

# The Stone Dagger

Tam Fairlie

the fl@ubert duck series



"Take me to your leader ... Please!"

Mavis  
Sarah  
Johnny  
Andrew  
Ariane & Stuart  
and all Soleckís

# Premonitions

In a trance Sarah was drawn to the valley rim and from that dizzying height, standing just back from the precipice, she surveyed a vast sea of tangled foliage below. Shattered pinnacles of stone pierced dagger-like through the verdant quilt and she could just make out the roofs of the ancient temples crowned with their stone fretworks, the little doorways, cast in mysterious purple shadow, which the blood soaked priests shared with their gods. She knew that they were ‘blood-soaked priests’, but she did not know exactly where she was, or why she was there. The ancient temple stones were gripped by the sinuous roots of trees, tentacles that had invaded every chink and cranny and heaved them up on mortar beds of living tissue. Through the imprisoning veils of roots festooned over these crags of stone, leered gigantic, grotesque gargoyles, caricatures with evil bulging eyes, that had seen too many of the grotesqueries of human folly, their pupils trailing green tears of dangling foliage.

She counted seven temples ranged in a circle around a black gash in the foliage through which glinted the mirror smooth, viscous surface of a lake which reflected the treacherous orange luminosity setting sun. The roots of the surrounding jungle trees seemed to distance them high above the surface, disdaining corruption at finger tips.

In the middle of the lake a pale bird was fluttering pathetically, struggling to free itself from the slick surface. She



watched in helpless dismay as the bird became increasingly enfeebled and then silently disappeared below the surface; its death throes created not a ripple on the thick viscous surface.

An irresistible force was drawing her closer to the edge. She glanced down at her feet willing them to move no further towards the danger and found to her horror that tendrils of liana vine were beginning to swirl about her ankles, pulling her down the slimy slope. The jungle was throbbing with the muffled sound of this rampant verdure, a feverish tension which was periodically released by cracking tearing sounds of the unsettled stones. The undulating canopy below her, the green veil pulsed like the throat of a giant frog, stretching, febrile.

The lips of the stone monuments seemed to be moving slowly, mouthing an inaudible message of warning. Straining her ears she could not understand the whispers. She could only hear the muffled tones of fear and apprehension. She caught fragments of words - “*..roke...reva...despec..forg...obliv...lethe...ruptu...*”

A searing pain cut into her hand as if she had been bitten. She opened her palm to discover a sharp stone object, a primitive dagger of razor edged stone its handle embellished with tiny totemic heads. She was not aware of having picked it up. Perhaps this was the force that was overpowering her and leading her relentlessly forward. She studied the sharp blade, scalloped flint, hard, unchanged since the moment the craftsman originally flaked it away into a razor sharp edge. Each little cameo of Evil on the hilt seemed to press itself into the skin of her palm. She could see the imprints of the pressure. She began to slash frantically at the tenacious vines that were pulling her irresistibly downwards. Their wounded stems suppurred a reddish flesh riddled with maggoty life that seemed to be growing its own tendrils.

A sudden ear-piercing shriek ripped the sky and a sharp lance of light bounced from one satanic building to another connecting them all in a sizzling, angular flash. Then the sky was plunged into blackness and all was silent.

Sarah blinked her eyes violently and threw herself backward from the precipice. Her dream was out of control and she desperately fought to claw her way back to reality and shape a positive outcome. At the same time she strained her ears wanting to know what the sinister stone images were murmuring and warning her about - whether there was some important subliminal message wrapped up in these strong images which she must heed.

Struggling to awake, Sarah's eyes focused on the source of pale light which filtered down the shaft overhead, casting a bluish hue over the metallic surfaces in her space. She realized that the *ANC (the Aleatoric News Channel)* which she had been receiving subliminally during her 'downtime' seemed to have cut off. She had programmed it to learn all about the dire crisis posed by mutating energy fields over equatorial vegetation - perhaps that is what had triggered this sinister dream.

A gentle voice chimed. "Good morning Zaaaar ... you look lovely this morning ... our *Monitors* note that you neglected to programme a course of reinforcement functions during the *restoration period* ... we regret that we cannot offer a full service today due to an interruption from our carr-e-e-e..."

The voice broke off so suddenly the Sarah had the satisfying vision of someone wrenching out a *personality board* and hurling it across the room. The voice which conjured up such a friendly conspiratorial presence had always irritated her with its cloying exaggerated drawl and its determined mispronunciation

of her name as if complicit in her innermost desires. Some people, like her brothers Johnny and Andrew, were more susceptible to the charms of their personality boards, or at least were able to change them when they became jaded with the same old tactics chivvying them on.

Sarah flicked on her *Infotron* and received the more matter-of-fact message delivered in clipped tones that service would be disrupted until further notice and that all subscribers should initiate ‘standby mode’ and select *Passive Visualizations* (or “*PeeVees*”) until the problem could be corrected.

“Not more *PeeVees*!” she muttered to herself, “never a dull moment!” She could not recall a total System breakdown occurring in her sector before.

Suddenly she pushed aside her goggle *Visualizer* and unclipped the sensors. She felt daring, vulnerable, exposed. Anything might happen and none of the Monitors would ever pick up her defiant lapse. She was a free agent, without her daily ‘ToDo’ task list and no barrage of sanctimonious advice from a personal *Server*. Escape from routine beckoned; a time to mull over her own distracted dreams free from being focused on productive activity. She glanced a little nervously, though, around her empty space.

Without the usual background surround of illuminated relay panels she found the dearth of reference to even the most recent past unnerving. Every night her space was meticulously ‘rectified’ by her *Server*- and all the detritus of the day’s activity was swept off her illuminated display walls, outstanding items condensed into a neat ‘ToDo’ list which would plague her on the following day, efficiently flashed up as memory prompts, until consigned to the murky ‘Done’ category and forgotten forever.

Selective memories of the past were organized for her recreation and then swept away neatly at the end of the '*Visualization*'. This was all part of a sane and healthy life, but this unremitting sanity and health irked her, especially at this hour in the morning with nothing much around to look at.

Sarah removed the regeneration bracelets which had ensured such a peaceful night's oblivion and moved over to the *Brek-fa-tron* dreamily forgetting that she was still connected to a *Vibraforcer*. She placed her hand over the *Thought Point* and visualized an appetizing aroma of coffee and fresh croissant and retrieved the small package which proffered itself on the sliding metal plate. She popped it between her lips distractedly, momentarily self-conscious about how quaint the notion of 'breakfast' appeared in the modern era.

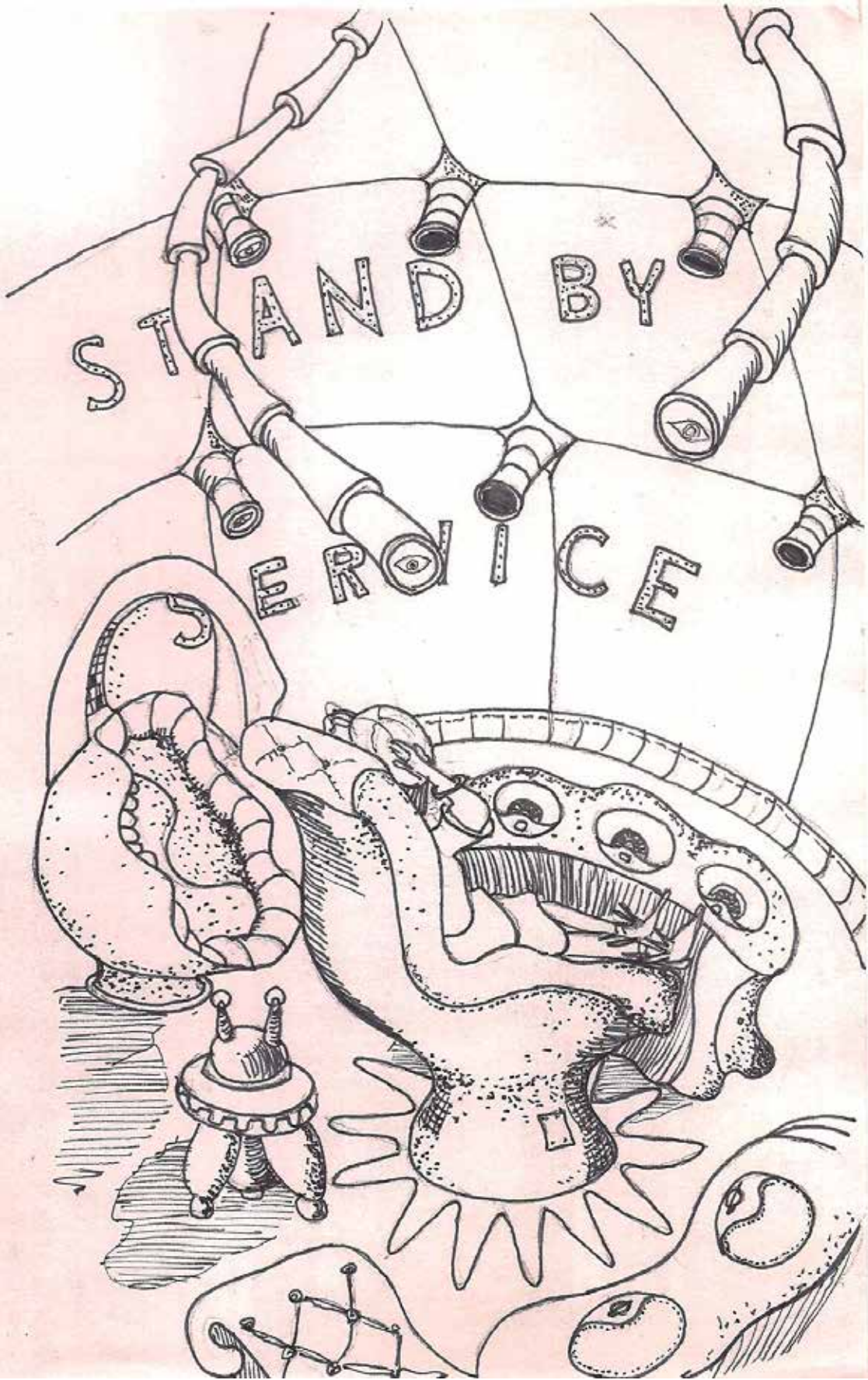
Unexpectedly her mind plunged back to a time long ago when she would don a heavy winter coat and boots over her pyjamas and trudge through the snow down to a barn carrying a special treat for Polo, a carrot, crisp from the refrigerator. He would be peering from his stall, soulful, huge, expectant eyes full of concern that she might have overlooked the treat and token of her love.

