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A Troubling of Goldfish

By Richard Romano

What is the nature of Evil? Just when we think we know its form, it changes shape, like a clever virus with shifting antigens, defying its enemies to find ways to eradicate it. It is known that people can be Evil, but can inanimate objects also become infused with whatever that force is that works in unspeakably dark ways? Has the ability of Evil to affect people transformed into an ability to affect things? And if so, what does it mean for the future of humanity?

"That's very good, lieutenant," said Santos, "and raises important questions, but does it really belong on an insurance claim form?"

"That car shot out of nowhere and nailed my rear fender. No one can be *that* bad a driver, not even a New York City cab driver. The Force of Darkness is the only other explanation," said Lieutenant Jordan, signing his claim form and folding it into an envelope.

"Speaking of the Force of Darkness," said Santos, changing the subject slightly, "someone has finally bought the old Edgard House."

"And this is important because"

"Oh, that's right, you're too young to remember the trouble up there."

"Well, I was so much older then, I'm younger than that now."

"You've been reading my back pages again, haven't you?" said Santos somewhat cryptically. "At any rate, it was around '66 the trouble happened. That was one hell of a summer. The weather was amazing. You know how hot August can be around here, well"

"Captain, as much as I would like to stroll merrily down Memory Lane with you, I am aware of my own mortality, so please make your point."

"Mm. Old Edgard House, the town's septic tank unclogger, murdered his entire family. He's still in the State Prison."

"That's awful. How did he kill them?"

"No one knows. The bodies were never found. In fact, there was no evidence that a crime had even been committed. Actually, the whole mess was purported to have been an ugly rumor started by his neighbor, who overheard and

misinterpreted a conversation between House and the milkman. Apparently, the phrase 'Could you not deliver any more cheese' was heard as 'I killed my family and buried them in the garden.' Within hours, the rumor was all over town. About two in the afternoon, it reached police headquarters and they had no choice but to pick him up. It was a much smaller town back then, before the mall was built"

"What had happened to his family?" asked Jordan, hoping to end this story as soon as possible.

"Nothing, really. Some mini-series was premiering that night and they were all in the living room glued to the TV. By the time it ended and they emerged, it was too late; House had been arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced. Justice, or something quite like it, tends to be swift in small towns."

"And no one bothered to release him?"

"Well, the paperwork was a nightmare and everyone kept putting it off. As it turns out, he found Jesus while in prison, and after one connubial visit, his wife decided she didn't want him back. They left the house, and it's been abandoned ever since. It's rumored to be haunted."

"So who bought the place?" asked Jordan.

"I don't know, but I'd be curious to find out. It certainly must be a brave soul."

The desk sergeant poked his head into Santos's office. "Sir? There appears to be a problem on 13th Street. Something about an eerie death."

"Well, that about does it for the backstory, lieutenant. Sergeant, we're on our way."

Way indeed.

"Most peculiar, lieutenant," said Santos, lost in thought.

"No, I didn't think you'd like the Carmen Miranda hat," said Jordan, removing his non-standard-issue headgear.

"Mm. And what do you make of this?" Santos asked, pointing to the body on the floor.

"Oh, jeez, I didn't even see him down there." Jordan bent down and examined the body. "No marks on his body that I can detect. Was he naked when he was found?"

"Yes," said Santos, consulting his notebook. "I'm told that his name is Herb Smeldman, a 44-year-old cereal-box writer. He was found by his next-door neighbor, who says she found the body at 3:00 this afternoon, which is in about a half hour. Oh, damn, I forgot to set my watch ahead last night." He reset his watch to 3:30, and returned his

attention back to his notebook. "Anyway, he was found naked lying next to the fishbowl." He looked over at a two-gallon fishbowl that housed an extremely large goldfish, which seemed remarkably unconcerned about the whole business.

"There is no sign of any forced entry into the house, although the front door is always unlocked. The neighbor, a Miss Judith Pulp, was at home watching *UFO* on the Sci-Fi Channel. She accurately summed up today's episode, which is no easy feat, so her alibi checks out. From the looks of it, he was apparently in the act of talking with his fish when he died." He paused. "You know, that is one huge goldfish. It barely fits in that bowl."

"Could it be natural causes?" asked Jordan.

"It's possible, or perhaps Smeldman just overfed it. At any rate, have Smeldman's body sent to Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder for analysis. Perhaps he can come up with something."

"Captain, should we bring the fish in for questioning?" asked Jordan.

"No, I don't think he's likely to be able to tell us anything, for a variety of reasons."

A uniformed officer approached Santos. "Sir, I don't know how important this is, but I found the receipt for the purchase of the goldfish. You may find it of interest."

Santos took the slip of paper and looked at it. "Twenty dollars for a goldfish? That's rather a lot, even for one that size. Perhaps it's a purebred. From Arthur's Aquarium. Never heard of it." He pocketed the receipt.

"Evidence?" asked Jordan.

"You never know."

"Captain, something fascinating," said Jordan, later that day. He was in his office at headquarters, sitting at his computer.

"What, you've finally managed to get back to Myst Island from the Stoneship Age?" asked Santos.

"No, a somewhat odd correlation. On a whim I checked out Arthur's Aquarium. It opened about a month ago, and is owned by an Arthur Mason, who moved to town shortly before opening."

"Are you planning on buying a fish, lieutenant?"

"No, but Arthur Mason is also the person who moved into the Edgard House."

"That is interesting. Who knows, it may even be useful. Keep checking. Now I have to meet with Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder. Wish me luck."

"Good luck, Captain."

"I'm afraid, Bernard, that I can't be certain of the cause of death. Aside from the fact that there doesn't appear to be a drop of blood in his body, I can find nothing wrong with him," said Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder. Smeldman's body was lying on an examining table in the middle of Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder's lab, covered with a sheet.

"Why does that sheet have Darth Vader on it?" asked Santos.

"The supply room was out of white sheets, so I took my son's *Star Wars* bed sheets. Actually, it kind of livens up the place"

"Adolph, a forensics lab is in no need of being 'livened up.' You know how the commissioner feels about this sort of levity. I still get grief about the time he looked in your tissue samples freezer and found a pint of Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia ice cream."

"All right, I'll get a new sheet. Sears is having a white sale this afternoon"

"At any rate, back to the cause of death"

"As I was saying, aside from the fact that he's dead, there is no compelling reason why this man can't just get up and walk out of here."

It was at that point that Smeldman's body stirred.

"Did you see that?" asked Santos, looking at the sheet.

"Oh, some residual muscular contractions are normal after death. I see it all the time."

Smeldman's body then sat up, the sheet falling down, exposing his face. Smeldman shook his head and rubbed his eyes.

"This, however, is a bit more unusual," said Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder.

Smeldman threw off the sheet and walked out the door, slamming it behind him.

"How rude!" said Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder.

Santos ran for the phone and dialed Jordan's number. "Jordan," he said into the receiver. "Smeldman's body has just got up and left the forensics lab. I want all units to be on the lookout for a naked dead man. . . .That's an interesting question, lieutenant. I'm not sure to what extent he can be 'taken alive'."

Alive indeed.

Late that night, Santos sat in his living room staring out the window at the garden gnome on his lawn. It needed cleaning again, he thought. Dwelling on something as seemingly insignificant as a garden gnome was to Santos a good way of forgetting the unforgettable events of earlier

that day. They had not been able to find Smeldman's suddenly reanimated body. Although initially he hadn't thought that it would have been hard to find a naked zombie wandering the streets of Moistville, but, well, Halloween was fast approaching and it became a more and more common sight. He walked across the room and went into the bathroom to look out the rear window. On the hill he saw the Edgard House silhouetted against the sky. Strangely, the Edgard House was visible from the bathroom window of every house in town. It had been designed by one of the first set of architecture students from the Lakeside Elementary School. Although very little frightened Santos—snakes and Cheese Puffs were it, really—he had to admit, to himself if no one else, that the Edgard House scared him silly. He had been eight when it was built, nine when the trouble with House happened, and a year later one of the infamous "dares" among his childhood friends involved walking into the house. Whoever could go in the farthest without running out in terror typically won. *Won what?* Santos asked himself in retrospect. Courage, perhaps. Or machismo, or some other abstract concept that at least one didn't have to pay taxes on. Well, not yet anyway. It had been the Johnson Administration, after all. He had won his courage many times over. He even framed it and hung it on the wall

behind his desk. He struggled to take his eyes off the house, but was unable. He found himself tripping back in time

I dare you, Bernard, to go into that abandoned house. You'll never do it 'cause you're chicken. This was the voice of his chief nemesis in grammar school, accompanied by the prerequisite clucking sounds. I'm not chicken, Adolph. I once tried to spell your last name. Yes, his chief nemesis in grade school, Adolph Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder, was now working for him. God, he loved it. *Dare you dare you dare you dare you!*

"God, you're irritating," he replied. "All right, I'll go into the bloody house."

With Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder and his pack of cronies looking on, he walked up the driveway towards the house. Its front door seemed to beckon to him; he took the welcome mat at face value. A carpet of overgrown weeds covered the top of the steps that led up to the front door, as did a tangled web of supermarket flyers. Some people have no fear, he thought.

"Bring something out!" yelled Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder.

"Like a severed head!" added one of his cronies.

"Or a finger!" contributed another.

"Or some aspirin, if you come across any!" yelled another one, missing the point completely.

Santos ignored them and continued up the steps. He grasped the knob and turned it slowly, then pushed the door inward. As he did, he heard a loud rustling. His heart pounding, he looked down to see what was making the noise, and was slightly relieved to see that it was only a big pile of unforwarded mail that had been slid through the mail slot. By virtue of his youth, Santos had yet to experience the abject terror of the post office. Inside, he looked around nervously, and was surprised to see as many cobwebs as were hanging from the ceiling and in the corners like Spanish moss. This was, after all, before web sites would become fashionable. There was a set of stairs in front of him, and he mounted them one by one, the wood creaking beneath his sneakers. His mind was crowded with thoughts of building-code violations. At the top of the stairs, he came to a hallway. He turned to his left and what he saw sent the adrenalin shooting through him at Warp 10. He turned around and ran screaming from the house. He ran all the way down the driveway, where he was intercepted by Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder. In tears, and crying rather effusively, he spluttered, "It was horrible! It was horrible!"

