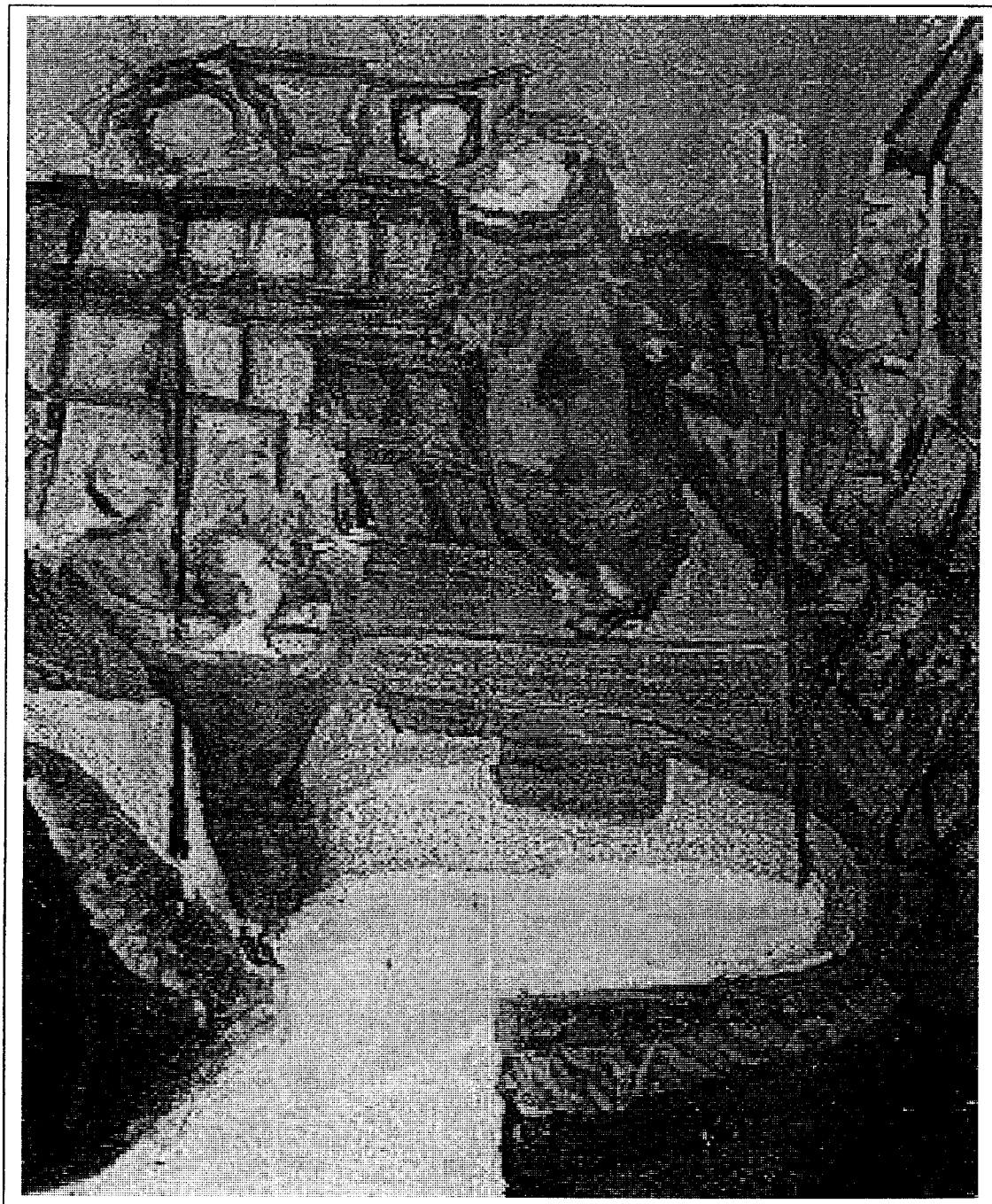


THIS TIME NEXT YEAR



ARROWS OF DESIRE EIGHT

THIS TIME NEXT YEAR

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

S. V. O'Jay writes:

Thanks to Tracy Twyman for sending me the terrific piece "The Day I Figured Out What 'Fuck' Meant". Convinced that this should see the light of day, I arose from my torpor and attempted to assert myself *vis-à-vis* the resurrection of *Arrows of Desire*. There was also an increasing feeling that the events of the last few years needed to be told.

Thanks to the two Pauls, Di Filippo and Kincaid, for their separate yet continued encouragement, advice and friendship.

The contribution of Ms. Bobbie, of whom much more in later instalments, cannot be overstated. Even Rudy Rucker would have problems with the infinite nature of this.

Nic Farey writes:

"Yeah, whatever."

OTHER MENTIONS:

To *Attitude*, *Banana Wings*, *Plokta* and *FOSFAX* for keeping us on the mailing list. Not to mention Martin Tudor's *Have Bag, Will Travel* TAFF Trip report.

