



**CENTURY CITY  
WAS A VAST  
METROPOLIS  
OF GLEAMING**

**SPIRES, OF GRACEFUL  
BUILDINGS THAT  
CLAWED THE BACK OF  
A PRETERNATURALLY  
CLEAR SKY. NONE WAS  
BELOW ONE HUNDRED  
STOREYS IN HEIGHT.  
THERE WERE  
SKYSCRAPERS OF  
SHINING CHROME, OF  
SEA-GREEN AND SKY-  
BLUE GLASS, OF  
BRIGHT PLASTICS AND  
GLOSSY PATTERNED  
CERAMICS. CENTURY CITY WAS A PRETTY  
COLOURFUL PLACE.**

*The streets of the city were wide and, despite the slab-sides of the buildings that towered over them, well-lit by cunning reflectors of sunlight. Broad pedalators trundled their lengths, carrying pedestrians. Some strode the rumbling belts; others relaxed in the seats provided, reading their news-flimsies, staring at the passing skyscrapers, engaged in conversation. Above the pedestrians were layer upon layer of traffic lanes – for antigrav belts, for antigrav cars at various regulated speeds, for swift antigrav vans and cumbersome antigrav carriers. At intervals, the sky was rent with the rolling thunder of personal shuttles blasting off from roof-top launching pads. Launches signified by roiling clouds that spilled down the bright sides of the buildings, a halo of exhaust about their crowns. Century City was a busy place.*

*The atmosphere of the city was more than simply seventy percent Nitrogen, twenty percent Oxygen, and other assorted gases. There was an indefinable rightness to the air, an aura of comfort that domed the city like an impervious force-field. The city was, as evidenced by the clear brows of its citizens, carefree. It was, as made plain by the sunny smiles swapped as people met, happy. It was, above everything else, safe.*

*Century City was a nice place to live.*

I was going to write a science-fiction story, a gaudy space-opera chock-a-block with rocketships and rayguns, bug-eyed monsters and dubious science, detailing the exploits of a lantern-jawed hero with an improbable name. But this was to be a Nineties space opera, morally ambiguous, the hero confused and unsure at this third dimensional universe. (I had once written a spoof space opera story, which was published in a now-defunct small press magazine. The story sank without trace, a fate in hindsight, richly deserved). My Nineties space opera was to be a personal homage to the long-dead, but still-published authors who had introduced me to the genre all those years ago.

The story grew, phrase by phrase, scene by scene, filling my mind's eye with vistas of alien worlds, with the barbed and fluted technology of Buck Rogers and Flash Gordon. Dialogue, splattered with ridiculous-sounding science-fictional expletives, reverberated around inside my head. I even had the perfect idiot-plot and, for the grand climax, a *deus ex machina* of breathtaking audacity. I was in love with my unwritten story.

And then I got made redundant.

It is a severe blow to discover you are no longer required by your employer, to find out that the loyalty you offered your firm in return for a regular wage has been judged worthless. As my manager broke

# PULP!

Written by Ian Sales  
Illustrated by Raffaele Teo

the news to me in his most compassionate tone, I could feel my self-respect leaking out, through my feet and into the worn beige carpet of his office. I looked down as apologies stumbled off his tongue (laden with the smug overtone of those that would remain employed), and it struck me that the innocuous taupe fabric beneath my feet must be positively water-logged with the failed careers of those that had received notice before me.

My story died.

It withered and shrank and vanished into a black hole of despair. Space opera is, after all, inherently light and cheerful, optimistic and gung-

