

ABORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION

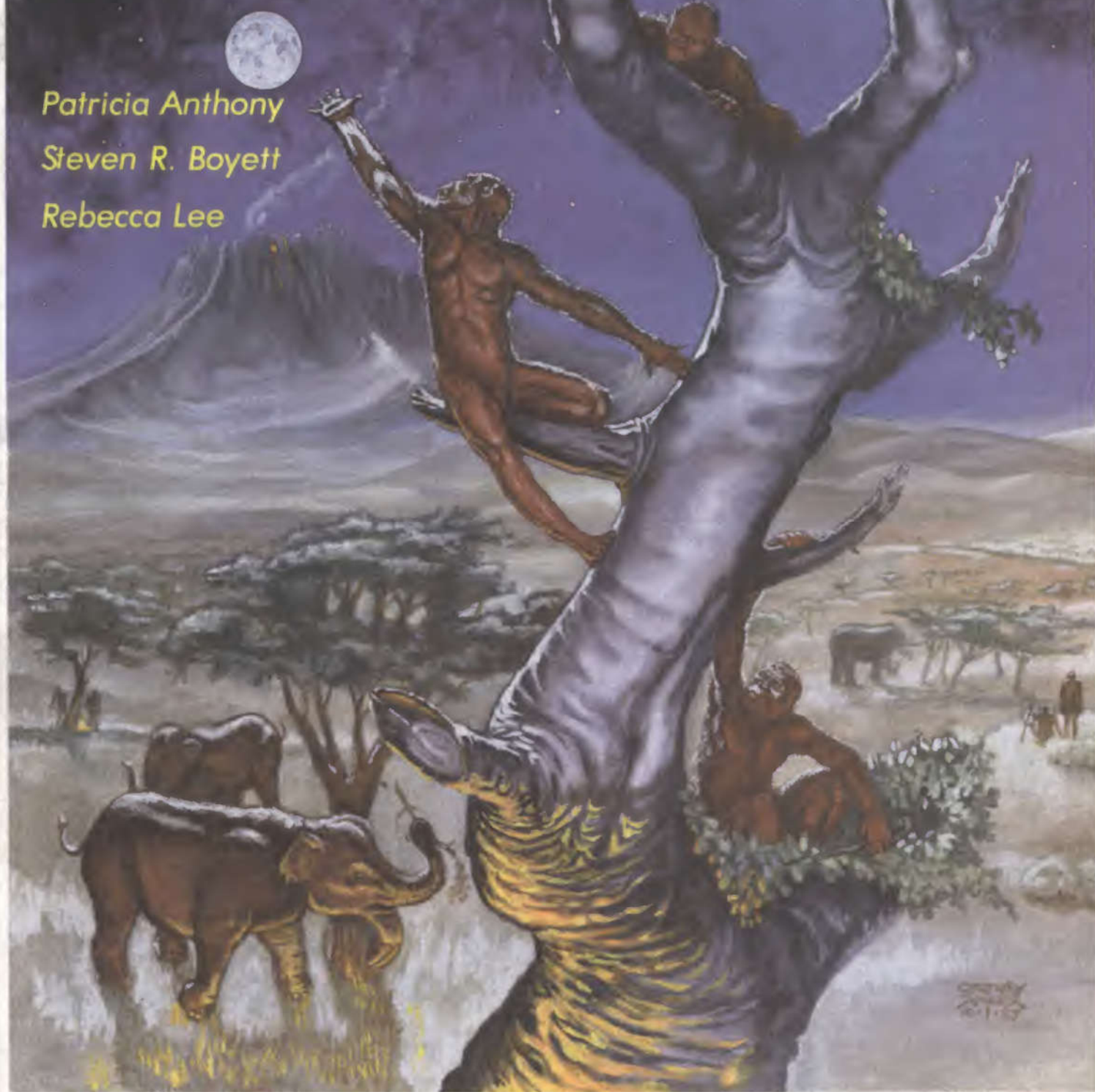
Tales of the Human Kind

Nov.-Dec. 1987/\$2.50

Patricia Anthony

Steven R. Boyett

Rebecca Lee



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By a crazy alien



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True Magic

By Robert A. Metzger

Art By Larry Blamire

Rasputin looked like hell. I bent closer, peering through the thick, green-tinted glass. His eyes were glazed, and his normally moist skin was dried and cracked. Dead flies lay strewn around him.