But centuries had passed since those days. It all seemed so distant, another era, in fact the *PreInfo Era* when the measurement of time was still related to events in ancient history. Yet some of those quaint memories of this remote past lingered to this day in remote crevices of her mind.

Some of her latest recreational *PeeVee* callisthenics had taken on surprising directions. Recently she had had a sudden urge to revisit the Curiosity Box which she remembered on the wall of the old cottage near the fireplace. It was on a dark stained pine

board wall full of knots like eyes peering out at the occupants of the room. Her peremptory visit had taken place in mid-winter and icy winds were howling around the cottage. Shivering in the dim light she opened the murky glass door of the cabinet. She could see the crude shelves of window glass laden with discoveries from the island, objects that people had chanced upon in their travels, feathers, egg shells, a snake's rattle displayed in a lens, colourful pebbles and bits of animal skeleton. With her simulation glove she was even able to flip through the archaic Rule Book which proclaimed that all of the objects displayed should be of '*enduring local interest*'. Quite apparently no one had taken the slightest notice of these stipulations and the shelves were heaped with debris, some of it very nondescript.

Sarah had been surprised by her sudden compulsion to revisit the past so out of season. Gingerly she felt each object in turn, grasping them, picking them up tentatively, turning them over in the palm of her glove, savouring how each object felt, the cold, almost damp black stone of a skinning knife from Neolithic times or the dry flaky fossils from times unimaginably ancient. There were dry catkins whose fibrous seed parachutes clung to her moist fingers. She peered at the dry little rattle reposing on its small disk of glass, picked it up and lifted the glass to her eye. The world through the dirty lens seemed murky, distorted. She peered at the rattle. Seven paper dry rattles meant that the owner had lived a full seven years. She pressed the frigid skinning knife against her cheek. It felt comforting and seemed to emanate the long departed happiness of a successful hunter. Nestled among the dry snakeskins she delved out a quaint little dagger, its handle adorned with tiny little heads assuming ridiculous grimaces. It felt searing hot to her touch in this cold room among the cold objects,



almost an electrical shock. She replaced it among the skins and quietly closed the door and turned away, pausing for a moment to consider how her *Server* might monitor such anomalies in her behaviour and what exasperating course of therapies might be prescribed as a result.

Sarah was in the habit of making frequent ‘virtual visits’ to Fairwood Island. She liked to keep an eye on the cycle of the seasons and enjoyed its restorative peace, the smell of the air scented with pine, hot days working away in the vegetable garden with the sun beating down on her back. Not that all this pleasure did not come with responsibilities - she could never look at those shutters without feeling that this was probably the year for a new coat of paint. But she realized how important it was to her and for each member of her family to know such a landscape so intimately. It placed them in the world and provided them with the unfolding sense of history that was now so sorely lacking in the neutral space in which she lived.

## Old Treasures

**J**ohnny stared blankly at the dim monitor for a few seconds wondering vaguely whether he had precipitated the spectacular collapse himself. Standby service crackled out that the whole Eastern seaboard had undergone a total shutdown and service would not be resumed for hours. Perhaps he had been asking too many questions lately and probing areas of data which

his *Server* exasperatingly described as ‘classified’ or ‘unavailable at this time’. The randomness of his associations only triggered palliative therapy sessions from the *Server* which Johnny found unrelievedly boring.

However, he had devised a clever ‘subroutine’ which responded to all of the questions and prompts of the *Server* and kept it fully preoccupied searching for esoteric information. Anyone reading the transcript of his activities would think that they were dealing with a first class ‘nut case’. But this diversionary tactic gave him wonderful periods of free time to roam at will under an assumed identity through all of the *InfoBanks*. He designed a personal electronic bandit mascot, with spotty kerchief disguising its lower face just like the legendary *PaleoMaterialist* ‘bad guys’. Though this was slightly risky, Johnny could see nothing wrong in the scope of these researches, even if he had to take such pains to conceal them from the inquisitive *Monitors* of daily life.

He placed his hand over a *ThoughtPoint* and visualized a peanut butter sandwich. The *MasticatorInterface* responded with the dry sticky texture and impression of bits clinging tenaciously to his teeth. He imagined the pleasure of smearing peanut butter over the *Monitor’s* receptor lenses, just a thin gloopy layer to blur the image. However the *Power Bar* which had emerged on the tray was dry, crisp, hygienic and would never perform in such a satisfying manner.

Johnny had a project which he had been pursuing with single-mindedness. He had set up his *Stabilizer* to run on a 24 hour schedule, even overriding *Revitalization* periods when his *Server* was supposed to be massaging him with appropriate *Passive Visualizations* or *PeeVees* (as everyone referred to them.) In his escape time Johnny would roam through the fields of data

collected from the *PreInfo Era*, all of it meticulously collected and indexed in the *InfoBanks*. Thousands of years of history had been amassed in vast libraries of information. In fact all of the artefacts from the PreInfo Era had been deposited in colossal vaults under heavy surveillance where they could be safeguarded in perpetuity.

However, he had grown suspicious about available Data Gathering Programmes with their relentlessly '*positive*' spin on all of the material collected. He had developed a secret data gathering system of his own and had turned up disturbing information about the past, areas in which the *PeeVees* were deficient or tended to gloss over. At first he had chanced upon information in his random roving which seemed to be at variance with other proclaimed facts. How many therapy sessions everyone had undergone to release the traumas of childhood and the *Great Adjustment*, yet little arrows pierced through all of the layers of armour inflicting painful doubts and uncertainties. In a perverse way he welcomed these shafts of doubt and redoubled his efforts to slip amidst the vast piles of accumulated information in a less conventional manner. His bandit mascot turned up in the most unlikely places winking out what appeared to be a great deal of non sequitur information.

People talked about the brutishness of life in the *PreInfo Era*, of its endless cycles of hatreds, conflicts, deaths all producing new hatreds, new wars and new deaths. Those scars had now at last all been massaged away. The concept of Death was almost unfathomable (except that it remained a common occurrence on the Outside.) Now the empty end of death had been replaced with the three R's or (*Retirement, Reformulation & Revitalization*). It was at least a solace to consider his own parents enjoying euphoric limbo and to contact his father from time to time to run

over the same old conversations about ‘spinodles’ punctuated with characteristic “Hah’s” Heather chiming in with her “Oh, Oh’s” seemed a reassuring counterpoint. (both just awaiting revitalization whenever they should choose to make the step.)

He glanced suspiciously over his shoulder at the vacant black eyes of the Monitor, then bent over and slid a loose metal plate sideways to reveal a cache of cables and discarded electronic equipment. This jumble of material which he had been intending to send for recycling gave him a pleasant sense of subversion. Here at least was physical evidence of time having passed, of experiments having succeeded or failed, of almost forgotten moods of elation or despair. Rummaging around in the debris his hands sought out the sharp edges of a small box. His heart jumped as his fingers made contact and he extricated a box from the midst of the tangle. The box was constructed of wood, a material now totally unfamiliar in daily life but once common. It was inlaid with thin strips of polished metal (possibly aluminium, a type of metal that had been banned for health reasons over a century ago)

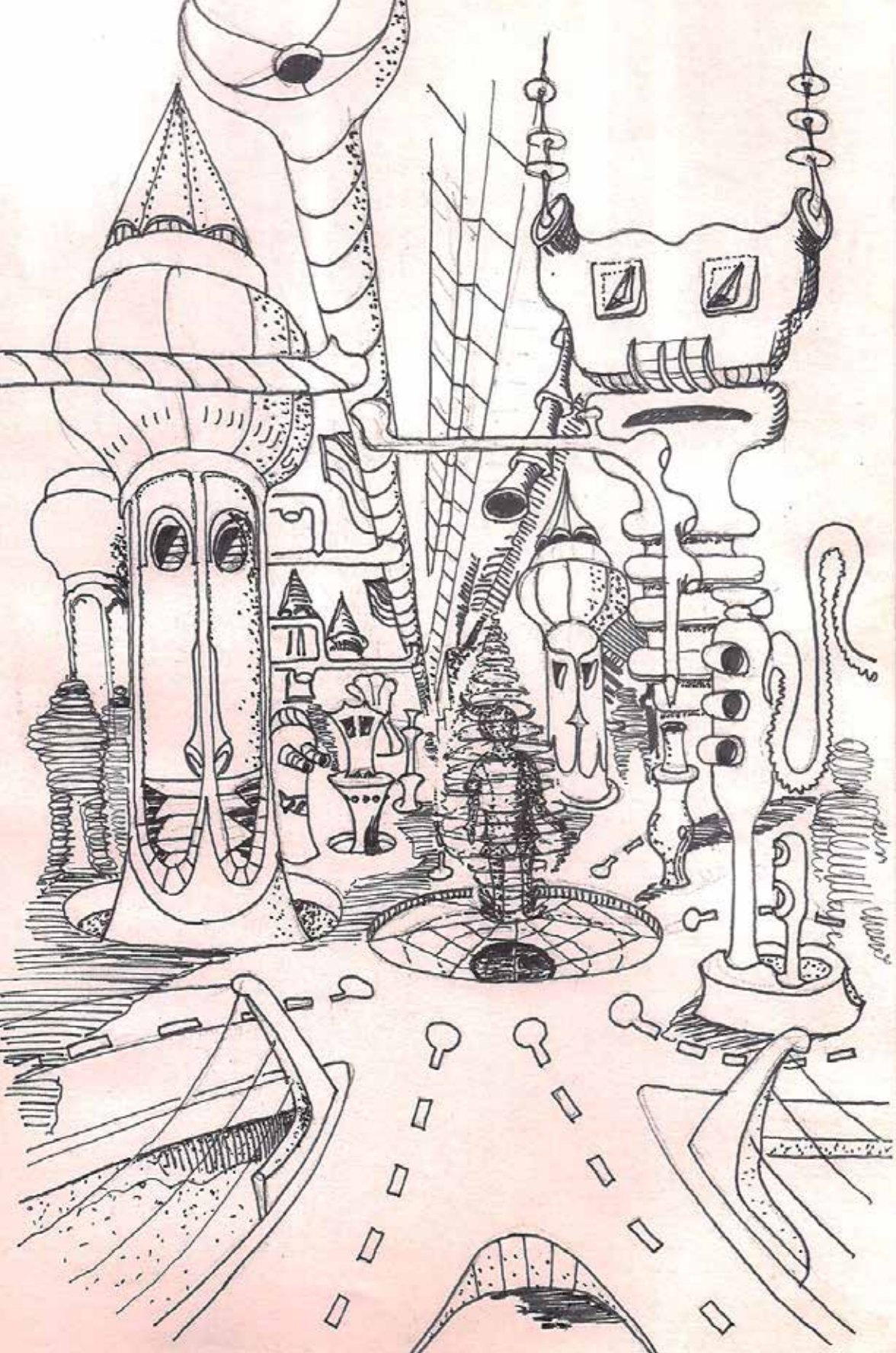
The box had probably been quite old at the end of the last Millennium, its square and misaligned brass hinges spoke of a much more primitive time when wealth and memories were hoarded away in small boxes like this emblazoned with the initials of some person who claimed undisputed ownership. “J-B-S” . Whose initials were those? Perhaps the ‘J’ represented another Johnny. He remembered being told once. He idly considered that perhaps the ‘S’ stood for ‘*Stranger*’, a suitable name for the owner of such a peculiar gamut of contents. He had attempted an *InfoSearch* and had turned up over three million possibilities (at which point his enthusiasm for the project had waned.) He knew that the information was available somewhere in an *Infobank* -