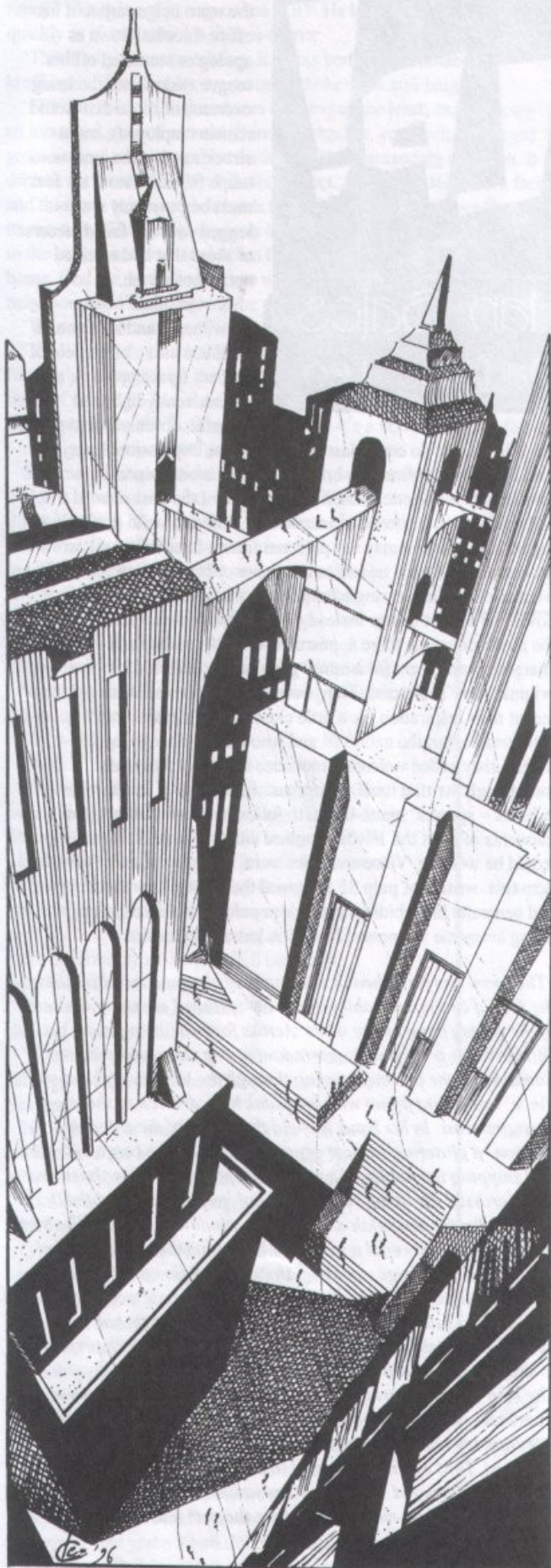
ho. It is the can-do enthusiasm of post-Great Depression America clad in a cloth cut from the bright and prosperous future. In retrospect, my Nineties vision of the future of the past seemed trite and an exercise in literary masturbation. I tried to write it, if only to regain some optimism in my personal future. I sat before my word-processor and forced myself to consign words to green screen. But what appeared in glowing letters before me was not what I had sat down and set out to say. Instead of my noble-countenanced hero with the moral dilemma, there appeared two foul-mouthed and violent characters, enforcers for a minor ganglord in a twisted vision of my original story's universe. They were called Vince and Jules (which meant their inspiration lay a little closer to the surface than was comfortable, but the names fit and who am I to change them? – indeed, they added welcome resonance to a story that was increasingly writing itself). Vince and Jules were of course, dressed in black – spacers' matte-black, to follow the forms of the genre, in garments of a cut the 1940s imagined citizens of the 25<sup>th</sup> century would be wearing. Vince and Jules were, naturally, armed. (A curious item this: writers of pulp SF imagined the distant future to be orderly and generally law-abiding, yet they populated it with characters toting awesome weaponry. The NRA has a long reach).

