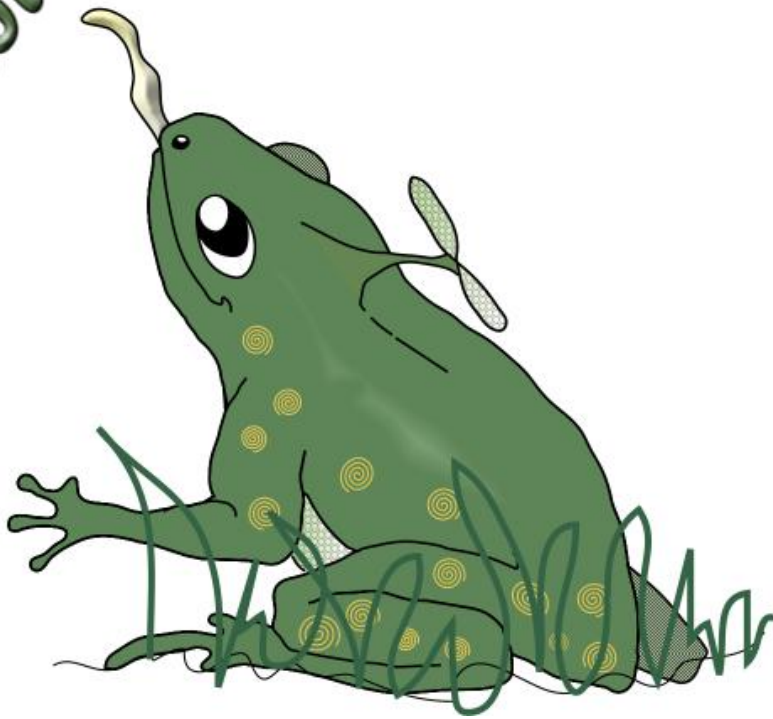


# VISIONS OF PARADISE



#135

# Visions of Paradise #135

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### Artwork

Sheryl Birkhead ..... cover

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# The Passing Scene

November 2008

Jean and I ended October by staying home on Halloween instead of going shopping. However, we had our usual small total of about 10 *trick or treaters*, so it was a relaxing night. The next day, after going to the YMCA in the morning, we had a quick lunch at a diner (which used to be as prevalent in New Jersey as mushrooms in a field, but recently have diminished to one every few towns) followed by a ride to Newark Airport to pick up Mark and Kate who flew back from a week at Disney World. They had a good week there, climaxed by a huge Halloween party at the Magic Kingdom so that they came home with two huge bags filled with candy.

November is the month of the Indian Culture Club's annual *Family Diwali Dinner*, and it was very successful. The officers did a good job planning it, the families brought lots of food, and everybody enjoyed themselves. Activities like this are very enjoyable for me as an advisor and make me very happy I have several clubs to work with after school.

As usual, we had a four-day weekend due to the NJEA convention, but since it is always held in Atlantic City it is too expensive to stay overnight and too far for a day trip, so very few teachers from the northern part of the state go to it. It hardly seems worthwhile for schools to close for two days, but since we have to make the days up anyway, I really do not mind the brief vacation. It gave me a chance to catch up on several activities as well as going to the YMCA and the chiropractor (my back has been bothering me since the snowstorm last Wednesday when I must have shoveled too much), going for a stress test, finishing and posting the October **VoP** and doing a bit of reading. A good weekend.

Jean and I planned to go to the Sculpture Garden in Princeton one weekend, but rainy weather altered that plan. Instead we went shopping at an outlet mall, then went with Mark & Kate, Fei Fei & Silvio to the All-Star Chinese Buffet, which is definitely the best buffet in our area. The fact that it is mostly frequented by Chinese people is proof of that, as well as the fact that several of their dishes are totally unfamiliar to me. I had to ask Fei Fei what some of them were.

On the way there, we went with them to a jeweler where Kate's ring was being re-sized. Somehow while we were there my cell phone fell out of my pocket and I could not find it even though I used Mark's phone to call it. After we left the buffet, Jean called the phone again and some woman answered! She had found it in the parking lot by the jeweler, but she said it got wet in the rain and it could not make outgoing calls, which was not good. Mark got it from her the next morning while I phoned Verizon and had my number returned to my old phone.