Bernie Evans and Iain Banks get mentioned here so we don't have to figure out some dubious way of working them in to the text. OK Bern'?

Cover picture: "Circus of Despair", artist unknown, from the Frances Jackson Gallery of the Museum of Bad Art; this oil on canvas painting was discovered in a trash can in Boston, Mass.

The Museum of Bad Art can be found at www.glyph.com

LYRIC SOURCES

Mascara Streaks (Nic Farey); *The River* (Bruce Springsteen); *Get A Haircut* (George Thorogood); *Independence Day* (Martina McBride); *Jumpin' Jack Flash* (The Rolling Stones); *Lucy in The Sky With Diamonds* (The Beatles); *Miss You* (The Rolling Stones)

ARROWS OF DESIRE EIGHT

downstairs room where she was and pull at her nose, fingers, anything I could grab on to. Apparently this amused her, even though she was in a lot of pain.

§§

Thomas Albert Farey was born on December 8th 1994 at Calvert Memorial Hospital. The delivery was incredibly swift, so swift in fact that it was a natural birth, their pediatrician not having time to arrive or contact an anesthetist (at 2am). In time-honored tradition, he peed on the nurse immediately.

In early February of the following year, Dee Ann discovered a worrying lump under her arm. There had been some family history of breast cancer (her mother, her sister and herself always ensured they had regular checkups), so the usual tests were scheduled immediately.

§

By the time all the test results had been sorted out, they pretty much knew what we were dealing with. That's the first time I'd heard the "C" word applied to anyone I actually cared about. We were getting all kinds of reassurance from the doctors in terms of "early discovery", "remission rates", "recurrence statistics" and all the other crap they like to baffle you with so you'll feel better. Really I think it's just to stop you going completely fucking nuts at that point and shooting up the clinic or something. Actually all the people we dealt with were pretty good. They always tell you that this is routine, which is probably is to them, and the soothing tones are probably just enough to keep you from yelling: "Yeah? Well this is about the **least** routine thing that's ever happened to me, motherfucker!"

I probably said that sometime later, though. They scheduled what they called a "lumpectomy" for March. This is supposed to basically get all the

problem-causing crap out of you, and gets followed up by months of chemo and radiation treatment, which is supposed to finish off whatever it is.

Dee Ann took to calling Tommy "my little miracle" because the docs thought that the pregnancy had somehow speeded up her metabolism and this had helped the cancer get detected earlier.

§

Of course, Dee Ann was very nervous about the upcoming surgery, even though the surgeons had assured her that there would be little scarring and that her full, nay, voluptuous figure would remain intact to stimulate the hormones of the male populace of the state of Maryland. Nic decided a distraction might be in order, so began laying plans for a night on the town. He told Dee Ann to pack a change of clothes for work one Thursday, they would be going out. Picking her up from the office, they drove to Dulles airport and immediately adjourned to the bar to assuage that greatest of human drives, thirst.

One of her first thoughts was that they must be meeting somebody who was flying in, perhaps Marianne from New York or the inimitable Ian Sales (who had been Nic's best man at their wedding). Neither was the case. Glancing at his watch, Nic turned to her and said "Better finish your drink hon', we gotta go". At this point she still had no idea what was going on. As they walked around to the entrances to the gates, he pulled a pair of cheap-looking plastic boarding passes from his coat. Unable to suppress a grin, he said "You know I promised you a night on the town?...."

"...and into the river we'd dive"

§

". . .Well, the town is Chicago". She gave me that look, always great to see, that she thought I was totally crazy but she loved me for it. I knew it was going to be a wild night,

ARROWS OF DESIRE EIGHT

because she had always been one to "live large", as they say.

We landed and lit out for town in a cab. Our friend, bartender and beer expert John Swoap had primed me for some good places to go - he hits Chicago every year for the blues festival. We flitted in and out of a couple bars, which were all packed for the Bulls game, found a good place to eat and ended up asking a cabdriver for a good blues bar. We found ourselves in Koko Taylor's on W Division, which was so friendly & with a great band we didn't do any more barhopping, just spent money. We arrived back at the airport, hitting a karaoke bar on the way, just in time to try to get an hour or so nap before the 7am flight. We got back to DC and basically hid out in our respective offices finding someplace to catch up on the Z's.

§§

Later it occurred to him to wonder whether the airline they flew (ValuJet) was some kind of harbinger.

After Dee Ann had moved into the old apartment at her parents' house, Nic was essentially living alone. Evidently deemed unable to care for Justin and Tommy alone, he typically returned from work straight to St. Leonard Shores (her parents' neighborhood), then visited for a while with Dee Ann and Tommy before returning to Kenwood Beach, fixing something to eat and retiring for the night, usually with some suitably distracting reading material.

