll never have a worse, fakier President than this. It’s got to get better from here.”

“I suppose.” Steve was silent for a moment. Then he said, “The Big Gypper. The Deceptor in Chief. The Great Deluminator. The Supreme Mystifier.” Steve’s voice began to rise. “The Deceiver in Chief!”

“Steve, Steve, calm down. I keep telling you, you’ve got to stop thinking about politics all the time. It only depresses you.”

Golden laughed. “I suppose that instead I should think all the time about getting published, the way you do. Yeah, sure, that doesn’t depress *you* at all.”

They walked on in silent, companionable gloom for a block or two. They had left the area where drunks littered the sidewalk and they were

now entering the region littered by overdressed, rising young men and women. The two men had often debated which kind of litter was worse. At least the drunks were genuine. The yuppies were all playing grownup, whereas the drunks were just being drunks.

This was a topic that often diverted Malcolm and Steve, but today they were both too depressed to bother with it.

Both men had been writing stories and novels for years and making little progress.

Steve had yet to sell anything.

Malcolm had had two stories and three novels published. All were science fiction.

One of the stories had appeared in a men's magazine of so sleazy a nature, and bearing a cover which proclaimed that sleaziness so loudly, that he had never intentionally shown the magazine to anyone. Marlene had found it once and had burst into hysterical laughter, after which Malcolm had hidden the magazine.

His novels had been, as his then-editor had kindly put it, "quietly received." The first time he heard that phrase, Malcolm was pleased. He imagined his book being thoughtfully discussed in low tones in quiet, dignified surroundings. Eventually he came to understand that "quietly received" was a New York publishing euphemism for "totally ignored." As Malcolm nowadays was by New York editors.

He fantasized about the editor who would say, "This is a work of genius, Mr. Erskine, sir! Where have you been all my life? How much money do you want?" The editor of his dreams. "How much money do you have?" Malcolm would reply.

Malcolm could not understand why Steve had not yet sold anything. He liked what he had read of Steve's work. It tended to be a bit heavy on political philosophizing, but it was well written. But then, neither could Malcolm understand why he had not sold more of his own work, or why what he had sold had been ignored by critics and readers.

Failure made Malcolm despair.

Despair made him whine.

His whining had already driven away one wife and one agent and seemed on the verge of driving away a second agent. When pressed, he had to admit that it was difficult to say which loss was the more painful.

Charlie, the first agent, had been ineffective but a nice guy. Marlene, the ex-wife, had been quite effective but not at all nice. She had, though, looked awfully good in underwear. Now the only human being Malcolm ever saw in nothing but underwear was himself, reflected in the bedroom mirror. The sight never excited him. As the years passed, he began to doubt that it would ever again excite anyone.

“Yeah,” Malcolm said after a while. “Workshops. The yahoos are so gullible. Everyone’s gullible. It’s all about gullibility. Look at those workshops. Someone advertises a workshop that will tell you how to start a successful business or whatever, and all the idiots rush to sign up and pay a couple of thousand bucks for a few hours of empty talk and some glossy slides and a fancy binder full of illiterate nonsense. Workshops . . .”

Maybe I could combine all of this crap, he thought. Use my fiction-writing background. Run a workshop while dressed as a gray space alien with big eyes. I could practically write the material in my sleep. How to start a successful business. Secret inside information from an alien.

Suddenly he stopped walking and spoke aloud the title that had just sprung into his head: “*Business Secrets from the Stars.*”

“Huh?”

Malcolm looked around quickly to make sure no one else had heard him. “Er, nothing. Nothing important. Well, actually, I may have just hit on something. Wow.” The more he thought about it, the better it sounded.

“You want to take the long way around, along the Mall?” Steve asked. “The girls in their summer dresses.”

“What? Oh, no, not today. I’ve got to get back to the orifice. You’ll just have to be horny and frustrated on your own.”

“Oh, I’m used to that.”

Malcolm practically ran back to the office.

With each step, it all became clearer.

Tens of thousands of years ago, and vast numbers of light years away, a mighty business empire had existed. The Andromeda Corporation was its name, and one of its top executives was Lukas of Aldebaran, a member of a noble, admirable, handsome race known as the Merskeenians.

Lukas of Aldebaran, star-dwelling Merskeenian! What a ring that had to it!

The Merskeenians were the ancestors of mankind. Now, across the immense distances of time and space, Lukas was communicating mind-to-mind with the only human being of a moral, spiritual, and intellectual fiber sufficiently refined to receive his messages: Malcolm Erskine. Lukas wanted to pour into the mind of his descendant the secret business wisdom that had made the Andromeda Corporation so great and so revered. It was Malcolm's duty to share this wisdom, these secrets, the business secrets from the stars, with his fellow human beings. Who in return would share their paychecks with Malcolm.

Oh, this was dynamite!

Of course, that first contact and all the astonishing revelations that followed it could not come to Malcolm in a cubicle or his apartment or out here on the street. The place had to match the experience.

Malcolm pondered for a while as he raced back to his office. Finally he came up with the image of himself sitting in lonely contemplation in the solitude, the clean, pure air of a Rocky Mountain peak.

That would be believable given that Malcolm lived in a city snuggled up against the Rocky Mountains and containing many enthusiastic mountain climbers and hikers among its citizens. Malcolm was not one of them. For him, the mountains were just an interesting backdrop, those jaggedy things off to the west that the sun set behind. Malcolm preferred city life. If he sweated and strained, he wanted it to be because of a beautiful girl with shoulder-length black hair and not because of a mountainside. But he'd leave all of that out of the book.

In the real world, Malcolm lived in a cubicle. He was a man-shaped rat surrounded by thin, movable four- and six-foot walls. He was required to sit in one place for hours on end, with his back to the cubicle opening, staring at his computer screen, churning out unspeakably boring computer programs for use by other cubicle rats trapped in the vast maze of the telephone company.

Some of the cubicle rats liked to call themselves cubicle cowboys. They managed to convince themselves that they were autonomous, in control of their lives, spending their days in a maze because it was their choice to do so and that it was moreover a strong and admirable choice.

They were macho, they were manly, they were warriors in a great capitalist battle. Malcolm, excellent though he usually was at fooling himself, was immune to this particular delusion.

The cubicle rats shared each other's lives unwillingly. Malcolm knew more about his fellow rats' personal relationships than he had any wish to. He had heard — could not shut out — their loudly angry or explicitly affectionate telephone conversations. He had always tried not to broadcast his own telephone arguments with Marlene, but she had a way of making him forget where he was and lose all self-control. "Oh, it's you," was usually the last thing he said at low volume.

At his first job, after being shown his assigned cubicle, he had immediately decorated the walls with photos and a calendar, making it his space, converting it from anonymous gray to something welcoming. Using a hook rigged from a bent paperclip, he had hung a cheap plastic clock where he could watch it easily. The next morning, his second day on the job, he had arrived to find the pictures and calendars taken down and dumped in the trashcan and the clock on his desk, its face cracked. There was a note taped to his computer monitor reminding him that, as stated on page fourteen of the employees' manual he had been given the previous day, only company-provided and approved material was to be placed on the walls of his cubicle. He had later decided that that was just as well, given how often he and his fellow rats were shifted from cubicle to cubicle.

So he settled for the gray, supposedly sound-absorbing walls. He never looked at them, anyway. All day long, his attention was — or was supposed to be — focused on the screen of his computer.

Malcolm's desk was actually a shelf attached to the cubicle walls, and the computer was placed so that its screen faced toward the cubicle opening. Sometimes, to give himself the illusion of privacy, Malcolm would swivel the monitor as much to one side as he could and would do his work with his upper body leaning awkwardly on the desk. That way, the screen wasn't quite so visible to anyone walking by or sneaking up behind him.

It was a good thing he had worked this method out. When he got back from his Mexican lunch, Malcolm swiveled the monitor to one side even more than usual, shoved aside a stack of already long-neglected requests

for new programs, and began writing what was destined to become his first and only bestseller.

**T**his, at any rate, was how Malcolm remembered the genesis of his great idea. He liked to think that his grand conception had come to him while he was digesting refried beans and a side order of menudo and that it had sprung from his existential headache like a New Age Athena. But the truth was that important seeds had been sown earlier.

Five weeks earlier, in the case of the first seed.

Malcolm had been ordered to attend a one-day workshop which was guaranteed to make him a more dynamic employee, a better salesman, and a more satisfied human being. His doubts about the utility of the whole thing were aroused as soon as he read the pamphlet which both announced the workshop and explained that no one was excused from going.

“Attendance at the voluntary loyalty meetings is compulsory,” Malcolm muttered, quoting from one of his own novels.

The compulsoriness of the workshop was enough by itself to excite his skepticism. In his experience, management always made compulsory those gatherings that no employee in his right mind would attend voluntarily.

Although it was a depressing fact that a surprisingly large number of his fellow employees were enthusiastic volunteers at indoctrination events that he considered stunningly inane. What all of that might signify, Malcolm had no idea.

More to the point, Malcolm’s job did not involve selling, so the workshop could scarcely make him a better salesman.

Nor could any workshop make him satisfied. Only a best-selling book, followed by a cascade of dollars and sexual delights, could do that.

And finally, he had no wish to become a more dynamic employee. He was happy being the narcoleptic employee he now was, and if he ever did achieve writing success, he would instantly become an ex-employee. He had already worked for the telephone company for ten years, and he didn’t see why any reasonably law-abiding citizen should have to serve a longer term than that.

As if all of this were not enough, the pamphlet advertising the workshop was written in what Malcolm had come to call Corporate English, a subliterate variant of the language that filled him with helpless fury whenever he was forced to read it.

Are you being all you can be? All you should be? When you lay in bed at night, do you sleep happily because you're Career's "right on track?" Or do you "toss and turn" because your worried about it's path? Don't worry any longer! Come join you're Successful Coworkers for a 3 day Workshop where you will learn to "factor Success" into you're Daily Life!

The temptation to mark the pamphlet up with spelling and punctuation and usage corrections in red ink and then mail it back to the 55th-floor office where it had originated was almost overwhelming, but Malcolm managed to resist the temptation.

No, he reminded himself, to the place where the pamphlet's writer officed. The word of the month was "office" used as a verb. Thus, Malcolm and all his fellow employees had recently received a memo announcing that Ted Jones had been put in charge of In-House Career Enhancement and that he would be officing on the 55th floor. It was from that very office that the pamphlet announcing the workshop had come.

According to the intramural grapevine, Ted Jones was currently sleeping with a very important company vice president. It was clearly unwise to belittle this man who officed on the 55th floor and sexed in a power bed. Some of Malcolm's fellow employees, conflating a useful British expression with a useful American one and coming up with something meaningless, liked to say that Western Bell was run by a good old boy network. They would have come closer to the truth if they'd said it was run by a good old bed network. Malcolm saw no point in endangering his job now, while literary success was still a distant dream.

The pamphlet went on and on, for page after slick page, with photographs of happy groups of Successful Coworkers who had attended previous sessions of the workshop, and with quotations from them

attesting to the impact of the workshop on their lives and their work. All in all, the telephone ratepayers of the state of Arapahoe had been soaked a pretty penny for this workshop even before it got under way. It was the kind of company extravagance that made Malcolm grind his teeth every time he encountered it. The thought of it filled him with guilt when he deposited his biweekly paycheck. Not that he would ever not deposit it. The monthly payments he had to make to keep Marlene in the manner to which the court had said she was entitled gave him little choice.

Wednesday of the next week found Malcolm the lone wearer of blue jeans and running shoes in a room full of overdressed and overeager Successful Coworkers.

They sat around an oval table of some heavy wood, a handsome piece of furniture, highly polished, and paid for by the long-suffering telephone ratepayers, who had no idea what their money had bought. The same, Malcolm thought, looking around the room and feeling out of place and trapped, could be said for the souls of his fellow workers. Those souls were also dense, impenetrable, well polished, and completely for sale. He pondered that analogy for a while, but it led him nowhere and he abandoned it.

At nine on the dot, the instructor bounded into the room, grinning frantically. "Hi, everyone!"

He was a young man, smooth of cheek and forehead, and, Malcolm felt sure, of brain. He was also tall, slender, handsome in a clean-cut way, with clear eyes and perfect teeth. His head was covered with thick, wavy dark hair and his clothes hung on him perfectly. He was every woman's dream and every man's nightmare.

"Hi!" he said again. He sprang from the doorway to the front of the room and said, "I'll be your facilitator today. My name's Jack Jackson, but you can call me 'Jack.'"

And my parents grew me in a vat from alien spores, Malcolm thought. Or maybe it's plastic surgery. Christ, look at them. They think this guy's great!

All the Successful Coworkers around him were staring at Jack "Jack" Jackson worshipfully. This was the man with the answers, the secrets of success, the holy knowledge. This was Important Stuff.

"Now that *you* know *my* name," Jack "Jack" Jackson said, "I think we

ought to go around the table and introduce ourselves.” He pointed at a woman near him, who looked first flustered and then flattered. “We’ll start with you.”

She pointed at herself and raised her eyebrows and batted her eyes at the facilitator, who was probably twenty years her junior.

“Yes, that’s right, you,” Jack-Jack-Jack said. “Just give us your name, dear, and the name of your organization.”

“Oh,” she said breathlessly, “I’m Rebecca Ortiz, and I work in New Products Marketing, and we’re right here on the 14th floor!”

The facilitator nodded. “Becky. That’s great. And you?” He bent his boyish gaze on the man next to Rebecca Ortiz. The man answered, and Jack-Jack-Jack shortened his name immediately as well.

Malcolm ground his teeth. Compulsive nicknamery. Another nickname nincompoop. How was he going to get through eight hours of this idiocy?

When his turn came, he said, “My name is Malcolm Erskine, and I work in the New Ways to Get Money from the Widows and Orphans Office, more popularly known as the Waffen SS. We office down in the 25th subbasement. Our motto is, ‘If you’ve got a last penny hidden somewhere, we’ll find it.’”