The middle week of November was one of those very busy weeks we all have occasionally. Monday night was *Target Teach*, so I got home at 9:15pm. Tuesday we graded TTP materials for the first marking period, so I got home at 8:15pm. Wednesday was the Fall *Morris Area Math Alliance* seminar, at which a friend of ours gave a very interesting talk. Jean and I got home at 6:35pm, and I expected to finally have some free time, but after supper Sun Hee came online and I spent 90 minutes helping her with Calculus as well as giving her advice about her new friend at

college. But chatting with Sun Hee is an enjoyable way to spend some time so I did not mind.

By the weekend of 11/ 15 I had tons of mail to catch up on, as well as 4 tests I gave at school the previous two days which needed grading. All that work needed to be done on Sunday since we spent Saturday at a funeral service for my friend Rick's mom which stretched from mid-morning to mid-afternoon since the internment was a long distance away, after which we returned to the church for a luncheon. In the evening we had a dinner appointment with Alan & Denise which filled the rest of the day and evening.

Denise has been in considerable pain recently for back problems, so after spending the week following our dinner on heavy medication, she finally had back surgery. She spent two nights in the hospital overnight and then returned home for convalescence. Hopefully, everything will go all right for her.

I spend my 7<sup>th</sup> period each day with Li Li, my independent study student who is doing *Real Analysis*, a junior year college math major course which she has already halfway finished. Next I am deciding between giving her Topology or Lebesgue Analysis—a first year graduate course—both of which I am certain she can do. She is brilliant, but does not realize it, similarly to Fei Fei. I really hope they can meet each other someday.

Jean's aunt Ceil arrived on 11/22 for her annual two-week Thanksgiving visit. She turned 88 the next day and, as usual, she is livelier than many people I know 20 years younger. She did show one sign of aging though, wrenching her back one morning so that she moved very slowly for a few days. But by Thanksgiving Day she had improved quite a bit already.

We had a very quiet Thanksgiving, with only the four of us for dinner. It was the prototype Thanksgiving dinner: roast turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, squash, homemade applesauce and cranberry sauce. We ate at 1:30 since Andy went to work at 3:00. Mark and Kate were at her parents' house, but they came in the evening for dessert (I made pumpkin pie, which I love!). Fei Fei and Silvio were in Cape May for a few days so they could not come at all.

Thanksgiving is probably my least healthy eating day of the year, since I always eat all the giblets, which are delicious but so bad for me! (

We had a half-day of school the day before Thanksgiving, and many of last year's students visited afterwards to say hello to their friends and former teachers. At one point over a dozen students were crowded into the Math Lab chatting with Jean and me. I was very happy to see my former *Asian American Club* president Kruti—who gave me a big hug (—and her buddy Sharan, and I also talked with many other students, none of whom were those whom I keep in touch with since they had not returned home early enough to visit. It was nice seeing them, but also a bit sad since except for an equally-brief visit before Christmas vacation, I will probably never see those particular students again.

# Wondrous Stories

In March, 2008, I reviewed Gardner Dozois' original anthology **Galactic Empires**, which featured modern interpretations of far-future interplanetary federations. This book was not the first sf book with that title though. In 1976, Brian W. Aldiss—one of the better anthologizers of vintage science fiction in addition to being a major writer and historian of the field—edited two volumes of **Galactic Empires**, collecting stories from the 1940s through the 1960s on that theme. The two volumes were short enough that today they might have been published as one 600 page volume. The books contain a lot of well-known SF writers. In Volume One are novelettes by Poul Anderson, Isaac Asimov (the original “Foundation”), Clifford D. Simak and James White (one of his *Sector General* stories). Volume Two has John D. MacDonald (an underrated author), James Blish and Harry Harrison. There are also short stories by R.A. Lafferty, Arthur C. Clarke, Cordwainer Smith, Algis Budrys, A.E. van Vogt and Poul Anderson.