His terror was infectious. "What was it? What did you see?" they all asked him, practically in unison.

"It was it was A Donovan poster. A big one, too. He was wearing a brocade coat Oh, the horror, the horror."

"My god, that sounds awful," said Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder, silently vowing to never go into the house.

"Terrible," chimed in one of his cronies.

"It must have been awful," said another.

"Actually, I like Donovan," said a third.

The ringing of the phone thankfully snapped Santos back to reality.

"Hello?" he said, then realized he was still in the bathroom.

He walked out to the living room, still in somewhat of a daze, and picked up the phone. It was Jordan.

"Captain, are you all right? I didn't interrupt . . . something, did I?"

"No, no, I was having some kind of acid flashback."

"An acid flashback? You?"

"Mm. Too much folic acid in my diet. At any rate, what's the trouble?"

"Well, although Smeldman hasn't turned up yet, there has been another death."

"Where?"

"15th Street."

"I'll be right there."

He took one more look out the back window at the Edgard House, then ran out the door.

It was some time before Santos realized that 15th Street was much longer than he thought it was. He supposed that he should have asked for a specific address.

"The body is that of Melvin Snogg, a 53-year-old professor of applied nudity at Drexel University, apparently on leave in Moistville for the fall." He looked down at the body. "Same M.O., Captain," said Jordan. "Lying dead and naked in front of a goldfish bowl. The goldfish is just as large as Smeldman's, too."

"Hmm. See if you can find a receipt for the purchase of the goldfish. I have a theory."

Jordan opened a rolltop desk sitting idly in the corner of the living room. A cat leapt out at him.

"Zoinks!" shouted Jordan in surprise.

"'Zoinks', Lieutenant?" asked Santos. "What, have you been watching *Scooby-Doo* again?"

The cat retracted its claws, much to the relief of Jordan's right shoulder. It jumped to the floor and ran over to the goldfish bowl. It looked down at the body of Snogg, and then began meowing and hissing at the large fish.

"Captain, that's pretty peculiar," said Jordan.

"Not really, Lieutenant. Cats and fish are natural adversaries, unless you raise them together, and so long as at least one of them is kept in a glass bowl."

"Or a rolltop desk."

"That is a possibility."

Assuming the cat was just being cute, cuddly, and feral, they ignored it. Jordan rummaged through some papers in the desk, and found the receipt for the fish.

"Captain, Snogg bought the fish—not surprisingly—from Arthur's Aquarium three days ago. Cost: twenty dollars."

"Hmm. This is damn peculiar, Lieutenant."

Jordan noticed another slip of paper clipped to the receipt. It read, Goldie, weight on 10/29 2.3 oz. He showed the note to Santos.

"But today is the 29th of October, or did I forget to turn my calendar back?" He thought. "That weight must have been taken this morning. Jordan, take that fish down to the lab and have it weighed. Something fi—"

"Captain, please don't say 'fishy.' I implore you."

Fishy, indeed.

"Captain, something odd," said Jordan, back at headquarters.

Santos strode across the room. "Aside from the fact that Snogg's goldfish now weighs 10 pounds when this morning it weighed 2.3 ounces?"

"Perhaps Snogg's bathroom scale was broken. You know how inaccurate those things are."

"Mm, yes, I'm quite aware of how inaccurate bathroom scales can be." He ran his hand across his stomach.

"Anyway, what is so odd?"

"Remember Judith Pulp, Smeldman's next door neighbor who claims to have been watching *UFO* on the Sci-Fi Channel when he died?"

"Ah, yes. I remember it as if it were yesterday."

"Actually, sir, it was yesterday."

"Well, that's why I remember it. Go on."

"Well, I checked the TV listings, primarily because I wanted to see if *The Five Mrs. Buchanans* was coming back. It's not." He looked crestfallen.

"Jordan, that show was cancelled years ago."

"Well, they brought *Star Trek* back after, what, twenty years?"

Santos glowered at him.

"Anyway, sir, it seems that *UFO* isn't on on the east coast until two o'clock."

"And? We were there at 3:30. She found the body at 3:00. If I remember correctly, *UFO* is a one-hour show."

Jordan smiled slightly. "Captain, what time is it?"

"It's not time for lunch yet, if that's what you mean. It's . . ." he looked at his watch, "11:30."

"Wrong. It's 10:30."

"Hmm. Lunch is much farther off than I thought." He thought for a moment. "Wait a minute! Why is it 10:30?"

Jordan explained. "Neither of us caught this at the time, but your watch was correct when you arrived at the Smeldman house yesterday afternoon. Remember? Your watch said 2:30. Miss Pulp said she found the body at 3:00, so you assumed it was actually 3:30. And you said, and I quote, 'Damn, I forgot to set my watch ahead last night.' But I had set my watch yesterday morning to the wacky morning deejays on WORM, who pride themselves on taking everything in the world as a joke except the correct time. And they must have been right, because *This Week With David Brinkley* came on

at the exact right time. I never reset my watch since then, so logically it must still be correct."

"So I mistakenly set it ahead. But what does that have to do with Miss Pulp?"

"She said she found the body at 3:00. But we were at Smeldman's at 2:30. She therefore neglected to change her watch Saturday night and therefore thought that it was 3:00."

"But wait a minute. If she neglected to change her watch then we would have to have been there at 4:30."

"No, sir. You seem to have forgotten that this is October. We set the clocks *back* in the fall, not ahead."

"Wait, isn't it 'spring back, fall forward'?"

"No, it's actually 'spring forward, fall back.'"

Santos snapped his fingers. "Aha! I understand now. If it was actually 2:00 when she found the body, then she wouldn't have been able to watch *UFO* yet. So how did she know the details of the episode before she had seen it?"

"Maybe it was a repeat? Or maybe there was a description in the TV listings? Who knows?"

At that point an elderly woman wandered in the front door. "Hello, Melvin?" she called.

Santos walked over to her. She looked past him to where Snogg was lying on the floor. "Melvin doesn't look too good, does he?"

"No," said Santos, "he has definitely seen better days."

"It was his nudity, you know. I always told him it would get him in trouble. Especially when he visited the Vatican."

"He's dead, you know," said Santos. "Did you know him well?"

"Not really, no. I had seen him naked, but then most of the Eastern Seaboard has, so I suppose that doesn't count for much."

"No, that's probably true," said Santos, desperately wishing she would leave. "I don't suppose you know how he died."

She thought. "No, I was at home all morning, watching my stories. There was a program on the television called *The Prisoner*. In this episode, the boy who is trapped in a mysterious Village, and who is only known as Number Six, had to defeat The General. All the residents of the Village were given subliminal history lessons, and they all knew the answers to test questions posed by other members of the Village. This nice Number Six thinks something very odd is going on, so he goes to some kind of intellectual retreat,

and confronts the Professor, the man who is running these subliminal telecasts, and he fights with the Professor's wife—"

"Yes, thank you, Mrs. . . ."

"—and then he tries to club the Professor with a stick, but he's made of porcelain. And then some other number tries to help him by giving him a subliminal message that will reveal the General's plan, but the General turns out to be a big computer and Number Six destroys it by asking it the question 'why?' and it blows up, but he's still trapped in the Village."

"That's quite remarkable that you remember all that."

"I have an excellent memory."

Santos was confused. "What channel was the program on?"

"I don't know. Maybe the Sci-Fi Channel. I must go now."

She turned to leave. "Oh, what will become of Melvin's goldfish?"

"We're going to find a new home for him. He'll be fine. Don't worry."

She suddenly turned very pale, and her eyes glazed over. As if in a trance, she intoned in a deep, oddly reverbed voice, "You cannot do that. The Master wouldn't approve."

This struck Santos as strange. "'The Master'? Who is The Master?"

She suddenly popped out of her trance, and seemed to forget what it was she just said. "The Master? Oh, I don't know. Maybe Bobby Fischer? Good day, officer." She strode back out the door.

Santos, not quite knowing what to make of that, turned to Jordan. "Lieutenant, I don't quite know what to make of that."

"Yes, I know."

Santos looked puzzled. "Have that goldfish brought down to the lab for analysis. Oh, and have Snogg brought there, too. And make sure they're clearly labeled. I don't want Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder to get confused. I need to find a car park."

"You know," said Jordan, watching Santos pace, "they're called 'parking lots' in this country. Besides, you're not even British."

"Shh. I need to think." Santos continued to pace. "What do we have? Two middle-aged men, both found naked and dead, with no discernible marks on their bodies. Both are found right next to an abnormally large goldfish. And both have next-door neighbors who can accurately summarize obscure British science fiction programs. Lieutenant, this doesn't make a great deal of sense."

"Is it supposed to? Isn't it a bit early for it to make sense, sir?"

"You may be right. But—and forgive me if I sound melodramatic—I think there is evil afoot in Moistville."

"Well, Time-Warner did acquire the cable system."

"No, no, I don't mean that. Something is clouding my mind. Something I cannot explain. I've been making mistakes, Jordan. Like the business with the watch on Sunday. I know I reset it to the proper standard time. And I know full well that you set it back in the fall. No, Lieutenant, there is evil here. Any dark force that hampers our ability to properly determine the time must be destroyed. Think of it, Jordan! No one knowing what time it is!"

"Does anybody really know what time it is, Captain?"

"Maybe in Chicago they don't, but in our modern world we need to. Oh, this evil force knows us too well. You don't eat our brains, or blow up the White House, or duplicate people. No, it knows that to truly conquer Earth, you screw up our ability to tell time."

"Sir? Has it been a while since you had a vacation?"

Santos snapped to attention. "No. First thing tomorrow, I think I'll pay Arthur Mason a little visit."

That evening found Santos once again staring out the window at the Edgard House. Santos didn't want to talk to that evening, so that evening was sent home rather abruptly. Santos thought back to his previous flashback

(but that wasn't the whole story, was it?)

and winced. He knew what was in store for him. He had lived his memories, so no flashbacks could truly surprise him. Except perhaps for that one evening

"Go on!" urged Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder. "You can do it!"

