

CLAIMS DEPARTMENT

Chris Garcia's First Rule- Don't take it too seriously. No matter what the 'it' is, it's not that important. Of course, when it actually is, things can come unglued. Of course, I'm not going to write about one of those moments, but they come once in a while. The last major one was the death of my Dad, and before that the first break-up for me and Evelyn's Mom. Neither one of those times was very good for me, but I managed. I even only missed one issue of The Drink Tank! So, why do I bring this up?

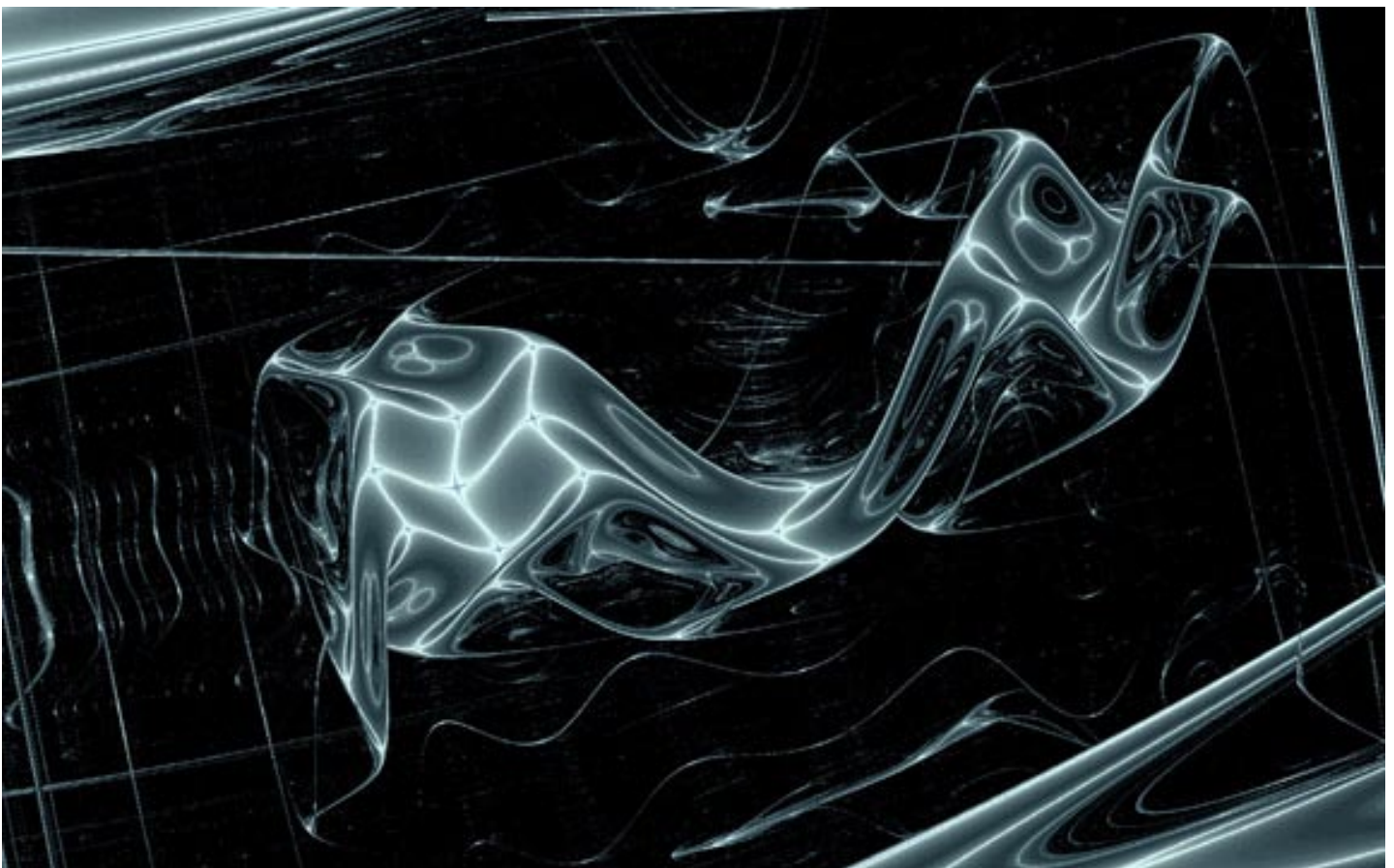
Because I'm getting tired of people dying. True, in recent months, the only personal loss I've had was Gen's Grandmother, who was a lovely old woman who was one of the few members of Gen's family who didn't totally freak me out. I Lost a grandparent-ish elder recently, but it was totally expected.

No, I'm talking about those people who had a serious impact on my love of all things popular culture. First it was Forry, who had the double impact of having been one of the major distant influences on my life and was a major influence on my Dad, especially with Famous Monsters. Then it was Bob Wilkins, the host of Creature Features who was one of the guys who really made me love movies of a certain kind... OK, the guy who brought me to B-films. Then, just today as I write this, it was the star and creator of

one of my all-time favorite TV shows: The Prisoner. There's no question that The Prisoner is what I'd want to make if I had ever been given the right to make a TV series. Same day, not but a couple of hours after I heard about the loss of Patrick McGoochan, it was posted that Ricardo Montalban had passed away. Yes...I know I misspelled that. He was probably the biggest name Mexican actor for years. He was a star in MGM musicals in the 1940s into the 50s after he'd been in Mexican films for years. When I was a kid, I loved him on Fantasy Island. I loved ABC shows back then and it was one of the best of them. Of course, he was also Khan, and a little later, it was The Wrath of Khan that was one of my favorite movies. The same day! The Prisoner and Mr. Roarke, both gone. Sucks.

I want to say a giant Thanks to Ditmar. He's one of the greatest fan artists of all-time, working in a style that's different from so many other Fan Artists. This issue is a tribute to him and his fantastic work! I hope you enjoy them as much as I do.

This time is the time to talk about spending a weekend on the run. Not literally, the FBI wasn't out to get me, but I needed a little time away from everything, as is often the case, and it was 2006. I told Gen I was going out of town, I told my Mom that I wasn't going to be around my phone, so no phone calls of



little bitty annoyances. I was on my own, which was the first time I'd had that for months since there were cons and various other distractions. I know, I'm complaining about my hobby interfering on time that I could be doing other things, like sitting around with nothing of any consequence. I got off work on Friday at noon. That's right, Noon. Why? I had to go to various Thrift Stores to look for artifacts for an exhibit we were working on, so I was told to take the afternoon to go and do that. I was glad to, because that's perfect. I had thrown two pairs of pants, three t-shirts, two over-shirts, three pairs of underwear, two pairs of socks, an extra pair of shoes, and my sports coat. That's right, I had the coat of three buttons.

That is a phrase I don't know if I've ever used in any of my zines. When I was going to school at Emerson, I was frequently poor. I'd have 25 bucks to last me three weeks often and that meant that I needed to make things stretch. I had a paycheck, 125.00 which I was hoping to make it last until I went back to California for Thanksgiving. I walked down Commonwealth Avenue in Boston, headed to Nuggets to buy a couple of CDs, and when I got to the store, I saw that there was absolutely nothing for the pudgy man

Nothing except for a 3 button coat, obviously from the 1960s, in black. It was marvelous, fit like a dream, and only cost 75.00 dollars. That's 3/5 of the money I had for the next month. I knew that if I bought it, I'd be out of everything, basically not having anything to spend the entire rest of the time. So, of course, I bought it.

I've kept it, and though I've gained a few pounds, I still wear it when I need to look at least mildly presentable. It's like Chris Farley said "Fat man in a little coat".

So, I headed up towards the East Bay. I'd been to Seattle the previous year for NASFiC and I went back and forth to Los Angeles a few times over the previous year. I'd been to Vegas twice and had a great time, so I had to go somewhere different. I thought about the range and realized that I wasn't about to make plans to go anywhere too far. I figured out that I couldn't really plan to go somewhere, but I could make a trip of it and just go as far as I could and then come home without a full plan. I headed to San Mateo. There were a few places there that I thought would be good to go looking for old computers. As I drove up, I found that there were a ton of places to look for stuff around those parts. I love San Mateo.

There's nothing but average restaurants and hotels. I love hotels! And there are a few fine Thrift Stores. I walked into one and could tell that this wasn't the kind of place where you'd find old computers and so forth. As I walked through, I found a ton of old furniture and console TVs. It was exactly what I figure should be in a Thrift Store. I spent a lot of time in various thrift stores over the last decade and a half. I often would go antiquing with friends when I was in high school and we made some great finds. This place was great for 1970s and 80s flava, but there wasn't much in the way of ancient electronics. At least not until I got to look into one of the TV cabinets. There was a lovely trove of old games of Atari 2600 games. There were several classics: Bezerker, Pac-Man, Joust, Combat and even a copy of Custer's Revenge, the single most racist and sexist game ever made.

My Favorite video games of all-time: Dig-Dug, Mr. Do, Mappy, Elevator Action, Mortal Kombat, 720, Tony Hawk Pro Skater, Nintendo Pro Wrestling, California Game. Ivan Stewart Racing

I've played it on a simulator, which is the least perfect way to play an old video game. The game features a guy who is trying to save an Indian Woman he is tied to a stake. It's weird, and there's a section where you can see Custer's erection. It tends to go for more money than it's worth, and here, it was 5.99. I love finding stuff like this. I bought all of them, which was good since it mostly filled in the important gaps. I actually bought them with my money and would be donating all of them except for Custer's Revenge to the Museum. I had promised to send that one to another museum which is working on gathering classic Atari games and didn't have a copy. It was one their wishlist, so it was something I knew they'd want.