Not surprisingly, the stories in Volume One run the gamut between pulpish adventures to serious, thought-provoking stories. In spite of Aldiss' literary leanings, he is still fond of the occasional rousing adventure, including two from the early 1950s: Poul Anderson's “The Star Plunderer” and Alfred Coppel's “The Rebel of Valkyr”. Anderson's was an early story of his, more interesting for its ideas than for its execution. It tells the story of a group of human captives being taken on a slave ship to the homeworld of a planet-sprawling Baldic League which has conquered Earth fairly easily. But the aliens are unbelievably stupid for intergalactic conquerors, and the small group of humans are able to seize control of the ship and initiate the overthrow of the conquerors with minimal effort. Not a story to be taken seriously, a rarity for Anderson.

Coppel's story was set during the early years of a reunited galactic empire after an interregnum when barbarism and warfare dominated. Upon the death of the beloved emperor who reunited the worlds, his despised wife and weakling son seize power away from his warrior daughter who is beloved by the other star-kings who supported her father. A rebellion is brewing against the new emperor, but one of the star-kings has suspicions about who is actually pulling the strings in the rebellion. Like Anderson's story, “The Rebel of Valkyr” does not stand up to deep thought, nor does it offer much beneath the surface, but it is fun reading.

H. B. Fyfe's “Protected Species” begins as a typical story about humans expanding into space and establishing a colony on a world dotted with ancient remains and one non-intelligent race of aliens which the humans use for target practice. Until an inspector arrives and proposes the theory that the aliens are the degenerate descendants of the builders of the ruins, and thus deserve to be protected as an endangered species. A fairly cliché concept, but what makes the story successful is a surprise ending which is much more intriguing than I expected, and likely could have been the beginning of another story rather than just the ending of this one.

Three novelettes are the highlights of the book. The best story by far is Clifford D. Simak's “The Immigrant,” one of his typically-low-key stories about an alien world which is so idyllic that only a few select humans are permitted to emigrate there, needing to pass a series of difficult IQ tests to do so. All humans who succeed send back tantalizing letters about the quality of life

there, but the protagonist of the story migrates to the planet and quickly learns that what is hidden between the lines of the letters is sometimes more telling than what is actually stated. This story shows Simak at his best, a thought-provoking story about the possible relationship between humans and the first aliens they encounter, a story whose protagonist thinks his way through the story rather than reacting to all circumstances physically. It reminded me of why Simak has always been one of my favorite SF writers and why I still enjoy reading his fiction as much as ever.

I haven't read Isaac Asimov's **Foundation Trilogy**—or much else by Asimov—in nearly forty years. He was a writer I enjoyed in my teens at the same time Clifford D. Simak was my favorite writer, but when I moved on to more sophisticated writers such as Roger Zelazny, Robert Silverberg, and Samuel R. Delany, Asimov faded away. I considered him simple, entry-level sf which I had passed beyond.

But included in **Galactic Empires** is “Foundation,” one of the earliest stories in that series, and I decided to read it to see how it held up. I was pleasantly surprised that it is still very enjoyable reading. The story is typical Asimov in that it is basically a problem to be solved interwoven with a mystery, as the scientists in charge of writing the exhaustive Encyclopedia on the planet Terminus struggle with the mayor against an inevitable invasion by breakaway worlds from the crumbling empire. The story is mostly talk, similar to the Simak story as well as so many SF stories I enjoy, since intelligent and provocative talk is generally more interesting than mindless action, and it all serves to forward the mystery and the solution to the problem.

By the time I finished “Foundation,” I realized that although Simak still appeals to me more so than Asimov, “Foundation” entertained me enough that perhaps I will go back and reread the entire **Foundation Trilogy** eventually.

Finally there was one of James White's always-enjoyable *Sector General* stories about a huge hospital floating in space which serves beings of many species. This time a comatose being is brought there who is considered almost god-like by some of the hospital's staff but a cannibal by the military. The protagonist Conway has the dual task of healing the being and learning whether it should be feted for its goodness or put on trial for its crimes. White's medical mysteries are always interesting reading.