This, at least, was the official version. In reality he was spending more and more time at the Tavern, preferring the sympathetic shoulder of a beer bottle and the soothing words of the whiskey to the reality of an empty house and one more night of the *Playboy* channel. While the decision for the children to move in, along with their mother, to Dee Ann's parents might seem to have been based on

this inevitable scenario, but the truth was rather more prosaic and rooted in some practicalities.

§

I was working for Total Beverage in Landover then, about 50 miles each way from home. Not only was I starting at 7am (meaning I had to leave home by 6, be up by 5:15 or so), but because I was still pretty much a department of one, I might have to work late any given time, and was also on call 24/7, meaning I could get called out at some godforsaken hour like 2am. Actually, because we had automated jobs that ran overnight on the computers, if I was going to get a call, 2 or 3am is exactly when it would be. I was *really* starting to hate the job around this time. Although I got on pretty well with my immediate boss, *her* boss (the big bumfuck in charge) was showing increasing signs of lunacy. I was beginning to get there myself, though for different reasons.

§

It was around this time that two friends from the UK, John and Eve Harvey, came to the United States on a trip. While it was clear from Dee Ann's demeanor that she was pleased to see them, it must have been extremely frustrating to be unable to participate in trips which both she and Nic had planned in advance of their friends' visit, given her weakening condition.

§

John and Eve's visit certainly seemed to perk Dee Ann up, though you could tell she's rather have been gallivanting around with us eating and drinking than being stuck in the apartment. Still, with the heavy chemo going, she was pretty worthless for anything like that. I don't know whether the Harveys were at all uncomfortable with the situation, they seemed pretty relaxed about it to me, but then they always do. I must admit I kind of appreciated the "pinch hit" for a couple of days, which kind of took the pressure off me to spend more

ARROWS OF DESIRE EIGHT

time with Dee Ann. I was having more and more trouble finding things to talk about.

“...get a haircut, and get a real job”

§§

Soon after their return from the Chicago trip, Dee Ann's scheduled surgery was carried out. This “lumpectomy” procedure was intended to remove the cancerous growth from her breast as well as some of the lymph nodes that were suspected to be harboring cancerous or pre-cancerous material. After the operation, the removed lymph nodes are tested for this material, and the area around the former lump checked for foreign matter. These checks did not come out 100%, but were deemed sufficiently within acceptable margins so that the radiation treatment and chemotherapy could proceed.

The treatments are spaced out over several months. The radiation can leave some individuals, especially those with fair complexions like Dee Ann, uncomfortably “sunburned”. This was the case, but was the least of her worries. Chemotherapy tends to be quite debilitating in terms of fatigue, and there are a number of well-known side-effects, not least of which is partial or total hair loss.

§

Dee Ann had a terrific head of hair. It was the first thing I saw when we met at the Illumination Eastercon in Blackpool. The fact that they tell you you're likely to lose the hair once the chemo starts kicking in doesn't prepare you for the actual fact. I remember how she burst into inconsolable tears when she took a shower that one day and great clumps of the stuff started falling to the floor. This was after a couple of the chemo treatments, so we'd been hoping she'd gotten away with it.

§

If you consider for a moment, one of the most unusual situations for any man who is not a

transvestite or female impersonator of any stripe would be a visit to a wig store. Marlene's of Dunkirk (no longer extant, having been replaced by, of all things, an Italian *Ristorante*) was such an establishment.

Statistics would seem to show that the incidence of cancers in Calvert County, Maryland is significantly, if not inordinately higher than other comparable areas. Speculation as to why this would be so of necessity includes the Calvert Cliffs Nuclear Power Plant, nevertheless a facility with a spotless record to date. Others may suggest a link with the frequency of arrival of nuclear-powered vessels at the nearby Patuxent Naval Base. Suffice to say that the staff of Marlene's were competent, if not to say experienced, at outfitting women undergoing chemotherapy.

§

One of the most amazing things I've ever seen has to have been the “Dolly Parton” wig catalog, endorsed by the great woman herself and with her picture prominently on the cover.

The folks at the wig store were really great. We came out with a couple of turbans and clutching an order for a wig which looked as if it would match Dee Ann's “old” hair pretty well, and did incredibly, as it turned out.

§

As usual, they had scheduled their annual UK trip to include Novacon in Birmingham, and the chemotherapy had been going so well that there seemed no reason the trip could not go ahead. Medical advice was sought, and this opinion indeed confirmed.

At this time Nic was still wearing his hair long, in much the same ponytailed style he had when he and Dee Ann married. Two factors were at work in his mind. One was, admittedly, that he had grown somewhat wearied of this high-maintenance style, the other was a not-so-buried sense of guilt that he now had an overabundance of flowing locks compared to his wife, a situation which, while not

ARROWS OF DESIRE EIGHT

being out of place in some alternate universe, nevertheless lent a slightly uncomfortable feeling to this one.

This was the genesis of the "haircut" plan.