I took my booty back to the car and dropped it in. I had a box that was sitting on Evelyn's car seat that I'd be filling with all the stuff that I gathered through the weekend. These were the first insertions into the box. The world would gather in that box.

I pulled out of my parking space and had to figure out what was next. I could get onto the 101 and head out for San Francisco, though that would be out of character for me, or I could get onto San Mateo Bridge and head across for Oakland or some such. I could go up 101 and end up in Sonoma, or I could go

South and make my way to LA or something. I put myself onto the road to the Bridge, figuring I could go a lot further that way than any of the others. I started to get an image in my head, and it was a weird one. It was of Tahoe, that city in the mountains, and I could gamble a bit, maybe go into the Lake, climb some rocks, hang out with some friends. There were options. It was four hours to get there, but I thought that a trip there in one day would be weak. I thought about maybe stopping along the way.

But before that, I had to drive across the bridge. It's the greatest bridge in the world for me. It starts as a concrete truss, a standard over the water bridge, but then it flattens out and becomes a causeway. That causeway's something like 4.6 miles. You look out to the left, it's water below you. If you look to the right, it's water. It's awesome. I was about to get onto the bridge when I discovered that I hadn't put in one of the CDs I had made before I left work. I make the most of my time when I'm working. I had put this one together right before I left because I hadn't thought of it earlier. It was from my man Christian. We'd gone to High School, and he was the star. There's always that one kid, that guy who was hyper-talented, charismatic and just ahead of every curve you could think of. That was Christian.

He was a year older than me, and in my class, there were a couple of us who might have qualified. I was one, my buddy Chris was one, as was my friend Matt. Of the three of us, I'm certainly the least accomplished, but Christian blew us all out of the water. He was in a couple of movies, notably *Sister Act 2: Back in the Habit*, and he would later move to Vegas and work on shows out there. More recently, he worked on creating one of *Cirque d'Soliel's* latest shows and was one of their lead clowns.

Along the way, he also recorded some gangsta rap.

OK, that's not fair, because the real concept of Gangsta rap has to do with content and not style so much. I had found him on MySpace and he had several songs up there. I captured all of them, of course, and along with a couple of other things

for filler, I made a CD.

Now, Christian has been interested in the supernatural as long as I've been. He used to read a lot about Alistair Crowley, the Beast, as he was often known. There's a lot of stories about the guy, and he led my pal to get interested in things like the OTO, Order Templaris Orientalis, I believe. Thelema, as the OTO is a part of, is a ritual-based religion, I guess you'd call it, and it's based around three phrases, the most important of which being 'Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law' and my favorite of which being 'Love is the Law, Love Under Will'. Still, I never got into it much, though I read a lot about it over the years. I got more into Conspiracy Theory and Cryptozoology, and especially Freemason stuff, which is another part of Thelema. Christian was always a performer, and with all those influences, he produced some great music.

There's a total way of going through with things and one of the ways is to start a MySpace and hope that people come to it. I certainly did, discovering that Christian's performance name was Scholar. It's the perfect name for that kind of performance work. The First song I got outlined the basics of The-



My favorite moment being on-stage with Christian Fitzharris was when we did High School ComedySportz. There was a game where we had to jump into a square at the front of the stage to tell a joke. My friend Morticia and I both jumped in at the same time, bounced off each other, both went flying off the stage, with me breaking my foot. Christian then jumped into the square, doffed his Gilligan hat and said 'Tah-dah!' That got the biggest laugh I'd ever inadvertently been a part of.

lema, with the three central tenants of Thelema being the chorus. The production values were really great. A lot of the folks who release stuff on the internet don't put out the solid production values. Christian always had good flow, especially back in the day when he was the biggest Public Enemy fan at Santa Clara High. I found them through Christian, and I've always been a big fan. There's a little bit of Chuck D in Scholar. Chuck D and The Beastie Boys and John S. Hall (from King Missile) and even some KRS-1. It's a great sense of mixture, the power of the lyrics, which are peppered with occult themes and phrases, but he also plays it all completely straight, serious, and when he cuts from the main flow, he throws it down harder. It's incredible to hear if you know anything about the mainstream of rap. I mixed it up with some De La Soul and Tribe Called Qwest, which are two of my all-time faves. Christian mixed well with both of those.

The funny thing isn't that there's a rapper who uses Thelema as one of his main themes, but that it flows so well and there's an edge to it that recalls someone like Grandmaster Flash (there's a lot of The Message in a couple of Scholar's tracks) and even a bit of hard core call to arms. It's like listening to Public Enemy and Kool Moe D back in 1987 or 88 when they were raging and people were just starting to listen.

Oddly, he's not the only rapper to come out of Santa Clara. My buddy Matt, that same Matt, has been working on a rap album himself. He's pretty damn good, though his production values aren't nearly as good. His flow is completely different. My buddy Leon also started working on his rap style, with the phrase 'which of your friends came out of the closet and THEN became a gangsta rapper' as the intro to the eMail where I first heard about it. He's pretty good too.

I was rolling across the bridge, minding my own when I got a thought. I should probably stop at the first Antique store I found along the way to buy more stuff. I knew that there were a couple of places along the road to Tahoe, so I figured out that I'd be

able to make it there pretty early-ish. I made my way up fast, enjoying my music as I was driving.

You know, that time of day when I was driving, it should have been a lot slower. I could always tell the state of the economy by the amount of traffic. Yes, we know that the current Grand Depression started in 2007, but it was already showing as of the middle of 2006. Go figure. I made great time up to 880, across 580 to 80 and that on the way to 50 up to Tahoe.

There is a section of 50 that is the best thing possible. You get on at Sacramento, drive for half-an-hour or so and then you start in the foothills and then to the actual Sierra Nevada Mountains. Now, there aren't a lot of traditional highway-side locations, especially after you've entered the actual mountains. Then you get these little pockets, tiny, two and three building lots where you can stop. Usually it's a restaurant and a tourist info shop. Sometimes you'll luck out and find one that's got a psychic or something. There are several that have Antique shops in them. One of them was a beautiful place, in a wide-spot that was near the city of Strawberry. It's a great location, nothing for fifteen miles in any direction, but it's lovely, set in among the pines with a deep gorge just a few hundred feet from where the highway ends. The view from the A-frame restaurant is lovely, I'd been there once a year or two before, but more importantly, the other building was an antique store. It was pushing four-thirty, but the hand-drawn sign said Open 'til 5, so I was safe.

I walked in and instantly, you know a place is special. In this one, you could tell because once you walked in, you were looking at a full-sized painting of a woman behind a dressing screen. It was obviously from the 1950s. How could I tell? Because there was a street tough staring in through the window, his gun with a silencer on. It had to have been a pulp cover. I couldn't be sure, but it looked so perfect. It had a cheap frame, but it was put up on this black-shrouded frame and it gave a touch of class to the place. You

could smell the weird stuff that lived behind that partition thing.

I stared at it for a while, then I headed around and was looking at a glass case full of old cameras. Nothing but old Kodak



I found a section of old computer stuff, Apple][s that might have been in use a few months before, a few old video game systems, though nothing rare. There was this bizarre piece that

Brownies, box cameras from the turn of the century, old movie cameras and even an old JVC portable VHS camera. I looked at the thing, then looked around a bit, trying to catch the eye of a shop hand, and then looking at the case again and noticing that there was no slide-lock like on those cases at almost every other antique store. I pushed it open a little and then stopped, waiting for the angry shopkeeper to say something. It squeaked loud enough that no one could have failed to notice. I picked up a 1924 Kodak movie camera. 16mm, beautiful, in good shape with its original box and the instructions. This was a good piece, and only 15 dollars. I held on to it and then slid the case closed. Work had sent me to find stuff for the museum, not for my personal collection.

I worked my way around. There was a lot of great 1950s stuff, most significantly a whole collection of cocktail shakers. You could have written a history of America over the last 80 years based on those shakers. From the 1920s, there were these huge shakers, ample space space to shake all the illegal booze you could handle with your giant, pre-Depression paycheck. From the 1940s, there were these silver shakers with what appeared to be a Bakelite ring, molded to the shape of two fingers, an early ergonomic concession from the shaker industry. From the 1960s, there were two Space Age shakers, one of which actually had the lines indicating the lines of what a rocket would look like. It was a cute design. The prices were high, but not overly so. Most places, especially since the Cocktail Revolution of the 1990s, have jacked their prices for the remnants of swinging times gone by.

looked like a dome on top of a joystick. I picked it up and read that it was a 'pointing device'. I had seen something kinda like it, so I figured I'd pick it up. That fact that it was only 5 bucks helped make the decision. I walked towards the counter, where I didn't see anyone, but I caught sight of a room that literally looked like it had been built out of fiberglass and 2-by-4 when they realized they needed a little extra space. I walked in and the entire room was books. No bookshelves, just books piled on desks and chairs (which had their own price tags dangling from them). The place was weird, and what was amazing was the way they managed to make these piles accessible (the spines were all pointed outwards) and they were divided into genre. There was a Science Fiction section spread across two chairs and a desk. There was a hope chest full of romance (and I kid you not about that) and I think there was a pile in front of it. There were two rocking chairs piled with Detective novels. I was ready to go and paw through those when I noticed a few science fiction covers that I'd seen before. Laser Books. I love Laser Books. I really love them. I've collected many of them over the years. There are 50 something of them and I currently own 34 of them. I looked through and I realized that they were all ones I already owned (including Scavenger Hunt, which is my favorite of them) and then I looked through more of the science fiction books.