*The room was furnished in sculptures of chromed metal fulfilling the role of chairs and tables. Rainbow-splashed scenes of the heart of the galaxy hung on the walls. Across from the living-room's entrance was a large picture window, giving onto a deep balcony. Standing on the balcony, staring through the window at Jules and Vince, was a bent figure with long lank hair, dressed in shabby accoutrements. In his hand, he held the object of the enforcer's mission: a glittering storage crystal containing the cargo manifests and shipping timetables of a variety of space freighters. Jules and Vince crossed the living-room to the balcony, Vince found the controls for the verandah door and the window slid aside. The man on the balcony cowered and shrank back from them. Jules pulled out his blaster, a huge weapon festooned with flanges. It looked mean. It looked like a handgun that could down a space frigate in mid-launch. Jules knew full well the effect his firearm had on people. He relished that effect. He even had a set speech prepared to accompany his drawing of the blaster. He began to deliver it. The man with the storage crystal stumbled backwards, retreating from Jules and his weapon. He hit the balcony railing and with a wordless cry tumbled over it. Gone. Jules stopped in mid-speech, confused. That was not supposed to happen. The man should have pleaded and begged. And then Jules would have shot him.*

*Vince stared open-mouthed at where the man had vanished.*

*"Shit," he said.*

*And then again: "Shit."*



He turned to Jules, who was glowering at the blaster he never had the opportunity to use. "Did you fuckin' see that, man?" demanded Vince. He laughed in disbelief. "Straight fuckin' over. Skydivin' seventy fuckin' storeys down." He planed a hand downwards with a whoosh, apeing the man's long fall to the ground.

I apologise for the crudity of this scene-setting (I make no apology for the crudity of the language; it is essential) but it is germane to the plot. The storage crystal is, in fact, the token around which the whole plot will revolve, the centre of its concatenation of coincidences.

Vince and Jules strolled down the spotlessly clean steps from the skyscraper's foyer, and strode quickly towards their parked antigrav car. They had crossed no more than halfway when Vince stopped abruptly.

"Look at that, man," he said, pointing to a particular patch of sidewalk.

"Look at what, man?" asked Jules, bored.

"Nothin', that's fuckin' what," declared Vince, smugly. "No fuckin' skydiver. There should be fifty fuckin' square feet of the fucker."

"Shit. So where'd he fuckin' go?"

They both craned their necks to look upwards, as if the skydiver were still hurtling towards his explosive meeting with the sidewalk. But, of course, the sky was preternaturally clear.

"Fuckin' antigrav belt," said Vince, with conviction. "The fucker had an antigrav belt. I'll fuckin' kill him."

Jules shook his head sadly: the cheek of some people.

In the antigrav car, returning to the nightclub where their employer maintained his headquarters, Vince stared out the windscreen at the buildings floating past. The ride was so smooth, the oscillations and sudden dips of air travel so dampened by technology that to Vince it was as if he were stationary and the skyscrapers marching past and behind him in rows of almost military precision. "What he want it for anyways?" he asked Jules.

"The crystal?" grunted Jules. "For Captain Ra. Him an' Captain Ra, they close as fuckin' clones."

"They are fuckin' clones, you dumb shit," responded Vince, twisting in his bucket seat to look at Jules.

"No way, no fuckin' way. Captain Ra and the Baron? Clones? No fuckin' way." Jules shook his head in surprise—whether at the fact itself or his failure to spot it, he was not sure.

"Fuckin' way, man. You know the Count? Like, when he was gettin' old, he gets himself cloned and does it fuckin' twice 'cause, well, he's like that." Vince grinned, happy to know something Jules evidently did not. "So the Baron is his clone, right? And so is Captain Ra, right? And they fuckin' wasted the Count when they old enough so's they can have the business."

"Fuckin' clones... So when'd all this occur, man?"

Vince shrugged. "Bout maybe ten years ago. I don't know exact. You know how old the Baron is? He's fuckin' fifteen."

"Fifteen? You shittin' me? The Baron is fifteen?" Jules took his attention off the antigrav car's instruments—it more or less flew itself, anyway. "Fifteen? Fuck."

"Fifteen," nodded Vince. "Force-grown. S'truth, straight fuckin' up. No lie, man. Shit, I got fifty years on the Baron."

"You sixty-five? Shit, I got you down for hundret ten at least."

"Fuck you, man."

I work—worked, I should say—as a clerk in the finance department of a well-known brand of hosiery. It is the principal industry in the town, and I had worked there since leaving school at sixteen. I even met the woman who later became my wife at work.