"What's wrong with Rasputin?" I asked.

"He refuses to rewire his neural network," said a raspy voice behind me.

I closed my eyes, and took a deep breath. The old woman was slipping fast. Breathing out slowly through my mouth, I then reopened my eyes. Control was the key. If I could hold on for just a few more minutes my escape would be complete.

Rasputin plodded slowly forward, then fell into his empty water bowl.

"He needs food," I said, while still looking at the Samoan Tree Toad. Rasputin flicked out his long pink tongue, ineffectively smacking the wall of the terrarium.

"There's more than enough food if he's willing to see it," replied Professor Thelma Beyers.

I shook my head ever so slightly.

Rasputin was one dead toad. He was wart deep in dead flies, but was starving because his brain couldn't understand the concept of a fly that wasn't buzzing about. Rasputin was the victim of his own limited neural hardwiring as well as the insane theories of an old woman who should have been retired a decade ago. But the powers that be couldn't retire Professor Thelma Beyers. The bureaucrats and bean counters who ran the university would have no qualms about trying to oust a woman who held the Amerson Chair in Psycho-Anthropology, but they would never touch someone who had lunch with the University Chancellor the second Tuesday of every month. In the world of university politics, it was much better to let a few toads starve, and a few desperate students jump out of windows, than to try and force the retirement of someone who broke bread with the big boss.

"Better you than me," I whispered to Rasputin. This was graduate school, and only the fit survived.

"What did you say, Kid?" she asked.

I smiled. That would be the last time that I'd have to hear the old bitch call me Kid. When she signed off on my thesis I would become Dr. William Benford, and I'd be halfway down the hallway before her office door could even slam shut. I turned away from Rasputin.

"I said, have you signed my thesis?" Hell, I would have kissed the old woman if I thought it would

have speeded up the process of getting my thesis signed. She had burned all self-respect out of me years ago.

She reached forward one liver-spotted, leathery hand, and rested it gently on my thesis. Except for my thesis and her bony hand, the only other thing on her massive walnut desk was a lopsided and cracked skull. There was not a family picture, a vase of wilting flowers, or even a dog-eared desk calendar to give some sense of humanness to her office. Thelma Beyers could only be comfortable with the smashed-in skull of a New Guinea headhunter as a desk decoration.

Thelma grinned wide, and her old skin stretched tightly across her own skull. Her pale blue eyes seemed to twinkle.

Something gnawed in my gut. I swallowed a burp, and tasted the pizza from last night's dinner. This was going to be bad.

"It's bat guano," she said simply and without emotion. Poking at my thesis with a bony finger, she slowly slid it across her desk until it teetered at the edge. "Pure bat guano," she added. With a final push, my thesis fell from her desk, and dropped into a brass wastebasket.

My brain screamed for action.

She had just thrown away three years of my life. This would be the old bitch's last insult. A plan crystallized in my head. It was both simple and just. I'd bash in her head with the old skull, then stuff her body into Rasputin's terrarium. It would be weeks before anybody would even notice the difference.

"Do it!" roared a voice in my head.

My body stood rooted to the floor.