Two came to view and I thought about buying both of them...until I noticed that they were all on top of a huge pile of Heinlein. Yes, you all know how I feel about Heinlein if you've read my blog or

The Drink Tank. Really, I only enjoy one or two of his books, most notably *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and to a degree, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*. I've often tried to get myself better read on him, tried tons of his books and have never managed to finish any of them. Some I haven't even made it more than a dozen or so pages into without having to put it down. It's that voice of his. I love EE Smith's *Lensmen* stuff, and a lot of the old timers, but Asimov and Heinlein I never got into.

But then mixed in with them was a book that I had never seen the first edition of. It was a pretty book, considering that many of the books piled up all over the place seemed to have come from the era when Spillane, de Kamp, and Cartland ruled the still-cooling Earth and showed every day of their age. The book was from Theodore Sturgeon, one of the best SF writers of all-time, and yeah, he's from an older time, but he still feels like he's a current player. The man wrote one of the three best short SF things I've ever read: *If All Men Are Brothers, Would You Let One Marry Your Sister*. The other two are *The Word For World* is *Forest* and *The Edge of the World is Burning*. I had never seen a copy of the first edition of *Venux Plus-X*, but here it was, complete and looking lovely. It looked positively unread, as if it had been published one afternoon when a wormhole which just happened to be in an annex to an antique store appeared and swallowed up one of each title. I didn't even want to open the

No kidding, today, during an exhibits committee meeting, John Mashey, a big deal with SGI not too far back, actually referenced Sturgeon's Law. I was most pleased.

book up all the way, but I did peel back the front cover enough to confirm that it was a first edition paperback. I picked it up and carried it with me.

When I walked over to the front area, there was a neat little pyramid of boxed Pixar Walking Teapot toys. I loved those things. They were very cute and I figured that they had been the ones who bought the eBay auction that I had seen a few weeks before that sold about 50 of them. The boxes were better than the toys, those they were cool, too. I picked up one or two and then a guy walked in through a screen door in the back.

"Oh, you must have been the car that pulled up." he said.

"Yeah." I said. I set my items on the counter next to a very old cash register.

"I was out back, tying flies. Good time of year to tie your flies." he said, picking up all the items I had set down. He looked them over and punched some numbers that slightly related to the ones I had seen written on them. Typically slightly lower, which was a nice thing. I ended up paying about seventeen dollars for the three items I'd picked up.

"You like science fiction?" he asked, stuffing them into a bag.

"Yeah, I am. Have been all my life."

He looked me over, then stared at the book.

"I bought this when I was sixteen, but I don't think I ever read it." he said.

"Were all those your books?" I asked.

"No, but most of them. I ran out of space in the house, so I built the side room to sell them" he said.

"It's an impressive collection. Lots of good stuff." I said.

"I'm hoping that I can sell all that stuff by next fall so I can bring another batch in. The first one went fast, but this lot's not moving hardly at all." He said, handing me the bag.

"You have a good day." I said.

He waved at me and then went around to the other side and reconfigured the Teapots into a new sort of pyramid. It had different gaps in it, which made it seem structurally unsound, but more festive, in a way.

I got back into my car and sat there for a second. I put the key in and turned it on, listening to a Scholar track. I was in the mountains, well and truly, and I had just enjoyed a moment of true collector's joy in that antique shop and all I could think about was enjoying a drink instead of realizing that this wide spot might be Heaven. The shack-like antique shop, in the mountains, where the air smells of pine, where you can hear the rush of water down in the canyon, and the sound of movement of cars and animals and wind and people coming in and out of the restaurant. This was probably closer to what would be my personal Heaven than any place other than a WorldCon.

I started up and started driving towards Tahoe again. I half-thought about turning around, going back home and enjoying an evening at home, maybe ordering in from Round Table, the Last Honest Pizza, and spending the evening basking in the memory of the antique shop like an oily shark in the Bay. I made my way up and then, at a point that I could remember from my days coming here as a kid to the day when



Alana and I drove over and we looked out and you could see the entire valley, the lake, the trees. You knew you were no more than twenty minutes away from being in Tahoe proper. I drove down, listening to the same CD for the fourth straight hour, making it to the floor in exactly the amount of time I thought it would take. Nearly a masterpiece of timing. I had to find a place to stay, and that would be the easy part.

When you've been a place as often as I've been to Tahoe, you know places. I remember staying with a friend at the Tahoe Inn. We rolled in at midnight and it had a room and 30 dollars a night for a rate, so it was perfect. It was cold that night, and there were two rooms, the heater could not heat it and we ended up doubling up the blankets, sleeping in one bed and actually making it through the night. I stopped there because they were still saying 30 dollars a night and there were vacancies.

I'm not the kind of guy who would normally stay in a 30 dollar a night hotel. NO, I'm the kind of guy who would crash on someone's couch for the night. I went in to the office and found the same guy who was working there the last time I stayed was manning the desk.

"Hi, I'd like a room please." I said.

The guy looked at a book.

"I got two rooms: a suite and a double queen." he said.

"What's the price difference?"

"Suite's 40, Queen is 30."

I had a quandary. I could get two beds, only one of which I could use, for thirty bucks. I could get a suite, which could mean any number of things, for ten bucks more.

"I'll take the suite."

The guy turned the page and made a few notes. He turned around and took a key from a hook. It had been a while since I had to use a real key to get into a hotel room. I slid my credit card across to the guy.

"How many nights?" he asked.

"I'll take two." I said, deciding on the spot that it would be a full weekend in Tahoe. I'd be spending all day Saturday and Sunday in the lovely Tahoe basin.

"He ran it through and then handed me the slip to sign. I noticed a sign behind him. It said "Please:

No Czechs." I laughed, wondering how they chose that particular sign. I took the key and walked off to the suite.

You've been disappointed by hotel rooms before, haven't you? You've opened the door and the place is nothing like the brochure, it's tiny, dark, the view they promised is of the heating ducts. These things happen. I can trump almost all of them. This suite was huge. I mean huge. I've only stayed in one larger suite, at the Vegas Westercon. This place was one giant room with a couch, a TV, a dresser, a table and a floor lamp. All of them could have had their own congressman since they were all against different walls. Let's say you were watching TV one night, with the light on, and you wanted to go to sleep on the fold-out. First, you'd get out of bed, then your sherpa would help you across to the lamp, where he'd hand you off to your native bearers who would take you across to the tv, which had no remote, and then back to the couch. The trip could be done in less than a day with proper preparation. There was a second room. You'd open the door and there it was, a bedroom with a Queen bed that stretched from wall to wall. It also had a small hallway with the bathroom. The weird thing is that the bed literally was against the wall of bathroom with the shower on it. The first room, massively under furnished. The second, just a sliver. It sucked. I figured that since there was no TV in the front room, I'd sleep on the fold-out. I brought in the bedding from the bedroom, the blankets still somehow thinner than the sheets. I had a pile of pillows and blankets next to the couch, waiting for when I turned the couch into the bed in a transformation that would stymie those elders of yore.

I turned on the tv, it was nearly 7 so The Simpsons was on. More disappointment: there was no HBO or Showtime or Cinemax or ESPN. There were local channels that came in well, so there was cable, since we were in the mountains, but nothing special. I watched the Simpsons, it was the classic Monorail episode, and I pulled out my pad of paper and made some notes. I always do that. I laid out a theoretic issue of The Drink Tank that would center around cocktails. it wouldn't come about until 2007, but it was there. I started feeling like I wanted to get

I love hotels. There was an anthology of poetry about hotels. I write a lot in hotels. Much of my favourite issue of The Drink Tank, the Corset issue, was done in the DoubleTree Hotel in San Jose, and the Radisson Edwardian at Heathrow was where 1/2 of my TAFF report started.

out and get some food and then maybe enjoy a bit of nightlife...meaning gambling. I grabbed my book and headed out the door.

Tahoe is awesome because there's a California side, where you can't gamble and where the big draw is snow sports, of which there were none this time of year, and there's the Nevada side where it's gambling. I headed out to find a place to eat, but first I noticed that there was a bookstore open, and I always look into bookstores when I can and I parked. The store was small, but along one entire wall was a magazine rack. The wall ran about 25, maybe 30 feet. The mags were put in that rack in a massive tumble. There were hundreds of titles, all clumped up. I spent all my time there. I found myself noticing the fiction mags. I've got a thing for fiction magazines, and I noticed they had a ton of SF mags. Not only the Big Three, but also various smaller press mags, like Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet and Interzone. It was set up like a Comic Book shop, where they'd have the current

issue on the front and behind they had back issues. It was very impressive. I found a lovely issue of The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction. It was a good issue from 2005, and since I've been enjoying Gordon Van Gelder's run with F&SF, I was happy to have it. I then looked through the book side and found that they had a ton of good stuff, but a tiny, tiny, three shelf selection of science fiction. I did find a fine copy of Christopher Buckley's Thank You For Smoking. I had read it before, but I hadn't owned a copy in ages. They were making a movie of it and it had just come out on DVD. I figured it would be nice to buy a copy, which was only a buck ninety-nine.