His coworkers looked at him in consternation, confusion, or hostility, depending on each individual’s degree of company loyalty and intelligence. However, JackJackJack was unfazed. Obviously, he didn’t listen to what anyone said. He heard only the name and then nicked it. “Mal,” he said, nodding, and turned his attention to the next Successful Coworker.

“Yeah,” Malcolm muttered. “Mal. Short for Malcontent.”

A lunch break was scheduled for noon. It seemed ten hours away, rather than three. Since only his body’s presence was required and not his brain’s, Malcolm tried to spend the rest of the morning working out plot details in the novel he was currently writing. It worked surprisingly well, and for him the morning was productive. He felt that he had indeed become a more satisfied human being. He was almost sorry to see noon arrive.

Lunchtime! Teacher J-J-J says, “See ya in an hour! Have a good lunch, you guys!”

The Successful Coworkers laugh.

Why the laughter? Malcolm wondered. Was there a joke I missed? It was a feeling he had often had, going back to his childhood. Nowadays, Marlene and the court system played a renewed joke on him every month, and he still didn't get the punchline.

Bell rings! Captives free for one hour, rush to the playground!

Malcolm fretted as he waited for the elevator. There was good stuff in his head from his morning's musings and he knew that it would drift away if he didn't get it into some permanent form soon. The elevator bell *pinged*, and Malcolm bulled his way to the front of the crowd so as to get on the elevator first. "Sorry, sorry, sorry," he muttered insincerely. "Running shoes. Won't hurt your toes."

A flash of insight: if all executoids wore running shoes, there'd be fewer mortal injuries as they scrambled over one another on the road to the top. Perhaps he could use that insight in a book some day.

Back at his desk (fifty-five minutes left), Malcolm yanked open the drawer in which he kept personal matters, pulled out a Tupperware container, pulled off the top, and began eating the lunch he had brought from home. Then he turned to his desktop computer and began processing words.

Eating, typing, eating, typing. Just a writin' fool. The outside world had vanished.

The outside world hadn't vanished entirely. Boss-radar alerted him to the passage of Jim Leiter, a man who had stopped climbing the corporate ladder a decade earlier and whom others now climbed over. Malcolm kept typing but also kept watching Leiter out of the corner of his eye, ready to save the chapter he was working on and substitute a program on his screen.

Leiter passed by, deep in conversation with another boss of the same level. Malcolm heard the other man say to Leiter, "You're lucky with Erskine. Works hard right through lunch, even in the middle of a workshop. Wish *I* had . . ." At which point they passed out of earshot.

Yeah, that's me, Malcolm thought. Just call me "Mal." Short for "Malfeasance."

Uh-oh, the bell's ringing again! The sad bell, the dolorous bell, the bell that calls the little barbarians back to the classroom.

Malcolm's face was appropriately long. The book — a tragic, gripping drama about an unsuccessful science-fiction writer — was going well and he hated to leave it in mid-grip.

His Successful Coworkers, however, looked happy and chattered together about their eagerness to get back into the room and hear more wonders from Teach. Out of the mouth of a babe and suckling, Malcolm thought, wondering briefly what the rest of the quotation was and where it came from.

J-J-J stood at the door to welcome them, each and every one, and he addressed each and every one by nickname, proving the value of the memory-aiding tips he had spewed out during the morning session. "Mal," he said, nodding.

Malcolm grinned brightly. "That's me. 'Mal,' short for 'Maleficent.'"

Christ, he thought, what a jerk, what a twerp, what a dork. This is endless. It's all endless. Life is endless. Failure is endless.

Failure is endless, he repeated, savoring the line. Not bad. Have to use it in a book some time.

Post-prandial sleepiness took over. There was to be no working out of plot details this afternoon. Instead, J-J-J's nattering kept merging with dreams, out of which Malcolm would jerk suddenly awake, looking around in short-lived panic to see if anyone had noticed his drooping eyelids and bowing head.

But his Successful Coworkers were all too absorbed in listening to JJJ to notice Malcolm. Their pens scratched busily on their burgundy-leather-encased ruled tablets.

Oh, God, Malcolm cried within the safety of his mind, they're taking notes!

While he was nodding with sleepiness, they were nodding in agreement with JJJ's insights into the business world — a world which Malcolm believed to be so lacking in depth that insights into it are physically impossible. The shock of seeing everyone else take all of this nonsense so seriously kept Malcolm awake for a full ten minutes.

During that time, JJJ was able to rattle off three points of vital importance for becoming more dynamic, a better salesman, and a happier person within the telephone company environment. With each point, he extended another finger, starting with his index finger, and waved his

hand in the air, so that at the end he was giving a manic Boy Scout salute.

“One!” JJJ cried happily to the roomful of wide-eyed, small-brained, busily scribbling listeners. “A customer never *buys* anything. You *sell* him something!”

Scribble, scribble, scribble.

“Two! You can go just as far in this company as *you* decide to! No one promotes you! You promote yourself! Golly! Look at Ted Jones! He started out as a lineman, and look at him now! You can do the same thing he did!”

There was a slight pause as all the Successful Coworkers thought about Ted Jones’s route to the top and wondered if they really wanted to take it themselves, but then the scribble, scribble, scribble began again.

“Three! Capitalism was ordained by God, right there in the Bible, so the more you do to advance it in the world and in your personal lives, the better everything will go for you now and in the afterlife.”

Malcolm expected an even longer pause after this bomb, but there was no pause at all. The Successful Coworkers nodded vigorously and scribbled furiously.

Malcolm sighed in defeat and drifted back into sleep.

He was rushing down a long corridor toward a gigantic old man sitting in judgement over the souls of the newly dead. The old man sat behind a battered gray-painted metal desk. He had a very long, white beard splattered with food stains.

“Who’s this?” the old man roared in a voice that shook the Heavens. “Malcolm Erskine, eh?”

Malcolm recognized him immediately. It was his grandfather, old Tibbs Erskine, source of childhood nightmares, a ghastly ancient whose death fifteen years earlier Malcolm had celebrated with a bottle of fairly good champagne.

The real Tibbs Erskine had had a hoarse, gravelly voice. Not this Tibbs.

“Gotcha now,” Tibbs bawled, leering at his hated grandson. He peeled back his thin lips, exposing those big, pointed, grayish yellow teeth that Malcolm had seen so often in nightmares much like this one. Tibbs opened and closed his mouth rapidly a few times, his powerful teeth

snapping together. “Heh, heh, heh. Filthy kid. Cleanliness is next to godliness. Lesson you never learned.”

He wagged his long forefinger at Malcolm, displaying a ragged, dirty fingernail. “Lessee, now. Questions for the defendant. Yes, indeedy. Number one: ‘Dja ever resist being sold a bill of goods, eh? Didja? Ever in your life?’”

Not that Malcolm could remember. And even if he had ever resisted being conned, falling for Marlene more than made up for that. He looked at his feet and muttered, “No.”

“Hah!” Tibbs Erskine checked something off on a clipboard that materialized in his hand. “Did you go just as far in your career as you wanted to, rather than let other people decide how far you could go? Huh? Didja, huh?”

Malcolm glared at the ground and shuffled his feet. “No.”

“Speak up, you godawful little turd!” The very ground shook. Those teeth snapped and snapped, sounding like thunder. “I can’t hear you! You’re as worthless as your father was at your age. Speak up!”

“NO!”

Tibbs Erskine glared down from his immense height. “Don’t raise your voice to me, Sonny. Must be your damned mother’s blood. Okay, last question. Have you always and ever and in every way and in every place and at every opportunity preached capitalism and condemned all forms of collectivism?”

“N —”

“Ah hah!” Tibbs Erskine bellowed, cutting off his grandson’s reply. He jammed his thumb down on the desk, depressing a huge red button that Malcolm was sure hadn’t been there before.

The floor beneath Malcolm vanished and he started falling. Far below him, a great pit of fire roared, its flames writhing up toward him eagerly.

He kicked in reflexive panic and awoke. He looked around quickly, but his Successful Coworkers were still intent on JJJ’s words of wisdom, and no one had noticed his movement.

The dream, he realized — and it was a very depressing realization — was better than anything he had ever written.

**T**he second seed was provided by Malcolm's still-new agent, a young woman named Judith Tillen, who was quickly learning why both Malcolm's first agent and his wife had dumped him.

"I wanna be rich," Malcolm whined. "Why aren't I rich?"

Why aren't I? Judith thought. Why don't I have at least one fabulously successful client, fifteen percent of whose royalties would make *me* rich, too? Then I could handle only those clients I really liked. Which is to say, those who don't whine.

"Because you've never had a hit, Malcolm. In fact, you've never even had a moderate success."

Malcolm glared at her for a moment, then relaxed against his side of the booth. "Yeah, you're right."

They were in the coffee shop of the hotel where the World Science Fiction Convention was being held. The hotel was filled with the socially unusual young readers of the fiction and the embittered middle-aged writers of it. The former came to these conventions to see the latter and to socialize with each other. The latter came to pretend that they were there to get to know the former, but they were really there to booze with each other, to badger their agents, and to lick the boots of any editors in attendance. The agents attended to do business with the editors and to let their clients get their badgering and whining out of their systems. The editors attended because their boots needed a spit shine.

The convention was usually held on Labor Day weekend, usually in America, and usually in some city where the heat and humidity in early September are frightful. This year, it was being held in Indianapolis, and the heat and humidity were frightful.

Malcolm had gone to college only fifty miles from here, at Indiana University. He remembered the summers as being hot and humid, but not this oppressive. His body must be having more and more trouble dealing with the heat because of age. God, he thought, now I'm getting old, too. Old *and* unsuccessful. I'll be one of those unshaven, drunken wrecks I see stumbling around these conventions. Look, someone will say, isn't that what's-his-name? And someone else will say, Oh, yeah, Erskine. Didn't he sell a few books a few decades ago that no one ever read?

"And every year," he told Judith, "there's a whole batch of new, young writers coming up that everyone goes ga-ga over, which pushes

people like me further and further down on the publishers' lists. This is a young man's genre."

"That's not really fair. There are plenty of older writers doing very well."

"Yeah, but they became famous when they were still young. I don't mean that only young writers can write this stuff. I mean that publishers aren't interested in discovering anyone who's already past thirty, or who's had books published that didn't do well. How well you write has nothing to do with that. If you don't hit it young, and on the first try, they aren't interested."

Embarrassed, Judith looked down at her dessert. Pecan pie, and far from the wonderful variety she had found only in the South, but at least she was closer to the South here than she was in New York.

"There's a lot of truth in that, Malcolm. But you really are a fine writer, with a polished technique and all the other craftsmanship an experienced writer develops." She meant that quite sincerely, and saying it made her feel — for the moment, anyway — warmer toward her luckless client. He *was* a pretty good writer, and he *did* deserve greater success, and acknowledging that to herself made her more sympathetic toward his whining and self-pity. "I don't know what to tell you, Malcolm. Maybe you ought to try something in a different genre."

"Well, I *have* thought about doing an expose of the software business. Rip the lid off it and show all the nasty little wriggling white things hiding in the darkness."

Oh, God, Judith thought. "I think the audience might be a bit limited."

"Oh, I suppose so. And the little nasty wriggling white things are few and far between. The main ugly truth about the software business is that it's so fucking boring, and that wouldn't make for much of an expose."

"It certainly sounds boring," Judith agreed. "I think you ought to stick to fiction. That's more your *metier*."

*Metier*, Malcolm repeated to himself. Jesus, I've got an agent who knows more words than I do. "You're right. Okay, listen to this. This is much better. I've been thinking of writing a satirical pseudo-Western. I keep hearing that Westerns are about to make a comeback any day now."

"I keep hearing that, too," Judith said. "But I've been hearing that for as long as I can remember. I bet you have, too, and I know you can

remember a lot further back than I can. Anyway, just what do you mean by a ‘satirical pseudo-Western,’ or do I even want to know?”

She had ordered the pecan pie before finishing the main course, a truly awful fish sandwich, in the almost superstitious belief that this would make her late lunch meeting with Malcolm end sooner. Now she poked at the dry, tasteless, flaky white sandwich filling and thought again about the South. For an instant, a memory of succulent, tasty, lightly breaded fried river catfish came back to her. She could smell it. She closed her eyes and smiled. But then in her mind the dead fish assumed Malcolm’s pouty face. She opened her eyes again and faced reality.

For a moment, Malcolm’s pout disappeared and he displayed some enthusiasm. He leaned forward slightly. “This was my idea. I’d call it *The James Boys*, and the gimmick would be that it would *seem* to be a straight historical Western about Frank and Jesse James, but in fact, as the reader — pardon me, the *intelligent* reader — would eventually come to realize, the two gunslinging brothers are really Henry James, the novelist, and his brother, the psychiatrist, whatever his name was.”

“William. I don’t —”

“Wait, wait,” Malcolm said, rushing on. “See, the plot would be one of the real-life escapades of Frank and Jesse. Robbing a bank, or whatever. But one of the characters, the older brother, would speak in Henry James’s impossible sentences, and the younger brother would ponder everyone’s inner motivations and psychological problems while he was shooting them.” He leaned back, smiling with pleasure at his own idea.

“The more I think about it, the more I like it. Or a variant of it would be to have Frank and Jesse fake Jesse’s murder and escape from the law by moving East and assuming new identities, becoming the other James brothers. Or maybe *vice-versa* if the dates work out the other way around. Have Henry and William move West and become criminals. Sounds like a blockbuster to me.”

“Sounds impossible to sell, to me. How many editors would even get the joke? It’s a bit obscure.” Judith congratulated herself on her tact. Her first impulse had been to tell Malcolm that his idea sucked with teeth.

Malcolm deflated immediately. “Yeah, maybe you’re right. Not to

mention that I'd have to read a bunch of Henry James novels to really get the feel for his prose, which is a pretty awful thought. Ah, well, maybe some day, when I'm famous and can write anything I want to, I'll give the idea a try."

I'm desperate to be famous, he thought. It's loosening my normally ferocious grip on reality.

Judith, he realized, might be the only agent or editor at this convention who even knew who Malcolm Erskine was.