"...but she looked a little worried and weak"

§§

Once January of 1996 came along, we were celebrating the New Year like crazy. All the treatments were done, and it looked like we could get back to normal, Dee Ann could get back to work and we could go back to raising our terrific little kid (and terrific big kid Justin) and get back into something resembling family life. I was still hating work with a vengeance and cussing out the big bumfuck with a great deal of regularity, but at least they'd promised me some programming help, and I had better things to think about now anyway. Those good feelings didn't even last through my fucking birthday.

§

Dee Ann had managed to get back to work with at least a minimum of regularity, and they were preparing for the annual beanfeast that was the Superbowl-cum-Nic's birthday party. She was still at this point getting some twinges, as she described them, but this was attributed more to the after effects of the treatments than anything else. Unfortunately, the pain seemed to be getting worse, and the lumps had returned. They resolved to get through the party as normally as possible, then to get re-checked immediately.

It was clearly evident that the cancer was back. Surgery and nine months of radiation and chemotherapy had failed to suppress the cause of the cancer. A mastectomy was quickly scheduled. There were, however, further complications. For many women, a mastectomy would not be a major "disaster" in terms of figure. Those less well endowed would be adequately served by some form

of padding. However, more generously proportioned women such as Dee Ann would almost inevitably wish to include some kind of cosmetic surgery to replace the missing breast. This cannot be carried out for several months after the mastectomy itself, since the usual tests to determine the elimination of the cancer have to be taken. It seemed that Dee Ann and Nic would be resigned to some time of her being what either of them might have considered to be physically abnormal.

§

It took a hell of a while to get the details out of her, because it was obviously something she didn't want to talk about (and didn't, then or ever), but I managed to piece it together from the stuff she did tell me, stuff the doctors told me and stuff the family told me that she'd let slip to them.

The whole breast was going to come off. In that spot they'd need a skin graft which was going to be taken from her thigh. The skin graft would need to heal up completely, *and* we'd need to be sure the cancer was finally gone before any cosmetic surgery could be looked at. Even best case, we'd be looking at six to nine months before I'd have a wife with a chest again.

They got the surgery done in early March, about a year after the previous bout. The first thing that became apparent was (a) her thigh hurt like fuck and bled all over the place where they'd taken the skin to graft and (b) the graft wasn't taking well. It was a bit pitiful to see her lying there, obviously not having gotten any sleep because she couldn't find a comfy position to get into, and then having to get more bad news from the doctors.

§

The description "from bad to worse" would in fact be pitifully inaccurate to describe the events of the next few weeks. Radiation treatment can have interesting effects on the skin other than its

ARROWS OF DESIRE EIGHT

tendency to cause the equivalent of sunburn. One of these more important effects is that the skin's ability to knit is impaired to a greater or lesser degree, and in Dee Ann's case massively so. The only thing that appeared to be going relatively well was the healing of the area from which the graft was taken, and even this was progressing slowly due to the general debilitation of her system.

It was also immediately apparent that the cancer had not been stymied by the removal of the breast, in fact it was practically "breaking out" of her chest at the point where the surgery had occurred. Further testing by the oncologist showed that the bone had been affected. It would be a trite understatement to say that the prognosis offered was not good.

A consultation was obtained with a specialist at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore, and the plain-spoken Irish doctor confirmed what our own doctors had told us. Bone marrow therapies were unlikely to succeed, and the only option at this time would be a highly aggressive series of chemotherapy treatments lasting a day at a time, and of course with increased side effects compared to the previous drugs used.

"...but it's all right now, in fact it's a gas"

§§

We'd *really* been looking forward to the trip to the UK and Novacon 25. All the therapy was about done, we'd checked with the docs (as there were still a couple of treatments left to do) and had been given the all clear to travel. Everything seemed to be going really well at this point - we were looking forward to the trip (and letting everybody see for themselves how great Dee Ann was looking) and to the New Year, and getting back to normal again.

§

In many ways, this was supposed to be a redeeming Novacon. Two years previously Nic had missed the convention since that was the year he and Dee Ann

married. That had been the first time he had missed that particular convention in several years. It had always been a special favorite of his as a haven from the politicking and general personal baggage of the *Star Trek* conventions he attended and, sometimes, ran. He truly felt that the friendships and relationships he had established over many years at the Birmingham Group convention were singularly free of the cant he experienced at others. It was also a special pleasure to be invited to return to Novacon tech ops (having fulfilled this function for a time many years previously) after successful and pleasurable stints as a committee member for the last Mexicons.

They had attended Novacon the previous year when Dee Ann was (rather heavily) pregnant with Tommy. It was then that they reached the culmination of a months-long argument about sex - Dee Ann complaining that she was being short rationed, Nic feeling continually uneasy about the prospect of sex with a pregnant woman.

§

Though I can't claim any lack of sexual experience (at least not with a straight face - that old reputation didn't come out of thin air, you know) the idea of fucking Dee Ann while she was pregnant (especially at seven months) seemed somehow not quite right. Being the passionate woman she was, she didn't like that answer very much. I must have had some kind of revelation, a lightning bolt up the ass, call it what you will, because that particular Novacon was the first time we'd done it in months. Wasn't half bad, neither. As Wendy Graham has been known to say, Novacon is the *only* place to get laid!