I headed out to the casino. now, they don't like you bringing in backpacks. They don't like you to have anything with you other than your money. And preferably, you leave with nothing. I wanted to have a book with me, so I put Venus Plus-X in my pocket. I love paperbacks in the traditional form because they fit into my pockets. I slipped it in and then headed into



Harvey's. Harvey's is the place where my parents used to gamble when I was a kid. There was a baby-sitting service there that I used to get dropped at every time we went. I loved it. It was in an arcade and that was good. They had wonderful games. I always loved video games and this place had a good one. I went back to it in 2003 and it had almost all the same games I remembered from when I was a kid! It was awesome to get to play them again.

The first thing I did was find a good blackjack table. I love blackjack, though it's not my favorite of the table games (that would be pai-gow) and it's not my favorite card game, that would be poker, but it's the one where I can usually come up with the most change. I have a system. Yes, every sucker with a computer and a dream thinks he has a system, but I do have one and it works pretty well.

Here's the system. Feel free to steal it from me.

First- find a single deck blackjack table. If you can't find one, go somewhere that has them.

Next- Never hit on anything higher than 15. Heck, don't hit on 15 if the dealer's showing a 2, 3, 4, or 5. Yes, the book says to hit on them, but it's far safer and smarter to play it very safe.

Follow that with splitting cards every chance you get.

The fastest way to win a lot of money gambling is to get extremely lucky. Other than that, there's no sure-fire systyem. Me? I tend to get lucky.

Only Double Down on eleven.

Never vary your bet. Come up with a bet to start with, then stick with it until you've reached a target, say 7 to 10 times what you started with and then you flip up to your next target. I typically go from 10 to 15 when I hit 10 times the amount I bought in with and then go to 25 when I hit 20 times. When I lose my buy-in, I go from the table.

This, against all the computer models and such, has won me a lot of money. Maybe I'm just lucky, and what's wrong with that?

I do pretty well. I buy in with 40 dollars and end up making my way up to 500 in about an hour and a half. I'm glad I made it that far that fast. I won 10 hands in a row, with three consecutive blackjacks. That was a nice touch. I then bumped my bet and was sailing around that level for a couple of hours. I had a

couple of drinks while I was playing. I had a system for that too. First, a bottle of water, then a scotch, then a water, then a scotch, then a coke, then a scotch, then a water, and so on. It's a way to get a little drink and not get overly bombed. I also kept my bets low. I knew I wasn't in shape to drive, but I was also not ready to stop drinking. So I cashed out my chips and looked for the bar.

Here's a note. Cash out your chips if you're up on it. It means you've got cash to party and it makes it harder to gamble and risk that money. Remember me saying that.

There is an underground passageway between Harvey's and Harrah's that allows you to go from one hotel to another, and I knew that there was better drinking at Harrah's. I walked over there and managed to ignore the tables. I found one of the bars where they were watching Friday Night SmackDown. I was happy with this. I love wrestling and watching it with other folks is a good thing. I sat myself down, recognizing that it was awful late to have SmackDown! on, it was after 11, but I was told that it had been pre-empted for some basketball game and this was the make-up showing. I was happy with that. I pulled the book out of my pocket and placed it on the bar. When wrestling was over, I might get a couple of pages down. I love reading when I've got a few in me because it makes it more exciting to see what I've missed.

I sat there for a few minutes, watching the wrestling and enjoying a lovely glass of Maker's Mark. After a few minutes, I noticed there was someone sitting next to me. I looked over and there was a woman. She was at least forty, maybe slightly older, but she was dressing like a twenty-five year old, baring a fairly taut midriff and wearing jeans that would look appropriate only of the young lasses who hung around Beefy's. She wore glasses, had a longish face that was more along the lines of a butler than a librarian, which was the only cliché of a glasses-wearing woman I had. She had good teeth. I could tell because she was smiling.

"What's the book?" She said, looking across me at Venus Plus-X.

"It's a science fiction book, from the 50s, I think."

"You just started it?" she asked.

"Yeah, I bought it at a antique store on the way up. I really haven't even touched it."

She looked at me and at the half-empty glass of bourbon in front of me.



"You're from Sacramento?" She asked, setting her purse down on to the bar in front of me.

"San Jose." I said, lifting my glass and taking a sip.

"I'm Liz."

"Nice to meet you." I said. "I'm Chris."

"I've read some science fiction." She said.

"I can't say that I've read any of his books. Mostly Asimov and Heinlein and Vonnegut."

"I love Vonnegut." I said, waving the bartender over our way. "I love Breakfast of Champions."

"I love those drawings he does." She said.

"What's this one about?"

Liz lifted up the book, turned it over and looked at the back.

"Sounds like fun."

"You want it?" I said.

"What?"

"Well, I'd be happy to lend it to you. All you gotta do is drop me a phone number so I can call you and get it back sometime."

She looked at me. She had a lovely jawline.

"You know, I have to say that's the best technique a guy has ever used to get my phone number."

I took another sip, smiled straight ahead and then turned my head.

"Well, you wanna borrow the book?" I asked.

She took out a piece of paper and a pen from her purse. Wrote down her number and then handed the piece to me.

"I'm home after 5 pretty much every day." She said.

We chattered about all sorts of things, largely things related to food. I can talk about almost all

aspects of food. It comes from watching a lot of Food Network and Top Chef and reading those strange magazines about cheese, meat and food science. I gave her a fine digression on the nature of Molecular Gastronomy. It's the science fiction of food. Chefs over the last decade or so have developed this method of cooking that is one part traditional cookery and one part chemistry. Oh, and one part smart assery. It's really a showy kind of cooking, as far away from slow food as you'll ever find. It uses chemicals, neat little devices and is what brought the Sous

Vide craze to the world. I have taken to that one strong over the last year or so. I cook most of my steaks in plastic bags in lower heat water. I'm doing some sous vide steak right now. It takes forever, but it's good stuff.

Liz said she worked as the hostess at one of the restaurants at Bleu, or however you spell it. It's the casino-resort that used to be the Lake Tahoe Caesar's Palace. I'd only been there a couple of times before the switch-over, and sadly, I've only been there once since. She had gone to a restaurant management program in Chicago and knew some of the names of the chefs I admired. She wasn't a devotee to Food Network, but had worked at a bunch of restaurants. Chicago's a good town for food.

After a while, with a number in my pocket, I walked her to her car. I was nearly sober enough to drive, but I needed a little more time. We were talking about Bay Area nightspots, of which she was far more knowledgeable than I was, and we got to her car where I said good night. There was no kiss, though she did do the call me motion after she got in. I walked around Stateline, stopping in the Horizon to get a cup of coffee. I guess I walked around for an hour, then made it to my car and drove the few miles to my hotel room.

And you know, I never saw that book again.

Saturday

Lake Tahoe is a good place for outdoorsy stuff. There's a lake, there are rocks for climbing, there are places for skiing, there are trails for hiking. It's got a little bit of everything. I'm not much of an outdoorsy person, but I enjoy walking around and talking with people. The Lake itself is huge and lovely. They shot a

fair bit of The Godfather part 2 there. It's a long walk from Stateline to the house that served as the Corleone HQ in the movie, but I make it when I have an extra day.

Before any major anything in Tahoe, I needed a good breakfast. And in Tahoe, there's only one place for breakfast as far as I'm concerned: Heidi's. Heidi's is a breakfast place that's situated in a faux-german chalet. it's awesome. The best things on the menu are the pancakes, and all varieties are fantastic, especially the German Pancakes. That's what I usually order, but this time i ordered the Biscuits and Gravy and a couple of sausages, along with orange juice and water. It was a lovely meal. I had to start carb-loading so I could make it through into a long night of gambling.

I headed across the street to the beach and

then walked along the beach until it ran out, when I walked along the water on the road. It took almost two hours to get there, but the place was visible from a beach down from the house. It's a private home right now, but there was a little plaque indicating that it was the place where they shot it. I didn't have a camera, but I walked around. I didn't see anyone home, because sometimes they'll take people around, but it was still a lovely spot and a nice walk. I headed home and made it back to the hotel room around 3.

Hotel rooms are interesting. Typically, they've got everything you need and a few things you want. Need: A bed, blankets, bathroom, coffee, towels, a shower, little soaps, power outlets. Want: a TV with cable, a radio, air conditioning. The room didn't have much in the way of wants, but I have brought my



IFunny thing about Lake Tahoe is that it's been a part of a lot of movies, most notably the Godfather Part 2 and Smokin' Aces. Smokin' Aces is an awful film, though it's a lot of fun in a weird way. It's got some funny performances and a weird sense of visual style.

mini-DVD player, as I always did when I went on these trips. I had a few DVDs, mostly ones I've seen a dozen times before and I can sorta zone out. Having a DVD on helps me sleep a lot. Having a DvD on helps me write. Having a DVD helps me think, cry, laugh, just about anything. There's nothing I love more than having portable films. I had a new one. I had bought a classic film, for varying values of classic. I had first seen it on a date in the early 1990s with Miss Jennifer Bushard. it was called Terminator 2.

Now, there's a lot to say about Terminator. It was a Jim Cameron film, and I'm not a big Cameron fan (though I love the Abyss) but this was one of those rocking films. The thing had great music, marvelous music. There was You Could Be Mine, Guns 'n Roses classic song, and it had a really good score. The cinematography was classic, and the effects were cutting edge.