accessible to anyone who had the inclination to retrieve it - and the right questions to ask. But that was the problem with most of the data banks, the researcher had to know specifically what he was looking for before he could initiate a search. Random browsing through data was always stimulating but it was almost impossible to shape the direction that you were likely travel or arrive at an intelligible conclusion.

After a further nervous glance over his shoulder to reassure himself that his *Server* was truly hors de combat, Johnny gingerly lifted the lid as if expecting the contents to be transformed into shards of wisdom which would bathe the room in a shimmering, mysterious light.

The box had meant something to '*J. B. Stranger*' in the *PreInfo Era*. Perhaps this was the only remaining trace of his having lived. Bizarre thought, and a bizarre selection of curious, unrelated objects wrapped in the fragile brown papers so dry that he dared not pull some of them out of their packaging. He picked up some tiny beads which had been fashioned out of mahogany coloured seeds, perhaps apple seeds, and a tarnished locket which contained a cracked photo, a knot of black hair crushed behind glass.

At the bottom of the box there was a lumpy wedge of paper which so exactly fitted the dimensions of the box that it had become wedged inextricably along its edges. There was an object wrapped up in the middle and he could just sense the outline with his fingertips. He peered at the flaky black leather cover and gingerly tried to prise up one corner with a sharp metal object that he had picked up from a pile of curious tools. The implement fitted neatly into his hand. The *PreInfo Era* had been full of such objects he recalled, aggressive devices for probing or cutting - or



sticking into other people. That design aesthetic had now almost faded from memory, having given away to the soft nurturing contours and mellifluous lines of his surrounding environment. So few modern materials were cut, extruded or assembled these days, almost everything was moulded (so much less wasteful) The *PreInfo* era's design aesthetics had always been an interest of his, the fixation with corners, sharp angles and straight lines. Quaint *PeeVees* of *PaleoMaterialist* dwellings such as the ones they had all grown up in so long ago, revealed that almost all of the components, the windows, doors, the walls were restricted to rectilinear lines simple geometries, responding to the challenges of gravity in the most facile way.

Taking a deep breath, he picked up the box, anchored it between his legs and set to work gingerly lifting the edges of the wedged bundle of papers.

## Excursion

**A**ndrew stared despondently at the blinking visualization panels surrounding his space, trying to cast his mind back to the last time that the systems had suffered such an extensive breakdown. All of the views of the glories of nature, his *RealTime* view of the sunny swimming rock at Fairwood and vistas of galactic grandeur had faded into a uniform grey on the screens. The exciting novelty of the sudden emptiness wore off

very quickly and he began to feel that he would like to share the novel experience with someone else. Adventure was foremost in his mind as he donned his emergency exploration suit. He struggled with the power packs, unfamiliar with the way the various field reinforcers were intended to fit around his body. In doing so he received a sharp shock when one of his arms penetrated the protective field. In theory such garments were only provided for emergency use. But he imagined that other adventurous souls would be in a similar situation, astonished by the rarity of the occurrence of a breakdown and turning to their emergency suits to find out how their neighbours were faring.

He also had in his mind's eye the astonished look on Johnny's face as he pictured himself bursting through his door for an unannounced visit. Though he spoke with his brother Johnny and other members of his family frequently it was always through *virtual* simulation. He could not remember the last time that they had actually *materialised* in each other's company, perhaps decades ago.

He stepped into the air lock, not without noticing an uncomfortable warmth of reflected energy as his protective field passed too close to a metallic work surface. With a wrenching shudder of the opposite door he stepped out onto the emergency catwalk. The catwalk stretched out before him into the distance, a thin luminous band penetrating the utter blackness of the service zone. He followed the phosphorescent strip which marked the centre line hoping that he would not collide with anything faster moving. His footsteps echoed on the creaking metal panels as he proceeded down the strip. In the far distance like the roar of a distant tide he could hear the sound of the impellers which circulated the air and water coursing through the veins of a vast

mechanical mega structure.

As he passed junction points which led off to other habitable spaces similar to his own , he took particular care in recording his route on his *Port-a-note*. It was surprising to consider that behind each of the metal panels he passed, people that he would probably never know or meet were fully preoccupied with the riveting minutia of their own lives. Occasionally he would pass under a skylight through which filtered distant hazy light revealing the sinister hulks of the relay stations planted at regular intervals alongside the path. Andrew referred to his pocket organizer and checked off another junction.

Years ago when Johnny had been working on the redesigning of the Service Net they had discreetly scanned some of the organizational drawings just for fun. Andrew could still remember the guilty look on Johnny's face as he discreetly downloaded classified information. From it they had devised a basic map which geographically connected many of the family and friends. The thought of dropping in unannounced on friends and arriving at the worst possible moment had always appealed to Johnny.

Andrew was worried that perhaps the infrastructure had been reorganized since Johnny's mapping days and that he would burst joyfully in upon a total unknown that would mistake him for an Outsider and raise the alarm. Then there would be a lot of awkward explaining to do! But he reassured himself that the current breakdown was a very unusual circumstance and that it was perfectly normal to resort to an unusual recourse in seeking outside assistance. Nevertheless he was surprised that he had encountered no one else making his way through the service zone. It seemed depressing that everyone else was content to fall back

on their *PeeVees*.

Overhead he heard the frightening zapping sounds of stray flecks of dust being caught by the residual static charge fields of the giant relay stations. In this vast mechanical environment he began to feel himself no bigger than one of those ill-fated flecks, and equally vulnerable. As he trudged along past the fiftieth identical junction he began to regret that he had ever embarked on what increasingly seemed a foolish mission. But he reassured himself that at least Johnny, Sarah and others he knew all had spaces in adjacent gallery pods and that they might be able to make quite a social event out of it if he ever found the right destination. That he would be able to take an *AeroGlisser* home again once the *System* was restored was at least a consolation.

Having counted his last turning and passing three secondary addresses he arrived at a flat steel plate and inspected it dubiously. His hand faltered on the porte-handle when suddenly his eye caught a little cipher, an elaborate “J” scrawled in what appeared to be a substance like peanut butter on the adjacent condenser surface. This could only be one person. With a mighty wrench he pushed the door aside and stepped into the air lock. The facing door had been left open and he found himself confronting a rather surprised looking Johnny rising from the work surface at the other end of the space. A small, brown rectangular object cascaded from his lap and fell to the floor with a splintering crash.

Andrew decommissioned his field protector and struggled out of his support suit to face a brother who looked remarkably haggard and unkempt. Though they communicated frequently, it was always relying on *Positive Image Enhancement* which compensated for any temporary deficiencies in appearance to provide a more positive experience of social interaction. Johnny

had clearly gotten into the habit of turning his up full torque editing out any unnecessary negative details. (Even pressed into maximum overdrive Johnny's Enhancer sometimes had difficulty conveying an aspect of 'normality'. )

So the visit was not without an element of surprise both ways as Andrew blurted out "Johnny - *SURPRISE* - Look at you! you could pass for a *PaleoMaterialist*. I don't think that you have approached your personal groomer in weeks."

"Well, mine broke down, and I just didn't want all of the hassle of getting it fixed. So I just shorted the Monitor so that it would relay '*Normal*' instead."

Though Johnny was clearly pleased to have a visitor, he was also concerned about the object which had fallen to the floor as a result of Andrew's unannounced entry.

"What's that?" Andrew pointed to the little object that Johnny was pushing back into his cable chase.