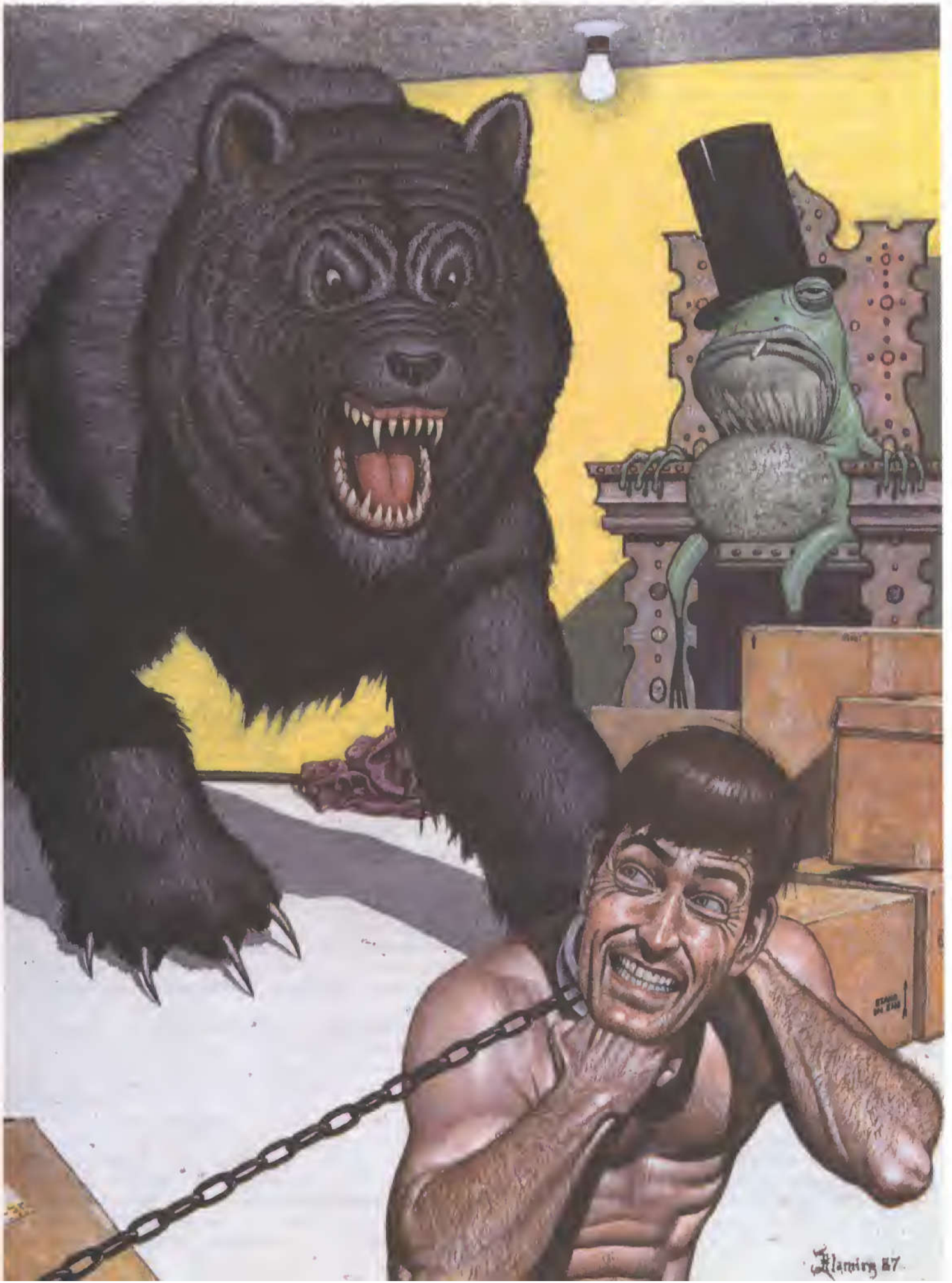
Somehow, the slave-master reflex that had been forged from so many years of graduate student submission held me back.

"A solution may exist for the dilemma we find ourselves in," said Thelma. She slowly stroked the skull affectionately, then ran a hand across her own chalkdust-streaked gray hair.

I found myself breathing, not even realizing I had been holding my breath.

"Give me one week of your time, and then I'll sign it." She glanced toward the wastebasket and turned up her nose.

I gritted my teeth. My work was outstanding. I had not only proved the existence of a racial memory in mammals, I had actually pinpointed its location in



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the brain. I had fractionated more rat cerebellum than any other grad student on the West Coast in my quest for racial memories. I'd clutch at any straw, and she damn well knew it.