The story: not so much.

Everyone had something for them in Terminator 2. There was the fact that Hollywood was able to make a movie with a hard core female character. I'm not the biggest fan of Linda Hamilton, but she was really good. Robert Patrick was good as the soulless killing machine, and Arnold was adequately stoic.

A note: for good times, think of Arnold Schwarzenegger speaking the lyrics to songs from The Smiths. Big Mouth Strikes Again works beautifully.

What's beautiful about Terminator 2 is the way it's put together with regards to the actors. It's not quite an ensemble piece, it's really a subdivided action flick, but Hamilton does some great stuff, Eddie Furlong is probably the best teenage actor in the world at the time of shooting, Joe Morton as a programmer and the designer of SkyNet is at his subtle best, and you can't find better movement between the different actors and it's good stuff. I'd have to say that this is one of the best action-packer thrill rides that won't let you catch your breath that showed up in the 1990s. Sadly, Cameron also made Titanic in the 1990s, so his record is not spotless. I think he also directed Lat Action Hero, which wasn't bad, but that's another edition of Claims Department.

I had just finished the part of T2 where Joe Morton is struggling for breath and then stops breathing and lets go of the detonator, causing the explosion that allows the group to escape the building when I heard something strange. I got up off the couch and headed into the bathroom and saw that there was a cell

phone ringing. it hadn't been there in the morning, but there it was, vibrating on the sink. I picked it up and saw that the screen said 'Front Desk'. I looked around, the room had been picked up and the bed remade, so I figured that it was one of the cleaning crew's cell phone. I took it to the Front Desk and handed it to the manager.

"I'm always leaving it laying around." He said. "I called seeing if I left it in one of the drawers."

He put it in his pocket. I hadn't seen anyone making up the beds, and now I kinda got it. When it was quiet, and it certainly was quiet this time of year, he must have doubled as Front Desk and Cleaning Crew. That's not a good double, and it's likely that he probably did it rarely. I had only seen two other rooms that looked to be occupied, and there were less than 15 rooms in total, so maybe it wasn't that hard.

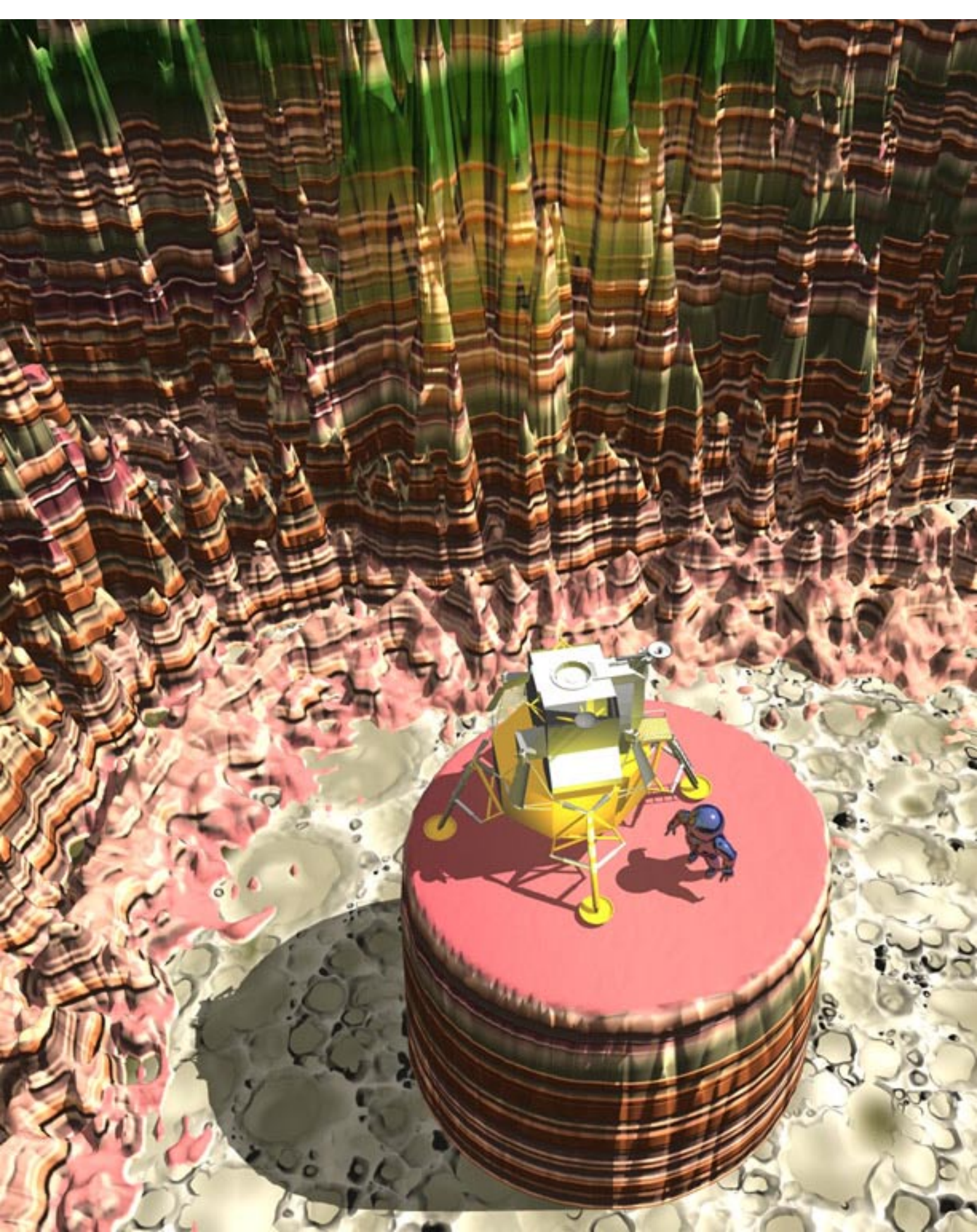
I went back to the room and then finished the movie. It has a most unsatisfactory ending, but what are you gonna do. The style of the effects really worked and I'd say it was a great film for a fifteen year old who loved movies. That's exactly what I was when it came out and I guess I'm still affected.

When I started writing the Graphics section of the Timeline of Computer History, T2 was the first film that came to mind. I totally forgot about Jurassic Park.

I wanted more gambling. If there is a good rule, it's quit while you're ahead. I seldom do that. I did two smart things: I took all the cash I had from the night before with me, and I left my credit card in the room. You won't get hurt as much if you leave the access to extra cash in the room. I got into the car and made my way over to The Horizon. This is a lesser hotel compared to Harrah's and Harvey's, but it's a good place to do some gambling. I found myself at a Craps table, which is a dangerous thing.

I've not got a craps system. I know people who do, and they tend to do pretty well, but I just play my feelings. I bought in for eighty bucks. I took a spot right next to the shooter, so it would be as long as possible before I was the shooter. I played the pass line, the safest bet, and managed to get in on a couple of elevens, which paid good, but I dropped a point when a seven was thrown, and the next shooter hit 8 as the point.

It was time for the hard ways. Hard Ways, bet-



ting that the shooter will throw a pair of 2s, 3s, 4s, or 5s before they throw a seven or any other combination adding up to 4, 6, 8, or 10 is thought of as a stupid bet, but in this case, it managed to win me a lot as I got 4 twice, both hard, and then the point came up at 8 with 4-4. That was a couple of hundred total, and that was followed by enough action, three more points and a couple of seven and elevens, I was up enough to play on the house for the rest of the night.

I left and headed to the poker room. Tahoe doesn't draw a lot of big names, but once in a while, you'll get one. I've played with a few big names, notably TJ Cloutier, who I managed to hold my own with. I looked at the table, there was a five-card draw table. It had two open seats, so I signed up and got taken over. I bought in 300, which wasn't much, but it was enough to play. At the table, I used a lot of weird plays. I'd bet tiny, just over opening, and then I'd say 'I'll take 0.' and everyone would fold when I had a 4-5-7-2-9. I played pretty well, but there were a couple of hands where I ate big face cards over my littles. It happens. After about 3 hours, I had about 120 left of my initial buy-in, and I called it a night. It was good stuff, a lot of fun, and only 60 bucks an hour.

Texas Hold 'em has become the most over-rated game in gambling. Personally, I like Stud better because it requires more luck than Hold-'em.

I needed food, and I knew that the food was better across at Harvey's, so I walked over there, with a little more than a hundred on top of what I brought with me. I went and got a little French Dip sammich and then settled into playing some Keno. Keno, much like Bingo, is a fool's errand. I played about 10 hands, enjoying a lovely fried shrimp meal and actually picked up 15 bucks out of 40 playing Keno. That's better than I usually do. I headed up to the Sports book to see what was going on there.