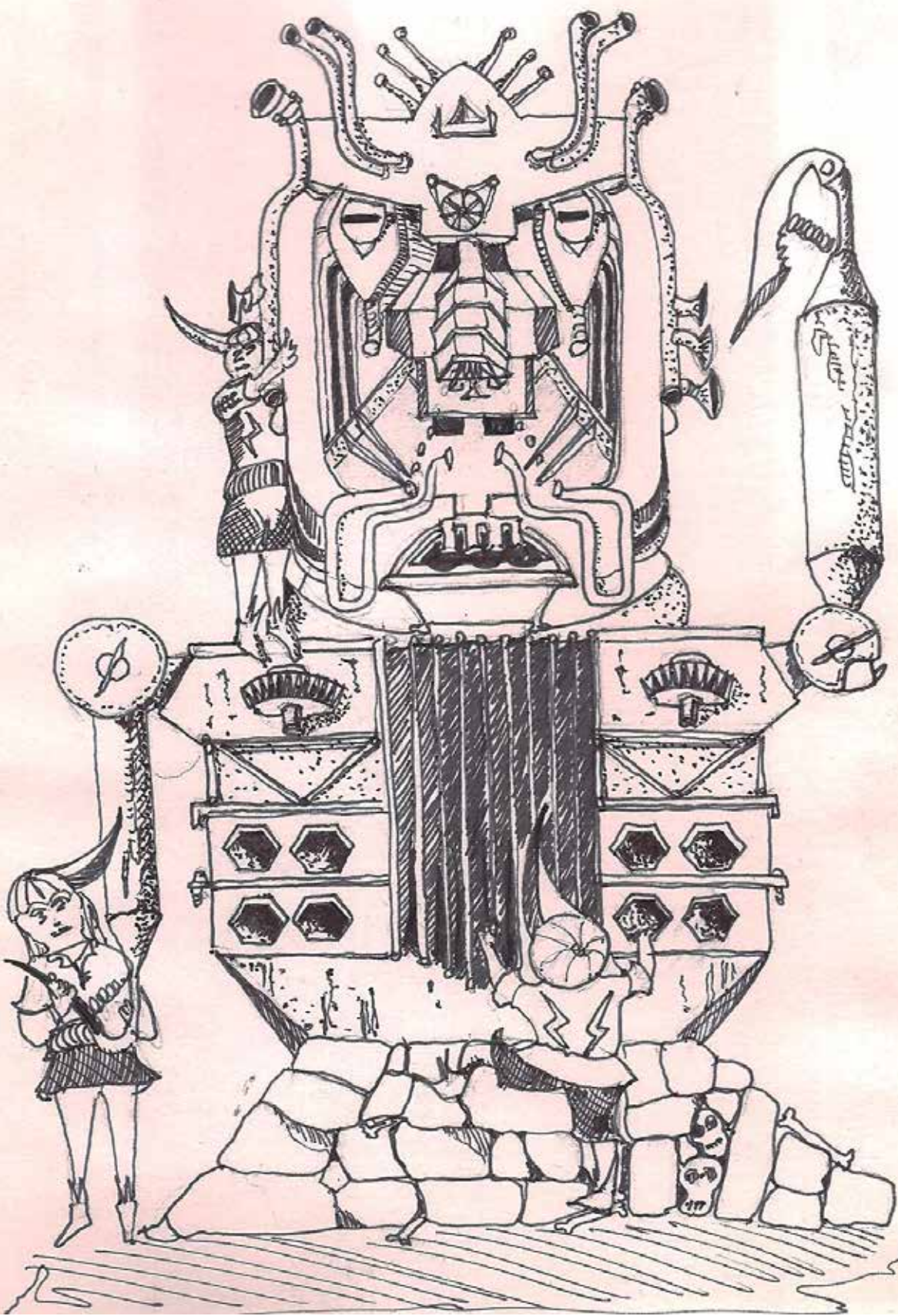
"I don't know, just something that I had forgotten about in the cable chase."

"Looks like it otta be in a museum."

"Well it isn't and it suits me just fine where it is. Feel this." Johnny held out the curious stony talisman which he had been unwrapping from a piece of ancient tissue paper.

"Don't worry, it's been irradiated."

Andrew picked it up and felt the curious cool stone. His fingers sought out the ancient depressions and he felt that he could almost understand the intuitive skill of the artisan who so many years ago had fashioned the stone and created a work that was utterly personal and unique. Never again would such an object be found necessary or the person found who had the skills and vision to create it. Andrew looked at the seven small heads ranged up the



shaft of this strange implement. He unwisely drew the sharp edge across the palm of his hand and to his horror a thin filament of blood welled up from the scratch. Johnny grabbed it back.

“That’s why they stopped making objects with sharp edges, years ago”, teased Johnny, “to protect people like you from themselves! I suppose that you had better cauterize it on the *TraumaPurge*.”

Johnny led Andrew over to the Standby and helped adjust the field throw. At times like this he always felt that his natural calling was to have been a doctor. When he returned he found that Andrew was closely inspecting the blood smeared tissue which he had picked up to stanch the wound.

“Just the piece of paper that I found wrapped around the object. I was trying to figure out what it said when you burst in.

Andrew, who was good at deciphering old calligraphies droned out.

*“6. There is an evil under the sun and it is common among men. A man may be given riches, wealth and honour so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet he may not be given the power to eat thereof, but the Stranger eateth of it.* Hmmm. What do you suppose that that means? There’s a lot more here but it’s all gummed up now with smears of blood.”

The curio sat in the middle of the worktop where Johnny had put it down. Both brothers regarded it suspiciously.

“I was thinking that it would be fun to go around and visit some of our friends during this breakdown, say Sarah and Mavis” said Andrew. Don’t they have their spaces in a gallery-pod near here? We could take this object and see what they would make of it. Maybe somebody will know what it is - or who the Stranger is supposed to be”.

Johnny seemed uncomfortable about relinquishing control of his discovery so soon after its discovery. But the prospect of an adventure was not unappealing and it would also be an opportunity to try out his new invention.

While he was struggling with a tangle of wires and filaments in the corner of the room Andrew had an opportunity to glance about and inspect some of the little aides and adaptations that Johnny had devised throughout his space. Every Monitor seemed to be connected to something else in a makeshift tangle of conduit. Every lens seemed to be covered with some sort of reflective material. Even the Thought Control points had been doctored with little wires tentatively taped across their surfaces.

“What on earth have you done to all of your equipment; it looks as if some mad inventor had been at work”

A slightly sinister flicker of satisfaction crossed Johnny’s features before he explained. “Well, I’ve been working on a big project, sort of on the quiet, and I just don’t want all of my *Monitors* to keep plying me with passivity and restoration exercises just when I’m doing something else entirely. In fact I’ve got a little invention here. I am going to patent it one of these days - the *Fairlie Stabilizer*. As far as your idea of making a general round up visit, this might be *the perfect time* to try it out.”

The *Fairlie Stabilizer* looked unpromising to Andrew’s eyes. It consisted of a small three wheeled wagon piled high with archaic wired devices. Andrew soon discovered that the purpose of the invention was not to stabilize the intended user any more than a good session with the *PeeVees* might. Instead the invention stabilized the environment which had just been vacated by its occupant. The device collected a vast memory of information about daily routines or random acts of its ‘client’ and

reorganized it to be fed back to the *Monitors* so that the *Server* would never detect the absence of the *Servee*. The *Server* would be fully engaged in following up requests for obscure information or with responding to recreational games or pastimes. Not only could the device subvert the immediate environment of the *Servee* but it could tap into other *Servers*’ environments and create exotic effects by remote control.

“For instance, by deploying the *Fairlie Stabilizer* on a group of *Monitors* we could arrange a huge party, invite all our friends to the rave and no *Server* would ever be the wiser.”

“It sounds as if it might be a concept that is quite difficult to market!” Andrew looked very dubious. “What *Server* would let you advertise that on the *Net*? And then what happens if something goes drastically wrong, you know ... it’s a big risk.

“Oh, it won’t...” said Johnny.

## Round Up

**I**t was not very much later that Johnny and Andrew appeared at Sarah’s portal and wrenched it open with the same terrifying abandon that Andrew had employed earlier. They found Sarah on her hands and knees trying to piece together a jigsaw of notes and scribbles prior to re-pulping. Her delight at seeing the interlopers and annoyance at being distracted from her project were somewhat mixed.

When Johnny unwrapped the curious dagger Sarah’s

# THE RANCH



surprise was complete.

“But that can’t be, there can’t be two of them! It’s from the Old Curiosity Box. I dreamt last night of being trapped in some awful invading jungle and slashing away at snaky vines with that very same knife. The vines were entwining around my legs, pulling me down towards some terrible fate”. Sarah seemed very excited.

“But that’s exactly my point,” interrupted Johnny. “There seems to be a massive divergence between Reality and what is presented to us a fact through our *Reality Monitors*. That’s what I’ve been doing, I’ve been exploring just where all of the inconsistencies lie, where the facts just don’t seem to add up to the *truth*. I don’t think that the truth is being distorted out of a real malignance, but rather I think that it’s happening because somewhere someone has decided that we must be protected from ourselves, that we will all go to pieces if we have to face the real truth about anything. And that’s where the *Fairlie Stabilizer* comes in.”

“The Fairlie *what?*” Sarah began to look worried.

## The Travel Bug

**T**hey found Ariane in her library of travel lore cataloguing and cross-referencing her information about distant places. Ariane offered a very complete *Virtual* travel service providing excursions into the exotic cultures of the last century

as well as simulations of the future. She was very knowledgeable, grasping intuitively what her clients were likely to appreciate and offering fully guided, highly informative adventures as well as the ever popular Sargasso Sea Escape Holiday for those who merely wished to tune out and drift in the virtual sun. Clients flocked to her because she could always contrive some element of excitement, a stretching of a projection to its limits, while providing a full insurance service should something untoward happen. She was pondering her insurance policy apprehensively. Did it include a small print section exonerating her from responsibility for the totally unforeseen, such as the breakdown of power transmission? There could be a lot of potential claims for damages due to psychological distress from people stranded half way up the Chimborazo or visiting the court of Tamburlaine who would be suddenly jolted back to Reality. Running her business was always fraught with these little worries.

She recognized that her clientele represented a very small niche in the market. Adventure travel was not a popular pastime in a populace which due to ever increasing life expectancy had become more and more reluctant to take any risks whatever, even *virtual* ones. She had researched a new generation of parents who would not even allow their offspring out of quarantine until their mid fifties and felt that this trend might bode ill for her Adventure travel enterprise in the long run.

Ariane's eyes began to dart with excitement when she was told about the proposed adventure. Andrew carefully unwrapped the dagger and displayed it for her in the palm of his hand.

"But this is extraordinary! I was just putting together a holiday package, a sort of trip to Inferno and virtual visitation with each of the Seven Deadlies, along the lines of Dante. It seemed

to be an odd idea but one which kept coming back to me. I just couldn't let it go. Coincidences *do* seem to happen constantly. Strange! Isn't it?"

## The CyberRanch

**T**he growing group attempted to burst in upon the Solecki Ranch with the same surprise factor that had been deployed before.