"It's a promise," she added. Her wide smile revealed dark-stained teeth.

The old woman might have been a crazy old bitch, but her word was good. She had never lied to me.

"Deal," I said simply and without any hesitation. I could do anything for a week if it would get me out of here.

"Sit down, Kid," she said, and nodded towards the table in front of her chalkboard.

"The name is William," I said defiantly.

Her eyes grew wide, and the muscles at the base of her jaw quivered. "Sit, Kid," she said slowly and evenly.

I sat.

Reaching into the top of her turtleneck sweater, she pulled out a silver chain. A key dangled from it.

"I need your aid in an experiment I'm carrying out in my *private lab*." She caressed the key.

I suddenly realized that a week could be a very long time.

She stood slowly, and I could hear her bones creak. Walking slowly around the desk, she approached the chalkboard. Her long, braided ponytail bopped against her withered old ass.

Picking up a stub of chalk, she scrawled something across the board. In a final underlining flurry, the chalk splintered, sending fragments across the floor.

I groaned, doing nothing to hide my feelings. Things bubbled deep in my gut. I had known what she was going to write before she had even picked up the chalk.

"True Magic!" she said as she read from the chalkboard. Holding her index finger and thumb up to her eye, she squinted through the narrow gap between them. "I'm this close to understanding the physics of true magic and demonstrating a magical act in a controlled lab environment."

Throughout Thelma's long career, she had done outstanding work relating brain structure and chemistry to the social workings of peoples, but she always seemed to drift back to what she liked to call *true magic*. Her obsession was not with the magic of pulling the Queen of Hearts out of a deck of cards, or transforming a cane into a bundle of flowers, but in true magic, where people levitate themselves and elephants actually disappear.

"Rasputin's a perfect example," she said. "Imagine if he, amongst all his toad acquaintances, had the unique neural wiring to enable him to see a fly that was stationary."

I had never considered that Samoan Tree Toads actually had acquaintances.

"At a gathering, Rasputin would spot a fly quietly sitting on a rock," she said. "No other toads could see that fly. Rasputin would then perform the ultimate act of Toad Magic. At his command, a fly would appear from the thin air. By merely flicking his tongue in the fly's direction, the startled insect would buzz into the air, thereby appearing to the other toads. That would

be true magic to the average toad."

I glanced over at Rasputin. He sat motionlessly, huddled in the corner of his terrarium.

"What's true for toads, is also true for humans," said Thelma.

Fantastic, I thought. I could be the hit of the next beer bash if I had the ability to summon flies from nowhere. The old woman was gone.

"There are those humans whose neural hardwiring is slightly different, whose perspective allows them to see things that others can't. These are the ones who with the proper *stimulation* could recognize their abilities and perform true magic."

I had little doubt that Thelma saw lots of things that other people couldn't.

"You will assist me in both proving and demonstrating that a special type of human mind, under the proper stimulation, is capable of true acts of magic," she said.

I'd put up with her for almost five years. Another week of taking notes while watching Thelma try to levitate tennis balls as she sat in a bucket of ice cubes wasn't going to kill me.

A racket in the terrarium caught both our attentions. Rasputin hopped from wall to wall, his suction-cup toes grabbing glass, until finally, from sheer exhaustion, he slid from the wall and landed belly up. His crash caused a single dead fly to ricochet upward. Rasputin's brain must have clicked into automatic, and locked onto the arcing fly, because his tongue darted, and he sucked down what must have been his first meal in a week.

I had never before heard Thelma laugh. Her cackle bordered on the insane. "Take a lesson from Rasputin!" she yelled as she pointed a withered finger at me.

My stomach had suddenly tied itself into a knot.

Constructed of a massive slab of steel, and crisscrossed with bolt heads the size of half dollars, the multi-ton door eased slowly open as Thelma tugged at it.