Why young Bernard Santos agreed to spend a whole evening inside the Edgard House was a mystery to him. Maybe it was once again

(dare you dare you dare you)

the need to prove something. Proving those geometry

(a squared plus b squared equals c squared)

theorems didn't seem to cut it with the malevolent Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder. No, the mischievous Adolph

(dare you dare you dare you)

knew the powers of persuasion needed to convince a ten-year-old boy

(is this getting annoying yet?)

to do anything he wanted. In Santos's case, that happened to include revealing

(attention at Tuckahoe: the 6:46 train to New York will be 15 minutes late)

his credit card information. So, ultimately, he agreed to do it. Even if it meant camping inside that

(traffic on the BQE is heavy, we suggest you use alternate routes)

house. He had brought his sleeping bag, several night lights, a toothbrush and

(weather for the tri-state area, heavy rain in the morning, clearing up around noon, with heavy fog in coastal areas; stay tuned for Len Berman with sports)

a heavy towel.

A light touch on his shoulder jolted him back to reality, or at least an as yet unexperienced reality.

"I'm sorry," a female voice purred, "I didn't mean to startle you."

He spun around and beheld a creature that walked in beauty like the darling buds of May. Or, no, wait a minute, she was compared to the night, no, oh, damn. He never could remember those sonnets. At any rate, she had a figure that resembled a perfect hourglass, or at the very least one of those three-minute egg timers. She had the kind of legs that went all the way to the floor and just stopped. Her heaving bosom reminded him of ripe muskmelons, either

Cucumis melo, or either of the varieties of *reticulatis*, *cantalupensis*, or even *inodorus*, native to central Asia and botanically known as *pepos*. Her long, platinum blonde hair looked as if she had been growing it all her life.

"Who are you?"

"I am for you, Bernard Santos."

She began to caress his shoulders and rub her leg against his.

"How did you get in here?"

"I crawled through the keyhole. Think of me as a black widow spider." He suspected she meant this to be alluring.

"You hide in dry wood piles and build irregularly-shaped webs?"

She appeared to be having rather a good time with his leg.

"Is it true what they say about cops?" she purred.

"No. We don't gratuitously beat people up."

"Is it true you carry a big gun?"

"Actually, I prefer not to carry a gun. There's not much call for weapons in a town like Moistville. Although, I did once thwart a burglar by hurling a garden gnome at him. Does that count?"

"Mmm. Was it a big gnome?"

"Well, as gnomes go, I suppose so. Look, Miss . . ."

"You don't seem too turned on. Don't I excite you? Look, this is your third case so far and you're still pretty sexually ambiguous. I think you need to loosen up."

She began to blow in his ear gently.

"I'm sorry, but like the Vulcans I only take a mate every seven years, at the time of the *pon farr*."

"You dress in women's clothing?"

"No, that's the *jamie farr*. This is something . . . different."

He was beginning to fall under her spell, but struggled to resist it. He had once fallen under a woman's spell, and had found himself on a stage, lying on his back supported by two straight-backed chairs. He hoped never to relive that experience again.

"Whisper sweet nothings in my ear," he said to her, not quite sure what a sweet nothing was. Perhaps this would finally clarify it for him.

"Oh, yes," she obliged, "now we're just like Martin Landau and Barbara Bain, in that episode of *Space: 1999*, where the Moon is being pulled into a black hole—"

He came to his senses abruptly and pushed her way.

"Another science fiction plot summary! All right! Where's the goldfish?"

Like the elderly woman in Snogg's house, she went into a kind of trance. "The Goldfish. So, you've been to see the Master. Good; he's been wanting to see you for a long time, but is rather shy about these kinds of things. He's not very adept at socializing or making new friends, which could explain rather a lot."

He decided to play along. "Yes, I've been to see the Master." he paused, hoping to get another cue from her.

"Oh . . . good," she said haltingly, as if not sure how to continue. "What did you think of him?"

"Uh . . . seemed like a nice guy." He thought wildly. "Um . . . taller than I thought he'd be."

"Mm. He wears lifts. Don't tell him I told you. And the hair; bad toupee. For some reason, he seems to think being short and bald diminishes his hold over people. I told him he shouldn't worry about such things. He has the power to move continents, and he has to wear a wig? Silly, really."

"Right, right. Well, ours is not to reason why. So, um, where is the Master now? I thought I'd drop by and say hello. You know, see if he wants to go out for a beer or something."

"What do you mean, 'where is the Master'? What a silly question. You—" She suddenly leapt back in terror. "You have *not* been to see the Master! I can see it in your

colors. You were trying to trick me! You have not seen the Master of the Great Dominions."

"Oh, *that* Master," Santos said, hoping to recover, or at the very least survive the evening. "I thought you meant Bernie Edelstein, the bowling champ. We call him the 'Master,' just for kicks, you know. He also wears lifts and a cheap wig."

"You evil—or, no, check that—you completely *non-evil* man! You will pay for your crimes!"

With that, she spun around and marched out the door.

He stared after her for a long time.

"That was weird."

Weird, indeed.

"Ah, yes, the goldfish," said Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder. "*Carassius auratus*, in the order Cypriniformes in the family Cyprinidae. It's an Asiatic fish, and does reach sixteen inches in length and can weigh up to three pounds."

"But according to Snogg's note, it weighed only a couple of ounces earlier in the day. Do they grow so fast so quickly?" asked Santos.

"No, not really. But one never knows."

They watched the horribly obese fish lurching back and forth in the very small bowl. Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder reached in and grabbed the fish. He immediately screamed and withdrew his hand from the tank, releasing the fish.

"Ah! The little bastard bit me!"

Santos looked strangely at the fish. "A biting goldfish?"

"And that's not all," said Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder, sucking on his injured finger. "Remember Melvin Snogg? Well, his body just got up and left, too, just like Smeldman's did. So now there are two naked zombies wandering around town."

"Well, that's only a few less than usual," said Santos reflectively. "Anyway, keep examining that goldfish. I'm certain there's something unusual about it. I'm going to meet with Arthur Mason."

"Ah, yes, Arthur Mason," said Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder. "Didn't he move into the old Edgard House? You remember that place, don't you, Bernard? Didn't you spend a night in it once?" He chuckled malevolently. "If I remember correctly, you, shall we say, 'left your mark' in it."

Santos was not amused. "And, if you'll recall, Adolph, I did get my revenge on you. Let's see, how did that go . . .?"

"All right! Save it for another flashback. Don't you have to meet with Mason?"

Meet, indeed.

Arthur's Aquarium was located in the heart of downtown Moistville, on Main Street halfway between Main Avenue and Main Drive. Santos walked in the front door, and was immediately greeted by the smell of the sea. The smell of the sea showed him to the back of the store, where Arthur Mason was sprinkling flakes of TetraMin into a large fishtank stocked with small goldfish. Oddly, it was only one of two aquaria in the store. A large, 100-gallon, pentagonally-shaped tank stood in a dark corner of the store. It was filled with water, yet contained no fish.

"Yes, may I help you? And may I remind you that we are having a sale on clown triggerfish. Only \$75 dollars each, two for \$125. Even nice at twice the price."

Santos stared at the goldfish in the tank hypnotically. "I'm Captain Bernard Santos, of the Moistville Police Department. May I have several words with you, Mr. Mason?"

"Certainly." He closed the top of the fishtank and replaced the tin of fish food on a shelf above it. He turned around to face Santos. Santos immediately noticed

that he was wearing elevator shoes and an appallingly bad toupee. The Master, he thought.

"Um, Master—er, *Mister*—Mason, I'm very curious about those goldfish. How many do you have there?"

"Thirty. A 'troubling.'"

"I'll bet they are, yes."

"No, Captain. A 'troubling of goldfish.' A group of goldfish is called a troubling. Much like a 'gaggle' of geese, a 'pod' of seals, or an 'arm' of frogs."

"Or a 'murder' of crows," contributed Santos.

"Exactly, Captain. I'm unaware of the etymology of the term 'troubling.' I wrote to 'Ask Marilyn' to find out, but she never responded. Oh, well. One of the many mysteries of life, I'm afraid."

Santos noticed that Arthur Mason had a trace of a British accent, which made even his tendency to randomly shout profanities sound dignified.

"Speaking of the mysteries of life, Mr. Mason, I seem to be confronted by several of them."

"That is a shame, Captain," said Mason. "How can I help you? I am a mere proprietor of fish, not a great detective."

"Mr. Mason," said Santos, pointing to the tank, "how large do these fish get?"

Mason shrugged. "Depends on the owner, really. If they overfeed them, they can get quite large indeed. Otherwise, they pretty much stay about the same size. Of course, underfeed them, and they'll be floating at the top of the bowl. That tends to happen a lot anyway. Is that your great mystery, Captain?"

"No, not really. Tell me, how many other types of fish do you have?"

Mason gestured around the store. "As you can see, Captain, I have a limited variety in stock. But I assure you, I can readily obtain any species you desire. What will it be, Captain? A garibaldi damselfish? A raccoon butterfly fish? A purple dottyback? A Picasso triggerfish? Name your fish, I can procure it for you."

"No, I'm not really in the market for a fish right now."

"Then perhaps one as a gift for that special someone? I always encourage my customers to give fish as gifts. In fact, whenever one of my customers makes a purchase, I always provide a free goldfish for just that purpose. I do not recommend using wrapping paper, but a carefully constructed bow attached to a dorsal fin looks quite festive."

"No, look, Mr. Mas—"

At that point, a jingling bell heralded the arrival of a customer. It was Miss Westerberg, Santos noticed, the proprietor of the world-famous Moistville Emu Farm.

"Yes, may I help you?" asked Mason, walking up to her.

"Ah, Miss Westerberg. Lovely to see you this morning."

"Thank you, Mr. Mason, and the same to you of course. I'd like to add to my aquarium again today."

"Ah, of course. What'll it be today?"

"Mm. What do you recommend?"

"I know your taste, Miss Westerberg. May I recommend a sargassum fish, *Histrio histrio*, native to the tropical Atlantic and western Pacific, tends to hide among sargassum weeds. You'd love it."

"I trust your judgment. Mr. Mason. Make it so."

"As you wish"

He walked over to the empty pentagonal tank. Standing in front of it, with his back to Santos, Santos could not see what was happening in the tank. But he noticed that, as Mason moved his hands over the top of the tank, it began to emanate a bright light, and heard the sound of bubbling water. Several moments later, Mason turned around, holding a transparent glass orb containing a rather odd-looking fish. He walked back to the front of the store, and handed it to Miss Westerberg.

"Ooh, how exotic," she said, examining the fish.