Overall, **Galactic Empires** is a fun book, and recommended reading. Of course, several stories have nothing to do with galactic empires, but since I enjoyed most of them why quibble about their inclusion in the book, especially since far-future off-Earth settings appeal to me too much to care whether there were any empires or not. I'm looking forward to reading Volume Two soon.

\*

I discovered science fiction in the mid-1960s, after which I primarily read current or recent sf. Thus the first Heinlein novels I read were **Starship Troopers** (too pro-war preachy for me) and **Stranger in a Strange Land** (the first half was gripping, but the second half was pointless). This was followed by **Podkayne of Mars** and **Farnham's Freehold** (both enjoyable but minor),

**The Moon is a Harsh Mistress** (the best of his post-60s works fiction), **I Will Fear No Evil** (almost unreadable) and **The Number of the Beast** (totally unreadable; I abandoned it halfway).

I did go back and read some of his earlier books (**The Past Through Tomorrow**—containing the “future history” stories, **Double Star** and **Universe**), all of which I enjoyed, but none of them were so awe-inspiring for me to rank Heinlein among my favorite SF writers. Eventually I read a few of his juveniles (**Citizen of the Galaxy**, **Time For the Stars**, **The Star Beast**), none of which changed my opinion. But, of course, I was in my 40s by the time I read the latter books.

Recently I decided to give his juveniles another chance, and purchased **Four Frontiers**, an SFBC volume containing Heinlein’s first four juveniles. **Farmer in the Sky** looked the most interesting, but it was still nothing special: no plot per se, little characterization, and mostly lecturing on the part of the teenaged narrator about the nuts and bolts of how to establish a space colony (he was awfully knowledgeable for a kid who whined about not having an education through the course of the book). It was easy-reading, and had a few good moments (particularly the discovery of the crystals and the collapse of the heat trap), but to my mind Heinlein is still Heinlein. I give the book a borderline B rating.

\*

Old-time science fiction fanatics generally point to two major “entry points” into SF reading for them: the young adult novels of Andre Norton, and those of Robert A. Heinlein. Both groups of fans tend to be exceedingly loyal to their first favorite writer even into adulthood.

As I indicated above, I did not enter SF through either author. I read L. Frank Baum’s *Oz* books and the *Tom Swift Jr.* books before I discovered **Worlds of IF** and **Galaxy**. By the time I read Heinlein I had been reading fairly “sophisticated” SF for several years, so his young adult novels never had the same thrill for me as it did to his “children.”

Joseph Major was apparently one of Heinlein’s children, if his dedication in the book **Heinlein’s Children** is any indication since the last line states, “We have all become Heinlein’s children.” His book is equal parts analysis of the fourteen books (beginning with **Rocket Ship Galileo**, published in 1947, through **Podkayne of Mars**, published in 1963) flavored with his love for those books. I bought a copy soon after it was published, admittedly not because of my fascination with Heinlein’s YA novels, but because Joe is a friend of mine. I read the first chapter devoted to **Rocket Ship Galileo** and found parts of it confusing because I was totally unfamiliar with that novel. So when I finished reading **Farmer in the Sky**, I decided to give **Heinlein’s Children** another chance by reading the relevant chapter.

The **Farmer in the Sky** chapter was much more interesting since I was familiar with everything Joe was discussing in it. Basically it was a scene-by-scene analysis of **Farmer in the Sky** augmented by comments from Heinlein’s nonfiction writings (most of which were published posthumously as **Grumbles From the Grave**) relevant to the scene and also comments from critical studies of Heinlein (especially Alexei Panshin’s seminal **Heinlein in Dimension**). Since I enjoy reading critical writing about science fiction, it was all fascinating stuff, even when I

disagreed with one of Joe's conclusions (which happened rarely).

**Heinlein's Children** is written in a rambling, fanzine-style rather than a stiffer academic style, which appealed to me since fanzines and fannish websites are where I read most of my SF criticism, and it is also the writing style I use myself. Joe has a tendency towards long asides, such as a paragraph on page 113 devoted to the movie version of *Lord of the Rings* which has only the most tenuous connection to Heinlein. But I don't mind those asides at all; in fact, if they are interesting, as Joe's invariably are, I actually enjoy them (although I am resisting the urge to insert such an aside right here. ).