"When this was the physics building they built their cyclotron in here." She rapped her bony knuckles against the foot-thick door, then dropped her key back beneath her sweater. With the door cracked open, Thelma reached inside and flipped on a light. An air conditioner whirred on.

Before entering, she turned, then stared at me. Through her almost translucent skin the veins in her forehead pulsed quickly. "You'll give me one week," she said.

I nodded slowly. At that moment, it occurred to me that there was only one thing more insane than professors, and that had to be their crazy students.

Thelma slipped into the room.

I followed.

Powerful springs slowly closed the door.

The room was large, but claustrophobic. I was only a hair over six feet tall, but the ceiling seemed to hover less than a foot above my head. Naked bulbs cast hard shadows throughout the nearly empty room, and not a single window cut the surface of any of the three visible walls. A dark curtain was pulled across

the far wall. This was the perfect retreat for Thelma. The room felt dead and sterile.

I still stood by the entrance, but Thelma had walked to the center of the room and stood in the middle of a circular slab of concrete that was raised nearly a foot above the floor.

"Evidence of true magic exists all around us," announced Thelma. She squinted in the harsh light, and I could imagine that she stared out at a phantom audience. Gradually, her eyes focused on me.

"Each day, as the insanity of this world grows, and as we move ever closer to global destruction, the stress and strain pushes our brains ever closer to see things that are unseen, and interact with dimensions and forces that ancient man could have never comprehended. With the correct stimulation, we could push ourselves into a world where true magic exists."

The room was warm, and the air circulated slowly, but I found myself shivering. Thelma's theories had often been half-baked, and I had called her an insane old bitch countless times, but this was the first time that she had actually frightened me. The old woman was flat-out nuts.

"Evidence!" she screamed. She pointed a bony finger into the air, then scuttled off the concrete platform and moved toward the curtain. Grabbing a handful of fabric, she tugged the curtain open.

I was drawn closer. It was like slowing down to see a wreck on the freeway. At first you caught only a glimpse and realized that you shouldn't look any closer, but you soon found yourself tapping the brake to slow down and straining to see the twisted wreckage and broken bodies.

I found myself stepping off the concrete platform without having remembered even crossing the room.

I faced a wall covered with keys.

"Keys?" I asked in unbelieving tones. Thousands of them dangled from small hooks that were sunk into the wall.

"Of course," she said. She smiled and her left eyelid twitched. "It's the perfect example of true magic in our modern world."

I had no idea what she was talking about, and the expression on my face must have shown it.

"Did your keys ever seem to misplace themselves?" she asked.

"Keys are always getting away," I answered. "They're easy to lose."

She shook her head slowly. "They don't get misplaced," she said. "The power of our own subconscious pushes them into a world we can't see. It is evidence of true magic."

I found myself looking over my shoulder at the massive door. The dean couldn't overlook a professor who spent all her spare time staring at a wall of keys, trying to will them to vanish. They'd get a nice padded room for her, and assign me to some slightly less unbalanced professor.

"The trunk keys to Volvos and Saabs seem most susceptible to this phenomenon," she said with a look of deadly seriousness.

I didn't even nod. I didn't want to startle her by making any abrupt moves.

"A further example is illustrated here," she said as she swept her hand over three small dollhouses set up on a card table. She lifted the roof off the nearest, setting it on the floor, then reached into the house, and lifted out a small stuffed toy.

"This is merely a simulation of the real thing, you realize," she said.

"Of course," I replied. To disagree with her while she was caught up in the depths of her fantasy might result in a total mental breakdown.

"Ever notice how when you put the cat outside, it seems to get back in, even though all the doors are shut and the windows locked?" She tugged on the whiskers of the toy cat. "I left this cat outside its house last night, and now we find it back inside. Solid evidence of true magic," she said.

This was becoming more frightening by the minute. I had never before watched someone become mentally unraveled.

"I've saved the most conclusive proof for last," she said.

I knew where her insane vision was taking her. When I saw the clothes dryer, I didn't have the slightest doubt.