The evening before, on the way up to his hotel room for the night, Malcolm had shared the elevator with a famous editor. Just the two of them, alone in a small elevator for who knew how many minutes! It had struck Malcolm as a gift from the gods, a golden opportunity for the kind of professional schmoozing that he had told himself was the main reason for attending the convention. He had smiled at the man and said hello in as warm and familiar a tone as he could manage.

The editor had smiled uncertainly and peered at Malcolm's convention attendee badge, pinned to his shirt pocket. Malcolm's name was on the badge, and a red ribbon was attached to it, indicating that he was a professional writer.

"Um, hi," the editor had said, frowning, concentrating on the name on the badge. "I'm sorry. Do I know you?"

"Not yet, ha, ha! Malcolm Erskine." He stuck out his hand.

The editor took his hand reluctantly and let it go quickly. "I'm afraid I don't . . . I'm sorry, I . . . What have you written?"

Malcolm told him. It didn't take very long.

"Ah, yes. I see. Well . . ."

There was a silence that seemed eternal.

The elevator bell *dinged*.

"Ah, my floor," the editor said, not hiding his relief very well. "Well. Have a nice convention."

The door opened onto a brightly lit hotel hallway filled with happy, laughing people who greeted the editor with cries of welcome uttered in rich, successful voices. Then the door closed, and Malcolm continued alone up to his floor, which was quiet and dusty and ill lit, where were located the rooms the convention had reserved for failed authors who really shouldn't have bothered attending.

He's just clutching at straws, Judith realized. Poor man. He really *is* depressed and worried about his career. With good reason, she admitted to herself. To what degree Malcolm's situation was her fault for not selling his work, and to what degree it was Malcolm's for not sending her work she could sell, she could not have said. She was sure that agents and their clients would always have different answers to that question.

"I'm not sure you should spend too much time thinking about Westerns."

"Maybe so," Malcolm said. "I suppose science fiction really is my *metier*."

This is going to go on forever, Judith thought. I'll never get to enjoy my pecan pie. I'll never even get back to my room. How do I stop it?

She looked at her watch. "Why, it's three o'clock already!" she said brightly. "So that means it's already four o'clock in New York! This whole time zone thing seems strange to me. I always have trouble keeping track of it. Here we are, eating," she sighed, "pecan pie, and in New York it's already almost dinner time. It's really quite late."

"Time zones are shit," Malcolm said.

"What?"

"They make no sense at all. The whole world should just be on Greenwich time. So instead of setting my alarm for 6 a.m. to get up for work, I'd set it for 1 p.m. So what? I'd still be tired and filled with resentment and anger when it went off. Anyway, it'd be less confusing for everyone, in the long run." Maybe agents wouldn't call their clients at 5 a.m. that way, thinking they must be up already because it was 8 a.m. in New York, as Judith had once done to him.

"But wait a minute!" he said suddenly. "Why stop there? The world's moving toward decimal measurements in everything, so why should time be sacred? Why don't we divide the day into ten parts? Divide that into ten parts and so on. So that way, a milliday would be, um . . ." He drifted off into calculation.

Judith played with her pecan pie. She could of course eat it and ignore Malcolm as he rattled on, but she knew she wouldn't really enjoy it until he finally shut up. And, preferably, left.

"Just under a minute and a half," he said. "So that would be convenient. People could get used to thinking in those terms."

“I couldn’t.”

“No, they couldn’t. You’re right. They wouldn’t accept it. People are idiots.” He didn’t notice Judith’s sudden stiffening or her glare. That editors and agents are also people with feelings was a fact that too often eluded Malcolm. “The only way to make such a radical change stick would be to kill everyone off and start fresh. No parents to bias the new kids. Brew the next generation in vats.”

Oh, no, Judith thought, he’s about to come up with another hackneyed, derivative, unsellable idea for a science-fiction novel.

“I could do a non-fiction book suggesting all of this,” Malcolm said thoughtfully, surprising her slightly. “Maybe make a bit of stir. Or maybe I’d just be dismissed as a kook. Probably not even publishable, right?”

Judith shook her head, feeling a vast sense of relief.

“Maybe I should do it as a novel, instead. A whole new world of new people. All speaking the same language, all using rational measurements. The only holiday all over the world would be the first day of the new year, which would be called Vat Day.”

“And everyone would look the same and act the same?”

“Oh, no. There’d still be lots of genetic diversity.” Malcolm laughed. “But they’d all read the same books. Mine!” He could imagine himself being happy in such a world. A rational world. A peaceful world. A prosperous world. A world in which he was the top bestselling author. Or maybe the only bestselling author. It wouldn’t be a very rational world otherwise.

Everyone would be physically perfect. Especially the women. Who would also be perfectly infatuated with Malcolm Erskine.

Too simple, Malcolm realized. You have to have tension and an antagonist. So maybe the bestselling writer turns out to be the world’s only defense against a seemingly sexy woman who somehow emerged from the vat mentally warped. Marlinga is her name. Maybe the temperature control went bad while Marlinga was still being formed. Or someone accidentally poured too much or too little of some important chemical into the mix. So she’s outwardly a hot number, with a firm little body that looks terrific in panties, and she can do pretty remarkable things with her mouth, as the author hero finds out before he discovers

that she's a criminal genius intent on destroying the world and especially him.

There'd have to be an even hotter babe involved, a girl who had emerged from the vats without a single flaw. All the temperature controls and chemical mixtures were absolutely optimum. She'd be a dusky goddess with shoulder-length black hair. She'd be rescued from Marlinga by the hero writer at the very end and would fling her arms around his neck and kiss him passionately. End of book, but not end of story.

Gazing off into space, smiling slightly, Malcolm sighed.

"Well, actually," Judith said, "I was thinking that maybe you should give science fiction a rest. Maybe you need to get some distance from it for a while. Crime, mystery, suspense — that's more what I had in mind. All very big right now."

Malcolm sneered. "So are New Age and self-help. Maybe I should invent some new kind of woo-woo."

Foolishly, Judith asked, "For example?" Maybe he had a germ of an idea for something useful. Infected by his desperation, she found herself wanting to help him even while she was desperate to get away from him.

"Oh, I don't know. I don't . . ." Then he chuckled. "Here's one. It just came to me. You know how idiotic astrology is?"

"Um," Judith said. One of her clients was selling a couple of hundred thousand paperback copies a year of an astrological cookbook, *Stars in Your Kitchen*.

"Right. Even if the theories weren't just pulled out of thin air and based on the sun's positions in the Zodiac thousands of years ago, how would the effect work? Not gravity. Someone calculated that the gravitational effect of the doctor standing next to a mother giving birth is far greater than the pull of the planets on the baby at the same time. I mean, it just makes no sense at all. But how about magma?"

How about those Yankees, Judith wanted to say. "What about magma?"

"Well, it's close by. Right under our feet. Almost. Sort of. It probably does have a gravitational effect on us. It flows in huge currents. Maybe it even releases gases that we aren't aware of. So in other words, where you're born and when may affect your personality because of the magma

flows underneath you at the time.”

“It’s novel,” Judith said uncertainly.

The gimmick began to appeal to Malcolm more as he thought about it. “Magmamancy,” he said. “Magmoscopy. No, that sounds medical. Anyway, I’d have to come up with a good name for this new pseudo-science. I could tie it to primitive religions. Maybe that’s why they used to throw virgins into volcanoes! They wanted to connect the tribe to the magma! They understood all of this intuitively.”

“I bet that never happened except in a movie,” Judith said.

Malcolm scarcely heard her. He had been transported into a fantasy in which he rescued a beautiful black-haired, dusky-skinned maiden from a terrible death in some Polynesian volcano. She turned to him, her almond-shaped eyes wide with gratitude and desire, and flung her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist and kissed him passionately.

That sexual fantasy gave way to an even more potent one: the cover of a bestselling book with Malcolm’s name on it. Across the top it said *Magmamancy*. Beneath that was a painting of a volcano in full eruption.

Malcolm frowned. He had seen that cover before, in real life. Hadn’t it been used for L. Ron Hubbard’s book about his invented religion?

Then he saw the look on Judith Tillen’s face, and both the book cover and the luscious mouth of the almond-eyed maiden faded away.

“Crap,” Malcolm said. “Maybe I should start a new religion, like Hubbard. Now even his awful science-fiction series is a smash, because all those Scientologists rush out and buy each new installment. And he’s dead! He’s writing bestsellers from the grave! Do I have to die to make it? I can’t become young again, but I can still die. Then you could hire some young guy to write more novels under my name and pretend they’ve just been discovered among my papers. Maybe then you could even sell my real novels, once they’re reeking of the tomb and decaying flesh and wriggling piles of maggots.”

Judith pushed her uneaten slice of pecan pie away and signaled for the check.

**M**alcolm found himself utterly caught up in his new literary project.

At work, he lied bald facedly about what he was really doing, and he worked on his new book instead of producing programs. He realized that eventually there would be a day of reckoning. He was counting on literary success coming first.

When someone approached close enough to see the monitor of the computer on his desk, close enough to see that the screen was covered with English text rather than lines in any computer language, he would say something about documentation. "Suppose a truck runs over me some day," Malcolm would say, repeating one of the oldest clichés in the programming business. "You guys would be left with having to figure out how all my programs work. I thought it was about time I started churning out detailed documentation, just in case of that truck."

Once, Jim Leiter, worried by how much time Malcolm was spending on this self-assigned documentation project, asked just how long all this text would turn out to be.

Into Malcolm's mind suddenly sprang a clear, solid, full-color picture of his book filling a window display in a Barnes & Noble outlet. It was a thick book. People of both sexes, various ages, and a range of income levels and professions were rushing into the store to buy it. It was as close to a religious experience as he ever wanted to come.

He closed his eyes to see his vision more clearly, watching one of the dream people pick up the book and read the back and front inside covers. He guessed the expensive hardcover to be around four hundred pages long. Meaning six hundred double-spaced manuscript pages. "Six hundred pages," he said.

Leiter stared at him in horror. "Six — !"

"Double spaced," Malcolm said quickly. "And with wide margins. Twenty-five lines per page, ten words per line. Say two hundred and fifty words per page, for the sake of argument."

Leiter looked dazed. "Huh? Why?"

"Because that's the way I do documentation," Malcolm explained.

"It'll take you forever! What are you doing to my schedule? I've got to hand in the next quarter's estimates to Jab. I'm screwed!"

Malcolm suspected that Leiter had never been screwed and never would be. "Give him anything," he told his boss, thinking this would soothe him. "He probably can't read, anyway."

Alarm filled Leiter's round face. He looked quickly to either side and then shook his head warningly at Malcolm. In a low voice, he said, "Don't be ridiculous. Of course he can."

"The guy's not even human," Malcolm said, although he did lower his voice.

Jab, as Leiter insisted on calling him, obeying the Western Bell dictum that everyone was to be addressed by first name or nickname, furthering the pretense of equality, democracy, and doors that were always open, was Leiter's boss. Malcolm had glimpsed him on a few of Jab's rare visits to what was supposed to be his office, and Malcolm really wasn't sure he was human.

"Look at him," Malcolm said. He kept his voice low, for until he achieved the success and wealth he was increasingly sure *Business Secrets from the Stars* would bring him, he needed a paycheck, and jobs were hard to come by in an America presided over by the Great Defibrillator. "He's like two feet tall and covered with hair. And he doesn't speak. He makes strange noises."

"You've spoken to him?" Leiter looked even more alarmed.

"No. But I heard that weird babbling outside my cubicle one day, so I stepped out into the corridor and I saw him walking away. He looked like a little monkey wearing a suit."

Leiter glared at. "Well, you're wrong, okay? I've talked to him. He has kind of a strange accent, but he's brilliant. He's just what this company needs. And you . . ." He pointed at Malcolm. His finger shook with agitation, possibly anger, possibly just his usual nervousness. "Just do your damned job, okay?" He spun around and stalked out of Malcolm's cubicle and away.

Malcolm closed his eyes again.

The dream reader was still there, waiting in line to pay for the book and avidly reading it while waiting. Fuzzy and indistinct before, the dream reader now solidified into a stunningly, exotically beautiful young woman with shoulder-length black hair and olive skin. She looked at Malcolm's photograph on the inside back cover (the author: pensive, frightfully intelligent, yet dashing and with an intriguing glint in his otherwise quiet eyes) and she said to the woman waiting in line behind her, "Wow! Isn't he wonderful? I'd give anything to meet him and throw

myself on him and wrap my arms and legs around him and kiss him nearly to suffocation and become his sex slave.” She sighed. “But of course it will never happen. Especially if he doesn’t get this book finished.”

Malcolm opened his eyes and threw himself into his task with even greater enthusiasm.

At home he pushed aside the novel he had been working on and devoted all of his writing time to *Business Secrets from the Stars*. When he wasn’t working on the book, he thought about it. When he slept, he dreamed about it, visions of the Andromeda Corporation and Lukas and his fellow Merskeenians drifting through his slumbering mind.

He was following the pathway blazed decades before by L. Ron Hubbard. He hoped, wished, prayed that he would have commensurate success.

For just a moment, Malcolm’s conscience bothered him. He had been a basically honest person all his life, and yet now he was planning to earn a considerable amount of money with what amounted to a confidence game. But it was the work of a moment to rationalize his feelings away and stuff his conscience back into the tiny cranny where it belonged.

## Two

*O beloved descendants, never let your history be a barrier to your future success. Old failures are buried in the past. You are blessed to live in the land of infinite personal reinvention and the limitless worship of form over substance. It is presentation that matters, not what underlies or does not underlie the surface. Do not let yourself fear because of what you were or were not. Forget your history. History, as one of your great thinkers told you long ago, is bunk.*

— *Lukas of Aldebaran, trying to be encouraging*

**D**ecades before Malcolm Erskine had his life-altering moment of illumination, indeed before Malcolm was born, young Daddy Longlegs came home from the war.

Daddy's postwar plans, formulated even before he had shipped out, were quite simple. He would marry Grammy, his fiancée, move from New England to Texas, start an oil company with the help of his daddy's friends, make a few million dollars with the further help of his daddy's friends, and live happily ever after.