"Yes, I thought you'd like it." He walked over to the goldfish tank, grabbed a small net, and scooped one of the goldfish out and placed it in a water-filled plastic bag. He returned once again to the front of the store and handed it to her. "And who is this one for?" he asked.

"For Denver Eggles, the nice man next door. He's been kind enough to feed my emus when I go to my biker rallies, so I thought I would give him a nice gift."

"That's what I always say, 'give the gift of fish.'"

She paid for the fish, and took her leave of him.

"Oh, and remember, Miss Westerberg, keep the sargassum fish at a temperature of 68-80 degrees Fahrenheit. And make sure you include floating sargassum weed. They like to stay concealed whenever possible."

"Of course. Thank you."

With a jingle of the bell, she was gone.

"Another satisfied customer, I see," said Santos.

"I do my best, Captain," said Mason.

"That was a neat trick with the tank over there. How'd you do it?"

"Oh, come now, Captain, I can't give away all my secrets, now can I?"

Santos walked over to the goldfish tank and examined them closely. He noticed something odd about them. "Mr. Mason, these goldfish. They are *Carassius auratus*, correct?"

"Yes, of course. I wasn't aware you were versed in ichthyology, Captain."

"I'm not. I simply pay attention when people talk to me. Sometimes. These fish, Mr. Mason. They look peculiar."

"Peculiar?"

"Mm. I'm no expert on goldfish, but I have flushed my share of them. These don't look quite right. Their skin looks, well, baggy, like a deflated puffer fish."

"There are many varieties of goldfish, Captain. That is the particular trait of this particular one. I assure you that they are quite healthy."

"I have no doubt about that. My problem is that in the past week I've seen two extremely enormous goldfish."

"And . . ."

"And they were both right next to dead men. Dead men who later got up and walked away from the autopsy room."

"Perhaps they weren't quite dead, Captain. That sort of thing happens all the time, much in the same way an automobile will suddenly make no more strange noises when it's in the repair shop, or an intense pain will vanish the

moment you walk into a doctor's office. And I scarcely see what my fish have to do with anything."

"I don't either, at the moment. Mr. Mason, are these goldfish poisonous?"

"No, of course not. I do sell fish that are dangerous or poisonous, but I assure you that goldfish are the most inoffensive of creatures." He glanced into the tank. "Well, harmless, anyway."

Santos couldn't help looking into the tank.

"Look, Captain, I have a lot of work to get done today. My partner is out of town at the moment and I'm afraid he left me to do all the work."

Santos's ears pricked up. "Partner?"

"Yes, Mr. Master, my business partner. He is in the Caribbean at the moment on a buying trip."

"Mr. Master."

"Yes, that is his name. We have been in business together for well nigh twenty years, or however long a nigh is."

"But you just opened. That was certainly not twenty years, nigh or no nigh."

"We were previously located in London, but we decided to relocate."

"To Moistville?"

"With a name like that, one couldn't ask for a better location for an aquarium store, now could one?"

"No, one supposes not."

"Now, Captain, I respect the fact that you have a mystery on your hands, but until you have a compelling reason to be here, I suggest you go search for clues someplace else."

Santos smiled inwardly, whatever that means. "Yes, I think I will." He turned to leave. "Oh , Mr. Mason, I understand you bought the old Edgard House."

"Yes, what of it?"

"You do know it's haunted."

"No, I did not know that. It was a bit creepy at first, but I got rid of the Donovan poster, and it seems fine now. The toilet doesn't seem to work very well, if that's what you mean."

"Hmm."

"At any rate, Captain, *auf wiedersehen*."

"Huh?"

"*'Auf wiedersehen'*. It's German. It means 'good-'"

"Yes, I know what it means, I've seen *The Sound of Music*."

"Ah."

Ah, indeed.

"*The Sound of Music*?" asked Jordan, after Santos related the events that had transpired at Arthur's Aquarium.

"Yes. Wasn't '*Auf Wiedersehen*' a song in it? Or am I thinking of '*Edelweiss*'?"

"I don't know. I've never seen *The Sound of Music*. I've seen *The Andromeda Strain*, though."

"*The Andromeda Strain*? What does that have to do with *The Sound of Music*?"

"Weren't they both directed by Robert Wise?"

"Possibly." That voice inside Santos's head was once again screaming "Change the subject! Change the subject!"

Fortuitously, Santos's phone rang at that moment. "Yes, and thank you for calling."

"Bernard, it's Adolph. Get down here immediately."

"Yes, you wanted to see me?" said Santos.

"Damn that was fast," said Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder, hanging up the phone.

"What's so important?"

"This." He pointed to a large pan in front of him, inside which was Snogg's goldfish, apparently dead, returned to a mere one-inch length. It was surrounded by several quarts of blood. Santos stared at the grisly tableau.

"Don't tell me it bit you again."

"No, it didn't. I had gone home to watch *Quincy*—I'm addressing the Forensic Pathology Department of Lakeside Elementary School next week and needed a discussion topic—and when I returned, Goldie here was floating upside-down in the bowl. I guess with all the tests I was running I forgot to feed him. Anyway, as I was dissecting him, I made a small incision and all this blood poured out."

"Wow. I didn't know fish had this much blood."

"They don't. This is human blood."

Santos wasn't sure how to respond. "Human blood? How the heck did it get into a goldfish? Don't tell me the Medical Center is embroiled in another blood transfusion controversy."

"I suspect, Bernard, that this is Snogg's blood. Before he up and left, I had time to do a preliminary examination. Like Smeldman, there was no blood left in his body. Also before he up and left, I did manage to make an intriguing observation, which I didn't at first know what to make of, but now I do. Look at this." He picked up a photo from the table. "This is a magnified picture of the tip of Snogg's index finger. See that right there? Two tiny marks in the skin, both about half a millimeter in diameter, and set half a centimeter apart."

"Hmm. What do you make of that?"

"I didn't know at first. But this fish has teeth that are unusual for a goldfish. Look." He pried open the fish's mouth and handed Santos a magnifying glass. Look at those front two teeth. Goldfish don't have incisors like that."

"Adolph, those are fangs."

"Colloquially put, but essentially accurate, I would say. And those fangs are the same size as the wounds on Snogg's finger. They are also set apart exactly one-half centimeter. Bernard, it is my somewhat professional opinion that this fish sucked all the blood out of Snogg's body."

Santos dropped the magnifying glass, and it shattered on the floor.

"You're not putting me on, like the 'crab fingerprint' episode, are you?"

"Absolutely not. What we have here, is a vampire goldfish. I dare say that Smeldman was killed in the same way."

"Well, it would explain the walking undead part, too."

"In this town, Bernard, I wouldn't make too much of that."

That, indeed.

Later that evening, Santos was once again in his bathroom staring out at the Edgard House. He supposed he should

flash back to That Evening in 1967, but was loath to. Some memories should just remain buried, he supposed. But then, as if being prodded by some uncontrollable force, such as the desire to keep the plot moving, he did. . . .

(dare you dare you dare you dare you dare you dare you dare you dare you)

"All right, now cut that out!"

"You sound like Jack Benny," said

Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder.

"I'll do it, I'll do it." He thought about it, and realized that there are no such things as monsters. This was of course long before he had to deal with a divorce attorney. Anyway, spend an evening in the Edgard House, leave early the next morning. Quite simple, really.

Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder and his cronies watched as he trudged up the front steps early that evening. Santos was upset that he would have to miss *Star Trek* on TV that evening. It was the last episode of the season, and he didn't know if the show would ever be rerun.

He opened the door and stepped inside. At the top of the stairs, he averted his gaze to avoid the Donovan poster and walked into the master bedroom. All the furniture was still there; apparently, Edgard himself had picked it out, in one of those mid-1960s futuristic phases. Even a year later,

his wife wondered just what he had been thinking, and apparently she moved the family out and decided to take a loss on the furniture.

(*And the Donovan poster, Santos thought.*)

He put his sleeping bag on the bed and walked around the room. What little he could see was illuminated feebly by the last rays of the setting sun shining through the dusty bedroom window. The half-opened Venetian blinds cast horizontal stripes on the opposite wall. Or so Santos thought; upon closer examination, the pattern turned out to be on the wallpaper.

(*bad taste bad taste bad taste*)

He walked out to the living room (again averting his gaze from the Donovan poster) and went over to a bookshelf. Since it would be many years before either the Sony Walkman or the Sony Watchman would be invented, he would try to find a book to help him pass the time. He skimmed through the titles: *The Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, *All-Time Great Horror Stories*, *The Big Book of Crime Scene Photographs*, *The Year's Best Ghost Stories*, and a novel called *You're Alone in a Spooky House and Things Are Going to Get You*. Just the sort of reading material he didn't need at the moment. He wandered around the house aimlessly; he figured he'd be scared, not bored. In a kitchen drawer

he found a pack of playing cards, so he began playing solitaire, until that got tedious, which was after one hand.

It wasn't long before the sun was gone completely, and the house was completely dark. Unfortunately, he and Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder had knocked out the streetlight the previous evening, so there was no light anywhere. He went back into the bedroom and unpacked his night lights. To his horror, he realized

(Niagara Mohawk Niagara Mohawk Niagara Mohawk)

that the electric company had turned off the power. He went back out to the kitchen; maybe there would be candles.

He was chilled to suddenly feel a cool breeze on his neck. He spun around to make sure no hideous ghoul was about to get him. Thankfully, it was only the flapping of a bat. Fortunately, he knew that bats were quite harmless, and were actually beneficial in that they ate many pounds of mosquitoes in an evening.

(Merlin Tuttle Merlin Tuttle Merlin Tuttle)

He would contribute much money to Bat Conservation International once he reached his adulthood. He resumed his search and found a pack of birthday candles in a cabinet above the refrigerator. He also found a pack of matches, so he lit two candles and saved the rest for later. He walked

back to the bedroom. He melted the wax on the bottom of one candle using the other, and stuck it to the top of the bureau. He melted the bottom of the second one and also stuck it to the top of the bureau. With somewhat decent light, he finally noticed how truly repellent the decor was. That was the scariest part, the young Santos believed: staying in a house whose decoration was inspired by *2001*.