I plan to finish reading **Four Frontiers** in the future, and I will likely read the corresponding chapters in **Heinlein's Children** when I do. I recommend the book to those of you who have already read some or most of the novels discussed, but I hesitate to do so for those of you who, in Joe's words in the introduction "haven't yet read Heinlein's juveniles, and want to know more about them." I do not feel this book is really intended for that audience. This book about Heinlein's children (his YA protagonists) is really intended for Heinlein's children (those who have already read his YA books). But apparently there are quite a few million of you out there.





# Slick Willie's Used Car World

*In the month of perhaps the most important presidential election since 1932, here is a story about two former presidents who, with only the slightest change in their lives, might never have reached the White House at all!*

## *Part One*

Jimmy Carter folded the paperback novel in half and placed it face down on the hot ground beside his chair. Rubbing his hands down his trouser legs, he closed his eyes and felt the August sun beating on his face. Sweat formed on his brow and ran down his cheeks onto his neck. Was this really how the Good Lord intended him to spend his life? Sitting all day at the curb under the *Slick Willie's Used Car World* sign, listening to the cars race by on Highway 70? Hagglng with a half-dozen customers a day, making one or two sales a week, just enough to pay his bills? Not to mention breathing in the fumes of the passing car exhausts all day long, or swatting those big, black, ugly Arkansas suckers that drank all your blood right through your skin!

Jimmy sighed and wiped his forehead with a large, white handkerchief. Leaving college without his degree had been the biggest mistake of his life. Whatever possessed him to think he could make that damned peanut farm a success? He still cringed at memories of tramping through burned out fields, practically growing roots in the soil like a goddamned scarecrow, scrimping every last dollar in hopes of meeting the monthly bank payments. And putting up with Miz Lillian's sharp tongue and constant heckling—God bless her. No, he had made the right decision to hit the road. Let Billy rot away back on the farm.

Jimmy stared at the cover of his paperback. He should have gone back to college to finish his degree rather than waste twenty years social working, selling bibles, cooking in soup kitchens, and a half-dozen other misguided attempts to make a small difference in the world. All it had accomplished was reducing Jimmy to sitting on the highway here in desolate Arkansas, mulling over the dim prospects for America's future. The excesses of the Sixties had evolved into the *me generation* of the Seventies and raised the specter of a future whose most important values were greed and personal excess. Jimmy might not have the ability to change that future, but he would be damned to Hell before he was corrupted by it.

The approaching roar of an unmuffled car broke Jimmy's reverie. He opened his eyes to the sight of a big-finned monstrosity bearing down on him. A gray 1959 Chevy, so rusted out and limping that, if it hit Jimmy, the car would surely stop dead in its tracks and crumble into a useless heap of scrap metal.

The car huffed and puffed to a stop spitting distance away from Jimmy's chair. Out stepped an old-timer wearing faded denim coveralls pulled high over a food-stained plaid shirt. White hair stuck out every which way from his careworn cowboy hat. He had a week's growth of grizzly white beard and a smile which showed a few rotted teeth trying desperately to hide the gaps.

Jimmy stood up and flashed his broadest smile. "Hi, y'all! What can I do for you today?"

"I need a car."

"Well, you come to the right place. Slick Willie has the right car for every customer. How much you planning on spending for it?"

The customer's face twisted into one of those *what-are-you-stupid* frowns razorbacks used on outsiders. He nodded towards his car. "I'm trading in that car for a new one."

"And how much additional money are you looking to spend?"

The frown got deeper. "I'm not looking to spend any money, young man! I already told you I'm trading in my car for another one."

Jimmy took a slow breath, fighting to maintain his smile. "That might be a slight problem, sir. The book value on a 1959 Chevy is too low for it to be worth much as a trade-in."

The old-timer took off his hat and scratched his head. "Book value? What in tarnation are you talking about? It's a car, not a goddamned book! Now show me what you've got!"