Chris, Matt and Owen occupied a large interconnected space referred to as '*the Ranch*'. From their control centre they were able to monitor vast algal bio-nutrient herds.

When all of the systems collapsed there was a flurry of activity at *the Ranch* to get emergency power operative and prevent a disastrous extinction of the herds. The last thing they needed was further media attention from the animal rights lobby which was so determined to assure that even single celled animals lived fulfilled and happy lives.

They decried the growing tendency to package food in desiccated, oddly flavoured *PowerBars* and had developed quite a range of bovine shaped spongiform lattices that provided their nutriments with interesting shapes and textures approximating PaleoMaterialist foodstuffs. It was a niche market, and quite vulnerable to attack from the politically correct.

Like most up-to-date ranching practice theirs was now taking place under water where conditions could be strictly

controlled. (This approach being also much more secure from interference from Outsiders who maintained their own ‘balance of nature’ and showed little interest in such high technology algal production.) Nevertheless raids out of purely destructive spite were not unknown and Chris and Owen were debating the possibility that the breakdown might be somehow connected with Outsider sabotage when Matt announced that a motley group of strangely assorted characters had just arrived at the quarantine air lock. They inspected the intruders dubiously.

“But that’s Ariane there, it must be the Fairlies!”

## Artist’s Studio

**T**he group found Mavis on her hands and knees scrubbing with a metal wand onto a sheet of film. She did not seem particularly surprised to see them as they crowded into her space so intent was she on her project. Johnny felt instantly at home in the clutter of the space and began to peer into the different corners where projects had been piled up to see if there was any material that he might also find useful.

“It’s a ‘*mystery drawing*’ - by folding over layers of material and then scrubbing them with this metal wand, strange patterns emerge as if by magic. Then I just work them up with liquid highlighter. It’s really amazing.”

Arranged around Mavis were piles of strange figures, vaguely

human, with twisted bodies.

“But they are grotesque!” Ariane seemed visibly perturbed. “They look exactly like a load of Outsiders. Who is going to want to surround themselves with negative images like that?”

Mavis began to explain her theory about ‘Morphic Fields’ when there was a sudden loud crash from the other end of her space as Johnny toppled a pile of project materials. Sighing resignedly Mavis turned back to her work. “Let me just finish this sketch, and then we can talk.”

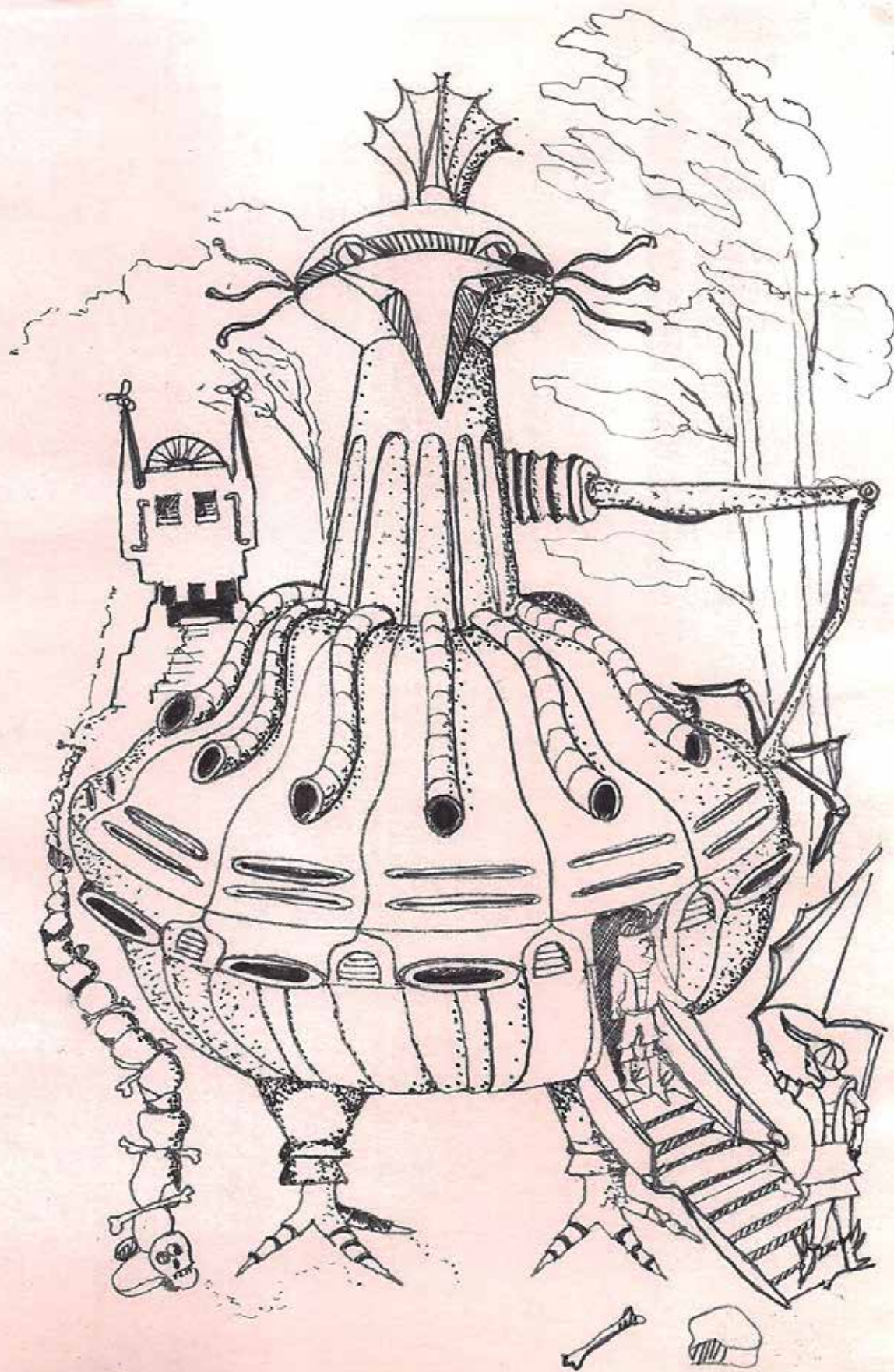
Sarah however seemed suddenly perplexed by what she was seeing emerge in the drawing.

“This is very strange. Look, Andrew! Don’t you see the resemblance to the images cut onto the knife handle? And they are also very similar to the stone monsters invading the temples in my dream. This can’t *all* be a coincidence.”

“Perhaps there is some sort of virus in the System, something infiltrating all of our sub-consciouses.” Sarah’s eyes suddenly narrowed and she began to look at Johnny very suspiciously. But Johnny affected an air of total insouciance and only rolled his eyes as everyone turned his way.

“One thing is very clear though, all of these dreams and visions are bound up with the stone dagger. And we all know that this is supposed to be in the Curiosity Box at Fairwood. At the same time it is wrapped up in Andrew’s pocket. The same thing cannot exist in two different places at the same time, and I think that its unlikely that its a case of a forgery. There is a mystery here and it is only going to be solved by going to the Curiosity Box and retrieving the other dagger.”

“But what would our *Monitors* pick up? If we made a trip like that we’d be placed in quarantine for months. And what about



all those tedious adjustment therapy sessions that we would be faced with afterwards.”

“Just leave all that to me.” Johnny’s features assumed a diabolical cast. Sarah instinctively turned her eyes heavenwards.

“*Oh No!*” shuddered Ariane. “*Not the Fairlie Stabilizer!*”

## The AeroGlisser

**L**ike so many modern inventions, the technology of the AeroGlisser was totally baffling. It was considered an ‘emergency vehicle’ in a world where transfer of mass was viewed as extremely inefficient in comparison with the conveyance of information. The AeroGlisser was designed to address a single purpose only which was defined as moving mass from one set of mapped co-ordinates to another. No allowance had been made to view the intervening territory from the craft, which might have been considered counterproductive in heightening anxieties. Instead, a comforting simulation mapped the territory passing below and provided interesting peripheral facts to divert the mind during the flight.

Shifting of mass was considered to be very much an inefficient last resort. But the main difficulty with travel of any kind was the provision of the exact co-ordinates of the destination. Sarah found it utterly exasperating that swamped as they all were with massive amounts of interesting data, the rigmarole of getting the data that you actually wanted was extremely complex. It

was always possible to overwhelm the lacuna with a wealth of fascinating facts about things that you didn't really need to know. She had once jotted down the co-ordinates for *Terras Ipiales* in a moment of distraction, though she had never any intention of actually going there. This seemed to be the nature of most modern information.

But somehow Johnny had discovered the co-ordinates of the old tennis court on Fairwood Island and tucked them away in a safe file for possible future use.

The AeroGlisser settled down almost noiselessly on the flat granite rock. Sarah emerged first into the strong sunlight followed by the others and deployed a parasol to protect the exploration group from debilitating solar radiation. They looked around and drank the pine scented air in deep gulps. It was exactly what they all most treasured about their *PeeVee* Visitations.

"I had forgotten what a difference the seasons make," said Sarah wistfully looking about at the newly green moss which had sprouted little groves of pollen laden lozenges. It was a late spring day and the island was lush, moist and green. In the woods alongside the landing area they could glimpse the reflective glint of stagnant bosques surrounded by thick carpets of sphagnum moss. Luminous ladyslippers peered at them from the purple shadows. It was utterly peaceful.

Suddenly Ariane's jaw dropped. She pointed speechless westwards towards the setting sun.

"What on earth is that? I don't remember that at all. Is it a joke?" The group approached tentatively.

Massive stones had been built up to shoulder height to form a large rectangular base plinth. On top of the plinth raised

high on an armature was an extraordinary assembly of what may once have been many separate machines parts serving many different functions, now unified under a coating layer of red rust. The strange bits of metal had been assembled into a grotesque face, with furious eyes and ears that sprouted like horns from the top of its head. The rust had dyed the falling rains and stained the plinth beneath with an ominous blood stain which seemed to dribble from the cruel lips of the monster across the smooth boulders of the plinth. The chinks between the rounded stones seemed to be packed with fragments of porous chalky material which Sarah scratched curiously with her finger nail. It felt soft and flaky. Close inspection revealed it to be chalky and organic in structure. Then she pulled her hand back suddenly with a sudden intuitive recognition of what she had been scraping.