But when he reached New England, he discovered that his daddy had changed the last part of the plan. Rather than live happily ever after, Daddy's daddy said, Daddy would have to become President of the United States.

Most immediately, this required that Daddy travel to Africa and murder some animals.

This quest for blood was driven by the careful calculations of his daddy's advisers, and most especially by the calculations of Mr. Umbral, an old Longlegs family retainer. For despite Daddy's wartime record, it was obvious to Daddy's daddy's men that Daddy gave anyone who met him the immediate impression that he was a wimp. If Daddy was ever to be President, it was imperative that he start working immediately to establish his non-wimphood. The advisers had agreed that Daddy should emulate Teddy Roosevelt. In a few respects, at any rate.

Daddy had another problem. With the possible exception of Grammy, no one who met him liked him. But that wouldn't matter so much politically, the advisers thought. The time was coming when no voter would ever actually meet a Presidential candidate in any meaningful sense. The image alone would matter, and they wanted Daddy's image to be that of a virile huntin', shootin' kinda guy. A man's man. A Teddy Roosevelt. Again, in some respects.

Fortunately, Mr. Umbral felt that it wasn't really necessary for Daddy to do his killing in, say, the Belgian Congo or even British East Africa. Some place safer and more civilized would be much better. So, accompanied by Mr. Umbral, Daddy went to South Africa, spent a few days enjoying Capetown's old-fashioned pleasures, and then drove up to Southwest Africa in a well-stocked Range Rover.

Mr. Umbral stayed behind in Capetown to discuss family business with some local oilmen.

Daddy, on his trip into the relative wilderness, was accompanied by a number of South Africans. They were all friends or business acquaintances of his father. All of them worked for Shell Oil. They were all men, of course. They were all white, of course. They were all virile huntin', shootin', drinkin', and cursin' kinda guys.

It was June, the sky was clear, and except for the roughness of the unpaved roads in "The Southwest," as his companions called it, and the strange accents of those companions, and the odd shapes of the trees, and the chilly dryness of the air, and the dustiness of the terrain, and the occasional native village, Daddy could have imagined that he was in northern Texas.

"This is the real bushveld," his companions told him, rolling their r's and speaking in deep voices with a kind of manly, worldly self-assurance

that Daddy envied enormously. Golly, this was the real place for a real man!

His companions' capacity for beer added to the north-Texas illusion. As did their attitude toward the natives. Each time they passed a native village or a black walking beside the road, they said something, always in an angry grumble, about "bloody Kaffirs," which they pronounced "bleddy Keffirs." As the miles increased and the supply of beer decreased, that changed to "blerrykeffirs."

Sometimes, Daddy, who did most of the driving because of the effect of the beer on his companions, felt like adding some racial pejorative of his own — not because he felt any animus toward the local blacks, or those back home, in fact he didn't, but rather as a way of becoming part of the gang, showing that he belonged in this company of older, hard-drinking, worldly-wise, tough, aggressive, virile men. But his nerve failed him and he said nothing.

They stopped a few times to spend the night — always in hotels, to Daddy's great disappointment, for he had been looking forward to camping out under the ancient African sky. But when he suggested this, his companions said scornfully, "And get robbed by blerrykeffirs? Maybe murdered in our sleep? Or just freeze to death? Man, you're crazy!"

In general, the driving toward the wilderness was taking far longer than Daddy had anticipated, in part because they stopped at every small town they passed through to buy more beer. Finally, though, the band of hunters found themselves a hundred miles inside Southwest Africa, in a wilderness with no other humans visible, and strange animal roars and cries coming from the surrounding bush.

It was twilight.

"Now we camp!" Daddy said with youthful enthusiasm. "No, er, dangerous blacks around. Real safe."

His companions laughed raucously. "Man, you think like a blerrykeffir! There're lions around. Lots of 'em. We're safest in here. We'll sleep in the bleddy car."

Daddy looked at his companions. He sniffed the air, rank with a combination of unwashed manly men and spilled beer, and he sighed. He said nothing, accepting their decree as he always had accepted the

decrees of men of their generation.

But, darn it, he was annoyed!

One of the men waved in a general way. "Over there. Park under that bleddy tree."

Daddy let the clutch out. A bit too quickly, as it happened. The vehicle lurched forward, hit a huge tree root, and stalled.

Daddy smelled or saw or thought he smelled or saw smoke.

"Fire!" Daddy screamed. "Abandon! Ditch!"

The others laughed at him. "Blerrykeffir!" "Stalled it!" "Stupid boy!" "Worthless. Tell the old man about him."

Daddy flung his door open and scrambled out. In the rapidly fading light, he stumbled over tree roots and rocks, trying to get as far away from the crippled, doomed craft as he could.

The other men were now silhouettes inside the vehicle, waving their bottles in the air and shouting at him. He couldn't understand a word they said.

Other silhouettes slipped past him, big animal shapes heading for the noise. Two of the beasts turned their heads toward him. Giant cat's heads were just visible in the gloom, one with a shaggy fringe of hair.

Daddy had seen lions in a zoo. He froze in place.

The two lions glanced at each other, looked back at him, then dismissed him and joined their companions.

One by one, unhurriedly, the lions entered the vehicle through the door Daddy had left open. The shouts of his companions turned to screams.

Daddy turned and fled into the bush.

Which was a mistake, he realized immediately. He could see almost nothing here, and it was close to impossible to make headway. Maybe he'd be safer in the open.

He turned, intending to go back. But then he heard the roars of the lions and what sounded like one last, faint scream from a human throat, and he retreated into the tangled undergrowth.

Too late for them now, anyway, he told himself. Can't go back. Wouldn't be prudent. Guy's gotta save himself.

He thrashed about, hoping he was making some headway and moving away from the car.

He heard a low growl from behind him and the sound of something large moving through the brush.

He screamed, tried to run, crashed into a tree trunk.

By now he could see nothing.

He scrambled frantically at the trunk. He felt a thick branch a foot above his head, grabbed it, and started to climb.

Lions, he told himself. Can't climb. I hope.

Daddy climbed until he was exhausted and the branches were too slender for him to pull himself up any further. He sat in a fork, wrapped his long arms and legs around one of the branches of the fork, and tried to stop thinking about lions.

This high up, the tree swayed slowly, gently. It was hypnotic. Daddy had had a very long and tiring day. Astonishingly, he fell asleep. Fortunately, he held on even in his sleep.

**D**aylight woke Daddy from a delightful dream in which Grammy was searching through his hair for lice.

Something *was* searching through his hair for lice. Daddy froze in terror. Lions? Did they torment their prey this way before killing it? He kept his eyes squeezed shut and played dead.

No, that pleasant gibbering sound couldn't be a lion.

Slowly, Daddy opened his eyes. He was still in the tree, with his arms and legs still locked around the branch of the fork, but now he could see that he was at most fifteen feet above the ground. Lions could probably jump that high, he thought, annoyed at himself.

Cautiously he looked around. The movement elicited a louder gibbering and a rustling sound. Three little faces stared at him.

"Monkeys!" he exclaimed.

The sound startled them, and they leaped away, landing on more distant branches.

"Hey, it's okay! My, aren't you cute little monkeys?" Lowering his voice, Daddy spoke to them. "Look just like each other. Are you brothers? I bet you are."

Actually, they were brothers. Also cousins. All the little creatures in their small, isolated clan were simultaneously first cousins and second

cousins and third cousins and so on. Incest was their way of life. Fortunately, they neither understood such concepts nor would they have been able to communicate the facts to Daddy if they had, which was just as well, for he probably would have been overwhelmed by a profound Republican disgust and fallen out of the tree.

In any case, they had no idea what he was saying. They liked the sound of his voice, though. Inch by inch, they crept closer to him.

By the time rescue arrived, some time around noon, Daddy had won the three little creatures over. The rescuers — all employees of Shell Oil — found him back on the ground with one of the little simians on each shoulder and the third one atop his head. Even in the presence of strange humans, they clung to Daddy.

“You’ll have to leave them behind,” one of the rescuers told him. “I think there are laws about that.” The man stared at the three little creatures, who stared back at him. The man said, “I’ll say this for them, though. They certainly are cute little monkeys.”

“Sure are. Named ‘em Jibber, Jabber, and Jebber. Going home with me.”

It took numerous telephone calls to Pretoria and the intervention of the U.S. ambassador at the request of Mr. Umbral on behalf of Daddy’s daddy, but of course the laws were bent. Laws are always crafted so that the rich and powerful are exempt from them. If that were not the case, how could we call ourselves civilized?

For a while, it seemed there might be a problem. A government biologist who happened to be in the area cataloging primates caught a glimpse of Jibber, Jabber, and Jebber and instantly declared them an unknown type of Greater Bush Baby. They were thus a national scientific treasure, he insisted, and must never be allowed to leave South Africa.

Fortunately for Daddy, the troublesome biologist, having returned to the bush to search for more of the new primates, disappeared. Once the biologist was out of the way, Mr. Umbral and Daddy’s daddy’s friends were able to produce a local biologist of their own who testified before a hastily assembled Crown commission that Jibber, Jabber, and Jebber were not Bush Babies at all. Rather, they were a branch of those mysterious Great Apes, native to the central west coast of Africa, that

had famously adopted the infant Lord Greystoke in the romances of Edgar Rice Burroughs. Their possession of a language, albeit an indecipherable language, was sufficient proof of this assertion. As such, while they were certainly African treasures, they could hardly be said to be South African treasures. Therefore, if it was up to anyone to decide whether they could be removed from their native soil, it was up to, the biologist sniffed, the Belgians, and they were notorious for their lack of concern for native species. Anyone who doubted his conclusions, he added, delivering the rhetorical *coup de grâce*, clearly had the intellect of a bleddy keffir.

**B**y August, Daddy, his new bride, and Jibber, Jabber, and Jebber were settling into their new home in Texas, which the three little brothers seemed to find satisfactorily primitive. Grammy Longlegs had loved them on sight, declared them almost unbearably cute little monkeys, and assured Daddy she'd raise them like her own children.

On a Sunday, the new family went to services at the local Church of the Moneyed Classes. Jibber, Jabber, and Jebber were dressed in little suits, custom made for their not-quite-human proportions, and the congregation was enchanted. After the service, Reverend Gregory descended to mingle with the crowd and get a closer look at the three brothers. He bent over and gravely shook hands with each of the three little simians.

This was Jibber, Jabber, and Jebber's first encounter with this human custom, and it delighted them. They would practice it with each other later in private for hours.

"My, my," said Reverend Gregory, "aren't they cute little monkeys?" He stared at the three of them for a few minutes, then said, "But they're not really the same as each other, are they? At first I thought they were, but the more I look at them, the more different they look."

Aware of the attention of a large and friendly crowd of humans, the three little simians, who were rapidly losing what fear they still had of these strange creatures, began to perform. Jebber covered his eyes and then spread his fingers so that he could look through them and gauge the crowd's reaction. Jabber covered his ears and crooned softly, a sweet and

charming and meaningless sound. Jibber jumped up down, ran around trying to shake everyone's hand, and gibbered, making sounds that closely resembled but weren't quite English words.

"Kinda reminds me of the Big Three at Potsdam," Reverend Gregory said.

The congregation laughed appreciatively. Even though there was in fact no resemblance between the three little simians and the three big statesmen, the comparison could be taken as insulting to the Democrat in the White House, and that delighted this crowd.

"So which one's Truman?" someone asked.

Gregory pointed at Jibber. "Him. He's a gladhander, he's teeny, and he talks a lot but makes no sense."

The congregation applauded, but Daddy Longlegs looked at his three little boys and stroked his chin thoughtfully.

**M**any, many years later, probably at about the time Malcolm sold his third novel and was still feeling hopeful about his literary career and his marriage, Daddy had the family retainers assemble a family for Jibber.

On that fateful day when Reverend Gregory had pointed at Jibber and said he resembled Truman, Daddy had decided that after Daddy himself became President, Jibber would become President in his turn.

There were practical difficulties associated with this plan.

Daddy had an impressive pedigree and education and, increasingly, political experience. Jibber was some kind of animal. He had not been born in America. He couldn't speak any human tongue. He was short. He still occasionally forgot himself and defecated on the carpet. But Daddy knew that other Republicans had overcome even worse obstacles on the way to the White House. A paper trail could be manufactured. Jibber could be trained, or at least restrained when necessary. Speeches could be written for him and handed to the appropriate sycophants in the press beforehand.

The most serious lack was a family. A politician had to have one, and nowadays, they had to be photogenic and, increasingly, telegenic.

As always in moments of distress and doubt, Daddy consulted Mr. Umbral.

Daddy hadn't spoken to Mr. Umbral in a couple of months. The upward curve of one corner of Umbral's mouth seemed more noticeable than before. As always, Daddy tried not stare at it, and as always he spent much of the conversation thinking desperately about not staring at it and therefore kept snatching surreptitious glances at it. "He needs a family," he said abruptly. "Jibber. Political career. Requires a family."

Mr. Umbral nodded slightly. He pretended not to notice Daddy staring at his mouth. "We could bring one over from the area where you found him, but that wouldn't do."

"Wouldn't do," Daddy agreed. His gaze wondered around the room, came to light on Mr. Umbral's mouth, and skittered away again. "Wouldn't do at all. Has to be a human woman. And human kids. Gotta face it, though. Human woman would probably run away screaming."

"He's a cute little monkey."

"Even so."

"Well. I'll see what I can do."

At that, Daddy relaxed. When Mr. Umbral said he'd do something about a problem, something got done. The problem went away. It had always been that way, even before Daddy was born, judging by some photographs he had seen from own father's youth. Daddy stole one quick glance at Umbral's twisted mouth as the old family retainer floated from the room. Yep, everything was okay again in the Longlegs world. Good old Umbral. Mr. U. Always there, always the same — well, except for the ever more twisted mouth — always reliable. Where would the family be without him?

Mr. Umbral — he hated being called Mr. U. — had connections.