Jimmy looked around frantically. Dealing with stubborn razorbacks was definitely not part of the good life. Where was Bill when he needed him? He was much better at handling country bumpkins. He was born here in Arkansas, grew up among these people, understood them better than a Georgian boy like Jimmy ever would.

"Just a second, sir," he said. "I'll be right back."

Jimmy ran into the showroom, yelling, "Bill! Where are you?"

There was no response, nor anybody in sight. Jimmy ran past used cars spiffed up to look like they actually had a snowball's chance in hell of running. But where was Bill? Neither in the showroom nor at his desk hidden behind precarious mounds of paper. "Where in the name of God are you, Bill?"

A head peeked out of the small alcove optimistically called The Employees' Room. Jimmy sighed with relief. Bill Clinton was taking a break, holding a cup of coffee in one hand and a donut in the other. He needed a donut like Jimmy needed another peanut.

"What's the matter, Jimmy? You look like you ran into the devil himself. Did Old Lucifer come to buy a car from me?"

"It's worse than that. Another old-timer wants to trade in his bomb for one of our cars." He took a breath, seeking a calmness that did not come easily. "I can't handle it, Bill. Is everybody in this Godforsaken state a con artist?"

Bill laughed, put down the donut and clapped Jimmy on the back. "Your problem, Jimmy, is that

you call on the Lord too much. He's got better things to do than handle all your problems himself. C'mon, watch a master salesman at work."

Jimmy followed Bill outside. He greeted the old-timer like a long-lost friend, gripping the man's hand in both of his, looking him in the eye while they both commiserated on why every car made in this great country of ours died within ten, a dozen years of driving it off a car dealer's lot.

"It ain't that I'm un-American," the old-timer said, "But them German cars sure last forever. If it weren't for the war, I'd surely think about buying one of them myself."

"I know exactly what you mean," Bill said, slipping Jimmy a quick wink. "That's why I don't sell new cars. I'll be damned if I'll funnel good money to those thieves up in Michigan. All I offer at Slick Willie's is resales, cars that have proven themselves time and again, cars that will be just as reliable for their second owner as they were for their first."

And so it went, so much manure Jimmy thought he was back on the farm with his shovel. But the past six months he had become very familiar with the method successful car dealers used. Two sides shoot the bull, each waiting for the other to flinch. As soon as somebody did, then pounce, flip over, hog tie, and the sale was yours!

Which explained why Jimmy Carter sold one or two cars in a good week, and Bill Clinton sold a half dozen each day.

Gradually Bill worked the old-timer around to the 1967 white LeMans they had been trying unsuccessfully to sell for the past three months.

"Isn't that a beauty?" Bill said, running his hand over the fender tenderly. "People will think you're the governor of Arkansas driving a car like that."

"Don't wanna be the goddamned governor," the old-timer growled. "He's a crooked politician just like all the rest of them."

"Amen to that," Bill said. "Maybe I should say you'll look like Sam Walton himself."

The old-timer brightened. "Now there's a great man. Wouldn't mind looking like Sam Walton at all. Not at all."

They discussed Sam Walton, the white LeMans, and the evils of inflation for twenty minutes more. Eventually the old-timer agreed that his old clunker was not the equal of that gorgeous LeMans. They dickered over the price, both men crying poverty and cursing inflation several times. At one point Bill admitted he had been eying the car himself for several days, and he was not sure he wanted to sell it at all.

That lie turned the tide. Soon thereafter the customer handed over \$500 in dirty bills, mostly fives and tens, and drove away a happy man.

"What are we going to do with that bomb of his?" Jimmy asked.

Bill smiled broadly. "With a little loving care, I should be able to sell it as an antique for \$500."

Jimmy shook his head in disbelief. "\$500 for a fifteen year old car that smells bad even when it's not running?"

Bill put his arm around Jimmy and led him toward the showroom.

"It's all salesmanship, my peanut farmer friend. With the right pitch, I could even sell sand to the Arabs."

"So why can't I sell cars as well as you can?"