Growing even more bored, he decided to look through the closet. His parents had warned him not to poke through other people's closets, only their medicine cabinets, but he figured since no one actually lived here it would be okay. He turned the knob and as he opened the door what looked like a human form fell out on top of him. He crumpled to the floor, the thing on top of him, screaming in terror. He stopped abruptly, noticing that it was too light to be a dead body, or a skeleton, or even Bette Davis. It was made of cardboard. He got up and reached for a candle. Illuminating the odd object, he saw that it was

(dare you dare you dare you)

a life-size cardboard cutout of Ringo Starr.

(we all live in a yellow submarine)

He again screamed in abject terror and ran from the room. He ran down the stairs and, in his confusion, accidentally turned the corner by the front door and ended up going down

one more flight into the basement. Slightly disoriented, he was surprised to notice a light emanating from the far corner of the basement. Curious, he wandered over to it. It appeared to be a fishtank, and the fluorescent lamp built into the lid was on—and the filter seemed to be working—despite the fact that there didn't appear to be any power cord running to the outlet. Batteries, he supposed.

(Knock this battery off my shoulder, I dare you dare you dare you)

He had no idea what that meant; as far as he knew, Robert Conrad wasn't really a star yet. He looked into the fishtank, and noticed two goldfish, seemingly in perfect health, swimming about, although he couldn't imagine that anyone had fed them in a while. He looked around, and saw a dusty can of fish food lying on the floor nearby. He opened it, and sprinkled a few flakes into the water. The fish perked up, and immediately began devouring them. Unlike goldfish he had had when he was younger, these seemed to be indulging in a rather violent feeding frenzy, like sharks attacking a chunk of chum, or his Uncle Mort at a buffet table. He knelt down and put his face close to the glass to watch the fish eat like pigs. Suddenly, one of the fish, apparently conscious that Santos was there, swiftly turned toward him and bared a large set of fangs, growling. Santos

jumped back and screamed again. Despite his shock, Santos was nothing if not rational, and knew that they must simply be hungry, that there were no such things as killer goldfish. He opened the tin of food again and dumped rest of it in the water, and he watched as a thick cloud of fish flakes enveloped the fish. They seemed quite excited by this, and they began to unleash another feeding frenzy

(Uncle Mort, that's not real fruit, that's not real fruit, that's not real fruit)

writhing about in the water. In minutes, they had eaten all the food in the tank, and then went after whatever had settled to the bottom of the tank. They started to dig into the four-inch layer of gravel and, as they did, an object was uncovered, which began to float around, buffeted by the currents generated by the feeding fish. Santos saw that it was a human finger, tendrils of veins and arteries dangling from one end. What revulsed Santos more was that there was dirt under the fingernail. *Yuck!* he thought. The fish then went after the loose flesh attached to the finger, and soon ate it down to the bone. Santos was more than a little freaked out by this and did the only logical thing: he fainted.

When he came to, he wasn't quite sure where he was. The candle had apparently gone out, and he was conscious of

there being complete darkness. As he slowly began to remember what had just transpired, he was surprised to find that the fishtank's filter was no longer running, and that the light had gone off. He felt around on the top of the tank for the light switch and clicked it a few times. It wouldn't work. He ran back upstairs to light more candles. When he returned, he noticed that the two fish were floating on their sides on the top of the tank. They had grown stunningly large, apparently from all the food, yet had obviously gorged themselves to death. Santos looked around the basement and found an aquarium net. He scooped the fish from the water and carried them upstairs to the bathroom. Hoping the plumbing still worked, he unceremoniously dumped them into the toilet. As soon as he flushed, he again noticed their size, and thought back to the tragic tennis ball incident in his own house several months earlier. In a replay of that incident—a more gruesome one, admittedly—the two large fish, rather than going down the drain, effectively plugged it up, and Santos noticed the water level in the bowl rising. He searched frantically around the room for a plunger. Damn! You'd think a prominent septic-tank unclogger would have at least one. He ran back to the bowl; the water was two inches below the rim. He ran from one room to the next, ransacking

closets, searching through dresser drawers (well, you never know . . ., he thought), checking on shelves, under beds, between sheets. Not one damn plunger in the whole house. He ran back to the bathroom—one inch below the rim!—and tried to think: what would McGyver do?

(Wait a minute, he thought; this is 1967. Who the hell is McGyver?)

Never mind that! Think, think, think! Half an inch to go.

He scanned the bathroom: soap dish? He grabbed it and tried to dislodge the fish with it. Nope, didn't work.

Toothbrush? He tried to pry the fish loose. (Quarter of an inch to go.) Nope, won't work. Hanging shower caddy? He grabbed it and tried to use the hook to pry the fish loose. Nope. (Eighth of an inch to go.) Safety razor? Nah.

(Sixteenth of an inch to go.) Diaphragm? Huh? (Thirty-secondth of an inch to go.) (Santos suddenly understood Zeno's motion paradoxes.)

Unfortunately, despite what Zeno had to say about the impossibility of ever reaching the end of a motion, the water level did indeed reach the rim of the bowl and began to pour out onto the cheap linoleum flooring. So much for logic. The young Santos, who in about thirty years time would be a police captain, fled the house, screaming.

Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder and his cronies, who had apparently been camped outside awaiting this very moment, laughed uproariously as Santos went running past them.

"Knew you couldn't do it! Scared? Huh? Are ya? Hah hah hah!" screamed Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder.

"Chicken!" screamed one of his cronies.

"Yellow coward!" screamed another.

"It was the wallpaper, wasn't it?" yelled a third.

"Hi, honey."

A female voice jolted Santos out of his flashback. He spun around. It was her again.

"You again."

"I've brought a little peace offering. I'm sorry about last night. I don't know what got into me."

She handed him a fishbowl containing a goldfish.

He jumped back in shock. He spoke in his most authoritative police voice, "Look, put the goldfish down and keep your hands at your side."

She was apparently undeterred. He supposed he didn't have a very authoritative voice. She drew closer to him.

"Look, Miss, I don't know who you are, but I—uh—I'm allergic to goldfish. Any closer, and I'll be sneezing like crazy."

She stopped. "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. And he's such a . . . frisky little devil." She put the bowl on the floor and continued to approach him. "And I'm just as frisky."

"Did you see that episode of *Dr. Who* last night? Terrific episode. It was the one with the five Doctors and—"

"Oh, you *Belong*." She seemed utterly confused. "That's okay. I mean, I'm okay with that. Really. Um, you know, I really liked *Torch Song Trilogy*. I even own a few Patsy Cline records. I'm sorry. I'll go now."

She picked up the goldfish bowl and left abruptly.

Santos snapped his fingers. He ran into the living room and called Jordan. "Lieutenant, I think I know what's going on."

"Um, look, she was just leaving. Really. She just came over for coffee. We weren't doing anything. . . ."

"I mean about the goldfish."

"Captain, do you know what time it is?"

"It's eight o'clock. Am I interrupting *The Munsters* or something?"

"No, Captain, it's midnight and you're interrupting something that is most definitely not *The Munsters*."

Santos blushed, but a lot. "Oh, I apologize, Lieutenant."

"It's quite all right. Now, if you'll excuse me."

In the background, Santos heard a female voice. "Jordy, I forgot to give you this little gift."

"Um, Captain, I really have to go now."

As he was hanging up, he heard his voice say, "A fish . . ."

"Jordan!" Santos shouted into the phone. "Stay away from that—"

At that point, the line went dead.

"—fish."

He quickly dialed headquarters. "Sergeant, this is Santos. I want a squad car to meet me at Lieutenant Jordan's apartment as soon as possible."

"Fine, sir. Oh, sir? Where is Lieutenant Jordan's apartment?"

"1313 8th Street."

"We're on our way."

Way, indeed.

"What's wrong, Jordy?" cooed a female voice.

"A scene, Jane, all to myself. I'm actually not accompanying Santos, or watching him pace, or muttering obscure cultural references which he never gets anyway. This is an amazing moment for me."

"Don't you like your fishy?" she asked in a childlike voice.

"Yes, very much. It's—um—gold."

She giggled. "Let's call him Goldy."

Jordan turned to face her. "You know, I don't think you have ever uttered a sentence that didn't end with the letter 'y'."

"I've written a letter to Daddy." She giggled again.

Jordan approached the goldfish. "Well, let's have a look at him, then."

Jane reached into her purse and removed a tin of fish flakes. "Why don't you give him something to eat," she suggested.

"-y," finished Jordan, not unsarcastically.

"You know what he likes? Put one of these flakes on the end of your index finger, and let him eat it right out of your hand."

He hadn't noticed that her voice had suddenly taken on a much deeper tone.

"Okay," he said, for no apparent reason.

He dipped his index finger in the tin, a few flakes sticking to the end of it. He then dipped his finger in the bowl. The fish quickly swam over to it and sniffed it. It opened its jaws . . .

Jordan giggled. "That kind of tickl—" He then shrieked in terror as the fish's fangs dug into his finger. He could feel the fish begin to suck on the end of it. He felt his blood begin to flow out of the wounds into the fish. He tried to pull his arm out of the tank.

"Why can't I move my arm, Jane? It's only a two-ounce fish, for God's sake!"

"It injected a fast-acting neural paralyzer into you. You won't be able to move your body for several hours. Which disappoints me more than you know."

"Help me! Jane, stop this crazy thing! I don't want a scene by myself. I think I like it better when Santos is around!"

"Sorry, Jordy. The Master wouldn't approve. With that, she grabbed her purse. She withdrew a slip of paper and walked over to his desk, placing the paper among what she believed to be his important papers. She then walked toward the door.

She was prevented from exiting by the fact that the door was kicked in from the outside. It was torn off the hinges and a chunk of the wooden frame was torn loose.

"It was unlocked!" yelled Jordan.

"Jordan!"

Santos ran into the room, followed by several cops. He pulled Jordan's arm from the bowl, and struggled to yank the fish from his finger. The fish was beginning to swell.

"Captain, I'm beginning to feel a little faint."

With a swift yank, the fish came off Jordan's finger. Santos flung it across the room, where it hit the wall. It flopped around on the carpet for a bit, then was still. Santos helped Jordan to the sofa.

"Captain, Jane here, she deliberately had the fish attack me," Jordan said.

"It was the Master," said Jane. "The Master wanted it done. I was just following orders. I was in Austria during the war."

"Right," said Santos. "Men! Take her down to headquarters. I'll be down to question her later. I'll stay here with Lieutenant Jordan for a while."

The men handcuffed Jane and led her away. Santos sat down next to Jordan.