He left the family compound immediately and flew to Los Angeles, where he met with some Disney people. They showed him their newest innovation, and it pleased him greatly. It reminded him of the old days, even though the artisans of those times had possessed skills modern man had yet to rediscover. Still, it was a start. He made his needs clear to the group of modern craftsmen. They expressed some doubts, but they were flattered by his confidence and the importance of his commission, and so they agreed.

Next, Mr. Umbral flew to London and met with a different group of craftsmen. These worked for Madame Tussaud's. They, too, were

flattered by Umbral's compliments and at being asked to participate in something so novel and important.

Finally, Umbral headed for home. Along the way, he stopped in New York, where he spoke to officials in the city's child welfare agency and arrived at arrangements satisfactory to both him and them.

While Umbral paid attention to family values, Daddy paid attention to other aspects of Jibber's image. Cute was good, and his boy had the cute part down pat, but Daddy was sure that that wasn't enough. Jibber would need an appropriate image, something that would push the right emotional buttons in the electorate.

Religion usually worked.

Daddy set about training Jibber to simper and raise his eyes to Heaven whenever he heard the word "God." Unfortunately, Jibber couldn't distinguish between words with a similar sound. So while he learned to simper and look at the ceiling when he heard the word "God," he also simpered and looked up when he heard "dog" or "log" or "bod." That last one actually made some sense to Daddy, but he feared the public might not agree.

Scratch religion, then.

How about jingoism?

The public had always been quick to confuse excessive nationalism with patriotism and xenophobia with love of country. Any politician worth his salt knew that fact and exploited it constantly. The trick always was not to go overboard. Even the American public could be pushed too far. You couldn't do something too obvious, such as wear a U.S. flag tie like some kind of used-car salesman. And while Daddy had a mental image of little Jibber wearing a Roman toga with stars and stripes all over it, like some kind of American emperor, he knew that would never fly. You had to wrap yourself in the flag symbolically, not literally.

Scratch jingoism.

No, he would have to be more subtle. More indirect. Strike the right balance, and you could be as absurd as you wanted to be, and Americans wouldn't even realize that their buttons were being pushed.

After casting about and looking at some popular magazines, Daddy settled on an old, reliable bit of fakery: the cowboy trail.

Daddy had a little cowboy hat and a little cowboy suit and a little

cowboy hat and a little pair of cowboy boots custom made for his hairy little boy. Fortunately, Jibber took to them immediately. He only had to be shown once how to wear everything, and after that, he was rarely to be found wearing anything else, except for those days that he reverted to type and wore nothing at all.

The little cap-firing six guns were an even greater success. It reached the point that Grammy had to forbid Jibber to fire them in the house. The sound was giving her a headache.

The only failure was the horse.

Daddy took all three brothers to a stable whose owner could be trusted to keep his mouth shut and introduced them to the cowboy's best friend.

Jebber and Jabber disappeared immediately. Fortunately, they had scampered back to the car and hidden under it, and Daddy found them there later.

Jibber wasn't quite so swift. He stared at the horse, trying to figure out what this creature was. It wasn't a lion or baboon or leopard or anything else he knew he was scared of, so for the moment, he remained calm.

Then Daddy scooped him up and set him atop the saddle.

The horse shifted impatiently under him.

Jibber froze in terror.

Then he unfroze.

Rather, his bowels and his bladder unfroze. They unfroze so explosively that his little cowboy pants burst open in the front and the rear. The back of the cowboy's best friend was covered by the monkey's worst products.

The horse shook himself in violent disgust and turned his head around, fixing Jibber with an evil glare out of one eye.

Jibber leaped off the horse and zipped away after his brothers.

Daddy backed away quickly from the horse, who had now turned his evil glare on him. He turned and followed his three little cowboys' dusty trail out to the parking lot. Tomorrow he would tell the stable owner to have the horse taken away and shot. That'd teach him.

Oh, well, Daddy thought. The kid can still pretend to be a cowboy. Reality doesn't matter in this game.

Six months after his trip, Umbral introduced Daddy and Jibber and Grammy to the new Mrs. Jibber Longlegs and Jibber's and her two

adorable children. Daddy was charmed, Grammy pretended to be charmed, and Jibber was bewildered.

“Allow me to introduce,” Mr. Umbral said, “Tess.”

On cue, a pretty young woman walked in from an adjoining room.

“More precisely,” he added, “Tess Longlegs. Mrs. Jibber Longlegs. I have already created a good pedigree and personal history for her.” He held up a looseleaf binder that looked quite full. “If you approve. We can change it, of course.”

“Satisfactory,” Daddy said. “Sure it is. Always is. You did a fine job with the three boys.”

Grammy frowned doubtfully. She stepped up to the young woman and examined her carefully. “Tess, you say?”

“Yes,” the young woman said. “Ma’am.” She paused, then added, “Honored. To. Be. Your. Daughter. In. Law.” Another pause. “Ma’am.”

“Why does she talk that way?” Grammy asked.

Daddy had understood right away. “Suitable,” he said. “Suitable. But Umbral, why not . . . Well, you know.”

Umbral nodded. “Why not human?” He gestured with his chin toward Jibber.

Daddy squinted at his oldest boy, who wasn’t really a boy at all, of course. For a moment, the illusion he had managed to convince even himself of fell away and he saw the little simian as he really was. “Ah. Yes. All right.”

Grammy continued to examine her new daughter-in-law. “Oh, Hell,” she said finally. She had accepted the three little simian brothers as her sons, so she supposed she could learn to accept this Tess person. At least she was human.

“Mr. U.,” Daddy said suddenly, as usual not seeing the faint hint of a grimace that crossed Umbral’s face at the sound of the hated nickname, “a wife is good. Politician needs kids, though. Cute ones. Told you that before.”

Umbral smiled slightly. “Oh, yes,” he said. Often, it was hard to tell that Mr. Umbral was smiling. His ancient internal machinery was slowly breaking down. In general, it didn’t interfere with his efficient performance of his duties as chief Longlegs family retainer. The only visible side effect was that problem with his mouth, the left corner of

which was slowly edging upward. Behind his back, some of the junior family retainers had taken to referring to him as “Mr. Sneer.” They thought he had no way of knowing about this. They were wrong. Mr. Umbral had long ago perfected the art of biding his time.

Still wearing his faint smile, he vanished into the room from which Tess had emerged. A moment later, he returned, leading two small girls by the hand.

The kiddings were about five or six years old. They were dressed in frilly dresses and shiny patent leather shoes, their hair was shoulder length and curly, and they glared at everyone.

“New York’s finest,” Mr. Umbral announced. “I’ve named them Bip and Bop. Those are working names only. I’m sure you’ll come up with something better.”

“Hmm,” Daddy said. “Like it. Fits with the J-J-J pattern for the boys. Bip and Bop. Yep. Those’re their names.”

Daddy and Grammy approached cautiously, trying to ooh and aah. These were wild kids, though. They curled back their lips and snarled, and the elder Longlegs were a bit scared of them.

“Okay,” them. “Okay,” Daddy said. “Enough with the grandparent crap. Take ‘em away. Keep ‘em in the nursery. Jibber, come here. Make nice with your new wife.”

“He. Is. A. Cute. Little. Monkey.”

When Tess said that, Grammy warmed to her a bit. Daddy warmed to her a lot. This was the kind of political wife a potential President needed! He watched with approval as Tess grabbed Jibber’s hand in an unbreakable grip and dragged him away.

Jibber twisted his head around and looked at Daddy as though begging for rescue.

Daddy smiled and nodded encouragingly. “Time the boy grew up,” he said to Grammy.

“Let’s go upstairs,” Grammy said. “Suddenly, I feel like breaking out the handcuffs.”

Mr. Umbral felt a tiny stirring of doubt. He straightened his back. “I am determined that everything will go correctly this time,” he told the family sternly. “I’m not going to repeat the mistakes I made with the Hapsburgs.”

“The who?” Daddy said.

“Do they live over in Bar Harbor?” Grammy asked uncertainly.

Umbral grimaced and rubbed his chest. He wondered if he needed some work in there already. He also wondered if he had chosen the wrong family yet again.

He decided not to bother explaining about the Hapsburgs. He would press on, grimly doing his duty, no matter what. Head held high, he left the room.

Grammy pulled Daddy up the staircase to the master suite.

While Grammy and Daddy set about making sub-dom whoopee, Tess led Jibber into the bedroom she had been told was theirs. She locked the door behind them.

Jibber shrank back against the door.

Tess yanked her clothes off and stood naked before her lord and master. As wax-covered robots went, she was not unattractive.

She waited expectantly.

Jibber hugged the safety of the door.

Memory stirred in Tess’s brain circuits. She heard Mr. Umbral’s voice explaining, “We have had to make some assumptions about the mating habits of the unknown species to which the three J boys belong, based on the ways of other, presumably related, African animals. We have colored your appropriate parts in what we hope is a suitable manner. You should turn your back to him, bend over, and, er, present yourself. Nature will then take its somewhat unnatural course.”

Tess followed those instructions. She turned and bent, pointing her rear end toward Jibber.

Jibber was filled with images of the females of his rare species. For a moment, he closed his eyes and imagined he was back among the scrubby trees of the veld. Safe in the branches, the cheerful females used to turn, bend over, and present their swollen red genitals to him. Jibber and his three brothers would shriek with glee and launch themselves upon the willing hairy little babes, commencing a night and a day and a night and a day and a night of delight.

Sniffing slightly, smiling nostalgically, he opened his eyes.

What he saw was rather larger than he remembered. And considerably less hairy. And the smell was odd. And it wasn’t red. It was blue. At the

center of the blue was a large white star. At the center of the star was an arrow pointing to the target.

Jibber burst into tears.

Tess wagged her star-imprinted loins at him.

Jibber straightened his back. He didn't understand much of what had happened to him since he'd been snatched away from his happy albeit lion-infested homeland and brought to this often horrifying place, but he felt a lot of warmth toward Daddy and Grammy Longlegs for their kindness toward him and his brothers, and he enjoyed the act he had been taught to perform involving cowboy boots and six guns, and moreover he understood that Daddy wanted him to pretend to regard this terrifying creature as a female of his own species, and finally he was awfully, awfully good at pretending, and so he steeled himself and tried to do what had to be done.

He pulled off his cowboy boots.

He untied the leather laces that held his chaps in place and let the chaps fall to the floor.

He flung away his little Stetson.

He unbuckled the heavy belt that held his holstered, pearl-handled cap guns and let it slide down his legs.

He unzipped his sturdy jeans.

He unbuttoned his cowboy shirt and peeled it off.

He pulled down his pants and stepped out of them.

Naked, he advanced upon his mate.

Tess wiggled again.

Jibber paused, steeled himself, and moved forward again.

He felt himself stiffening and looked down and was surprised to see just how erected he was. Poor unlettered little simian, he was unacquainted with the ancient tradition of humans mating with beasts. For that matter, he had no idea that he was about to write a new chapter in those pornographic annals by becoming a beast who mated with a wax-covered animatronic machine.

Disney and Tussaud's had done their work well. The appearance and odor of the starry end of Tess were real enough that Jibber finally gave a cry of delight and triumph and leaped upon her, thrusting himself deep inside her.

Relatively speaking. He was rather small compared to her. He found himself straddling her like, well, like a cowboy straddling a horse. His feet were a foot off the floor. His penis, while enclosed entirely inside her, wasn't actually all that far in. Nonetheless, he did his determined best, holding onto her haunches with both hands and thrusting away valiantly.

Unlike the hairy little enthusiasts of his native land, Tess remained immobile.

Jibber's enthusiasm began to fade, and his movements became slower. Closing his eyes and thinking of Africa, he forced himself into rapid motion again and concluded triumphantly. He gibbered in high-pitched delight as his masculine juices shot out of him into the fairly good imitation of a human woman.

Exhausted, Jibber slid out and off. He landed on the floor in a crouch, dazed, confused, exhausted.

Tess straightened and turned around. She looked down at her husband. Jibber looked up at her. Her mouth expanded into a smile simulation. "Thank. You. Jibber," she said. Her metallic teeth glinted. She leaned down toward him, probably intending to simulate a kiss but looking as though she meant to eat him.

Jibber shrieked in terror and sprang away. He scampered up the expensive drapes beside the huge window, zippety zip, lickety split, as fast as any little simian ever did. He balanced for a moment on the heavy-duty curtain rod, testing his footing, then sprang a full fifteen feet to the fan rotating lazily in the middle of the ceiling.

Hanging onto one blade by his fingertips, going around slowly in a circle, Jibber stared down in horror at the creature he had just mated with. He gibbered even more meaninglessly than usual. His bowels loosened, and chimpy feces showered down on Tess and the expensive carpet beneath her.

The door opened and Mr. Umbral walked in. He looked the scene over, wrinkling his nose in disgust. At times like these, he really missed the Inquisition.

## Three

*Oh, Starspawn of my star-begotten loins! How like unto a god art thou! How divine thy needs and wishes and desires, and how debased thine enemies and those who stand in thy way and keep thee from what thou deservest! Heed me, O distant descendant: you deserve it, they owe it to you, so grab it, and let no one stop you!*

— *Lukas of Aldebaran, stardwelling Merskeenian,  
as transcribed by Malcolm Erskine,  
after what might perhaps have been  
a few too many beers*

**T**he successful writers Malcolm had met had about them a lordliness, a self-assurance, an overly evident awareness of being at the top of the heap, that always drove him up the wall. It would have been bad enough if he had considered any of them his moral and intellectual superiors. Perhaps then he could have excused their superior manner. Most of them, though, were in his eyes measly scum.

Sometimes he wondered if they really had that air about them or if he was imagining it, creating it whole cloth out of his envy. But most of the time he didn't care whether they had that air or not. He just wanted to get there himself, to reach the point where Malcolm Erskine could look down his nose at anybody he chose to, and anyone observing him would say, "That's Malcolm Erskine. He's such a rich, famous, powerful writer that he's earned the right to look down his nose at anyone he wants to."