"Because you have too many scruples, Jimmy. All the while you're dickering with a customer, you're worrying about how long the car's muffler will hold up, if the rust will eat through the body in another thousand miles, can the customer really afford to pay as much as you're asking?" He shook his head. "The only way to succeed in this business is to first convince yourself that whatever you're selling is the most important product in the entire world, whether it's cars, encyclopedias, or tax increases. When your own faith in your product is total, then whatever means you use to sell it is justified by the good you're trying to accomplish."

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Jimmy nodded half-heartedly. "I don't think I'll ever convince myself that selling cars is more important than treating customers with dignity and respect."

Bill frowned. "In which case selling cars might not be the best profession for you. Maybe you'd be better off going back to your peanut farm in Georgia."

A chill ran up Jimmy's spine. "No way am I crawling back to Miz Lillian."

Bill's laughter was cut off by a sudden explosion rocking the lot. Jimmy thought it was an earthquake, but nothing seemed to be falling. He looked at Bill whose face was paler than Jimmy had ever seen it.

"What the hell is going on?" Bill whispered. He sprinted through the showroom, followed closely by Jimmy. They hurried through the body shop filled with ailing cars waiting to be spiffed up and moved into the showroom. No apparent damage had occurred there. They ran to the storage shed whose entrance was blocked by billowing black smoke. Bill charged through the smoke, clearing his way by waving his arms. Jimmy hesitated, fearful of sudden flames and smoke inhalation, before uttering a *Dear God* and following Bill.

At the center of the shed a strangely-dressed man lay atop the remnants of a bicycle that looked

as if it had taken on a tractor trailer and lost. He wore a single, tight-fitting outfit that only exposed his head and hands.

Bill bent over the man. "Are you all right? What the hell happened?"

Slowly the man shook his head and looked at Bill. His eyes widened with recognition.

"My god," he whispered. "Bill Clinton. Younger than your pictures, but definitely you. I made it!"

"Made what? Who are you? How do you know me?"

The man sat up with Bill's help. When he glanced at Jimmy, a different expression crossed his face.

"Jimmy Carter?"

"Yes, I am." Jimmy was rattled by the stranger's recognition. He had only met Bill himself six months ago. How did a stranger appearing in a cloud of smoke and a crushed bike know them both by name?

"Answer my question," Bill insisted.

"It's kind of hard to explain." The stranger wiggled around a bit trying to get more comfortable. Jimmy gazed at the broken bike, wondering if they should still be in the shed. But the smoke was clearing, and the bike did not seem on the verge of exploding.

He looked back at the stranger who was watching him intently. "You look about fifty years old," he said. Then he turned to Bill. "And you're not even thirty." He rubbed his jaw. "What year is this?"

"What year is it--?" Jimmy hushed at Bill's warning look as he mouthed the words *brain damage*.

"It's 1974," Bill said.

"1974?" The stranger ran his tongue over his lips. "Are we in Georgia?"

"No, sir," Jimmy said. "This is Arkansas."

"Arkansas?" He looked from Jimmy to Bill, eyeing their clothing. Jimmy was dressed casually in jeans and a plaid shirt, an outfit Bill had assured him would improve his image with the customers. Billy wore slacks and a dress shirt.

"Are you on a campaign stop?" the stranger asked Jimmy.

"A what? I work for Bill."

His eyes widened. "Work for him as what?"

"Selling used cars. This is *Slick Willie's Used Car World*."

The stranger stared at them in disbelief. "That's impossible," he muttered. "In 1974 you were the governor of Georgia."

"Governor of Georgia?" Jimmy felt very uncomfortable. "I'm no politician, just a failed peanut farmer trying to find a better line of work."

"What do you mean—a *failed* peanut farmer?" The stranger leaned so close Jimmy edged away from him.

"I think you'd better answer the man's question," Bill said. He looked even more nervous than Jimmy felt.

"I left college thirty years ago to manage the farm," Jimmy said, "but the cycle of droughts and flooding made it a losing proposition. Ten years of barely breaking even convinced me to give the farm to my brother Billy and move on."

"And you never ran for governor of Georgia?"

"I never even ran for dogcatcher. Who would vote for a peanut farmer for anything?"