“It’s pulverized bone... Or something like it.” suggested Chris. “This whole monument has been mortared together in some macabre way with animal bone. It’s barbaric! These animals didn’t live happy, contented lives, I’ll bet. And they complain about our spongiform herd!”

“It must be the Outsiders, it’s one of their sacred spaces,” suggested Owen.

Mavis pulled out a small section of the offending bone and looked at it very carefully. She seemed to be about to say something, but then to think better of it and fell back in silent thought.

Andrew scrambled up onto the plinth and tried to wrench an old fly wheel from one of the eye sockets but it seemed to be locked irretrievably. “It will need more than a little rust remover to get this working! What do you suppose it is? What kind of people would build a monument in this location out of bones and rusty

machinery? This is more than a little weird.”

Johnny had already begun to explore the vicinity of the strange assembly. Suddenly he whistled to the others and beckoned to them excitedly. Stretched out before him in what appeared to be a long processional avenue was a route of similar decaying machinery displayed on small plinths of carefully fashioned stones.

“Look! It’s an avenue of old boat motors, you remember those outboard motors that were used in the *PreInfo* Era when everyone used to travel around so endlessly and aimlessly.”

“A little like we’re doing now” added Chris “thanks to you and your brilliant inventive mind - Hah.”

“And your thirst for adventure travel, too.”

The ancient relics had been upended in the air on individual plinths, displaying pathetically cracked propellers and crank shafts. Many of the perishable parts had rusted away which seemed to transform the ancient decomposed engine blocks into gaping empty skull-like shapes with lifeless recesses and fissures. Johnny began to walk up the avenue towards a grouping of rusted material, reviewing the hulks on right and left like some parade ground martinet. Sarah however, noticed the luxuriance of the moist moss to either side of the ceremonial route, which had been carefully prevented from impinging into the avenue.

The initial exuberance of the Exploring Party had diminished since these peculiar discoveries and they began to communicate in subdued whispers. They followed the avenue peering at the strange monuments and stopped occasionally to inspect strangely formed combinations of elements or read a name plate still visible through the caked layers of rust.

The avenue terminated in a clearing with a shallow hollow

in the rock which was mounded with glittering black ash. Mavis was immediately down on her hands and knees selecting small chunks for drawing and tucking them into her belt. She began to experiment with these, drawing patterns on the smooth rock with obvious delight. Ariane rolled her eyes indulgently, knowing how dedicated Mavis was to unconventional drawing expression, remembering how in showing her home space Mavis would make no concessions to the Positive Image Enhancer. In the background were piles of projects, schemes, and constructions looming over her like some guilty conscience trying to take form. Scrabbling deep into the pile, Mavis picked up a lump and dropped it with a sudden cry. "Hot!"

Andrew pushed forward to pick it up. "There must have been a big fire here recently. Everything around is as dry as a bone, not like the moss beyond. We had better keep a watch for Outsiders. There aren't supposed to be reservations in northern Onto. I can't see how something like this could have been overlooked."

"They are supposed to be very timid; perhaps they just fled when they saw our AeroGlisser landing."

"I think that we had better keep a close watch on the craft. If they get so excited about old mechanical technology, just imagine what they'd make of an up-to-date travel craft. And it's possible that the Outsiders are not nearly as timid and complacent as they are reputed to be."

"Well for starters, they are clearly not as eco-friendly as they are reputed to be." Sarah surveyed a pile of rusting mechanical debris nearby.

"Or vegetarian!" added Mavis ominously.



# The Transformation

Sarah 's description of her visits to the old house, her obvious delight in surrounding herself with its history and her concern that some basic maintenance was required, had given everyone the sense that everything would be as they remembered it. They were all familiar with the pleasures, the smells of the ancient landscape, travel being so fraught with risks and dangers, no one had ventured physically so far from home in many years. But the environment was carefully monitored so that all seasonal changes could be closely observed and accurately reconstructed in the *Passive Visualizations*.

Andrew still had his obligatory and bracing morning swim thanks to *PeeVee* technology and enjoyed the feel of the cold clean water on his skin. Johnny who was rarely attracted to the water fussed about with his strange inventions and Sarah and Mavis continued with their art work and struggles with the garden. They all felt that they knew the place intimately as a result of their many restorative visits. Nevertheless the little group of explorers felt very apprehensive as they picked their way along the path in the fading afternoon light. They could glimpse the bulk of the old house through the trees as they approached.

Sarah clutched at Johnny's arm. "What on earth is happening? Look! its all totally unrecognizable!"

The little group peered out of the bushes at an extraordinary sight. Instead of the expected simple silhouette of the old

cottage slumbering in the landscape, they were confronted with the broken hulk of a stockade of massive tree trunks supported between roughly fashioned scaffolding towers. The site of the old house seemed to have become an encampment of crudely shaped outrigger structures with pole ladders up to surveillance platforms at tree top level that were connected by catwalks. The lower levels between the timber structures had been filled with battered fortifications of stone. Old animal skins hung in tatters from the decaying poles. There were no apparent signs of life.

“Who could have built all this? ... And so fast? ... Why I was only here yesterday” Sarah whispered. And what has happened to the shutters that we so laboriously painted last summer? I don’t see any surface that even looks remotely paintable”

A strange light of comprehension came into Johnny’s eyes and he glanced at Andrew. He looked almost pleased to be confirmed in his suspicions about a clear divergence between Virtual Reality and Actual Reality.

“I think that this has been happening for quite a long time. I think that what we have been receiving through our *RealTime* monitors is more than a little out of date.. like perhaps a century or so!

Andrew made a sign for everyone to skirt around the encampment discreetly and determine whether there were any signs of life. They were aware that the stillness that precedes the dusk had fallen over the whole landscape. There seemed to be no one around but they all had an uneasy feeling that they, the watchers were also being watched.

“If we are being watched by Outsiders, they will probably be rather put off by all our skulking about spying on them. Perhaps we should send in a delegation, just go right in and knock on their

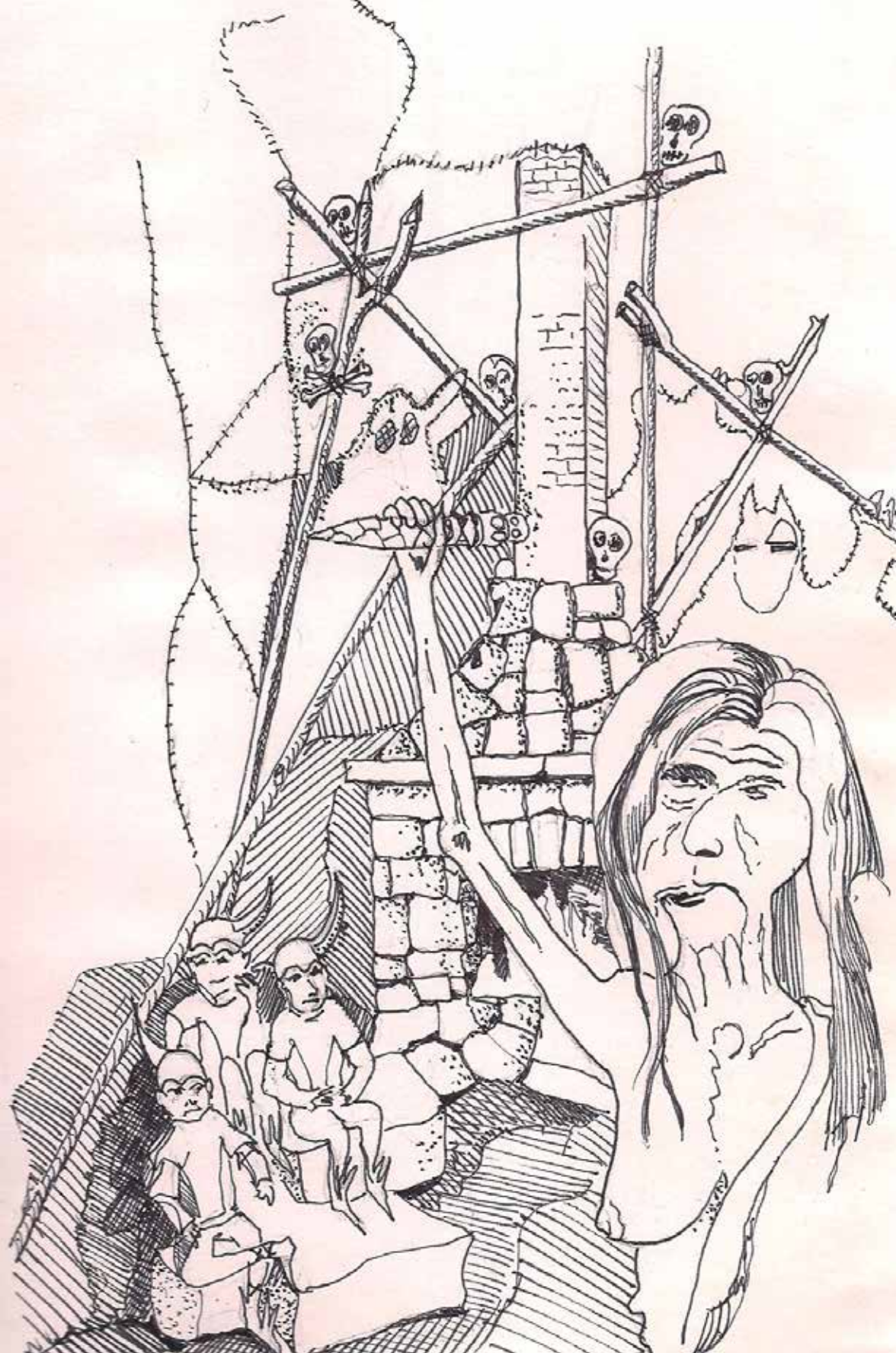
door and ask what they think they're doing" suggested Ariane.

"Their door! Where do you suppose that we'd find a door in this jumble of logs and skins?"