"Captain, what the heck was that about?"

"That, Lieutenant, was a vampire goldfish."

"You're kidding, right?"

"I'm afraid not. Lieutenant, I desperately need a car park right now."

"You could paint lines on my carpet, if you'd like."

Santos stood up and paced anyway. "Let me see if I've got all of this straight. Arthur Mason is breeding vampire goldfish. Somehow, the Master—his partner, Mr. Master—is hypnotizing all the women in town. They are allowed to buy the exotic fish of their dreams, any fish in the world that they want. In return, they are given one of Mason's goldfish, which they are coerced into giving to men, which then drains their blood and makes them into walking zombies."

"The fish injects a neural paralyzer into the body, which is supposed to last for several hours."

"And that must be why the previous victims didn't get up and walk away until they were in the morgue. But why the sci-fi plot summaries?"

"Secret code, perhaps? You know, you let them know who Belongs and who doesn't?"

Santos nodded. "Mm, right, like a secret handshake, perhaps."

"But why, Captain? Granted, it seems to want to take over the town, but why would one want to do that? What can be gained by taking over Moistville?"

"I have a theory." He spied a computer across the room. "Lieutenant, you're kind of 'hip' and 'with it,' whatever that means. Do you have Internet access from here?"

"Yes."

"Would you mind if I logged on? I need to try to find something."

"Go ahead. Do you know how?"

"Does a fish swim?" he smiled.

"Captain, please don't mention fish."

Santos sat down and booted up the PowerMac 6100.

"Impressive machine, Lieutenant. You can afford this on what I pay you? Hmm." He located Jordan's ISP program and launched it. He clicked "dial" and soon the modem was making all the appropriate noises. Well, except for the busy signal.

"It's America Online," said Jordan. "This may take a while."

Forty-five minutes later, Santos was able to log on. "I want to find photographs of all the milkmen who worked in Moistville in the late 1960s."

He located a World Wide Web search engine and in the search field entered "milkmen Moistville". The search engine returned two items.

"Wow. I must get one of these. This is pretty impressive."

He clicked on one of the two items, which bore the URL "http://www.moistville.milkmen/unimoist.edu." The computer was sent to the Web site, and soon the home page came up.

"Oh, this doesn't help. This is simply the transcript of that University of Moistville symposium in 1988 on 'The Post-Modern Milkman and the Semiotics of Bovine-Related Cultural Iconography'."

"Actually, that was a pretty good symposium. I was on that committee."

"I didn't know you went to Unimoist. You learn something new everyday I suppose."

He went back to the search page and clicked on the second URL: "http://www.dairymoist/milkmen.moistville.com."

"Aha! This is exactly what I want. 'Photo Gallery of Moistville Milkmen: A Historical Retrospective'." He clicked on the link marked "1950-1990." Once that page was loaded, he clicked on the link marked "1960-1970," then on the link marked "1965-1970," then the one marked "1965-1966," then finally the one marked "1966." "Boy, you certainly do need to descend through all these strata, don't you?" The page and pictures loaded. When they appeared, Santos let out an "aha!". "Jordan, have a look at this."

"Um, in case you've forgotten, sir, I can't quite move right now."

"Oh, right. It says here that a man named Mason Arthur was a milkman for Dairy Moist from 1960 to 1966. For all those years, he worked the route that in 1965 included the newly-built Edgard House."

"Oh, good, I had been wondering about that. Captain, what does that have to do with the fact that a bloodsucking goldfish nearly killed me?"

"It means that our dear friend Arthur Mason, né Mason Arthur, was the milkman who caused all the trouble for Edgard House, and who is now causing even more trouble for Moistville. You see, Jordan, I had completely blocked out of my memory—in some weird Freudian way—the events of 1967, when I was coerced into spending an night alone in that house. On that evening, I discovered two goldfish alive and well in the basement. They were similar in temperament to the ones that are now making the rounds of Moistville."

Santos related the contents of his most recent flashback to Jordan. When he finished, he awakened Jordan and added, "It is my theory that Mason Arthur deliberately—and through what means I do not know—had House's neighbor mishear the 'cheese' remark as an admission of murder. Arthur wanted House out of the house. I don't think the rest of the Houses left of their own accord, I think Arthur murdered them. Although I suspect the bodies were disposed of such

that they would never be found (in other words, eaten by fish), but just in case, there was already someone in prison for it. Arthur covertly used the house as a place to keep the fish, until such time as he could afford to move into it himself. The Houses had been carrying a pretty steep mortgage, and a milkman's salary is not exactly a high one. By ensuring that people thought it was haunted would keep people away, with the exception of brave and stupid ten-year-olds."

"Captain," said Jordan. "Are you still connected to America Online?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Did you know that they charge by the minute? And did you also know that you've talking for a lot of minutes?"

"Oh. I apologize. Jordan, how do I save a copy of this picture of Arthur?"

"Hit 'shift-command-3'. That'll generate a screen dump of whatever you're looking at."

Santos did a screen capture, logged off, and copied the screen capture onto a floppy disk. "Don't worry, Lieutenant, the department will reimburse you for the time I was online."

Jordan growled a little, but was interrupted by finding that he was suddenly able to move his arms. And his legs. He tentatively stood up.

"Captain, I can walk! I can walk!"

They were interrupted by movement on the living room floor.

"Captain, the fish! It's still alive!"

"No, Jordan, it's not alive." He walked over to it, picked it up carefully by the tail, and plopped it back into the bowl. It began to swim with its usual enthusiasm. "It's undead. Let's leave it here for the time being. Just don't go near it. Now let's get down to headquarters. We've got work to do."

Back at headquarters, they were met by Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder, who was still in the lab.

"Adolph, I need a sketch artist."

"Look no further."

"You? What happened to Jenkins?" Santos asked.

"He was sent back to do courtroom renderings. Remember? The cubism?"

"Oh, right. Okay, Adolph. Get your sketch pad. I've got a picture I need you to alter."

"What sketch pad?" asked Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder.
"I've got a Mac and image-processing software. Screw the sketch pad."

"Okay. Let's try it."

Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder led them into his office where had a Macintosh computer secreted. He booted it up, and opened the proper program. Santos handed him the diskette. Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder inserted it, and accessed the file.

As Santos watched, he said, "We've got one of these?"

"Yes. It's quite a remarkable program, Bernard. I can take any photograph that has been digitized, bring it into this program, and make a variety of changes to it."

"When did I approve this system?"

"When you got back together with Miriam last year. You were quite agreeable. We took you for a lot of stuff."

Jordan added, "And when you broke up with Miriam again, you made us get rid of the Belgian waffle maker."

"Oh, now I remember. Okay, see that photo there, Mason Arthur? We need to age him a bit. Put some lines around the eyes and mouth. . . . Good. Now, thin the hair at the temples and gray it a bit. . . . Perfect. Now, add a jet black toupee on top. . . . Excellent." He stared at the

manipulated image. "Yes, I'm positive that that is now Arthur Mason. That's a pretty useful program, by the way."

"Mm. I can do anything to him you want. Like this, for example"

Santos watched. "No, he doesn't have a moustache."

"Okay, scratch that. How about this"

"No, he doesn't have Isaac Asimov sideburns either."

"How about this"

"No, I've never seen him wear a bunny suit."

"This?"

"No, I'm positive that he doesn't have a third eye."

"Okay, how about—"

"Would you stop!"

"What do we do next, Captain?" asked Jordan.

"What time is it?"

"4:05 am."

"Okay. Since we already have one goldfish specimen, we should destroy all the others. Jordan, we're going down to Arthur's Aquarium."

"Captain, if they're the undead, how do we kill them?"

"Remember your horror movies, Lieutenant. A wooden stake through the heart."

"Right, of course."

"Since fish are small, we don't need a big stake. We can pick up a box of toothpicks on the way there. That should do it. Let's go." He moved toward the door.

"Captain, where exactly is a fish's heart anyway?"

Santos stopped. "Good question. Adolph?"

"Behind the mouth, just below the gills."

"Ah."

Heart, indeed.

They pulled into the parking lot of Arthur's Aquarium. As they expected, it was completely dark, except for a kind of ethereal glow emanating from one of the side windows.

"Probably a night light," said Jordan.

"Lieutenant, I scarcely think that the Prince of Evil needs a Donald Duck night light."

"You never know."

"Mm."

They got out of the car and walked up to the door. Santos expertly picked the lock and they went inside.

"Captain, pardon my asking, but how Constitutional is this?"

"Lieutenant, we're dealing with Satan's Spawn here. I think we need to go through other channels than those explicitly provided for in the Constitution. And I for one

would not really want to be in a room with twelve of his peers."

"Well, you know the ACLU, Captain," said Jordan.

"Captain, if Arthur flees, would we be able to extradite him from Hell?"

"Shh."

They walked across the store until they came to the goldfish tank. The fish were swimming about unconcerned. Of the thirty that were in the tank earlier in the day, twenty-five seemed to be left.

"Well, he certainly is taking his time, isn't he?" said Santos.

"How are we going to do this?" asked Jordan.

Santos stood back and considered. "Let's flip the tank over. We'll be better able to drive in the toothpicks if they're on the floor rather than in the tank." He walked over to one side of the tank. "Grab that other side. On 'three,' heave it over." Jordan got into position. "Okay . . . three!"

They pushed, and the tank went over on its side with a loud crash, as the glass shattered and the water, gravel, and fish splashed across the room. Santos had not anticipated that the water would carry the fish to

inaccessible parts of the store. The fish began flopping about wetly on the tile floor.

"Damn. Okay," he reached into his pocket and pulled out a box of toothpicks. He gave a handful to Jordan. "Start sticking them. Remember, behind the mouth, just beneath the gills."

He and Jordan began driving the toothpicks into the hearts of the goldfish. There was an audible sound whenever the pick was driven home properly, like steam escaping, or like Santos's Uncle Mort after having been to the buffet table. After about two minutes, they stood up. Santos did a quick body count.

"We got twenty-one out of twenty-five. Let's find the other four."

Jordan found one wedged under the front desk, and promptly skewered it. Santos found one buried under a pile of gravel, and he promptly skewered it. One had actually slid under the front door. Jordan opened it, saw the fish on the welcome mat, and, again, promptly skewered it. He looked around for more. Santos was also searching for the last one.