"Who indeed?" the stranger muttered.

"Now it's your turn to explain a few things," Bill said. "What are all these strange questions anyway? How do you know both Jimmy and me?"

The stranger shook his head. "Actually I'm a little confused at the moment myself. Can we possibly go somewhere where I'll be a bit more comfortable? I promise to answer all your questions as soon as I figure out what the hell is happening here."

Bill rolled his eyes, but Jimmy said, "Sure enough." The two of them helped the stranger to his feet. They helped him to the couch in the Employees' Room. When he was sitting comfortably, Jimmy fetched him a cup of steaming coffee.

"Thank you," the stranger said, sipping it. Immediately he spat the coffee back into the cup. "*What is this stuff anyway?*"

"It's coffee," Jimmy said.

"Coffee?" His brow furrowed. "I drink coffee every morning and it sure doesn't taste anything like this." He laughed. "Times do change, don't they?" Shaking his head, he laughed even louder. "Damn, doesn't this beat everything? Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton working together in a used car lot."

He laughed so loud hot coffee spilled on his lap. He jumped to his feet as Bill quickly took the cup out of his hand.

"Thanks," he said, swiping at his pants with the back of his hand. Jimmy's eyes widened as the coffee evaporated, leaving no stain. The stranger shook his head when Bill offered him the coffee again.

"I'm sorry for confusing you. I assure you it wasn't intentional. Are you ready for the most amazing story you'll ever hear in your lives?"

"Go ahead," Bill said, skepticism in his voice.

Jimmy nodded, his discomfort growing with each passing minute.

"My name is Maynard Gonzalez," the stranger said. "I'm a twenty-eighth century historian."

"How can you possibly study the twenty-eighth century?" Bill said.

Gonzalez shook his head. "I don't study it. I'm from the twenty-eighth century. What I study is the late twentieth century."

"That's impossible," Bill said, rolling his eyes.

"You're a time traveler?" said Jimmy.

Gonzalez looked at Jimmy with increased respect. "That's right. I came back eight hundred years to study the last two American president who tried to stave off the Dark Years but failed."

"What are the Dark Years?" Bill said.

"Why has nobody ever seen a time traveler before?" Jimmy said. "Are you the first?"

Gonzalez smiled at Jimmy. "You ask good questions," he said. "I'm not the first time traveler, but I am the first to ever make it this far back in time."

"Why is that?"

"A time scooter travels through time by absorbing mechanical energy from the era through which it passes. During the four hundred Dark Years there was so little mechanical energy that any scooters trying to pass through stalled, stranding the travelers in time."

"So how did you get through?"

"We finally improved the scooter's efficiency sufficiently to give it enough momentum to coast through the Dark Years. This era is so rich in mechanical energy I should be able to power up my scooter again and return home the same way."

Jimmy nodded his head thoughtfully. Normally he would dismiss such a wild science fiction story immediately. But what else could explain the stranger's wild appearance in a cloud of smoke, or his exotic outfit and curious accent? They all indicated something well out of the ordinary, perhaps something totally unexplainable by normal means, and what was more unexplainable than time travel?

"Even if you are a time traveler," Jimmy said, "That does not explain how you know the both of us?"

"That's the crazy part of this whole thing," Gonzalez said. "You are the two presidents I came to visit."

*To Be Continued...*

## On The Lighter Side

Jokes by Bill Sabella

\*

A man boarded a plane with 6 kids. After they got settled in their seats a woman sitting across the aisle from him leaned over to him and asked, "Are all of those kids yours?"

He replied, "No. I work for a condom company. These are customer complaints."

\*

Dick Cheney and George W. Bush are having breakfast at the White House. The attractive young waitress asks Cheney what he would like, and he replies, "I'd like a bowl of oatmeal and some fruit."

"And what can I get for you, Mr. President?"

George W. looks up from his menu and replies with his trademark wink and slight grin, "How about a quickie this morning?"

"Why, Mr. President!" the waitress exclaims. "How rude! You're starting to act like President Clinton," and she storms away.

Cheney leans over to Bush and whispers..... "It's pronounced 'quiche.'"