As the group reached the east side of the building, they began to perceive that there was more order to the encampment than they had imagined. Due east of the encampment where the old veranda should have been there were two flanking tripods covered in a crazy quilt of stretched skins. Stretching eastwards down to the water's edge was an avenue of upended logs with long sharpened tips which seemed to have been hardened with some kind of resin glinting in the fading light. Though pointed outwards in a hostile manner, they seemed rather ineffectual in repelling any known animal and were sufficiently spaced that a person could slip through them into the avenue space within.

Finding himself democratically elected to lead the official deputation; Johnny threaded through the stockade and stepped into the avenue leading up to the wall. He arrived at a skin flap and pushed it aside calling out "Anybody here?" The group followed a few paces behind.

Visible before them lay the stone steps and the familiar split granite boulders of the veranda. They found themselves in a large room in which the rectangular veranda formed a kind of raised plinth in the middle. High overhead roof openings in the peaks of the giant tepees bathed the space in a dim light. To either side there were dark shadowed grottoes where nameless horrors might conceivably be lurking. Stepping up onto the granite dais, they found themselves in front of a curious altar of square hewn logs. On top there were two ancient motor propellers placed ceremonially at either end and a small bunch of yellow dandelions scattered in the middle. Sarah touched the flowers gingerly and silently drew



attention to the moisture on her hands to point out that they were quite fresh and unwilted though out of water. Someone had been in this place only moments before their arrival, and had perhaps fled as they approached. Skirting the altar they stepped down on the opposite side and pushed aside the coarse skin flaps. The space beyond was utterly dark except for a glow of embers in the old fireplace which seemed to form the centre point of a large circular room. The floor of the old cottage had rotted away and completely disappeared so that the group found themselves standing on solid rock looking up at the hearth which was now at chest height. It took some moments for eyes to acclimatize to a feeble light shed by the dying embers.

They were not alone in the room. Immobile in front of the fire sitting in the centre of a ring of stones was a solitary figure clad with a ragged, grey shawl draped around her shoulders.

Mustering up his most friendly, optimistic tone, Johnny croaked "Hello?"

A long silence ensued while he considered whether to go and tap her on the shoulder or perhaps go around and confront her from the fire side. He glanced around the room. Their eyes became acclimatised to the outlines of the circular space in the dim light. The roof overhead seemed very high. There were faint cracks of light filtering in through the overlapped skins far above. An acrid stench pervaded the atmosphere. Adjacent to the silent figure there was an section of boarded wall wedged vertically between stones, and on it were displayed ancient yellowing photographs some of which were recognizable from their *PeeVee* visits in the past. There were also curious improvised bookshelves raised upon stone plinths off the damp ground and laden with books. All of the book spines of these had been removed so that the shelves seemed

stashed with a uniform texture of anonymous grey matter.

Books like this in the *PreInfo Era* were extremely uncommon. All had been digitized, efficiently pulped and recycled long ago. Somehow these, thousands of them, must have escaped the process.

Just as he made up his mind to approach the grey figure, as if reading his mind, a dry, cracked voice broke the silence.

“I have been waiting for you a long, long time”

Johnny froze, rooted to the ground waiting for her to say something else. All he could croak was a nervous “Oh!”

“I know what you have brought back to me. You have brought back the knife which will cut the last strand of our sad Destiny.”

Ariane glanced down nervously at the dagger which had caused so much trouble and over which she had been appointed responsible custodian. She had carefully wrapped it up in its original tissue.

“Sit Down,” the old woman croaked waving a listless hand behind her to the circle of flat rocks around the open pit. She herself got up and threw some kindling on the fire which burst suddenly into explosive life and sent shadows dancing frantically about the inside of the space. The group perched apprehensively on the ledges of shattered rock and staring up at the hearth. Slowly she turned to face them. In the black outline of her silhouette her eyes seemed to smoulder and emit their own pale light. Her hair hung in wisps around a deeply wrinkled face. It did not disguise that her head was seriously misshapen, as if partially crushed in some dreadful accident. She hobbled with great difficulty back to her ledge and sat down and began to chant to herself in a deep droning voice.

“*There is Evil under the sun and it is common among men*  
... “followed by a long silence.

The visitors looked from one to another apprehensively wondering whether they could politely bring this scene to a close and make their escape. Stuart made a crazy face to Andrew and screwed his finger into his ear, letting his tongue loll out, in a very *unreconstructed* manner. Andrew’s eyes flickered agreement.

Suddenly the crone began to intone in a creaking, sing song voice.

“There were so many of us once - and now there is just me. I have lived all my life on these islands and so did my grandparents before me. We chose our way of life while others, you, chose a life quite different!”

“But we never realized that in the very choosing to be different, to be separate, to honour our Nature, we were condemning each other to a terrible fate. Yes, we condemned ourselves, but we also condemned you at the same time.”

“To you we were the Outsiders, the people you left behind, who never left the land in the times of hardship when there was so little to go around. We, on our part, thought that we would survive when your civilization had crept further and further from the Truth.

“You see that I am alone. But I still have the Power. It was I that brought you here. It was I that planted the dagger in each of your hearts.”

Ariane held out the curious dagger. “Is this what you mean by the *dagger*?” she asked as brightly as possible under the circumstances.

The old woman did not look down or acknowledge the question.

“On that dagger you see the heads of the Seven Deadly

Sins, one ranged above the other. While we felt that we had escaped to the freedom of the Outside, you felt pity for us and perhaps more than a little remorse that we had been *abandoned* to the *Outside*.

“But don’t the Seven Deadly Sins seem a little passé in this day and age?” asked Ariane. “I mean we don’t really see people eating themselves to death any more. In fact science has produced a perfectly regulated diet for all of us. And if we have a problem with anger or some other unproductive emotion, well we just swallow a pill. All these things that you call Sins seem to me to be just overwrought emotions, and we have learned to deal with those.”

“Have you?” The old crone paid no further attention to this brave opinion.

“The spirits of Evil are everywhere. You have passed through the avenue of sharpened stakes and probably wondered who those stakes were intended to deter. The answer to that question is the Evil that lay within us.”

The old woman rose from her stone and shuffled over towards the bookcase. The fingers of her outstretched hand seemed like gnarled twigs as they clenched upon a volume in the shelf. The books on either side seemed to crumble into a flaky dust.

“Many years ago, when there were still many of us, I was priestess in the temple of Changes. A man of ghostly radiance appeared following one of my visions. I had never seen a complexion so white, even his hair was purity itself. I had never seen an Insider. He went directly to the little box of antiquities which was mounted on the wall beside the temple fire, a box that no one in my living memory had dared to approach. He selected one object with an unerring knowledge of its whereabouts, explaining

that he had come to borrow the dagger, that he had need of it. After he explained that I should never be gathered to death except by my own choice and only by means of this instrument when it was returned. At that time, in my folly and ministering in desperation to my dying tribe, I was pleased that the Gods had granted me such an important Fate. Now, alone, I am ready to receive back what was once borrowed.”

The Stranger selected a book from my treasury and from it he ripped a single page, folded it and placed it in my hand saying that this would explain who he was and why he had come.

From the book in her hand she pulled a single leaf of fragile onion skin paper and began to read.

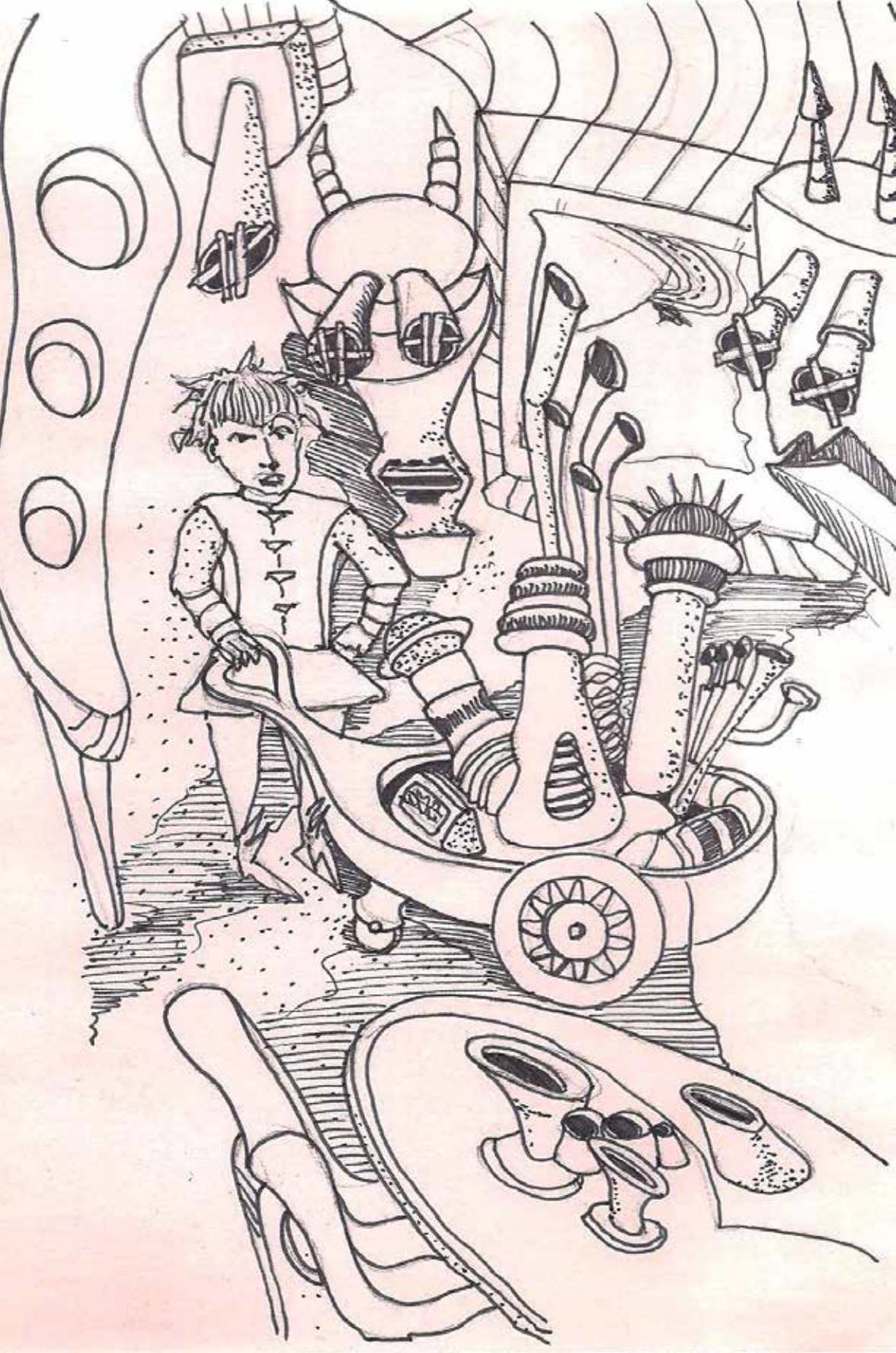
*“There is an evil under the sun and it is common among men. A man may be given riches, wealth and honour so that he wanteth nothing for his soul of all that he desireth, yet he may not be given the power to eat thereof, but the Stranger eateth of it.”*

“For years I pondered who this Stranger might be, and why he had visited me. And then I came to understand that that Stranger had lived with me all of my life. He was always there eating away at my life. He is the sin of Omission, more deadly than any of the evils depicted on the handle of the dagger. Finally I came to realize that he was also present in your lives.”