There was a lot of action being placed on various fights coming up, including UFC. I put a little bit down, about 50 bucks, and I'd end up winning everything I bet on, though the numbers were so low, I didn't quite double my money. I found a Pai-Gow table and that was where I shone for the night. I love Pai-Gow and my concept is much simpler than most. Try for the push. The House always plays to win, so if you play to push, you're more likely to get the push

and sometimes the win if you play for the push. This annoys dealers, because they like to have everyone playing for the win. This is like the guy who refuses to hit on fifteen when they're showing a 6. I played for almost 4 hours at the table, only leaving eventually when I really had to go to the bathroom. I had made about 40 dollars, but I had some great wins. An example: I had three pair, 4-4, 8-8 and K-K, backed up with an ace. Smart Money- K-K on the top hand, 4-4-8-8-A on the bottom. I went A-4 on the top, K-K-8-8-K. Now, this is significantly stronger on the bottom than on the top. K-K is the second highest top hand, but A-4 is pretty good and K-K-8-8 is really good. The Dealer ended up with Q-10 on Top, so I would have destroyed her with my K-K, but I still beat her with my A-4. She had J-J-5-5-3. Now, she had to play it like that, them's the rules, but I had moved things around. If I had played it the house way, I'd have pushed, but instead, I got the win by putting the strength underneath. I am win.

I had only a couple of drinks, but I was in the mood for some tasty beverages. I wanted to be closer to my hotel, so I hopped in my car, parked at the hotel, noticed that it was really late (after 1 am) and found that there was a lovely bar just a couple of streets over. I walked over and found that the place was a ghost town save for three people sitting at the bar, and a young woman bartender who I have to say was possibly the most beautiful Indian woman I've ever seen. She somehow had incredibly blue eyes and was nearly 6 feet. I didn't realize until later that she was wearing nearly 6 inch heels. She was lovely, but so thin you could probably have slid her into the cracks that had risen in the wood in the bar. I took a stool at the end closest to the obviously broken pinball machine.

"What can I get you, baby?" the lovely Indian lass said, saying not only those words, but telling me that she'd been smoking since she was in junior high and that she had grown up somewhere in the south.

"Johnny Red, rocks." I said.

"You got it, hun." she said, as she headed over.

There were three others in the bar. Two of them were women, both very young, maybe 22 or 23. One was pretty, but she wore too much make-up and too tight jeans. She reminded me of the song Fuck-Me Pumps from Amy Winehouse. The other one was not nearly as cute, but she had a better body, and thus, didn't need to dress over-sexy. The other one was a guy who was in his sixties, had a massive goatee. He was seated closest to me.

“Hey, man,” the guy said “how long you been growing that beard?”

“About six months.” I answered as the Indian woman placed the booze in front of me.

“Man, your hair grows fast!” he said.

I will admit that I spent a little too much time staring at the bartender and the done-up girl. I caught her eyes at one point and she smiled, then took herself off the stool and headed into the hallway with the bathroom. Her friend stayed behind and she looked over to me and smiled. I smiled back. She had strange teeth. Not terribly mangled, but off enough to make me slightly worried. The old guy was enjoying his tall beer.

The bartender came over.

“So, we officially close at 2, but you’re welcome to stay. It’s just my roommates and Bobby, but after we close, usually we play some pool, drink a little.” She said, putting her elbows on the bar and leaning forward. “You wanna stick around?”

“Sure,” I said, “Sounds like Fun.”

The cute girl walked back from the restroom.

“Hey, Carla,” the bartender called to her, “he’s gonna stick around, we’ll play some pool.”

“Sounds good to me.” Carla said.

Bobby, who I assumed was the old guy, laughed a little to himself.

I got myself up and headed over to the pool table. It wasn’t a pay table, which is rare for a bar, and set up a 9-ball game.

“Care to play, Carla, is it?” I asked.

“Not yet,” she said, “But I’m betting Denise does.” She said.

“I would, actually.” the other girl said. She stood up and I saw that she was wearing a shorter skirt than I had imagined, but she had draped a coat across her legs to fight off a cold that I hadn’t noticed. It’s a shame as she had what I might well call majestic legs. I’m not much a leg guy, but even I had to say ‘wow’ to myself. She was short, maybe 5’2, and she had an English accent.

“Nine-ball?” she said.

“Yeah, I love nine-ball” I answered.

She grabbed a cue from the stand and pulled

the one ball from the front and rolled the cueball over to me.

“Lag for the break?” she said.

I took the cueball and set myself for the shot. She lined herself up and I could tell she was trying to distract me. It was unnecessary, she had already distracted me and there was no way I was going to out-lag her anyhow, but she worked it. You gotta love it when a lass is willing to put forth the

effort.

She managed to get the cue so much closer than mine, that mine hadn’t even stopped when she was lining up the plan for her break. I reracked the nine balls and stepped back. She broke and it was a thing of beauty. She managed to sink two balls on the break and left herself an easy roll through to the six. She sunk the 2, 3, 5 and 6 with ease, but a bad break while shooting for the seven meant I got a chance at the balls. She had left an easy seven and I had to two rail it before sinking the eight. I had a long shot for the nine, and the angle was weird.

“How you fell about that shot?” Carla said,



watching from the bar.

"I'd be chalking up if I were Denise." I said, looking it over.

Denise giggled. I love that.

I took the shot and managed to sink it on a harsh angle, with too much speed. Luckily, it went in and I didn't blow it. It was amazing. Denise came to me and extended her hand. I shook it. She had very soft hands. It's a strange thing the things you notice. Carla stood and walked to the table.

"My turn?" she said. It was obvious that she'd noticed me noticing Denise.

"Sure." I said, and racked the nine balls into the black wooden diamond.

I was on.

I actually sunk the 7 on the break and left myself with a fine combo of the one and the nine, which allowed me to win without ever having to let her take a shot.

"You're pretty good." Carla said.

"Nah, just lucky." I said with all the honesty of a Saint who wants to be thought of as a sinner.

"You ready to play, Anna?" Carla called over to the Bartender, who had come out from behind the bar, turning off the Open sign, turning off the front lights and locking the door.

"Sure, I'll play. Just let me put some music on the Jukebox." She said, walking over to the glowing Wurlitzer in the corner, sliding in a card and making a few selections.

Denise walked over.

"So, where you from?" she said in a lovely accent.

"San Jose."

"Not that far, is it?" Denise said.

"Certainly not as far as where you're from, right?"

"Nope." She smiled a fun little smile, a truly American kind of smile that you rarely see these days. "I'm Welsh, but I've been here for most of the last twenty years."

"You must have been really young when you came, then." I said.

"I'm the older friend from all the movies. I'm 33." she said.

"You don't look it at all." I said, and she kept smiling. "I'm 32."

Anna had put in a ton of songs, at least ten or so, and the first one that popped up was a classic.

Love, is a burning flame. And it makes, a fiery ring...

Johnny Cash. The classic. I've loved this stuff since I was a kid. My dad loved Johnny Cash, my Grandma loved The Man in Black. Even my mom could tolerate it. Johnny Cash needs a place in every

bar's Jukebox. This was a great piece and it made me happy to play pool.

Anna came over, grabbed a cue while Carla setup the 9-balls, trying a little hard to get the same attention that I'd been paying to Denise. Anna stepped back, since it was my break. I cracked it hard and didn't manage to sink one. Anna took the table and she did really well. She took a fair bit of time with her shots, and by the time she was working on the 4 play, the next song came up-

I hear the train

a-comin', it's rollin' 'round the bend and I ain't seen sunshine since, I don't know when...

You can not go wrong with Fulsom Prison Blues. Anna was singing along as she was shooting. She was a beautiful woman, no question, but she was obviously the Down-to-Earth friend.

She missed on the 7 and I managed to sink the rest. I had officially beaten all of the girls. I rushed it, though I slowed a bit when the song changed again-

There's a Southern Accent, where I, come from. The youngin's call it county, the Yankees call it dumb.

From Johnny Cash's last album of covers, Southern Accent from Tom Petty gets a lovely rendition on that CD and I really love it. I listened to it, but I could hear all the girls singing along with it. I joined

Johnny Cash was the subject of a documentary that showed at the 2009 Cinequest. It was called Johnny Cash at Folsom Prison and talked about the famous visits that Cash made to the prison and the life of an inmate who he helped get released who couldn't adjust to life on the outside.

Oddly, this was a very good doc that was slightly scattered. Gene Beley, a guy who donated a number of artifacts to the Computer History Museum, was one of the guys who they interviewed. It was cool to see him on screen!

in. Somewhere along the way, Bobby the Old Guy had left.

“You like Johnny Cash?” Carla asked.

“Always.” I said.

“Anna won’t stop playing him around the house. She’s in love with him.” Denise said.

“At least it’s not that Depeche Mode stuff you’re always wanting to play.” Anna said.

“I can’t argue that.” Carla added.

Anna headed back behind the bar, grabbed four shot glasses, splashed Johnny Red in each and handed all of us one.

“To the winner!” Anna cried, and she slammed back the booze.

We all followed suit.

After that, we took turns playing pool and sitting at the bar. Denise and I were getting along famously. She was a reformed Goth. I knew what that was like. She was of a different type than I, though. I was much more into The Swans, Johnny the Homicidal Maniac and the films of Tim Burton while Denise had been more of a Rivet-Goth with Type O-Negative, Nine Inch Nails and the films of The Brothers Quay. Luckily, we shared a fondness for a number of Finnish Metal bands, which is something that I seldom get to share. She was a movie girl too, which was also fun.

It turned out that it was almost 6 am when Anna said that it was time to go. I had no idea that it was so late. We were all just having a good time. I walked out and headed up to room. The girls walked to their place, which was literally behind my hotel. I walked to the manager’s office, which was manned, oddly enough. I got another night. There was no way I’d be waking up by noon, ready to go. I put myself down soft, which if I had gone down fast I probably would

have hurt myself. I was relatively drunk. We’d had at least three different rounds of shots so that was a way towards true boozing. I found myself sleeping harder than I usually did, which was a good thing as I’d been needing a deeper sleep. This was in the time before I had my CPAP machine. I love that thing.