"We got three, Lieutenant. Where did the last one go?"

He spied it, working its way in a thick puddle that flowed toward the pentagonal tank. As it turned out, the

pentagonal tank was also the source of the ethereal emanation of light. As Santos charged after the fleeing fish, the light became more intense. The water inside the tank began bubbling and becoming cloudy. Santos watched. Inside the murk, he could barely make out some kind of form, which looked like an octopus.

"Captain, is that an octopus?" Jordan asked, also spellbound by the mysteriously churning water in the tank.

"It appears to be, yes." He looked down and once again noticed the last surviving fish making for the tank. He ran over to it, toothpick in hand.

A tentacle shot out of the tank and grabbed Santos by the throat. "Lfgfgieufgfftengfgant . . ."

"Um, sir? About that 'no gun' policy. . . ." He ran over and tried to pull the tentacle from around Santos's throat. Instead, another tentacle shot out and grabbed Jordan by the throat. Once secured firmly around their respective throats, the tentacles did not tighten; the cephalopod in the tank seemed content to just hold them still for a while.

"Lieutenant, what do you make of his?"

"Well, octopi are supposed to be remarkably intelligent creatures, sir. They're also not supposed to be particularly lethal."

A deep, guttural chuckling sound bubbled up from the depths of the tank.

"Lieutenant, did you have cabbage for dinner or was that the octopus? Mind you, I'm not quite which I would find more disturbing. . . ."

The chuckling again.

"No, captain, I'm afraid that was the octopus."

A third tentacle reached out of the tank and arced down toward the goldfish. It settled next to it, and the fish hopped up onto it. The tentacle lifted gently back into the tank, taking the goldfish with it. The bubbling in the tank settled down a bit. The chuckling, however, did not.

"I think we just witnessed a rescue," said Santos.

"Do not screw with the Master," said a deep, resonant voice from within the tank.

Santos and Jordan looked at each other. "Lieutenant, was that James Earl Jones or the octopus? Again, I'm not sure which I would find more disturbing."

"Oh, I am."

The tentacles then tossed Santos and Jordan across the room, where they crashed to the floor.

"Ah!" screamed Jordan. "I landed on a toothpick."

The bubbling in the tank tapered off, the murk cleared, and the light dimmed and faded out. There was now nothing but water in the tank.

Santos slowly climbed to his feet. He helped Jordan up, and they both stared at the tank.

"So that was the Master," said Santos. "Or Mr. Master, as Mason put it. I wonder what kind of buying trip he was supposed to be on, anyway."

"Interesting business partner. What do we do now?"

"I'm not quite sure."

"Well, I am." Jordan walked over to the desk, picked up the cash register, and hurled it at the tank.

"Lieutenant! What are you doing?"

The register effectively shattered the glass of the tank, and water and shards of glass fell to the floor. There was a noise, like a loud explosion, which shook the walls and ceiling. A bright light pulsed in mid-air, in what had been the center of the tank. A strong wind blew out from the source of the light, blowing papers off the desk, objects off shelves, tiles from the ceiling. Santos and Jordan were blown back toward the desk, and the remains of the tank—glass and water—began swirling in the air. The tornado made its way toward Santos and Jordan.

"Jordan, behind the desk!" They jumped to comparative safety, and heard the splashing of the water and the tinkling of the shards of glass on the front of the desk. As quickly as the monsoon had begun, it ended, and all was quiet in the store. Santos peeked out from behind the desk, and saw nothing but water and broken glass, plus gravel from the goldfish tank. However, the bodies of the dead fish were gone.

"Captain, what do you suppose that was about?"

"I don't quite know. It's possible that the door to whatever netherworld the Master dwells in is located over there and the fishtank was simply created around it. The door may still be there, but perhaps a water-dwelling creature is incapable of using it now."

"That's only comforting until you realize how many dangerous creatures don't live in water. How do we close and lock this door?"

"I don't know. But I think I know who does."

"Mason?"

"Right. Let's head over to the Edgard House."

"*This* is the infamous Edgard House?" said Jordan, incredulously, as they walked from where they had parked on NW 15th Street and climbed up Edgard Hill.

Santos looked over at him. "Not what you expected, Lieutenant?"

"I was expecting a big, creepy house, like in *Psycho* or something. This is a white, split-level tract home, practically identical to most of the other houses built in Moistville in the 1960s. Levitt houses are more distinctive than this is."

"Terror comes in all shapes, sizes, and architectural designs, Lieutenant."

They continued the somewhat arduous climb up the Hill toward the house. They crouched behind a shrubbery along the side of the driveway and stared at the front door.

"I'm surprised you've never seen the house before, Lieutenant. It's visible from every bathroom window in town."

"None of the apartments in my building have bathroom windows. We have a very paranoid coop board. They had them all removed."

"It's just as I remember it, Jordan," said Santos, nearly breathless. The climb had been a tough one, and he was not as young as he used to be. "Although, it's not as big as I remember."

"One gets used to that," said Jordan. "Anyway, what do we do now?"

"We need to get into the house. Lieutenant, remember that act you performed at last summer's Emu Day Festival, where you were able to emulate the frequency of the signal emitted by a garage-door opener's remote control?"

"Yes. It was a little trick I learned during my days as a valet parking attendant."

"Do you think you might be able to open that garage door?"

"I'll run through a range of frequencies and see what I can do."

He opened his mouth and held it open. Santos could see the veins in his neck tightening, even though no sound—at least to Santos's ears—was coming out. The garage door didn't move, but Santos looked up and saw that the sky was suddenly thick with circling aircraft.

"Uh, Lieutenant . . ."

Suddenly, there was a clicking sound from within the garage, followed by a humming noise. The door started to rise.

Jordan closed his mouth and relaxed. He grimaced.

"What's wrong, Lieutenant? You did it."

"A moth flew into my mouth." He spat it out.

"Come on, let's hurry."

They darted from the shrubbery into the open garage. As soon as they were in, the door closed behind them.

"Well, someone knows we're here," said Santos.

"Sorry, sir, that was me again. I was just singing a Mariah Carey song."

"Well, stop."

They looked around the garage. Nothing out of the ordinary; a workbench covered with screwdrivers, wrenches, hammers, saws, and other tools.

"Hmm. He seems to be quite the handyman. Didn't Satan have a home renovation show on The Learning Channel?"

"No, Lieutenant, that was Bob Vila." Santos looked down at the floor. "There's been a car here recently. I didn't see one in the driveway. Mason must be out for the evening."

Jordan bent down and examined a still-wet puddle.

"Satan's car is dripping transmission fluid." He stood up.

"Sir, do you think he's gone down to the Aquarium?"

"We didn't pass him on the road, and we took the most direct route here." Santos said ominously, "It's possible he's gone out for the evening to feed."

"Or he has a date."

Santos motioned for Jordan to follow him through a door into the rest of the house. They walked down a short

hallway until they were in the basement, a basement that Santos remembered from long ago.

"Captain, if Mason is a vampire of some kind, why was he out during the day? Don't vampires stay indoors until dark? Dracula did."

"Well, you must remember, Lieutenant, that they didn't have sun block in Victorian England."

As Santos looked around the basement, he noticed that the fishtank from all those years ago was still there. The light was on, the filter was working, but it contained only water.

"This tank, Lieutenant. This is the tank that had the early versions of Mason's evil goldfish, back in 1967." He and Jordan walked over to it, peering through the glass.

"Version 1.0, you'd say nowadays, Captain," said a faintly-accented voice behind them.

Santos and Jordan spun around.

"Mason," said Santos.

"Arthur," said Jordan.

"You're both right," said Mason. "I was Mason Arthur. Now I'm Arthur Mason."

"Your only mistake—well, one of your mistakes—was to pick such an obvious alias, Mr. Mason," said Santos.

"I didn't pick it, Captain. The DMV made a mistake when I renewed my driver's license. I found that it was simpler to just change my name than have it corrected."

"Mr. Mason, forgive my bluntness, but it's late. What's the deal with the vampire goldfish?"

"Do you like them, Captain? I spent decades perfecting those creatures."

Santos looked at him. "Well, go on."

Mason smiled. "That's right. You're both going to die, so why not tell you all my secrets? You won't live to do anything about it. You see, Captain, I saw the future long before anyone else did. In the 1960s I knew the dairy industry would phase out home milk delivery some day. The changing times, I suppose. The innocence of the 1950s, when milkmen could be trusted to deliver milk promptly in the morning, was being replaced by the tumult and turmoil of the 1960s. Milk was out, Captain."

He looked down at the floor, almost sadly. His head jerked up, and his voice slowly began to increase in pitch. "All I knew was milk. I grew up at Dairy Moist. As a lad from London, I was impressed by the American dairy industry. And I'd seen the reports, I knew what milk could do, how one could grow in twelve ways. But, this power I was born with, this gift . . . enabled me to see the

future. No more milk. The industry would be forced to resort to ghastly ads of celebrities with milk mustaches. It was too much for flesh to bear, Captain. I was a milkman, if the industry fell . . . I would fall with it."

"Jeez, Captain," said Jordan, "Shatner can't ham it up like this guy."

"Shush, Lieutenant."

Mason continued. "This house has evil in it, I knew that then. This fishtank surrounds the portal to Hell, just like the tank at the Aquarium had. I knew I could use the evil of this house to take revenge on a world that allowed the milkman to fade into extinction."

"The Master helped you?" Santos asked.

"The Master helped me. I was on vacation in the Caribbean. I met the Master in a bar on Jamaica. I saw this octopus sitting alone at a table sipping a piña colada, and I thought to myself, 'There was someone special.' We struck up a conversation, hit it off pretty well. Lacking any type of skeletal structure, he could limbo far better than I could. And yes, Captain, I did accept his invitation to spend the night at his place."

"What is the source of the Master's evil power?" asked Santos.

"The Master has no evil power. He's simply an anthropomorphic octopus. No special power. Well, nothing Satanic at any rate. I, however, do possess evil powers. I was born with them. My mother smoked heavily while she was pregnant with me. Do you think the tobacco companies tell you *everything* that's in cigarettes?"

"So why is he called 'the Master'?"