"I see you are starting to understand," she said, having incorrectly interpreted the look on my face. Opening the lid of the clothes dryer, she pulled out a handful of socks. "The plaids are almost twice as likely to vanish as the solids," she said.

In a matter of moments I had gone from feelings of total contempt to those of embarrassment and fright, and then finally to pity. Her mind had turned to tapioca.

"Any questions before we begin?" she asked.

I had to figure out some way to get her out of this room and upstairs to where I could get some help. "Do you want to get something to eat before we begin?" I asked.

"No food for you," she said sweetly. She smiled, and for an instant she reminded me of my grandmother.

"Why?" I asked gently.

"Because the experiment has begun," she answered. Reaching further into the dryer, she pulled something out. She pointed it at my chest.

"Remove all your clothes, and get the chain out from beneath the dollhouses."

She cocked the pistol.

I blinked once, but the gun was still clenched in her bony fist.

Bang!

Hot air fanned my left ear. The bullet slammed into the far wall, and the metallic echo filled the soundtight room.

"Bring the chain," she said. The gun was once again aimed at my chest.

I brought the chain.

The concrete slab chilled my bare ass, and the Teflon collar around my throat chafed at my neck. The fast *thump* of my heart pounded in my ears. A thick link chain ran from my collar to a bolt sunk into the concrete platform.

"Two things are required for true magic to take place," said Thelma. She carelessly waved the gun in my direction.

I tensed, waiting for a bullet to rip through my chest.

"Care to venture a guess?" she asked. She smiled and lowered the pistol.

I didn't move.

"First," she said, "is a subject whose neural hardwiring is skewed from the norm. A subject is needed who has demonstrated the ability to draw on and use information that most people can't quite see." Again she pointed the gun at me.

I shook my head. "Not me," I squeaked.

"Kid," she said laughingly, "for five years I've studied you. I've given you problem after problem to solve, always making sure that you never had quite enough facts to draw any valid conclusions. Yet, you always saw some correlation in what appeared to be meaningless facts, and were able to draw startling conclusions that were always validated later when I gave you the complete set of data. You knew things that couldn't be known."

"I just have a gut feel about things," I offered feebly. My gut grumbled at me as if to back up my story.

"Don't sell yourself short, Kid," she said. "Your mental makeup is the most atypical I've ever encountered."

Despite the situation, and the fact that I was staring down a gun barrel, I laughed nervously. *She* was the queen of the atypical mental makeups.

"The second thing you need," she said as she ignored my laughter, "is stimulation."

She waved the gun around the room. "I have provided that."

I could hear the pride in her voice.

"The rules are simple," she said. "You are attached to the floor by a length of ten-foot chain. You have no food or water. Only with an act of true magic can you save yourself."

She turned and started for the door, then stopped and looked back. "I'm not trying to be cruel," she said. "You'll find a small opening in the floor that was once used as a drain. It's against university policy to not include proper sanitation facilities during this type of experiment."

I had reached the snapping point. It would be better to be shot now than to die of thirst days later. "You're a crazy, lying old bitch!" I screamed.

"I have not lied," she said calmly. "In a week's time I will sign your thesis. If you're not alive to submit it to the graduate office, that is through no fault of mine."

Reaching the door, she pulled the silver chain from around her neck and unlocked the inside of the door. "I'm very reasonable. I'm going to leave the key by the door so you can get out once you have removed your neck collar. Two acts of true magic in one week would be too much to expect." She dropped the chain and key to the floor.

Pulling the door open a crack, she squeezed her way out. The door slowly shut.

I tugged on the collar around my throat for just an instant, then rattled the thick chain.

Rasputin had been her first victim, and now I was her second. I had just been killed by my thesis adviser.

My mouth was already dry.

"Willy," said a voice.

With my eyes still shut, I moved slowly. My chain rattled.

"You're dying," said the voice.

I opened my gritty eyes. A blurred lightbulb hung over my head. I couldn't swallow past my swollen tongue.

"Time's running out," said the voice.

Turning slowly on my side, the room swiveled around me.