I woke up and it was exactly 2pm. I called my work and said that I’d be in later on Monday, which was fine with them. I’ve got a great job. I had a full day of nothing, and since I didn’t have to fly away home until the next morning, I was about to spend the day just hanging out in a hotel room.

I’ve written a lot about hotel rooms. There is something special about hotel rooms, something exciting and comfortable even when they’re bad. I figured that I’d go and get some food, bring it back and enjoy an afternoon watching DVDs on my little TV. I jumped into the shower, got myself all dolled up and headed out the door towards the little strip mall just beyond the bar. I past the bar and made my way to a little pizza place, where Denise was waiting for a pizza.

“Well, lucky me.” she said when I tapped her on the shoulder.

“I’m big into pizza.” I said. “What’s good?”

“The calzone.” she answered, looking at the menu. “The Spanish Main, I think it’s called.”

I looked at the board. The Spanish Main- Serrano Ham, manchego and Mozzarella, tapenade of olives, garlic in a saffron pizza dough crust. It did sound amazing.

“I’m waiting for one. I was going to take it back to my place, Carla is working and Anna’s still sleeping.”

“Well, I was planning on going back to my room and enjoying a DVD of Bring It On.” I said.

“You have a



CD player in your room?" She said.

"Well, the DVD player will play CDs."

"I'll run back to my place and meet you at the Hotel."

"Sounds good to me."

Denise got her calzone and smiled as she walked out.

"I'll see you soon."

It took another fifteen minutes or so for me to get my calzone, and another five minutes or so to get back to my room." Denise was sitting down in front

of the office. She had changed. She had been wearing jeans and an oversized t-shirt. The jeans may have been the same, but she was wearing a new top. A lovely new tank top which made her look very...well, the best word is hot. I figured it was a better idea not to say anything.

"Well, I grabbed the CD, but I have to admit that I did have a couple of bites of my Calzone."

I put on my false shock face.

"You did what?" I said in over-exaggerated

She smiled. She got the whole over-the-top Garcia thing, which can be incredibly difficult to understand, or at least difficult to play along with.

We headed inside and I grabbed the DVD player. Denise handed me the CD. It wasn't labeled. I popped it in and it spun up. It was a 12 track CD, so I pressed play. The smell of the calzone was killing me. I started to open the calzone package and Denise had folded her paper bag and foil wrapper so that she could eat her calzone like a burrito. As it started, it was a scratchy violin with an organ going in the back-

ground.

"Who is this?" I asked, but the instant after I asked, the voice came on and it was obviously Nick Cave of Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds. The song was called Bring It On. it was strange. It wasn't structured like your average Nick Cave tune, it was somehow bigger and more orchestral. I hadn't heard it before and I was amazed. It was an amazing song and it was catchy at the same time. It wasn't the kind of tune that I'd expect. It was one-part Lounge song, one part Bayou Blues.

"I haven't heard this!" I said.

"It's the best thing Cave's ever done." she said.

We both took a bite of our calzones. Heaven. Heaven of grease and flavor and scent and heat and salt and olive and ham and wow.

"You like it?" Denise said with a playful bit around the words.

"Can't talk...eating." I answered.

The CD continued with

various Nick Cave tracks, some live, some unreleased. Denise and I sat on the couch and ate. The flavor worked so well with the goth-y, bluesy, lounge-y, powerful music. It was one of those things. Music can increase any experience, and this was a flavor sensation that was only heightened by the music.

Denise was done before I was, she'd had a couple more than a couple of bites of her calzone before coming over, and she explored the TV cabinet and found that there were a couple of board games in a drawer. There was Connect Four.

"You wanna play?" she said, lifting the box like a spokesmodel from The Price is Right.



“Sure.” I said, though I’m pretty sure it hardly came out because my mouth was full of calzone.

“What are the stakes?” she said with a devious look in her eyes.

“Well,” I said, stalling. “I’m guessing we can come up with something.”

“How about this,” she said, smiling even broader, “we’ll play ten games and the winner gets to choose the prize.”

“And if we tie?” I said.

“Then I guess we both get something we like.”

This sounded good to the single guy in the room. She set up the game and I finished my calzone. It was delicious beyond all reason. I’d be tasting the ham and cheese combination for hours and I wouldn’t mind at all.

We played the first game. She started. I employed the fill and drill concept. You don’t place a piece that’ll allow them to get 3 in a row. It’s a defensive strategy that works, but you have to think a lot more about how to play when there are no places to keep a three-way from forming. I managed to stymie her early in the first game and she wasn’t paying enough attention, so I managed to take her with a diagonal.

“Well done.” she said, smiling. She was sitting on the floor on the other side of the couch.

“I think to make it fair, we should switch sides.” She said. “You know, like in tennis.”

I could argue, but it wouldn’t be as much fun.

We started the second game and I used the same strategy. She used a much different strat: she made sure to keep my attention off the game. She was slyly leaning forward, making sure that her cleavage was showing. It was an evil trick.

The next five games we played she won four, I won one.

“Four to two. You’re in danger.” She said.

“True, but would it be as fun when I come back and when it all.”

This led to a classic Garcia comeback. I actually won the next two games without her having a chance. She was trying to use her feminine wiles, but I was determined. I dropped the next game, making it 4 to 5. It was all down to the last game. It was like one of those lame sports movies where it’s always 4th and long with a single tick on the clock as the final reel starts.

“This means I’m going to have to start playing unfair.” She said.

“Really?” I said as we changed places.

“Well, you’ll have to say, won’t you?”

I sat down on the floor and made the first move.

She was slow, leaning forward deep. Very deep. It was criminal how she did that. And rather than disrespect her by not noticing, I took my time and paid attention, then returned to the game. I quickly got her in trouble. It only took three or four moves for her to catch on that I was going to take the win.

Then she got mean.

“I need a minute.” she said, and leaned back on the couch. She crossed her legs, somehow managing to keep my eyes locked on hers, and slid a single down the side of her cheek. She was making a very good distraction.

I fought back the only way I knew how- I just sat there stupid.

She dropped onto her knees in the space between the couch and the table, then dropped a piece in an area that clearly gave me a win. I almost didn’t want to play it because I was enjoying her techniques of distraction. On the other hand...

Drop.

“That’s game, lady.” I said, smiling.

She pushed the game aside and leaned over, giving me a kiss on the lips.

I pulled back.

“That’s your prize, and now mine.” I said.

Again, we kissed.

“You know, if you were going to be around for a while, I’d say we should go out, but I gotta work in half an hour.” she said.

Connect Four had my favourite commercial of the 1980s featuring the greatest commercial quote ever: Pretty Sneaky, Sis.

“Damn.” I noted.

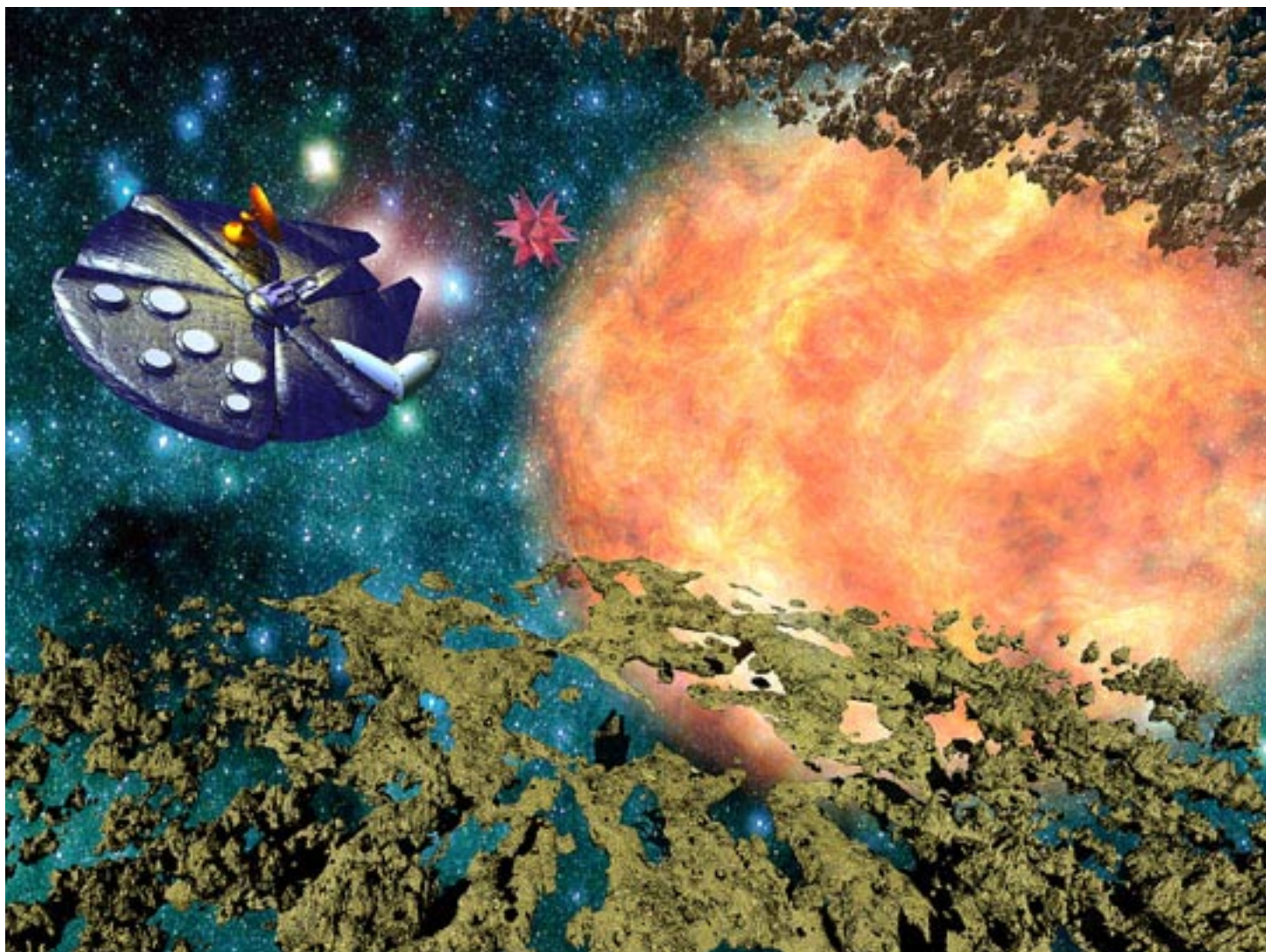
We kissed a couple of more times, exchanged MySpace names, and I walked her back to her place. Anna was still asleep, and Denise was still gone.