Malcolm already had his candidates for lofty nasal observation picked out.

Joe Hoffman, for example: fellow Piketonian, fellow science-fiction author, fellow alumnus of Indiana University, at one time even fellow

computer programmer for Western Bell. That was all they had in common, though. Hoffman was up to about a dozen books vs. Malcolm's three. Hoffman had been the guest of honor at a couple of major science-fiction conventions, whereas Malcolm had yet to be invited even to pay his own way to a single one. Hoffman seemed to be getting somewhere, edging toward real literary success, while Malcolm was still mired in the mid-list, perhaps forever. Hoffman had a sexy wife and a happy marriage, whereas Malcolm had memories of Marlene, the girl of his nightmares. Hoffman was self-confident and possessed considerable presence in public, but Malcolm was inundated by self-doubts and self-criticisms and could never hide that from others. In short, in Malcolm's view, Hoffman had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, Malcolm with his foot in his.

Which part of all of that was the worst? Malcolm couldn't decide. Perhaps it was the guest of honor thing.

How he dreamed of being one some day! He imagined himself walking among the adoring fans, bestowing a gracious smile or two. Not too many. Keep them in their place.

It was common practice for the guest of honor to give a convention speech on the topic of his choice – a well attended speech, of course. Malcolm's speech would be brilliant. He had it planned out, written in his mind, just waiting to be delivered.

"Were I but King of Anglophonia." That was the speech's title. It would detail the linguistic atrocities Malcolm would outlaw if he had the royal power to do so. He would ban the words "respect" and "disrespect" so that no one would be able to use them as rhetorical clubs against those expressing opinions the club wielder disagreed with. He would require that anyone speaking English include the *w* sound in the pronunciation of "Quebec" – unless the speaker consistently used the French pronunciation of "Paris" and the Russian pronunciation of "Moscow" and so on for all other foreign place names. No one would be allowed to refer to committing a moral or legal transgression as "making a mistake."

And there was so much more! It would be a long speech. Amusing, of course, witty, entertaining, but leaving no doubt about Malcolm's firm opinions on how his subjects would be required to speak were he but King of Anglophonia.

At which point in his fantasizing, Malcolm would sigh and think, Were I but guest of honor at a science-fiction convention.

Like Joe Hoffman.

Once, during the final stage of their marriage's disintegration, Marlene had said to Malcolm, "Why don't you stop whining and turn out books, like Joe Hoffman does? And start doing some kind of exercise, like lifting weights like he does. He looks great. I'd sure be better off with him — in various senses."

To which Malcolm had replied, "Think you could compete with that gorgeous wife of his? Hah!"

Marlene had snarled. "At least *she* doesn't have to put up with whining from *her* husband!"

"Of *course* not. What does *he* have to whine *about*?"

Oh, what a lovely marriage it had been.

Its breakup had been delayed when Malcolm's third novel appeared on the stands. Marlene had privately decided to give her husband's career one more chance, to see if the third time was the charm, if Malcolm could finally hit the bestseller lists and bring her the wealth and ease she knew she deserved.

However, the stands on which the book appeared were very few, and Marlene immediately recognized the pattern set by Malcolm's first two books: high expectations followed by limited distribution followed by near-zero sales. She had ordered him out of the house and immediately filed for divorce on the grounds of mental cruelty. That, she had felt, was not an exaggeration.

Malcolm learned from a machine that his wife had chucked him out. The machine was a computer, something soulless and without any human feelings, which seemed appropriate.

The computer ran a voice messaging system that Western Bell had named SAM. Malcolm had no idea what that was an acronym for. A coworker had suggested that it stood for "Sadists and Masochists," since that covered everyone who worked for Western Bell.

At two o'clock in the afternoon, he got back to his desk from a long lunch with Steve Golden at their usual Mexican restaurant and checked for messages. He was hoping for the voice of his agent — his first one, at that time — brimming with eagerness, saying that Malcolm must call

him immediately because numerous publishers were beating down his door with demands that they be allowed to give stupendous quantities of money to Malcolm Erskine.

SAM's voice was female. How many hours of intensive thought on the part of marketing executives — who are endowed at birth with only a limited ration of hours of thought, which must last them all their lives — had gone into the choice of the woman who had recorded the phrases and digits which the SAM computer combined to make up its spoken sentences? “You have . . . six . . . new messages. To listen to your messages, press one. For more options —”

Malcolm quickly punched the ONE button on the telephone's numeric pad, cutting off the recorded voice. If I must listen to a computer-generated female voice, he always thought, then I ought to at least be on the bridge of the Starship *Enterprise*. Beam me up a woman, Scotty.

And then Marlene's message began.

“Hello, you son of a bitch. I figured you'd be at lunch still, you lazy jerk. It's that attitude that explains why you're still a programmer at your age, in case you're interested, you piece of shit. Anyway, I called during your three-hour lunch so that you wouldn't be there, because I didn't want to have to deal with your whining. This is to let you know that when you go home tonight, you're going to have to go to a different home. I've changed the locks. You don't live here any more.”

The message continued for half an hour altogether. Since SAM wouldn't accept messages longer than five minutes, Marlene had had to keep calling back to complete her love note. Thus the six messages. Malcolm listened to all of them, following SAM's instructions mechanically as each one ended, absorbing, with deadened feelings, the insults and the promises of financial degradation. Marlene finished with, “Take good care of yourself, sweetie, because you're going to be taking good care of me for a long, long time to come. Shithead.”

Buzz. “End of new messages. To erase messages, press seven. For more options . . .”

Malcolm and Marlene. A match made in Heaven. Or possibly in some other place.

Malcolm pressed SEVEN, erasing all of the six messages at once. If only Marlene could be erased so easily.

She could, of course. Murder is a simple and easy thing. . . .

Malcolm shook his head. No, murder would not be simple and easy for him. He might get caught. Even worse, he might botch the job and leave Marlene alive.

Still, it was very pleasant to imagine her dying in various grotesque ways. One of the very few lines of critical praise Malcolm Erskine the writer had received had been for the vividness of a violent death scene in his second novel. He might not have the courage to actually do anything gruesome to Marlene, but he did have the talent to imagine it well.

The dial tone interrupted his thoughts. Almost automatically, he dialed Steve Golden's number and told his friend what had just happened.

"Great!" Steve said. "This is just what you needed. I tell you, I never felt so good as I did when my own divorce was finalized. Now you're free. Now you'll have the time and energy to write much more than before, and you'll be able to chase women all you want. Now the fun begins, pal."

Like the fun life you lead? Malcolm was tempted to say. With Steve's example as a warning, he saw a long, dreary, and lonely few decades stretching ahead of him, a sad decline toward death.

"Tell you what," Steve said. "After work on Friday, I'll buy you a beer to celebrate."

"Sure." On the bright side, maybe he could now undertake an earnest pursuit of Joe Hoffman's wife. Maybe it was Ellie Hoffman who was somehow responsible for Joe's success. Perhaps she was a talisman. It couldn't be the quality of Hoffman's writing. Of that, Malcolm was sure. "How would you like to buy me about ten beers?"

"Ten — ? Well, sure. If you're sure you really want that much."

"You bet. I've got the stomach for it." Malcolm winced suddenly as he imagined Marlene saying, "No, you don't have the stomach *for* lots of beer. You've got the stomach *from* lots of beer." What a sense of humor. "Bitch," Malcolm muttered. Yeah, well, he thought, Hoffman may have less stomach than I do, but he's also got less hair.

But he hung up the telephone and looked down at his paunch and was not happy. If he was to have a chance at a successful bachelorhood, that paunch would have to go. Joe Hoffman didn't have a paunch. Joe

Hoffman also lifted weights, as Marlene had been so careful to remind him. Maybe *that* was Hoffman's secret. Maybe editors were all in love with his muscles. It wasn't the man's writing, he assured himself again. Surely not that.

There were perhaps a dozen science-fiction writers living in and around Picketon. Only two of them had had novels published, a few more had sold short stories, and most had never been published at all. They met once a month to critique each other's work and, after the verbal knives had been resheathed, to socialize at some area restaurant. Had it not been for Joe Hoffman, Malcolm would have been the undisputed star of the gathering by virtue of having had three novels published. The poor sales of the novels wouldn't have prevented the younger, less published writers in the group from being impressed by his achievement. As it was, the undisputed star was Joe Hoffman, with his dozen novels, his growing commercial and literary success, and his damned pleasantness.

Hoffman didn't exactly *try* to be in charge of the group or to be the mentor of the younger writers in it, but he certainly made no effort that Malcolm could see to turn down the role when the others thrust it on him. And so the rhythm and tone of the workshops were Hoffman's, and the standards of criticism were Hoffman's, and the literary paradigm was always what Hoffman had written, and Malcolm sank into the background and ground his teeth.

When he sold his third book, Malcolm had swallowed his pride and approached Joe Hoffman for a cover quote. This had actually been his editor's idea, not Malcolm's. Malcolm would have preferred to eat a bowl of hot tar.

"Let's see if we can do something," his editor had said, "to, well, frankly, break this third book out of the level of low sales expectations which the numbers for your first two books have probably preconditioned the chain buyers to base their calculations on."

Malcolm had had to chew that sentence over for a few minutes before he realized that what his editor was really saying was that the buyers for the bookstore chains would look at the sales figures for his first two books and would then decide not to bother picking up any copies of his third for sale in their stores. Which would be the kiss of death for his career. Whereas a favorable cover quote from some more famous,

established, and respected science-fiction writer — such as Joe Hoffman, damn his eyes and his ears and every other part of him — might just possibly persuade them to give this latest Malcolm Erskine book a chance.

And so he had had to eat the bowl of hot tar.

He had looked up Hoffman's telephone number in the address list for the critique group and forced himself to dial the number. Ellie Hoffman answered in that low, warm voice that had always thrilled Malcolm. He could imagine what she looked like, standing there, holding the phone, those lively, intelligent eyes shining. Then he imagined her holding the phone while dressed only in panties, and he felt the beginnings of an erection, so he asked to speak to Joe, the undeserving bastard who got to paw her.

"Hello?" Hoffman said cautiously.

Don't worry, you shithead, Malcolm thought. My low sales numbers won't rub off on you over the wire. "Hi, Joe! It's Malcolm! Erskine! How's everything?"

"Just fine, Malcolm. Hope you're okay."

"Oh, I'm just great!"

"And your wife?"

"Oh, she's just fine, too, Joe!" This was, of course, before Malcolm knew just how perilous the state of his marriage was. Perhaps if he had realized the degree to which the future of his marriage was riding on getting a good quote from Hoffman and good sales figures for the novel, he would have been even more nervous. As it was, sweat was soaking his clothing. "And yours?" That lovely, sweet, intelligent creature, that paragon of a writer's wife, that angel whom I deserve so much more than you do.

"She's fine, Malcolm. Is there something I can do for you?"

Too fucking busy to spend any time chatting pleasantly with me, aren't you? Bastard. You're so goddamned superior. Shithead. "Well, actually, Joe, I called to ask a favor. It's a big favor, and I wouldn't blame you at all if you refused. Especially given how busy you must be, with the way your career is going. As I'm sure you know, my thir — my next novel will be coming out next summer, and my editor asked me to approach some of my friends and ask for a cover quote, so I was hoping,

well, wondering if you'd be willing to read the manuscript and — if you like it, of course — say something that could be quoted on the cover. Front cover.”

“Whom else have you asked?”

Why don't you say “who” like everyone else, you pretentious asshole? “No one else yet. You were the first person I thought of, of course.”

“Hmm. Your publisher is Insignifica Press, correct?”

“Uh huh.” After an awkward pause, Malcolm added, “They're based in New York.”

“Hmm.”

“They have national distribution.”

“Umm.”

“Some of their books have been mentioned as possibilities for some awards.”

A heavy sigh came across the line. “I suppose you could send me a copy of the manuscript, and I'll try to look at it if I can. Of course, I can't promise anything.”

Oh, thank you, thank you, Sahib. I kiss your shoes. I lick the ground you walk on. I abase myself before your awesome awesomeness, you shithead. “Wow, that's wonderful, Joe! Thanks so much!”

So Malcolm printed out a copy of his manuscript on the trusty printer at work and mailed it to Joe Hoffman, and in the fullness of time he received a letter couched in Hoffman's usual pretentious circumlocutions but containing one passage that Malcolm and his editor agreed would make a very suitable quote to put on the front cover of Malcolm's novel: “Erskine delivers precisely the kind of plot and characterization that those familiar with his previous work have come to expect. They will have anticipated the derring-do of the novel's writer-hero, the malice of its attractive female antagonist, and the passion of the dark-eyed, dark-haired heroine the writer just barely manages to rescue in the book's event-filled final scenes. It has been said by a far more accomplished and respected genre author than I that to be successful, science fiction should eschew character development, and certainly by this measure Erskine's latest effort achieves success.”

Malcolm was delighted. His editor was delighted. They were both

convinced that this quote alone would propel the book to the top of the bestseller lists, or at least the science-fiction bestseller lists.

The book came out, Malcolm and his editor waited eagerly for the success that would be so good — and was so necessary — to both their careers, for the gushing reviews, the remarkable sales figures. And they waited. And they waited. . . .

Eventually Malcolm's editor stopped waiting, shrugged his shoulders, and turned his attention to another novel by another author, another book he hoped would make his career and get him the hell out of Insignifica Press.

Malcolm kept on waiting. Unlike his editor, he had no other options.

Alas, Book #3 was also quietly received, just like the two Malcolm Erskine novels that had preceded it.

There were only three reviews. Two of them were lukewarm. In the third, Malcolm read this:

“The only good thing about this book is the cover quote by the justly esteemed genre author, Joe Hoffman, to whose forthcoming novel this reviewer looks forward with anticipation whetted by frequent rereading of the excellent Mr. Hoffman's previous works. The quote from the highly acclaimed Hoffman amounts to saying, ‘For those few people who like the kind of garbage Malcolm Erskine keeps rewriting, this is the kind of garbage they like.’ Most amusing of all is the fact that neither Erskine nor his publisher seem to have understood just what the brilliant Joe Hoffman was really saying! But then, they wouldn't, would they?”