There had been talk of lay-offs around the factory all week. The economy was in a mess. The 'green shoots of recovery' (that over-used and much-ridiculed phrase) had yet to poke their way through the ground-mulch of recession. It had been a hot summer and sales had plummeted (the hosiery market suffers at the whim of both fashion and Britain's mercurial climate). A new competitor had hit us

hard, importing low-cost tights and stockings manufactured in roboticised super-factories on the Continent, and taking our market share. In the finance department, we had seen costs spiral upwards and revenue corkscrew downwards, and were more than aware that drastic reductions were required.

Curiously, despite the fact that the company knitted a garment, it will always be a 'factory' to me, and the process will always be 'manufacturing'. In part, this is a result of my erstwhile function in finance, but there is also something industrial, something produce-like, about nylon tights and stockings. They are, after all, sold in supermarkets, alongside foodstuffs and toiletries. Seeing the way in which they are made every day – the seven miles of thread whipped and stitched into shape, the stinking vats of dye, the drying, ironing and packing, the very production-like nature of it all – has destroyed for me any other associations hosiery may have. (They say a woman dressed only in stocking looks erotic, yet a man dressed only in socks looks comical). But then, Life is like that: dreams are shattered when we discover the dirty reality that props them up.

*The Baron was an immensely fat man, with the plump unlined features of the very young. But beneath that rounded pleasant face of pink vat-grown flesh, there festered a mind of frightening brutality. The Baron could, by turns, be effete and cultured... then, in an instant, a mere sidereal second, he would be sadistic and sociopathic, violent and vicious. His mercurial temper was rightly feared by all his subordinates. These mood swings were all the more to be dreaded since the Baron carried a gun, a small yet potent blaster.*

*The Baron suffered fools badly. Those that had, in his words, "screwed up", could expect swift and summary injustice. Both Vince and Jules had in the past carried smoking corpses down to the recycler in the basement, the remains of supplicants to the Baron that had met with unfortunate and abrupt ends.*

*It was with this fear in the forefront of their minds that Vince and Jules entered the nightclub where the Baron held court. They perched on stools at the long chromed bar whilst, at a table on the club floor, the Baron berated one of the scantily-clad club dancers for a misjudged peccadillo.*

*Tony, the barman, sidled over to Vince and Jules. The club was shut, but the bar never closed when the Baron's court was in session. "Yo guys," said Tony, "What's with the glum faces?"*

*Vince grunted. He gestured at the Baron and the dancer with a nod of his head. "He in a good mood?"*

*Tony batted a rat-sized polisher-robot to one side and propped both his elbows on the shining metal bar-top. "Shit, man," he said. "How the fuck I know?"*

*Jules' dour expression turned a shade more dour.*

*The dancer had climbed up from her knees before the Baron. With a quick bob, she turned and made her way to the bar.*

*"Yo, Peaches," said Vince.*

*"Hi guys." Peaches swept past them, a constellation of secondary sexual characteristics barely covered by scraps of metallic cloth, and sashayed through the staff door by the bar.*

*Vince and Jules slid off their barstools and diffidently approached the Baron.*

*"Well?" asked the Baron, once they stood before him. His voice was high and menacing.*

*Vince did the talking. "Sorry, boss. No crystal."*

*"Whaddaya mean 'no crystal'?" He poked a fat be-ringed finger in their direction. "I sent you to get a fuckin' crystal and you come back with no fuckin' crystal."*

*"We were beaten to it, boss. There was this guy there already, and when we went to get it off'a him, he, like, fell off'a the balcony."*

*"So you could'a taken it from his body, right?"*

*"There weren't no body, boss. He must'a had a 'antigrav belt. Shit, he just flew away, boss."*

*The Baron growled. "Vince, you tellin' me you screwed up?"*

*Vince shuddered: those fateful words! He shook his head vehemently.*



"An' what 'bout you, Jules? You got nothin' to say in your defence?"