“I never asked, where do you work?” I said.

“I’m a pit boss at Harvey’s.” she said. “I love it.”

I had so many questions, but I figured she had to go and with MySpace as a touchstone, I’d be able to keep up. I kissed her goodbye and walked back.

Sadly, none of my future eMails to her were



ever returned. I also noticed that she changed her status to In A Relationship not but a couple of weeks later.

I headed back to the hotel, and realized that I still had Denise's CD. It gave me a reason to come back to return it. It was very much the reverse of the situation with Liz. I put it on, turned off the lights and closed up the curtains. I laid out on the couch and found myself asleep in less than ten minutes.

It was midnight. Actually, it was 12:07. I had managed nearly 7 hours of fine sleep. In the middle of the day. Magic happens! I cleaned myself up, got all my stuff and packed it into the car. I was going to go for broke the old fashioned way: throwing dice with no back-up plan. I dropped my keys in the night drop, got into my car and headed to The Horizon.

Now, you may be asking yourself, but Chris, why not go to Harvey's, see if you can reconnect with the lovely Denise? A fine question. A very fine question. The answer is, of course, I am a coward. I wanted to gamble, but I knew if she was there, I'd turn into a quivering mound of Jell-O. That's the way I roll...

sadly.

I found myself at a craps table at The Horizon, put about 1/2 of the remaining money from my earlier wins on the table and started playing. I looked at my cell phone. It was almost 1 am. As soon as I got to the table and took my spot next to the coming out thrower, I knew I had the luck on me. I played perfect the next three hours. I don't think I missed a single point. If I put money on the field, it'd come up 12. If I put money on Don't Come, they'd throw snake eyes. It was the kind of magic I always love feeling. I think I managed to get myself up almost three grand. I was playing kind of reckless, and I was managing to win. It felt like that kind of magic that you expect for other people. And as always, as most gamblers will tell you, it was the little losses that hurt more than the big wins felt good. It's a sad fact and it's how they keep you gambling. You want the ten grand hit that you're sure feels better than the five dollar loss you just took. It never does. It keeps you at the table. It keeps you playing. It sucks the money from your wallet. It's only worse if you win big because you feel like you can

afford to give more back before you get that magic hit, that moment that will actually make it all feel good again, drown the hurts.

I knew all that, but I also knew that there was no way I was going to stop playing. I didn't have to be on the road until 6 am.

I moved, headed over to the 100 dollar blackjack table. This sounds stupid, I know. I'm the guy who's always talking about how little money he has, about how I can't afford this, that or the other thing. I had at least 3 large in my pocket and I'm putting it on a hundred dollar table. It's sad, but it's what my lizard-brain was telling me to do.

I got 30 One Hundred dollar chips. They felt like they were worth 10,000 a piece. It's like that. A five dollar chip feels like a nickel. A ten like a dollar. A 25 dollar chip feels like a hundred. A fifty like a thousand. Such is the state of the smalltime gambler. It's what keeps it all going. I've only once had a five hundred dollar chip. It felt like a million. It really did.

The first hand was the kind you always wanna start with: A-A. That's right, a pair of Aces. There's a rule: always split aces. I did. 200 on the table. The dealer added a card to the first hand.

10.

And then another to the other.

K

It was two blackjacks. It was magic. I had won 250 bucks the way I always liked to, against the odds. I kept playing, and as magic it was with my winning, so was it with my losing. If I got Blackjack, the dealer would show one himself. KK, expect the dealer to have the same. I bled. And bled. There was no bandage. I leaked money until there were only 5 chips on

my table. I had lost 2500 bucks.

Now, look at that sentence. I lost 2500 bucks. It's not that I was up 500, I lost 2500. The dangerous thinking of the American gambler. I picked my chips up, tossed them to the dealer.

"Can I get a five hundred?" I said.

He fanned them to show the magic eyes in the ceiling that there were really five, then put them into one of his stacks and tossed me a five hundred dollar chip. I took it to the cage, The Five Hundred dollar chip felt like a million. The five hundred dollars in cash they handed me from the cage felt like half my rent for the month.

The dangerous thinking of the Small Time American Gambler. Many folks would have stopped when they saw the light of day over their stacks. Not me. I just played until there was almost nothing left. A real gambler would have walked that puddle dry trying to raise their stake up higher. Ebb and Flow, they'd say, watching their last dollar float into the tray. Ebb and Flow.

I hopped into my car, it was nearly 6, and I drove out of the Lake Tahoe Basin. Up into the mountains as the sun was rising. I made my way up, over the mountains, past the antique shops, the psychics, the greasy spoons. I made it to Sacramento, stopped for gas, bought some In-n-Out Burger and then got right back into my car, making it to work at noon.

I'd been gone for exactly 72 hours.



So, that's my issue with the art of Ditmar. Dick Jennsen was kind enough to send me a disk full of his great art and I'm so proud to get to run it. His work is interesting because it's so different. There's a certain amount of computer art that feels false, like it's trying to be art from a computer, and there's other stuff that feels flat and lifeless. Of the fan artists that I've had the honor of running, Alan White and Ditmar have most taken advantage of what computer composition makes possible.

The images I chose were all the ones that really made me stop while I was going through the images on the disk when I first got it. The cover is my favourite off that disk. Alans Planet is what it's called and to me, it's exceptional. Just fantastic stuff and the perfect cover for this issue.

The fractal images on pages 1 and 3 are both faves. I'm a sucker for Fractal Art (I met Benoit Mandelbrot once at the Computer Museum in Boston and we chatted for almost an hour. He was a pompous jerk, but I have to admit, the guy had good stories.

The image on page 5 is one that I think should be an image that the Australia WorldCon should use. Of course, maybe a meteor crashing into the continent isn't what they'd want to show... It's called Meteor and it's a gorgeous piece that just breathes amazing to me.

Page 7 is a fun piece called Galaxy Gate V. I love the Stargate in it, which is weird since I was not a fan of the Stargate TV series. I did like the original movie though. Jaye Davidson, a big talent.

Mushrooms and Fairy appear on page 9 in a piece called MushroomsAndFairy, which is a nice piece and it features an awesome eagle swooping. It's a great piece which makes me happy.

NotStandardSpaceAlternate is the name of the image on page 11. It's the reason that I picked it: it wasn't your standard space image. There's something about it that just got my eye. It might be my third favorite of all the Ditmar images I got to use in this issue.

Behind Ranks6, the image of a group of fighter ships against a background of green lace-like fractals. It's a gorgeous piece for me and I realised that one of the reasons I enjoy it so much is it reminds me of a game from my youth where you raced down a space-luge track, only this was far more detailed and beautiful. It's a great piece and I thought of using it as a cover for a Drink Tank at one point.

Page 14 is Tower Above, a lovely piece with a lander that seems to have been modeled on the Apollo lunar landers. I find my eye drawn to the pattern on the stones in the ground. I'm not sure why, but I stare into it for some reason.

Page 16 has a piece called AntTrifid. I like it especially for the galaxy or explosion or nebula in the background. I love the ant. It's kinda creepy!

Page 18 is BlackHoleCropped. It has a ton of feeling. Maybe it's the way the colors interact, or the lightning emerging from the haze, I dunno, but it just works for me.

Bowdlerized Angel on page 20 uses pixelization to give a feeling of movement in much the same way that many of the early avant garde filmmakers used it to give a feeling of disquiet.

Asteroids6 on page 22 makes me wonder what the Millenium Falcon is about to blow up. I want to know what that box-thing is.

Page 23 is ChinesePavilion, which is a magnificent view. The closer is ColossusAtTheGate, which is a fine way to close the issue.

This issue of Claims Department is dedicated to the art of Ditmar, one of the few artists I can say is completely underrated. It is also dedicated to the memory of John Tolos, wrestler from the 1970s who was also a fan of good writing. The next issue of Claims Department should be handed out at Silicon and that'll be the issue starring the art of Selina Phanara, another artist whose stuff is among my favorite. I'm hoping that issue will be in the hands of 20 fans around the world by mid-October.