"Are you ready to do it?" asked the voice.

I blinked. My left eye remained glued shut.

"Can you see me now?" asked the voice.

The back of my eyeball itched as I focused. Rasputin was back.

"Leave me alone," I whispered through my cracked lips. The toad would give me no rest. The first time he had come, he had simply sat there, flicking his tongue, and rolling his eyes. The second time he had shown up, he wore a small top hat cocked over his left eye. The third time he came he wanted to talk about baseball.

The little bastard was a Mets fan. I pissed on him and he vanished.

The last time he had appeared, he wore a monocle and kept rambling about extra dimensions and knowledge gained through racial memories. He only left after I had made comments about his mother and her relationship with an Australian Stench Toad.

This time he wore a red velvet coat adorned with two big brass buttons. He sat on a jewel-encrusted throne. A cigarette dangled from his lips.

"If you don't do it this time, you won't get another chance," said the toad. He flicked ashes onto the cement floor.

I hated toads that smoked.

"Good," I hissed at him.

Slowly sitting up, I felt something in my ears pop, and a few bars of the "Star Spangled Banner" drifted through my head. Rasputin was still lounging in his throne.

"Let's be rational about this," said Rasputin. "We both know that I'm just a figment of your dehydrated and dying brain, but that's no reason to ignore me. You don't want to hurt my feelings, do you?"

I wished I could have spit on him.

"You can get out of that collar if you want to," said Rasputin.

I slowly lifted my hands to the collar. Dried blood flaked from my fingertips. "I can't break it," I said.

Rasputin sighed. "Why does everything have to be so damn difficult for you? You don't have to break it, you just have to slip it through your neck."

"There's no such thing as magic!" I yelled at the

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True Magic

(Continued from page 20)

toad through my ripped throat. The blood in my mouth tasted salty.

"I'll explain it once more," said Rasputin. "Thelma was right on all counts but one." He held up a single webbed finger. "Her chronology was wrong."

"Screw you," I answered.

The toad ignored my response. "Thelma thinks that this ability of your skewed brain comes from some new wiring of your neural network that has evolved due to the stress and strain of living in the modern world." He pressed his lips together and hissed.

Rasputin was a little bastard, but he could produce one wicked raspberry.

"Your brain isn't the next step in human evolution," said Rasputin. "Your brain is a holdover from a more primitive time. If you think modern life is tough, remember back to a time when you were huddled out on the frozen wastes of Europe, trying to outguess a cave bear that wanted you for dinner. Those were the days when true magic was needed. Those memories and abilities are buried deep within you. Remember your thesis?"

"Leave me alone," I pleaded. I wanted to die in peace, not spend my last minutes discussing cave bears and magic with a toad in a top hat.

"Try once more and I'll go," said Rasputin.

I nodded. I'd do anything to get rid of the toad.

"How many dimensions do you live in?" asked Rasputin.

We had been through this before. I knew the answer that the little bastard wanted to hear. "Four," I answered. It was pure bullshit, but I'd do anything to get rid of the little toad.

"And they are?" he asked.

"Height, width, depth, and yogurt," I answered. I had named the fourth dimension myself. It was a direction orthogonal to normal space. You could go in two directions in yogurt space, to the left was orange, and to the right was lemon. This was all pure crap.

Rasputin smiled. I was impressed. Smiling was no trivial task for a toad.

"Correct," said the toad. "My brain only allows me to see a fly that is moving. When the little critter wants to escape my perception it simply stops mov-

ing. In the same way, when that cave bear is charging, all you have to do is move into that direction orthogonal to the lower three dimensions, and the cave bear simply can't see you. If a Neanderthal can do it, so can you!" yelled Rasputin.

It was insane. If I could actually slip into the fourth dimension, I could leave the collar behind, then slip back into normal space somewhere else. It was impossible.

"It would be true magic to the cave bear," said Rasputin.

I closed my eyes. "Screw you," I said to the toad.

The toad was not pleased. A deep growl filled the room. I smelled damp fur.