Malcolm wanted to scream, but he couldn't because Marlene was in the next room. He wanted to strangle Joe Hoffman, but he wouldn't have dared try because of the brilliant Hoffman's large muscles. He wanted to settle for stealing Joe Hoffman's wife. The bastard deserved to have that happen, at least.

He wanted to . . .

He didn't know what he wanted, except to succeed, to be rich, to be famous, to never again have to be torn from sleep by an alarm and stagger off to a day of humiliation and degradation and emasculation at Western Bell. He didn't want to have to endure any more of that at home, either.

Despite himself, a whine escaped him.

“What’s going on in there?” It was Marlene, calling from the next room. “Did you break something of mine? Did you spill something on my furniture? Did you hurt my house?”

How foolish could Malcolm have been in those days that he didn’t notice her choice of possessive? Not foolish, perhaps: just overly focused on his own misery. Perhaps he did sense, just a bit, on some level, that his marriage would stand or fall on the success of this book, for he tried to make his voice sound bright and cheerful as he said, “Nothing’s wrong at all, darling. Just talking aloud. Just planning the sales promotion for my new novel. It’s going to be a big one, you know. My breakout book. This is the one that’ll finally make us rich. Make us *both* rich. Really, really rich.”

“Yeah, right.”

Some day, he *would* be rich and famous. Some day, Joe Hoffman, his once-promising career having evaporated, would come crawling to Malcolm, begging for a cover quote for the stupid, dumb, pointless, worthless novel he had just managed to sell to some laughable, insignificant, fly-by-night publisher, a cover quote from the great, famous, brilliant, universally admired Malcolm Erskine, the winner of the Pulitzer Prize and the Nobel Prize and all the available genre prizes, a cover quote that would resurrect Hoffman’s career and give him a faint chance of rising out of the gutter again, and the illustrious Malcolm Erskine would put his hand on the bowing and scraping man’s head in benediction and he would smile and he would fill his lungs and he would shout until all his breath was gone: “Noooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!”

**A**fter he received Marlene’s six messages on SAM, Malcolm realized he would have to leave work early and find a place to stay.

By coincidence, the previous day, he had seen a TO RENT sign next to an apartment building near work. Perhaps if he went there right away, it would still be available. However, his work group was scheduled for a warm, collegial meeting that afternoon with Milo Grossbuck, the Big Guy of Western Bell, and Malcolm knew he dare not miss it because now he needed his paycheck more than ever.

The meeting was scheduled to start at 3:30. Malcolm, held up by

listening to Marlene's six installments of hatred, almost didn't make it. He burst into the conference room panting and sweating and quickly took his seat.

His coworkers didn't notice. Some of them, the ones who were disorganized enough to also be almost late and wise enough to know that it was important to be present and on time, were also sweating and panting. The rest were too excited by the thought of this intimate meeting with one of America's great titans of industry to notice anyone else's panting and sweating.

Despite what he had told Jackjackjack, Malcolm didn't really work in the New Ways to Get Money from the Widows and Orphans Office. The proper name of his group was the Zombie Programmers Department. It was true that they were a part of the Every Penny Counts Squeeze 'Em Dry Division within the central billing office, so perhaps Malcolm's exaggeration was excusable.

Back in the early days of his marriage, when he had naively expected sympathy from Marlene, he had described his work as the providing of brain-dead programs for brain-dead users. Marlene had looked him up and down with a sarcastic smile, and he had never repeated the phrase to her. Now he looked around at his fellow zombie programmers and wondered if his eyes were as dead as theirs.

The room was large and was filled with long, narrow tables with chairs lined up on one side of each table, all facing toward the wall opposite the door through which Malcolm had entered. That far wall held a white board, and there was a projector behind Malcolm aimed at the white board. The room was used for classes and presentations more than for conferences.

Malcolm had been in here before. On one of those occasions, he had noticed something interesting.

Near the whiteboard was another door. It had a small pane of glass in it, but the hallway or room beyond was dark, so one couldn't see through the glass. That door was locked, as Malcolm had discovered when he had tried to get out that way in hopes of avoiding the crowd leaving through the main door.

However, during a previous meeting of his work group with a high company official, Malcolm, idly watching the dark pane of glass while

trying to stay awake, had noticed a face, dimly lit through the pane of glass by the overhead fluorescents of the conference room.

Intrigued, he had watched.

The face peered through the glass, then looked down at something, then looked through the glass again, then looked down again. The action was repeated a few times, and then the face disappeared.

Taking names, Malcolm realized.

The almost invisible face might be creepy, but there was nothing supernatural about it or what the person on the other side of the door was doing. It was some lackey checking off names on a piece of paper, probably attached to a clipboard below the level of the window.

After that particular meeting, the few fellow zombie programmers who had not bothered to attend had disappeared.

Now Malcolm looked around and wondered who was missing today. How soon would they disappear? They would be dismissed into the outer darkness of the non-Western Bell universe, lost and wailing souls, drifting aimlessly and hopelessly over the blasted terrain that everyone in Western Bell knew the outside world consisted of. They would never know what they had done wrong, whom they had offended, what unwritten rule of Western Bell behavior they had transgressed.

Better them than me, Malcolm thought.

Every employee kicked out, in these increasingly bad Big Gypper days, was one fewer employee who would have to be laid off.

A minion bounded into the room from the door behind Malcolm and leaped and skipped to the front of the room. He had all the manic cheerfulness of JackJackJack. It might even have been the same man. Malcolm couldn't be sure.

The minion shouted, "Hi, everyone!"

"Hi!" most of them shouted back.

"So how are you all today? Is everyone doing great?"

"Yes! We're all doing great!"

"Well, that's just great! So okay, as you know, we're here today to meet with our fearless leader, the Big Guy of our wonderful company, the greatest telephone company in the history of the entire world, Western Bell Telephone and Telegraph!"

Lots of cheering and stamping of feet.

“Great! Okay, so the Big Buck is meeting with every work group in the company so that he can really get to know everyone and really be your buddy because we’re all coworkers here and all doors are open and everyone is part of the same team! Yee hah!”

The crowd shouted, “Yee hah!”

It was the new company yell, inaugurated only days before and intended to typify the rugged Western cowboy independence and vigor and energy and competitiveness of the typical Western Bell employee.

“Kim chee,” Malcolm said, a few seconds later.

His immediate neighbors frowned at him, and he cursed inwardly and strove for better self-control.

“Okay, so, right, as you probably know, the Big Buck has just returned from a relaxing three months at the Big Guy Institute, which is, you know, like a special place the government runs where big executives can relax and meet together and change their attitudes about various things when what they’ve been doing makes the government see that they probably need to make those changes, and now he’s back here to take the reins of the greatest telephone company in the history of the entire world again and talk to all of us about what he’s learned and how he sees the future.” He drew a breath. “Yee hah!”

“Yee hah!”

Malcolm managed to join in on the second syllable this time.

Then to his surprise the locked door to the dark regions opened and Milo Grossbuck himself swaggered in.

Grossbuck was tall, somewhat overweight, somewhere in his fifties, bald, and he smirked. His tie cost more than Malcolm had earned in any given month in his life thus far. Grossbuck’s suit cost many times as much as his tie. He had coined the nickname Big Buck all by himself and he insisted that everyone use it.

“Hello, everyone!” His voice was enormous. He smiled, and Malcolm was sure for an instant that Grossbuck’s teeth were long and yellowish gray and filed to points, but that was surely an illusion.

“Hello, Big Buck!”

A couple of members of the crowd, even more enthusiastic than the rest, called out, “Yee hah!”

Grossbuck frowned. “I’d like to start out with an important

announcement,” he boomed. “Since I got back from the Big Guy Institute, I’ve been meeting with the senior management team about a lot of things. Refrigerators are cold places. That’s important. Yarrow. About changes we want to make. About new directions for the future.”

Uh oh, Malcolm thought.

Some of his coworkers stirred uneasily.

“These are difficult times for all of us,” Grossbuck said. “Tough economy. Tough world. Tough competition. Tough, tough, tough. Beedle. Whichness. Goom. But we can handle it. Why?” His smirk became a grin. “Because we’re the best! Bring on the competition! Eat our dust!”

There were a couple of scattered yee hahs.

Grossbuck frowned again but continued. “So, yes, we are going to have to rein in a little bit, be more careful with our resources, even watch those pennies, clean out your refrigerators, moldy food in the back, tune up your cars, work even harder and longer to ensure the continued success and strength and growth of this company we all love. Bep. Bep. This great telecommunications corporation that has been so good to all of us. Spleeble. It’s a monument. A monument to the greatness of free enterprise and the power of faith. Bow your heads for a moment. Thank you, Lord, for American free enterprise. Tegtegteg. So, well, okay, we won’t all be making the great trek into the future together. There’ll be an announcement about that aspect of things.”

The uneasy stirring grew.

“But the big thing I wanted to tell you about is that we’re broadening our scope. Don’t mope. Keep up the hope. On the ropes. We’re more than just a regional Western company now. We want to assert our new identity and make sure the world knows we’re here and we’re strong and lean and mean and tough and we can do everything. That’s why, effective today, we’re changing our name to Western Bell Universal Telecommunications Incorporated. Greeg! The new company cry is,” he drew a huge breath into his big torso and bellowed, “Uni! Versal! Uni! Versal! Come on, everybody! Do it with me! Uni! Versal!”

With growing enthusiasm, the gang joined in. “Uni! Versal! Uni! Versal!” Their unease was forgotten.

Malcolm shouted along with the others, although the second time he

said, “Virgin! Vestal!” and no one seemed to notice.

“So, yes, well, as you were just told, I spent the last few months at the Big Guy Institute brainstorming with a whole bunch of other big guys from all over corporate America. Geniuses. Brilliant. Real movers and shakers, titans of industry, captains of this great ship we call our free-market economy. Oh, sure, we spent a certain amount of time playing golf and tennis and just walking around and getting some exercise every day during the assigned hours, but then, after dinner at those fucking long tables, we all sat down and talked about what we had all been doing and why we were all there and our wonderful country and the greatness of our way of life and how God loves free enterprise, and we kind of planned out the future. Poop. Did that every evening until it was lights out and they told us we had to go to bed. Bananas. Prunes. You guys and your future and what to do about you and how to take care of you. That’s what we planned. And the government. And the media. And just everything. Minnywinny.”

He paused in deep thought for a while and then nodded. “Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. See, people, when you’re in charge of the ship, when you’re the captain, when it’s all on your shoulders, it’s like this, see. Murgle. Blither blather.”

Malcolm shook his head. “What?” he said.

The coworker to his right, an attractive young woman named Jeannie who worked in a cubicle near his, shushed him. Her eyes were glued to Grossbuck’s red, sweating face.

Malcolm whispered to her, “But he’s not making any sense. He’s speaking nonsense words.”

“Gabargle, gabargle, gabargle!” Grossbuck shouted. “Meenie oodie oodie! Snicker whacker. It’s like, oh, I don’t know, wilga woolgy.”

“He’s incoherent,” Malcolm said.

“Oh, hush.”

“We have to refrigerator notebook magazine newspaper radio television control and conglomerate.”

A few people said tentatively, “Uni! Versal!”

“All together! All together! Repeat, repeat, repeat, and then eventually everyone agrees!”

The enthusiasm was growing. “Uni! Versal! Uni! Versal!”

Grossbuck grinned approvingly, and again Malcolm thought he saw those ugly pointed teeth. He ignored that and said in a low voice to Jeannie, “He’s a blithering idiot. He can’t string words together to make a meaningful sentence.”

“You don’t get it,” Jeannie said. She was annoyed. Her voice was also low, but the tone was hostile. “His brain is working so fast that his words can’t keep up with his thoughts. He’s thinking brilliant business-management thoughts all the time. Corporate leaders like him are the true heroes and intellectuals and mental giants of our age.”

A woman seated on Jeannie’s other side had apparently been listening to their conversation. Now she joined in. “He’s so powerful and impressive!”

Jeannie nodded. “He really turns me on.”

Good God, Malcolm thought. Good God, Good God, Good God, Good God! Won’t some godlike alien save me? Teach me to blither like the Big Buck? Make women look at me the way Jeannie’s looking at that horrifying creature?

Maybe there really are wonderful, noble races out there in space, Malcolm thought, just like in my fiction. And equally horrifying, evil, monstrous ones. Maybe Grossbuck is actually one of the evil ones, stationed here to control us. No, to destroy us! To destroy any human being who shows real intelligence and soul.

Marlene’s one of them, too.

“Religious bathtubs,” the Big Buck blared. “Radio station. We bought one. We have to get our message out. Deregulation. Bring on the competition. If your faucet’s dripping, you should probably replace the washer. Fix the leak. Control the flow. That’s gotta be our philosophy. Thank you.”

Cries of “Uni! Versal!” Loud applause.

The minion who had originally introduced Grossbuck stepped to the front again. “Okay, so listen everybody. The Big Buck has to get back to the 55th floor now and think a lot for all of us. Before he goes, he wants to shake everyone’s hand and say hello and get to know each and every one of you.”

Oh, boy, Malcolm thought.

His fellow workers moaned a simultaneous orgasmic “Oooh!”

“Except for anyone whose first or last name begins with a W,” the minion said. “Those people need to proceed immediately to Room B, right next door, where a group of managers and security guards want to explain some things to you. The rest of you, please line up in an orderly manner and walk past the Big Buck and shake his hand and say hello at the rate of one employee per three seconds.” He clapped his hands, a sudden, startling, cracking sound. “Move it!”

The cattle lined up obediently on one side of the room and began to shuffle forward at the rate of one employee every three seconds.

Except for the handful whose first or last names began with W. They went obediently through the door at the back of the room and then into the adjoining conference room, Room B, where a gang of managers backed up by large, well-armed security men explained a few things to them. They were then handed their personal belongings, which had been brought there in sealed cardboard boxes, and were escorted from the building via a rear door giving onto a filthy, stinking, dark alley infested with rats, drunks, and roving bands of hungry, armed gang members. The faucet had been leaking quite a bit lately.