The following year we just planned to have a good ol' time, drinking and eating and fucking and just generally celebrating life. Mark Plummer, for one, seemed to be gratified to eventually discover that "Baby Pictures Nic" as I was later described in *Banana Wings* was indistinguishable from the original version once I'd got

ARROWS OF DESIRE EIGHT

a drink or two under the belt. Hey Mark, I just enjoyed your disbelieving expression when I regaled you with all those snaps of the little 'un! We also had a laff or two in store for Sunday night...

§

Dee Ann was, of course, aware of Nic's previous efforts in the area of fund-raising at conventions. Part of this had germinated at an earlier Mexican, where the then newly minted tech crew enjoyed a case of Corona auctioned off at the end of the convention, giving rise to a "tradition" of end-of-convention tech crew public parties, nominally hosted by Nic but more usually presided over by the more reliable Mark Plummer, especially if monies were to be collected for some worthy fannish cause. The most memorable of these occasions would surely have been the beer and tequila party after the Mexican in Harrogate, with Nic insistent that the correct method of imbibing the Mexican spirit be demonstrated to all comers. The inevitable result gave rise to what may be a unique moment in the annals of science fiction conventions – the head of the tech crew being carried to bed by the Guest of Honor (Norman Spinrad). Norman, Lee Wood and Dee Ann then proceeded out to enjoy dinner while Nic was left to awaken an hour or so thereafter and stumble around the hotel in his socks looking for cigarettes, Dee Ann having pocketed his out of concern he might set fire to the bed.

§

For this convention we'd decided to add to the TAFF auction by making the buggers pay to cut my hair, which at this point was still very long. My old mate Martin Tudor was running for TAFF, so I naturally agreed to have "TUDOR FOR TAFF" shaved into the back of my head. I think we raised about a hundred quid on the haircut, then after Rog Peyton got in the act and complained that he'd always hated my beard, I think we made about another hundred losing that. I still have the pictures on the fridge!

The grand finale was supposed to have been Dee Ann whipping off her wig (or turban, I forget exactly what she was wearing), showing her bald head and yelling "SNAP!". When it came down to the wire, though, she couldn't do it, more's the pity. That would've been quite a stunner.

Great convention!

"...the girl with kaleidoscope eyes"

§§

By the beginning of June 1996 Dee Ann was essentially bedridden in the Chesapeake Room of her parents' house. The skin graft wound on her leg had almost fully cleared up, at least enabling her to lie or sit in relative comfort, but any ease this might have given her was completely exacerbated by the increasing pain from the cancer in her chest. The painkillers and drips supplied by the oncologist did not appear to be alleviating her condition, and she was dreading the idea of extended chemotherapy. The family met together with her and discussed what options were left, which came down to one: the Hospice would be called in.

§

The people from Calvert Hospice were really good at explaining what it was all about, and they don't really leave you in any doubt, but they do somehow manage to convey a sense of comfort to you with everything they do, which when you think about it is pretty amazing. Not to put too fine a point on it, the Hospice is where you go to die. In her condition, Dee Ann wasn't about to "go" anywhere, so they arranged for in-house care for her, with oxygen and some wicked drugs.

§

It was explained that, once under Hospice care, any preventive or curative medicine is discontinued. The function of Hospice is to ensure the patient's comfort as far as can be possible, and in many cases (as with Dee Ann) this concentrates on the alleviation of pain. Of course, the more

ARROWS OF DESIRE EIGHT

considerable the pain, the stronger the drugs that need to be administered, and the stronger the drugs, the greater the side effects.

§
As I believe I've mentioned to a couple of people: there **are** some things you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy. Once they started pumping Dee Ann full of the jolly juice she was basically zoned out the whole time. She'd have taken her medication, then five minutes later ask whether it was time to take it - I guess her short term memory went completely to shit. She still pretty much knew who we all were, but it was like she was permanently drunk on something, slurring her words and with a totally glazed look on her face the whole time. This kinda got worse over the next few days to the point where it was actually getting to be unpleasant for me to visit - this was not the woman I knew.

§
Nic became privately more and more distressed over the course of the week. On one day, he was visiting Dee Ann at the same time the caregiver from the Hospice was there for the twice-daily checkup. He followed her outside, ostensibly for a cigarette break, and asked: "Can you be honest with me, what's the prognosis?" (He actually did say "prognosis"). The Hospice nurse was reluctant to commit to anything, but evidently a polite "Look, *off* the record, OK?" and perhaps something about the look of desperation about him made her relent a little. "Well", she said, "We generally find that once a patient stops eating, it usually means there isn't long to go." She paused. "Dee Ann hasn't eaten for three days." This was July 13th.