Mason shrugged. "Simply a pet name, like 'Pookey,' 'Snookums' or 'Evil Mound of Filth.' At any rate, we came back to Moistville, at which point I had had my 'declining milkman' vision. I told my analyst about it, and he suggested that I should act on my feelings, so I decided to launch an all out war against humanity. I doubt that that's what he had in mind, but I interpreted it as such. But first, I needed this house. The portal to Hell was so convenient, it essentially cut my commute in half. I couldn't afford to buy the house, so I covertly snuck in here at night to begin my goldfish-breeding experiments. Then Edgard House and his miserable pack of children moved in. And you know kids: if there's a portal to Hell in house, they'll find it. I knew I had to get rid of them. So, I deliberately used my psychic powers of suggestion to have the old biddy next door mishear House's request that I not

deliver any more cheese. According to plan, House was arrested."

"And you killed his family," said Santos.

"I did not, Captain. They are still alive. They went through the portal and are now living in a Cape Cod-style house on the outskirts of Hell. Say what you want about it, Hell has really affordable real estate."

"That's true, Captain," said Jordan. "Probably because it's so far from the Interstate."

Mason continued, "And since the house was reputed to be haunted, I was allowed to continue with my goldfish experiments unimpeded. Until . . ."

"Until I thwarted you," said Santos.

"Yes, that's right, Captain. Do you know what your esteemed Captain did, Lieutenant? On a ridiculous adolescent dare, he not only spent the night here, he found two of my goldfish and overfed them. You killed my fish, Captain. And to make matters worse, you tried to flush them and ended up flooding the upstairs bathroom. That set me back months. Finally, several months ago, I perfected the very first vampire goldfish. But then the question became, how to get them in the hands of the population of Moistville. I thought, and remembered that this town loves

exotic fish. The whole town is fish crazy. I set up the Aquarium—"

"Where did you get the money for that?" asked Santos.

"Contacts, Captain. Did you know that Satan himself is an avid venture capitalist?"

"That doesn't surprise me."

"With the link to Hell I had installed at the store I could provide any fish the customer asked for. By imbuing all the exotic fish with psychic powers, I could then control the minds of any person who bought one."

"Buy why only women?"

"They're far more organized than men, Captain, and I dare say more reliable. If I'm going to create an army of obedient slaves, I want them to at least be conscientious about it. And with the free vampire goldfish, I could then have all the men turned into mindless, willing zombies."

"You know, Mason, a swimsuit calendar would have pretty much accomplished the same thing."

"True, but the evil goldfish seemed more fun."

"And the point of all this?" asked Santos.

"With a legion of followers, I could take over the world and control all dairy production. The milkman would no longer be doomed to extinction or to a figure of fun, but would be the rulers of the world!"

"And the science fiction plot summaries?"

"To keep track of who had been recruited and who hadn't, of course. And I've always liked science fiction television anyway."

"There's one thing I don't understand," said Jordan. "If the goldfish were gifts from female acquaintances, why were purchase receipts found in the homes of the victims?"

"Tax reasons."

"Ah, of course."

"And the Master's role in all this?" asked Santos.

"Nothing major. Answering phones, licking envelopes, that sort of thing." Mason sighed deeply. "There. Now that all that is off my chest, it's time for you to die."

He walked over to the fish tank and waved his hands over it. There was a bubbling and churning, and the emanation of a bright light. In the tank appeared two goldfish. Mason reached in with both hands and plucked them out by the tails.

"Now, Captain Santos, Lieutenant Jordan, prepare to join me." Santos and Jordan, realizing for perhaps the first time, that they were not tied up, quickly pivoted and attempted to make a break for it. They got about two inches, and were stopped dead in their tracks.

"Oh, poopie," said Jordan.

Blocking the only exit was a mob of what looked to Santos like nearly every man in town—zombified and holding a large trout.

Santos subtly gestured to a gap in the ranks of Mason's army. He and Jordan quickly attempted to make a break for it. As they reached the front line, Herb Smeldman swung his large trout by tail at Santos, who caught it on the chin and went flying backwards across the basement. Denver Egges thwacked Jordan back across the room.

"They appear to have a great deal of strength," said Santos.

"Well, I'm told that the zombie lifestyle is very invigorating," said Jordan.

They looked back at the line of the advancing undead. One member of the throng in particular again made them shriek with terror.

"Oh, no!" yelled Jordan.

Pushing his way to the front of the mob was none other than Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder—apparently also the victim of Mason's goldfish.

Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder led the mob toward Santos and Jordan, who quickly retreated, until they were flat against the wall. Mason, still carrying the two fish, walked over to them.

"Extend your index fingers," he said, "this won't hurt a bit."

"Trust me, Captain," said Jordan, "it hurts."

Seeing no possible escape, Santos and Jordan both let out sighs of resignation and extended their fingers. The goldfish opened their mouths as they were brought closer to the waiting fingers—

Suddenly, Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder broke rank and clubbed Mason with his trout, Mason collapsed to the floor, and the two fish plopped on the floor next to him and began to wriggle toward the tank. There was a general confusion and hubbub among the throng, who took a few moments before unanimously deciding to go after Santos and Jordan. Santos saw his chance: he reached in his pocket and withdrew two toothpicks. He lunged in pursuit of the two fleeing fish. The army, apparently much brighter than he had thought, knew what he was about to do, and moved to intercept him. Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder, however, began swinging his trout wildly, knocking Mason's soldiers to the floor.

"Go, Captain!" yelled Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder.

Santos ran over and quickly drove the toothpicks into the fish. The reassuring popping noises led Santos to believe that they were safe . . . for the moment. Mason regained his feet, and summoning as much psychic energy as he could,

reinvigorated his troops, who had no trouble in disarming Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder. One well-placed bonk on the head, and Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder was out cold.

"Nice try, Captain," said Mason. "Let's have another go at this then. Grab him!"

Denver Eggles and Melvin Snogg came forward and grabbed each of Santos's arms. They led him over to the fishtank, where Mason was once again conjuring up more fish from the portal.

With all the attention that was being paid to Santos, no one noticed as Jordan snuck to the rear of the crowd where Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder was lying unconscious. He grabbed Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder's trout, looked for an opening in the crowd, and found one. He raised the trout above his head, and charged toward Mason.

"This is for Jacques Cousteau!" he yelled, as he brought the trout down across Mason's back. Mason fell forward into the fish tank just as two goldfish were appearing. Suddenly, more goldfish began appearing, surrounding Mason, and beginning to nibble at his flesh. Swarms and swarms—er, troublings and troublings—of goldfish began appearing, all of them feasting on Mason, who was thrashing around in the water.

"No! What are you doing? I created you! You ungrateful louts!"

In moments, he was reduced to a heap of bones. There was more bubbling, churning, and emanation of light, and the fish and the Mason's remains were gone, replaced by an octopus—the Master.

"Oh, damn. We're in for it now," said Jordan.

"No, my friends, I will not harm you," said the deep, guttural voice of the Master. "I was opposed to this idea from the beginning, and though I loved Mason dearly, I could not allow him to succeed in his plan. You see, I'm lactose intolerant. Your town has been freed from his icy grip."

"What about the portals? Can they be closed?" asked Santos.

"Perhaps, but it will take a great deal of time to get the proper work permits. The worst thing about Hell is that the bureaucracy is a nightmare. I'm going back to the Caribbean to mope now. Oh, well. At least I can consume eight drinks at once. I urge you to do the same. Good-bye, Captain Santos, and I apologize for all the trouble this has caused you."

More bubbling, churning, emanating, and the Master was gone. The fishtank itself disappeared into the portal. One

last flash of light, and it was gone. Or at least invisible.

"Well, it's been a weird day," said Jordan.

"Mm. This is true."

"Captain, what time is it?"

"I don't know. 5:30 maybe?"

"You still don't know what time it is?"

"No, Jordan, I don't. Perhaps it wasn't a force of evil. Maybe I'm just getting forgetful in my old age." It was at that point at which he turned and noticed the newly-released crowd. "All of you can go home now. Please."

They confusedly began to file out of the house. After they had gone, one unconscious crowd member stirred.

"Oh, my head," said Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder.

Santos looked down at him, albeit briefly. "Good work, Adolph. Infiltrating their ranks and posing as the undead was a stroke of genius."

"What infiltrating? I was out for a walk, saw this parade go by, and thought I'd follow them. It was only when I got here that I knew what the hell was going on."

"Adolph, I don't think I want any more peeks into your private life. Please go home. I'll see you back at the office tomorrow."

Tomorrow indeed.

"Oh, no, no more dénouements here! Out out out!" yelled Osgood Smelt, as Santos, Jordan, and Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder stood in the lobby of the House of Smelt and waited to be seated.

"No, Mr. Smelt, we've had our dénouement already. This is the epilogue, now. We've decided to make this place our new hangout."

"Oh, joy," said Smelt. "All right. Go sit over there by the fern. I'll be with you shortly."

The trio walked over to their table and sat down.

"Well, Captain, the last of the goldfish have been destroyed, and this afternoon I supervised the cordoning off of the two portals to Hell."

"Excellent, Lieutenant. What did you use?"

"Those velvet ropes they have in banks and movie theaters. No one crosses those."

"Ah good." Santos looked at Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder. "You know, Jordan, I don't believe I ever told you how I got Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder back after the Edgard House incident all those years ago."

"I don't think the Lieutenant cares to hear about that," said Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder.

"Oh, I'm sure he does."

"What did you do, Captain?"

"Well, three weeks later, the whole Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder family took their yearly vacation in Nuremberg. While they were away, I snuck into the house and redecorated it exactly like the Edgard House. Horizontal striped wallpaper, the potato chip-shaped chairs, the Laugh-In-like shower curtains."

"And don't forget the best," said Schlickelmeinengrubenbieder.

"Right. And directly above Adolph's bed, a big Donovan poster. It scared the hell out him, let me tell you."

Santos laughed uproariously. Jordan looked at him expressionlessly.

"Kind of lame, Captain."

Smelt wandered over and unsmilingly handed each of them a menu.

"You know, Mr. Smelt, I don't believe I saw you among Arthur Mason's army of undead followers last night."

"Should I have been?"

"I don't know. Didn't anyone give you a goldfish as a gift recently?"

"Yes, actually someone did."

"Really? And it didn't attack you?" asked Jordan.

"Attack me? Why the hell should it attack me?" said Smelt.

"What happened to it?" asked Santos.

"Check today's Chef's Specials," said Smelt.

Meanwhile, in the Basement of the Edgard House, something stirred