Malcolm, meanwhile, had been shuffling forward with the non-Ws. He had contemplated leaving with the W group and then splitting from them outside the door, but something, some instinct born of years of working at Western Bell, had told him that that might not be safe. So instead he had fallen obediently in line behind Jeannie. Now, gloomily, he moved a step, paused, moved a step again, meanwhile staring longingly at Jeannie’s back.

When they reached the front of the room, Jeannie gripped Grossbuck’s extended hand tightly, stared up at him adoringly, and said, “Do you need a trophy wife, Big,” she breathed rapidly, “Buck?”

Grossbuck looked her up and down admiringly and chuckled. It was a sound that turned Malcolm’s stomach and raised the hackles on the back of his neck and made him wish the damned Commies would finally start World War Three at that very moment and put these people out of his misery. “Call my secretary,” Grossbuck told Jeannie, “and make an appointment.”

Jeannie passed on, stars in her eyes, and it was Malcolm’s turn. He shook Grossbuck’s repellent paw as the great man looked through him.

“Malcolm Erskine.” He thought he should say his name.

“Uh huh.”

“I hate you. I hate my job. I hate my life.”

“Of course you do.”

Malcolm froze in horror, then realized that what he had said aloud was, “I admire you greatly, sir, and I feel honored to work for this company.”

Some day, you’ll be in a book, Malcolm thought. Some day, all of this will be in a book.

Malcolm would be in the book, too. Except that in the fictional version he would behave heroically. With a single, mighty blow, he would vanquish the evil alien invader, the Grossout, and rescue from his slimy tentacular grip the gorgeous, black-haired Jennya, who would fling her arms —

The apartment!

Malcolm looked at his watch and was surprised to see that it was only 4:30. He had been sure it would be midnight.

He rushed from the conference room and back to his desk, shut down his computer, flung his possessions into his briefcase, and sprinted for the elevator. He ran from the building and then ran the five blocks to the apartment building.

Thanks to the dismal economy, the apartment was still unrented. And so, only hours after listening to Marlene’s enthusiastic farewell message, Malcolm had a place to live. It was furnished, it was near downtown, it was cheap, and it was immediately available. It was also tinier than anything he had lived in since his student days.

The next day, he called in sick, took the bus to what had been his home, betting that Marlene would be at work (she was), and broke in. He loaded a large part of his personal possessions, including his computer, into what had once been his car and drove downtown. The car was legally Marlene’s, just like everything else. She had always preferred to get a ride to work rather than driving herself, partly because it was her nature to have other people do the difficult or tedious stuff and partly because she liked to spend the commuting time telling one or more of her friends how worthless Malcolm was and how she deserved far better. Malcolm didn’t know about the last part, of course, although he had

guessed that that was what she did during the commute. Because of all this, he had bet — correctly again — that the car would be at the house.

After unloading the car at his apartment, he drove back to his former house, left the car parked where it had been before, and then took the bus back downtown and walked to his apartment.

Then he settled down in his new home and began to write.

He began a new short story, titled “Sleeping in the Devil’s Bed,” about a fearsome monster from another world, accidentally brought back to Earth by an expedition of hardy space explorers. The creature is called a Marlinga, but the explorers think it is a human woman, the lone survivor of a crashed alien space ship.

That the theme and style of his story were more appropriate to the pulp magazines of the 1930s than to any literary market of his own time didn’t bother him. He wasn’t writing for art. He was writing for release.

It took him two weeks to complete the story, which turned out to be quite long — too long to sell anywhere he knew of.

In the story, the monster is finally exposed as an alien female from a species whose females first mate with their males and then devour them. The creature’s outward appearance is that of an attractive human woman — very attractive, especially in panties — but under that shell it is little more than poison glands and ravening appetite. Its downfall comes when it tries to seduce a seemingly mild-mannered science-fiction writer who divines its true nature just in time and dispatches it in a grisly scene involving a small, dull hatchet and a paring knife.

Just before this scene, the alien monster also threatens the life of the writer’s next-door neighbor, a young woman of stunning, exotic beauty, with shoulder-length black hair and olive skin. In slaughtering the monster, the writer also saves this young woman’s life, and she demonstrates her gratitude appropriately, in a scene Malcolm described in almost as much loving detail as he had the monster’s bloody death.

In the final scene, the heroic writer is shown explaining everything to a close friend of his. They are together in a bar, and the friend has just bought the writer ten beers in celebration. “Best of all,” the writer is saying, “I already owned the hatchet and the paring knife, so cutting off this relationship, as you might say, didn’t cost me one red cent. I’ll sure miss one thing, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Well, when it all started, before the creature showed her true nature, the dame sure was good in bed.”

Malcolm hesitated over those last few lines for quite a while. Somehow, they seemed to strike a false note. But then he shrugged away his doubts. What the hell, he thought. It’s better than anything Joe Hoffman ever wrote.

And just to prove to the world how true that was, that very evening, at work, after all his fellow workers had gone home, he printed out the entire story on the office laser printer, and then he made numerous photocopies of it (**Warning: These machines are to be used for Western Bell Universal Telecommunications official business only. Any personal use constitutes a violation of the Western Bell Universal Telecommunications code of business conduct and is grounds for termination**) and mailed the copies out to the other members of the writers’ workshop for their critique.

Take that, Hoffman, he thought happily as he sealed the copies in large envelopes from the supply room, stamped them on the postage meter in the mail room, and dropped them in the sack some anonymous company gofer would pick up in the morning and deliver to the Post Office.

**T**hree weeks passed before the writers’ workshop met, and during that time, Malcolm did not reread the story his fellow writers would be critiquing. On Saturday morning, as he was eating breakfast preparatory to leaving for the workshop meeting, he decided to skim “Sleeping in the Devil’s Bed” quickly to refresh his memory of it, and immediately he realized what an awful mistake he had made.

Why, this is crap! he thought.

This isn’t how I normally write, he assured himself, feeling the bony fingers of despair latching onto his soul. I’m better than this.

He hoped that was true.

Years before, he had complained (all right: whined) to Marlene that there must be a cabal of New York editors who met in an underground cave lit by flickering candles where they agreed to reject anything written by Malcolm Erskine. How else explain his lack of success?

“Bullshit,” Marlene had said scornfully. “Don’t kid yourself. There’s no cabal and no secret agreement. They reject your stuff because they read it and see that it’s all crap.”

Had he been fooling himself all these years? Was his writing, in fact, all crap? No: consider the good reviews his books had received. They had also received some bad reviews, but there was no point in paying attention to those.

Oh, well, Malcolm thought, might as well put a good face on it and bear it.

Which turned out to be hard to do.

Joe Hoffman, of course, led off the critiquing round. “I do think, Malcolm, that I’ve read this story a few times in collections of old works from the pulp magazines. And I’m forced to say — am, in fact, unable to refrain from saying — that the old pulpsters did a better job of it than you did in the current opus.”

Why, Malcolm wondered, can’t this guy speak English? Why does he always produce those long, carefully thought out sentences and deliberate archaisms? Does that come along with success? Will I start talking that way, some day? Will I, one must wonder, ever have reason to do so — which is to say, will I ever be as successful as he? Christ, now I’m thinking the way he talks!

“I’m not really sure that a detailed analysis of this story would be too terribly productive,” Hoffman went on. “Suffice it to say that I choose to dismiss it as a minor Erskine effort — a *jeu d’esprit*, one might say.”

If one were inclined to say such pretentious things, Malcolm thought. Prick.

“However,” Hoffman continued, “I must object to the details of one scene. On page 28 —” *riffle, riffle* as all the others flipped through their copies of the story to find the offending scene “— where you describe the unsuccessful attempt by the lesser science-fiction writer trained in the martial arts to fend off the attack by the Marlinga, the details of the physical encounter are utterly improbable. I feel that I can speak authoritatively on this subject since, as you may know, I am a science-fiction writer trained in the martial arts, and I can assure you, Malcolm, that the physical movements you’ve described are quite unbelievable.”

And he *looked* just like you, too, before the Marlinga got him,

Malcolm thought. Of *course* I know about your martial arts training, you jerk. You mention it every chance you get. Why don't *you* ever submit anything to this workshop, Hoffman? Afraid to give me a chance at your stuff in public?

Larry Lefkowitz, a younger member of the group, chimed in next. Malcolm had noticed before that Lefkowitz almost always spoke right after Hoffman, whose protégé he seemed to have become. "As you know, Malcolm, and as I have urged upon you before, I feel that the goal of the writer must always be truth, that is, the presentation of the truth to the masses, whether they want to hear it or not."

When, Malcolm wondered, had this child started sounding like Hoffman? And what made the boy feel he had the right to lecture his elders and betters? And why was Malcolm sitting here taking this? And how severe would the legal penalties be if he strangled the kid?

"I, of course," Lefkowitz continued, "am putting *my* efforts into a novel that I know will change the world. Unlike you, I'm not concentrating on mere entertainment. However, that's your choice, and under the terms of the workshop, it's my duty to help you write better entertainment. Or at least to improve your chances of attaining some degree of commercial success. That said, given the nature of the sub-genre you have chosen to write in, I'm willing to accept the silly tough-guy *patois* used by your protagonist, but other than that I do wonder why you don't strive for more originality and inventiveness in these rip-roaring action-adventure tales of yours. What I want to know most of all is, why, in everything you write, do you always have your hero ending up with a beautiful young woman with black hair and olive skin and almond-shaped eyes?"

"I do not!" Malcolm protested.

"Yes, you do. It's in every one of your novels, and now it's even in this short story. L-o-o-o-n-g short story."

Everyone laughed.

Malcolm gritted his teeth. "Maybe it's wish fulfillment, okay? You have yours. I have mine. It's my fantasy world and my protagonist, so I'll have him end up with whatever kind of girl I want him to."

"Which is to say, a beautiful young woman with black hair and olive skin and almond-shaped eyes." This from Gloria Samson, whom

Malcolm had always found attractive before today. Now she launched into an attack on his story that made it sound like the worst waste of paper and ink she had ever read.

“It’s not that bad,” Malcolm said weakly.

“I think it is,” Gloria said.

Bitch, Malcolm thought. Hormones out of whack, or what? He said nothing, though.

“*Trés bourgeois*,” Lefkowitz sneered.

“One thing I have to say,” Joe Hoffman added, “is that although we’re all sympathetic regarding your marital problems —”

How the hell did he know already? Malcolm wondered.

“Not all of us,” Gloria Samson muttered.

“I’m surprised Marlene hung around this long,” someone else said.

“— I think you should maintain a more objective attitude toward them,” Hoffman concluded. “I don’t think you should convert Marlene into the central monster in your story.”

Good God! Malcolm thought. It’s true! The story really is all about Marlene the Malignant. It’s not about some outer-space monster at all!

How humiliating to have to have Joe Hoffman point that out to him.

More than ever, he felt like an outsider in the group. Maybe I really wasn’t cut out to be a science-fiction writer, Malcolm thought gloomily. Maybe I ought to try something else, some other field. Maybe non-fiction.

**I**t was one year later that the inspiration to write *Business Secrets from the Stars* struck.

For a moment, Malcolm was moved to submit the manuscript for the book to the workshop as he wrote it, but then wisdom prevailed. For one thing, the members of the workshop, so dedicated to trying to produce serious fiction, would never understand such a book as it was meant to be understood. For another, one of them might understand the book and its potential all too well and steal the idea. Malcolm was not the fastest writer in the world, and he could just imagine one of the other workshop members staying up for seventy-two hours straight and producing his book before he did.

Malcolm trusted no one. Once, he had trusted Marlene. That, he was determined, would be his last mistake of that sort.

But he knew almost from the start, from the opening words of *Business Secrets from the Stars*, that the book would be his ticket to the top. And so he was able to sit quietly at the meetings of the writers' workshop and feel a superior certainty when comparing himself to his Piketonian fellows. He could see now that they were stuck in place, getting nowhere, repeating themselves, churning out hackneyed work in a genre with a diminishing readership. Their focus was narrow and seemed, with each monthly meeting, to be getting narrower.

Even the ones who did try to break out into the mainstream didn't know how to go about doing so.

They just don't get it, Malcolm thought. They don't understand how the world works.

Larry Lefkowitz, for example. He had finally stopped writing science fiction stories that were thinly disguised political lectures. Now he was working on a long, mainstream novel that was a thinly disguised — but l-o-o-o-o-ng — political lecture. It started with a brief scene depicting rabblers in pre-Revolutionary France singing, "*A la lanterne, les aristos!*" Then it leaped to contemporary America, where the sinister ruling class of plutocrats had instructed all the power companies to install exceedingly high lampposts. The book's tentative title was *The Second American Revolution*, and the rabblers' slogan of its heroes was, "Lower the lampposts!"

Malcolm was astonished at how seriously his fellow workshopers took all of this. When it was his turn to comment on the chapters they had all read for this month's workshop, Malcolm said, "I think you should make the parallel clearer. Have them shout 'Lower the lampposts!' in French."

Lefkowitz looked surprised, then interested. "I like that! Thanks, Malcolm. I'll do it."

Malcolm could hardly keep his face straight. The book was doomed anyway, but just in case it had had a chance, that touch of wackiness would kill it for sure.

Although the whole lamppost conspiracy thing is kind of clever, Malcolm thought. I wonder if I could use that somehow *in Business*

*Secrets from the Stars*. He pondered the idea for a while but then gave up on it.

Why should he borrow anything from any of these people, anyway? They were insignificant compared to what he would soon be.

Of course, none of them had yet realized that Malcolm was destined to be the biggest literary and media star that Picketon had ever produced or probably ever would. So to outward appearances he remained a lesser figure in the gatherings, and Joe Hoffman remained the star. That didn't bother Malcolm quite as much as it once had.

Enjoy your chieftainship, you prick, Malcolm thought with calm inner joy. It won't last.

He looked around the room at the others. *They* were stuck on Earth. *He* was on his way to the stars.

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