§
When I arrived at the house, it was pretty obvious from Lawrence's expression what had happened. I walked deliberately into Dee Ann's room, and saw that they'd disconnected her drips and stuff. She was laying with her head resting to the left on her

pillow, eyes just a little open still. She looked peaceful, beautiful in fact. At that moment she was almost radiant to me as I looked for the last time at the woman I loved and married, and for a moment forgot completely the stranger who had laid in that room for the last ten days, and I cried.

§
The next few days may as well have been a dream sequence in a Terry Gilliam film: Justin riding away on his bicycle at high speed as the body was being taken out; visits to the undertaker and discussions about the funeral / memorial service; the memories discussed, the pain, the relief; the announcement in the newspapers.

Nic at this time might be said to be holding up extremely well. He had, after all, been through a similar time when his father died in 1981, although this time at least he was not the only one managing to maintain a stoic appearance. Dee Ann's family were very much in evidence, reminiscing and comforting with him and with each other, whereas when his father had died there was essentially just his mother, who was going to pieces.

§
I'll probably never forgive my mother for this one thing: a few years after my dad died, and at the time she'd been all over the place, useless for anything, so I had to do all the arrangements and keep face front, she'd said to me "Well you didn't seem very upset when your dad died". At least this time around it was OK to be upset, there were other people around to share the load.

§
The next year was about to begin...

To be continued...

THE DAY I FIGURED OUT WHAT 'FUCK' MEANT

By Tracy Twyman

It was October of 1987, my eighth year. That weekend I was standing in the tomato garden throwing stones over the back fence into the neighbors' yard. They had complained about this before, claiming that one of my rocks had almost hit their two-year-old daughter on the head, but my Dad said they were assholes so I kept on doing it. As I bent down to procure another stone I noticed a yellow Bic lighter lying there among the plants. I checked to make sure no-one was looking and picked it up, flicked it a couple times but could not get the little rotary thing to turn. I'd never successfully used a lighter before and figured it must be broken. All of a sudden I heard a noise behind me, and fearing that my Dad had been watching me I looked over my shoulder. I saw Chris, the seven-year-old Czechoslovakian boy from down the street, walking across the brick wall that separated my backyard from the neighbors on that side, his arms extended to keep balance.

"Hello Tracy, whass going on?", he asked in his Eastern European accent.

"I found a lighter", I answered, showing it to him, "but I can't get it to work." He tip-toed across the wall until he stood looking directly down over my head.

"Give it to me", he said, "I can do it."

"Come on down here", I ordered. I was afraid that the neighbors might come outside and see him up there playing with it. He jumped down and took the Bic away from me, flicking it again and again excitedly, something he'd obviously done before.

"What're you doing here anyway?", I asked. Chris was certainly an infrequent visitor, and usually the only time I saw him was when he was hanging out with Justin from two doors down. Individually they were both friendly and sometimes played with me,

but when they got together they would beat me up and break my toys.

"Danny and I want to climb your brick wall on the *other* side", he replied, "and get into your neighbor's yard over there." He gestured towards the house on the left.

"You mean where Monica used to live?", I said, remembering the Mexican family with a ten-year-old daughter that had recently moved. They'd had to leave shortly after their eldest son had been caught burglarizing neighborhood homes with other members of his gang. Our home had gotten burglarized around that time as well, but we could never prove a link.

"Yeah", Chris answered. "The house is still empty. Danny says he knows how to get in."

"Where *is* Danny?", I asked. He was this kid from the next block over who sometimes played with Chris and Justin. He was a year older than me, an intimidating nine.

"He's in your pool", Chris replied.

"What?!" I shouted, running towards that funky old Jacuzzi we hadn't used in years. "I'm not even s'posed to have people back *here*, and *definitely* not in the Jacuzzi!" I peered over the tile rim and saw Danny there, sitting on the spa's second "level" amongst filth and dead leaves, playing with the layer of brown fuzz that covered his head.

"Hey Tracy", he said when he heard me approaching. "What's up?" He turned his face up to me and gave me a devilish grin. "Nice pool."

"Jacuzzi", I corrected.

"A what?", Danny asked, climbing up out of the muck.

ARROWS OF DESIRE EIGHT

“Lookee”, Chris interrupted before I could answer. “She has a lighter.” He flicked it off a couple times before handing it to Danny.

“Cool”, Danny said. “We can take it with us. You’re coming, aren’t you Tracy?”

“Where?”, I asked.

“To Monica’s house”, they answered in unison.

“C’mon”, Danny insisted, pulling my sleeve. “The window’s unlocked. I been in there before.”

We climbed the brick wall on the other side of the yard and hopped over, nearly landing in a rose bush on the way down. Danny headed straight for the kitchen window and pushed it open. He gave Chris and I a boost, then climbed in himself. The place had been hastily abandoned, you could tell. Drawers had been yanked out and left lying there, the floor was covered with trash and there was a stream of baking flour that ran from the kitchen to the front door. Lots of stuff had been left behind, especially toys and clothes. Danny and Chris immediately got started burning things: socks, candy wrappers, little scraps of paper. They would just watch the flame for a while and then let it go out. They seemed like they were having fun, so I asked Danny if I could play with the lighter for a while.