Jules picked his gaze up from the floor. "We gonna get it back for you, boss. That's a promise."

"I'm gonna give you this one chance, guys," said the Baron, his eyes glittering. "'Cause today I'm feelin' magnanimous. You get me that crystal or you goin' down the recycler and you ain't comin' back, y'hear?"

Vince and Jules nodded in unison.

There is nothing  
new under a  
galaxy of suns.

I signed on for Unemployment Benefit yesterday. I waited amongst rubber plants and Yuccas, scowling whippet-faced young men in jeans and football shirts, scowling anaemic young women with squalling babies. At a desk, behind which sat a terse blonde with blood red talons, I filled in form after form. All those questions that seem at first glance incredibly asinine, but on reflection make a peculiar bureaucratic sense: "Are you blind?"; "Can you read English?"

I am now officially a 'Job Seeker'.

This story is becoming a form of catharsis. My life is joining that of Vince and Jules on the fluorescing screen of my word-processor. Seeing the words appear before makes me realise the curious nature of creating a fictional milieu for a science-fiction story. Not content with merely inventing character and plot, SF writers must also build a whole world (which can be as big as the universe) from scratch. The slightest inconsequential thought can set off a chain of fervid imagining from which, like the proverbial acorn and its oak tree, a whole galaxy of stars, planets, and cities can grow. Such an act of creation has no equal in any art form.

An example: dear reader, you are no doubt aware of a film starring Bruce Willis called *Hudson Hawk* (I make no critical judgement of this movie – other than to say I thought its stars capable of better). It is not necessary to recap the plot of the film, only to mention that it involves the mechanical genius of Leonardo da Vinci. In a climactic scene in *Hudson Hawk*, Bruce Willis and the heroine, Andie Macdowell, escape from the villain's lair in a reproduction of da Vinci's glider. As this scene occurred, my creative juices began to flow. What if, I reasoned, da Vinci had built a working model of his glider and ushered in the era of Flight three centuries early? Fanciful notion built on fanciful notion, and soon I had troopers of the Holy Inquisition parachuting out of aircraft driven by Hero of Alexandria's steam-engine, leaping out of the sky to hunt down heretics.

And then, a writer I admire, and whose work I enjoy, published a novel based around a similar premise: an industrialised Renaissance Italy. A couple of months later, BBC2 aired a documentary demonstrating that the reputation of the Spanish Inquisition was an historical myth – of the tens of thousands of cases the Inquisition 'investigated', less than ten percent were actually tortured.

'Da Vinci's Aeroplane' deflated like an old balloon.

Are there a finite number of ideas around which to base a science-fiction story? Is the only recourse for aspiring writers (and I include myself in that nebulous body) to differ the angle of attack? Has, indeed, this very story you, dear reader, are now reading, been written before?

Metafiction has, I freely admit, been done by others, both consciously and unconsciously: "Before him stretched an arena of white sand"; "He awoke, his mind a complete blank". Authorial interventions are not a thing I can claim credit for inventing.

There is nothing new under a galaxy of suns.

Back at the bar, Vince and Jules sank onto stools. Tony was at the other end of the bar-top, eyeing the polisher-robot with suspicion as it scurried back and forth, burnishing the metal surface with its padded feet.

"Good move, Jules," said Vince. "What the fuck we gonna do now?"

Jules did not reply, but simply stared at his blurred reflection in the mirrored bar-top.

"We gotta find the skydiver: how we gonna do that?" asked Vince.

Jules looked up. "I seen his face somewhere before," he said.

"Yeah, sure Jules. You seen him before. Fuck!" Vince kicked the bar viciously.

Jules reached out and gripped Vince's shoulder. "No, listen up, Vince. I seen him before. I know. We just gotta find out where, then we get the crystal off'a him."

"You believe that? Shit, man, you dumber 'n a garbage-bot."

"Fuck you."

"Fuck you."

The pair of them lapsed into hostile silence.

After several minutes of mutual glaring, Vince climbed to his feet.

"Don't know 'bout you," he said. "But I gotta go home. You comin'?"