“You see that I am old and wasted, but time passes differently here on the Outside. You are my ancestors.”

“Give Me the dagger” cried the old woman suddenly in a strident, imperious voice that made them all start. Ariane automatically held it out at arm’s length and the woman’s hand, guided by unseen power plucked it from her hand and began to feel the contours of each of the caricatures on the handle.

“At the end of the handle and at the starting of my life is



the Sin of Pride. For I was once the most beautiful soul of these islands. But Pride is a death's head, an empty skull; it contains only the dust of its own small obsessions and undoing. Where are they now, my beautiful smooth skin and sparkling blue eyes?

“Where indeed?” murmured Owen, tapping his finger to his temple.

“Below Pride on the totem pole is Anger, and Anger lashed out first against those that had retreated and left us in our misery. You. We knew that we had been excoriated as ‘Outsiders’ by our own brothers and sisters. But then our Anger was turned upon ourselves.

“Then we were eaten by Envy, the most destructive of the sins. First we hated your distant, mythical civilization but then we came to Envy it, and we lost what was most treasured about our own. And when we lost that we sank, sank, sank through Lust, Gluttony, to inertia, inactivity, Sloth, all the sins of the Despairing.

“But where did you all come from?” Sarah’s voice faltered slightly. “We thought the Outsiders had all migrated to comfortable temperate climates. In fact we have been monitoring this place for years. Its been a place that we have all shared and which we have all come back to frequently for restoration. But we never saw you here, I mean not on our *PeeVees*. We never saw all of this hideous ruin that you have created and which seems to be existing in some sort of parallel space.”

“That parallel space is what you have learned to call the real world. Our reality is quite different from your Virtual realities. My people knew that you had to protect yourselves from reality, that you had fashioned machines that would protect yourselves from facing unwelcome, disturbing facts, that would rewrite your history and that would protect you from committing any of the

Seven Deadly Sins.”

“Many years ago, my people made a choice. They saw that their souls lay in Nature. They chose to return to the Garden of Eden leaving behind all of the artificiality and disorientation of the scientific world. Then we were Proud and independent.”

“The tragedy is that after so many years of rejection, we came to Envy the very things that we had rejected. We turned all of the broken technology which we found lying about us into idols of worship. These became more important in themselves than the life that had created them. You have seen the avenues of broken, decaying mechano-gods. By the time we came to collect it, and elevate it into a divine Being the spirit had long since left it. No one could remember how the magic was created. But none of these machines could be sparked back to life. All we remembered was that they had once been powerful, that all this had once happened. Those gods that could push a gigantic craft through water or air, uproot whole trees or displace mountains of rock. We remembered what we had once chosen to reject in the stories passed from generation to generation.”

“There came a time when Anger held sway over all of our people. First we vented our anger on you, the people who had turned your backs on us. But you were locked away in your impenetrable labyrinths of metal. We had forgotten that it had originally been our choice, a choice driven by our Pride. Then, in frustration, we turned our Anger upon ourselves. We broke up into little groups, plotting each others downfall taking out our sense of failure upon each other.”

“But where are all your people now?” Mavis glanced apprehensively into the shadows. “Have you been left alone?”

“They are all here around us but they are dead. I shall now

join them.”

“But that just wouldn’t be right.” Sarah began to see what was being proposed. “We can’t just leave you here to devise your own death. Perhaps we could drop you off somewhere among a more flourishing tribe of Outsiders, or perhaps we could arrange for you to go into suspension for eventual *Revitalization*. How would that be?”

“A little difficult to explain to even your Server I suspect” Andrew muttered under his breath.

“My own people are here. Though they are dead, they are living around me as shadows. You have brought back to me both my and their release. The cycle is complete.”

She turned to face the fire and held the dagger up over her head. A scrap of ragged cloth fell from her shoulder to reveal the skeletal emaciation of her body, the creased brown skin draped loosely over the bones seemed to be covered with gashes of ancient ecstatic self-mutilations.

The visitors glanced around themselves into the shadows.

With a sudden cat like movement the woman pushed her hand deep into the fire. She held it there for seconds, as if relishing the pain. With a shriek she called out, “Let the Stranger eat it!” and flung the glowing embers around the space. The visitors found themselves showered in a burst of burning embers. A faggot fell into Owen’s lap and he leapt up with a shout. They all scattered around the room which began to glow with a reddish light as the flames licked up the walls. The alcoves around the room were illuminated as the skins and draperies began to incinerate. Sinister packages wrapped in dry cracked skins spilled their contents, the bones of the long deceased. With a great hoist Andrew pulled Ariane out from under a beam which had lurched sideways and

fallen in slow motion onto her.

The scattered group converged upon the entry. Johnny was last to leave and turned to see the old woman again with the raised dagger drawing its sharp edge across the leathery skin of her forearms.

The group re-gathered in their surveillance hollow in front of the stockade and watched as the fire slowly licked its way around the junctions. Then in a sudden explosion the whole building was alight with a towering flame carried far up into the night sky.

“What will the *Monitors* make of this?” wailed Owen.

“There are no *Monitors*” snapped Johnny.

The group watched for some time spellbound until the flame seemed to subside. A piercing shriek emerged from the inferno.

“She can’t be still alive in all that. We had better return to our AeroGlisser, a fire this size is bound to attract a lot of attention, and we may have to field a lot of questions that we don’t really know the answers to.”

“Well, we know the answer to one”, said Johnny grimly.

Shaken, the group returned to the AeroGlisser, a pristine comforting glimpse of modern technology in the midst of mayhem. Sarah was last to ascend and took a final, longing look at the beauty around her, the smell of the night air mingled with the acrid smell of the distant fire, the sparkling stars overhead, a fingernail of new moon. She could make out the red embers of the conflagration visible through the black silhouetted trees.

# Conclusion

The stewardship of the *Fairlie Stabilizer* during the group's absence had not been an unqualified success.

To her initial alarm Sarah discovered herself awaking each morning to a doe eyed holographic hippo calling itself Polo who seemed to be insistently demanding a carrot.

Ariane was slightly annoyed that her collection of travel literature had all been translated into Bunjirati, a PaleoMaterialist language without identifiable grammatical structure. She soon realized that it would be easier to learn the language than translate them all back again. But a new spark of adventure had been planted in her heart

Stuart eventually came to appreciate the hundred strong pipe band which paraded through his space at unexpected intervals of the day or night. He had always felt that he was a traditionalist at heart.

Mavis conjured up a new level of chaos in her environment. Heaps of interesting new materials arrived daily in her dispatches. Previously she had known intuitively where all of her resource treasures could be found, but now the disarray seemed amplified and every project was exploring uncharted territory. The experience was exhilarating, the memories of the excursion continued to fire her imagination.

Andrew was so busy planning the next excursion for the group that he hardly noticed that the same question about Kazhikastani armorial patterns had been answered over two

hundred and fifty times in his *InBox*.

Chris, Matt and Owen retreated to their cyber-ranch to find the stock very lippy and knowledgeable about advances in spongiform cosmetic surgery.

After recovering from her initial shock at the appearance of Polo, Sarah diffidently approached her *Server* to request a recreational interlude at Fairwood. She took care to hide the apprehension in her voice, but the *Monitor* detected some note of uncertainty and prescribed an extra period of Revitalization at the end of the day.

The screens came alight with dazzling sunshine of a hot august day. Sarah walked up from the dock smelling the wonderful pine scent, listening to the waves of the boat still rebounding back and forth across the channel. Apprehensively she passed through the door of the old cottage which closed with a reassuring ‘clunk’. She felt the solidity of the stone flagging of the veranda underfoot, and the superimposed piles of ephemeral debris everywhere, the sad group of deckchairs which were awaiting their own ‘revitalization’ on some unlikely rainy day in the future, the scattered furniture with its jaunty, joyful colours. She passed into the still living room, dim but hot from the sun beating on the south wall of the house and approached the Old Curiosity box opening the cabinet door. Her fingers unerringly sought out the little shape with the sharp edges nestled among the snake skins. She lifted it up to the dazzling light flowing through the side windows and inspected the seven little totemic heads arranged one over the other on the handle. She felt the sharpness of the blade with her finger. She drew it across the palm of her hand and watched in fascination as the blood welled up from the almost imperceptible wound.

Then she picked up one of the Neolithic axe heads and

dropped it suddenly through all of the shelves. With a crash the objects were deposited on the floor, feathers, snake skins, the broken fragment of a clay peace pipe fell into a nondescript pile of debris around her feet. She stared at what she had done in horror.

A great sense of sadness overwhelmed her and a sob began to well up in her heart. She pushed the “UnDo” button and watched as the dazzling array of objects reconnect with each other, gathering again into a focussed splinter of light. Glass shelves and their contents danced back together through space. She took one last look that everything had settled in its right position and carefully closed the door. She sadly turned away and walked down the rock to the boat.

**M**eanwhile Johnny pulled from his pocket a strange assortment of objects gathered on these recent travels. Further ‘enhancements’ for the *Fairlie Stabilizer* were already taking shape in his mind.