“No!”, Danny responded indignantly, clutching it to his chest. “I’m not done with it.”

“But it’s *nine*”, I whined. “I found it in my own yard.”

“All right”, he sighed, handing it over. I walked into the garage looking for something to burn. All I could find was a wooden baseball bat, but when I tried to light it I still couldn’t get the Bic to work, so I gave up and went to see what the boys were doing. I found them in what had once been Monica’s room. They had discovered a piece of orange chalk and Danny was drawing something on the wall. It was one of those five-pointed stars like Mrs. Lowry used to draw on our papers when we got 100%. Danny laughed an evil laugh.

“Y’know what they have in the next room?”, he asked me. “A bed.”

“Yeah, so?”, I said, following him back there.

“So, you could fuck on it”, he replied.

Back then, I didn’t really know what the word ‘fuck’ meant, I thought it was something you said when you dropped a dictionary on your foot, so I was confused when Danny used it like that. We entered the room and he showed me the bed, a filthy twin mattress lying in the middle of the floor. He and Chris hopped on top of it and started jumping up and down.

“See”, Danny continued, “It’s perfect for fucking. I’ll bet people *did* fuck on this. We should call this ‘The Fucking Room’”. He hopped off the mattress and scrawled ‘The Fucking Room’ in giant cursive on the opposite wall. Chris headed out into the hall and swung open the door to the linen closet.

“Look!” he shouted in his Czech accent. “There’s places to fuck here, too.” Danny went to check it out and I followed him.

“Ya see Tracy, one, two, three, four, five,” he said, counting the shelves. “You could fuck all the way to the top.” I still didn’t understand what he was talking about, but the space in between the shelves seemed too small for people to do *anything* in there.

“You guys are stupid”, I said, and walked into the room opposite ‘The Fucking Room’. I didn’t find anything in there except a fountain pen and an empty Tic-Tac box on the floor – peppermint. I picked up the pen and scribbled ‘The Tic-Tac Room’ onto the wall. I wrote it small, though, and it wasn’t quite as impressive as the way ‘The Fucking Room’ was written, so I decided to make them block letters. As I was coloring in the blocks I heard Danny and Chris calling me from across the hall. I went to see what was up. They were lying on the mattress, Danny on his side giving what I would later recognize as that “come-hither” look.

“Come lay on the bed”, Danny said.

"Why?", I asked. "It's all dirty."

"Chris and I wanna fuck you", he answered bluntly. I was starting to wonder if 'fucking' and 'sex' might actually be the same thing, because that sure seemed like what they were asking for.

"No", I answered. "I don't want to." Secretly I kinda did, but Danny seemed like a bad kid and I was afraid he might hurt me.

"Why not?", Chris whined. "*Please, Tracy.*"

"Yeah, c'mon Tracy", Danny begged. "We need it, and you're our only hope". There was a moment of silence as they stared at me, pleading, expectant looks in their eyes, trying to be seductive. I stared back at them, debating whether or not to follow my curiosity. Then Danny grinned at me and I suddenly felt sick.

"I'm leaving", I said, and marched down the hall towards the front door.

"Wait!" Danny hollered after me. "At least let us see your pussy!" I slammed the door behind me and was halfway down the driveway when Danny and Chris caught up with me.

"Hey, c'mon, don't take the lighter", Chris begged, grabbing my arm. "Let's go see if Nicole's home." Nicole was this little black girl about Chris' age who lived down the road. We went over there and rang the doorbell. There was no answer, and no car in the driveway. We did find a pumpkin on the porch, however. An attached flyer said it was a gift from Sue Hashimoto Realty. They owned a lot of local property, including the house we'd just been in.

"All right!", Danny shouted gleefully. He picked up the pumpkin and punted it across the driveway, where it smashed into a million bits. He and Chris continued to kick it until the driveway was completely smeared with pumpkin innards, then they took the flyer and set it on fire, though it only burned for a moment before the wind blew it out.

"Would you show me how to use this?", I asked Chris, referring to the lighter. "I can't make it work."

"You have to press the button at the same time you turn the metal thing", he explained.

"There's too much wind", Danny said. "Here, try over here." He pointed towards a small brick wall separating Nicole's front and back yards, showing me that there was a little nook between the wall and the side of the house where a brick was missing. It was near the bottom, so I had to crouch down. I stuck the paper in there and tried to light it, but just then an Isuzu truck pulled into the driveway and the boys took off running. Realizing I'd been caught, I just stood there, shocked, and tried to think of something to say. A man I recognized as Nicole's father stepped out of the truck, and I immediately started to cry.

"What's going on here?" he demanded, approaching me. "Looks like you're tryin' to set my house on fire." He took the lighter and the bunt-up flyer from my hands.