I opened my eyes slowly. Down on all fours, its shaggy head scraped the ceiling. Spit dripped down its muzzle. The cave bear raised a paw that was as wide as my chest. It readied itself for a swipe.

"No!" I screamed.

Twelve-inch claws raced down.

I slipped into a yogurt sea. The world tasted lemon.

"Dr. Benford?"

My eyelids flashed open and I instinctively raised a hand to block the bear's blow. I could almost feel the razored claws slice through my forearm.

"I'm glad to see you awake, Dr. Benford."

I slowly lowered my arm.

A bearded face looked down at me. He had a wide stupid grin and sweat covered his forehead.

"Where's that damn bear?" I asked.

His smile widened, and his left eye began to tick convulsively.

I found myself laying beneath a starched cotton sheet, and an IV was stuck in my arm. The room reeked of antiseptic and ammonia. The notion of a talking toad and a charging cave bear rapidly faded.

"How'd I get in the hospital?" I asked, "and who the hell are you?"

The smile must have been permanently attached to his face. It didn't so much as quiver. He handed me a thick book. The cover felt like real leather.

"Your thesis," he said, having ignored my questions.

I slowly opened the cover, and, thumbing past the title page, came to the signatures. All four of my committee members had signed. The last signature location was reserved for Thelma but was filled by a

name that I didn't recognize.

"Who the hell is Bernard M. Rashtan?" I asked the bearded face.

"The Chancellor," he said.

My brain finally woke up. The stranger looking down on me instantly became the Chancellor. I'd seen pictures of him countless times in the *Tech Trib*, but never sweating the way he was now. I'd sweat too if one of my professors had just tried to murder a student.

"Have you got her in a padded cell?" I asked flatly. I had little doubt that he knew exactly what I was talking about.

The smile finally faded from his face. He nodded slowly.

"How come I'm not dead?" I asked tactlessly, hoping that the words would sting.

The Chancellor swallowed slowly and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

"I was having lunch with Thelma as I often do, and she made some mention about a special experiment she was running." He stopped talking and was unable to look me in the eye.

I had little sympathy for the man, someone who must have known about Thelma's insanity for years, but chose to look the other way. The empty and pained expression on his face made me cringe. He looked like an animal in a cage. It was an expression that I had little difficulty identifying with.

"You asked her for further details," I said, "and at that point I'm sure that she happily told you about the student she had bolted to the floor in a basement dungeon."

He nodded with an empty and drained face, but then I could see a question come to his eyes.

"Why do you say bolted to the floor?" he asked.

I reached up, and felt my bruised throat. "The damn collar she had around my throat," I said.

The Chancellor was obviously confused. "We found you a few feet on the other side of the door, a key clenched in one hand, and a ..." He sputtered to a halt, then pointed to my left.

I twisted in my bed, and bent toward the nightstand. A small glass bowl filled the table.

"Rasputin?" I asked, looking at the toad, but not quite believing what I saw.

The toad flicked out his tongue in greeting.

"Yes," said the Chancellor. "The toad was locked in your other hand."

I sagged into the bed. No one had gotten me out of the collar. I had done it myself.

"I see you're tired," said the Chancellor, "but I have a question that's been nagging at me for days."

"What?" I asked. I knew what it was going to be.

"You had the key. Why didn't you simply unlock the door?"

How could I tell him that I didn't unlock the door, because after I had slipped into the fourth dimension and somehow pulled Rasputin out of his terrarium, that when I returned to normal space and picked up the key, I must have collapsed before I could unlock the door?

"I don't know," I said simply. In a way it was the

truth. It must have happened, but I couldn't remember any of it.

The smile had returned to his face. "Don't worry about it," he said. "Just get some rest."

Turning, he walked through the room's swinging door.

I glanced over at Rasputin and again was greeted with a flick of his tongue. I slowly took a deep breath and smelled a scent that had not been there an instant before.

"Do you smell lemons and oranges?" I asked Rasputin.

He didn't answer.

— ABO —

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