"I'm sorry!" I sobbed, "I was just burning that little piece of paper, that's all. Please let me go! I swear I'll never do it again! I'm sorry!" I always acted like that whenever I got caught, I was a real wuss back then.

"OK, OK, calm down", he said. He made me sit with him on the porch. "Now what about this pumpkin all over my driveway? Where did that come from?"

"It was on the porch", I sniffled. "Danny and Chris started kicking it."

"Wait a minute. It was on the porch?", he asked.

"Yeah, it's from Sue Hashimoto", I explained. "I guess everyone got one." I pointed at the half-burnt flyer which was still in his hand.

"Oh, I see", he nodded. "OK, so who kicked the pumpkin?"

ARROWS OF DESIRE EIGHT

"Danny. Him and Chris ran away when they saw you coming"" I answered.

"But you didn't kick the pumpkin?"

"Yeah, I told them to stop", I lied.

"OK", he sighed, I'm gonna let you go, but I'm gonna keep this lighter. You shouldn't be playing with that. And if I see you around here again, I'll tell your parents."

"OK thanks", I said, and ran off with my heart pounding. I was still freaking out as I circled the cul-de-sac and headed home. I'd come so close to being in big, bad trouble. About two doors from my house, Mom's car pulled up next to me, bulging groceries. She rolled down her window.

"I just went to the store", she said. "I got you a ball." She tossed me one of those 50-cent bouncy balls that you get out of a big wire basket in the supermarket. It was red.

"Come inside soon", she said, "I'm gonna start making dinner." I felt real guilty. *If she'd known what I'd just been doing*, I thought, *would she have bought me a ball?* I didn't want to go inside and face her just yet, so I stood in my driveway and bounced the new ball up against the garage door. But after a few minutes I started crying again, thinking about what I'd done. I ran inside and told my mother everything – well, except I didn't mention the sexual proposals I'd received, but I did say that Danny had written 'The Fucking Room' on one of the walls.

Four days later I was sitting on my bed, grounded for two weeks. My mom had just come from a meeting with someone from Sue Hashimoto's office. She'd called them immediately after my confession and told them she'd noticed some kids breaking into the house, but didn't tell them that I was involved. I have no idea why she called them at *all*. Anyway, they'd asked her to tour the house with one of their agents to look at the damage and see if there were any clues as to who might have done it. That's where she'd just come from when

she stormed into my bedroom and grabbed me by the collar.

"Young lady!", she shouted, "What does your little adventure next door have to do with Satanism?"

"What?", I said, staring back at her. "Satanism? You mean like on Geraldo?"

"You know very well what I mean", she spat back, shaking me. "You drew a pentagram on the wall in one of those rooms."

"A what?", I sputtered.

"A star inside a circle!", she exclaimed. "Someone drew it on the wall."

"Oh yeah", I said. "That was Danny."

"Well it's a Satanic symbol!" she screamed. "And I don't want you playing with that boy any more!"

"OK", I said. I didn't even *want* to play with him any more. My mom started to calm down.

"You know, the real estate agent gave us \$100", she said.

"Why?", I asked.

"For looking after the house next door", she said. "Isn't that funny?" She wasn't laughing.

"Yeah", I said. I wanted to be left alone. I felt guilty again.

"Is there something you're not telling me?", Mom asked. I thought about how Danny and Chris had wanted to fuck me, and kept my mouth shut. If 'fuck' really meant what I thought it meant then Mom didn't need to know.

"Well then", Mom said, "I'll drop the subject. I won't bring it up again, OK?" I was relieved. She got up and headed out the door, then stopped herself.

"By the way", she said, "Why did you write 'The Tic-Tac Room'?"

ARROWS OF DESIRE EIGHT

A few months later, toward Spring, Mrs. Lowry didn't come to work on time and everyone in our room was forced to join a fourth-grade class at the other end of the school while we waited for her to show. I got seated next to a tiny Asian girl and I noticed that sitting two desks in front of me was none other than Danny, facing the chalkboard and rubbing his fuzzy head. He had the same devious smirk on his face as when he'd asked me to fuck him. My heart leapt into my throat as he started to turn around; I immediately looked away. I spent the next hour and a half staring at a wad of gum underneath the desk until our teacher finally came and we went back to our own room.

That Friday, right after lunch, Mrs. Lowry announced that Jonathan, one of the kids in the class, had just been shaken down for his lunch money in the boys' room by some fourth-grader named Danny. I knew it was the same one because that's exactly the kind of thing he would do. The teacher asked us if any of us had been wronged by Danny before, because the school was trying to expel him and they were compiling evidence. I started to raise my hand, but then it occurred to me that asking some girl to fuck you on the weekend outside of the school premises was probably not against the rules.

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Part two of *This Time Next Year* will follow in 1999.

AND FINALLY...

"...there's some Puerto Rican girls is just dyin' to meet you..."