(Oh, wouldn't it be subversive to have Vince and Jules lovers! But no, this is a space opera and so must follow the forms: big guns with which to shoot things, big sex drives with which to screw 'objects' such as Peaches. However, it is also the Nineties: will a strong female character appear at a later juncture? We can only hope).

Vince shared an apartment with his girlfriend. Jules lived alone.

Vince's girlfriend was a dancer at another nightclub. As a result, she kept odd hours. To say that Vince trusted her would be a misrepresentation of his character – the concept was not in his vocabulary. Their relationship thrived in an atmosphere of mutual jealousy and suspicion. That either of them strayed was taken for granted; that other men had sex with Cherry, Vince's paramour, was evidence to him that she was desirable and that only he had the charisma and sexual prowess to keep her.

It is not recorded what Cherry felt regarding Vince's frequent lapses from monogamy.

Jules, on the other hand, lived alone since he fancied himself something of an ascetic. He had long since made peace with whatever gods or material fetishes shared his life. He felt himself to be a cultured individual. This was manifestly untrue, but no-one had the heart to tell Jules this. He lived cosseted by this delusion, secure in the knowledge that the little speech on the iniquities of existence that he delivered to those he was about to 'execute' made him an interesting person. Of course, no existence is perpetually sunny, and Jules' was no exception. There was always the Baron, a brooding thunderhead that dominated the horizon whichever way Jules looked.

En route to his home, Jules dropped Vince off at the skyscraper where he shared an apartment with Cherry. Naturally, she was out when Vince stepped through the front door. Nevertheless, he called out "Honey, I'm home!", mistakenly believing it to be witty and funny. Chuckling, he headed down the hall to the living-room. There was a message from Cherry on the screen by the door to the kitchen. Vince bent close and read:

"Darling, going to be late home tonight. Got an important client calling at the club and Mister Keep wants me to be a hostess to him. All my love, Cherry"

... in the looping feminine typeface she liked the computer to use to display her dictated messages (needless to say, Cherry's grasp of correctly-formulated English was as shaky as Vince's, but the computer would invariably clean up her syntax). Vince sighed: another night in, alone in front of the 3D set, watching porn and drinking beer.



I note that so far my wife has failed to appear in my story – other than a brief mention a page or so previously. I have taken so much care to introduce the love of Vince's life (will *she* be the strong female? We shall see), that it seems churlish not to allow my own spouse a voice in this narrative. If I have been sparse with physical descriptions of my cast, then that is deliberate: Jules and Vince are, after all, stereotypical enforcers; Peaches and Cherry are stereotypical sex objects. They are not real people. My wife, on the other hand, is very much real.

We have been married eight years. As I think I mentioned, it was a shopfloor romance. We were very much in love – in love with ourselves, with each other, with the bright new world of the mid-Eighties. After six months of going steady, it was only natural that we tie the connubial knot. Our respective families were more than happy at being joined. In the years since, we have become... *comfortable* with each other. Like a prematurely-aged couple, we have seen the world outside our marital semi-detached turn sour, and we have comforted each other in light of this. It yet remains to be seen whether my wife (I have failed to name her for you, dear reader; it is Janet) will succeed in administering succour to me in my new state of unemployment. We have rowed already. I have yet to spend the night on the sofa, but it seems only a matter of time...

My life is falling apart. There is something vital and primeval about Vince and Jules, and they are my comfort. Janet says "all you do is sit in front of your computer typing away; you won't find a job that way" in that hectoring tone wives have perfected over the centuries. Vince and Jules are my escape from the real world: their limited vocabularies (centred around hard-edged *real* expletives like 'fuck' and 'shit' as it is), their awesome handguns, their nubile female acquaintances, and even – it has to be said – the simple moral code by which they live.

Janet is downstairs, doing the ironing and watching Richard and Judy on the box. Last night, we argued about bills. We have negative equity on the house. We cannot meet the next set of payments on the two-litre Ford Orion. The television and video are rented, and may soon have to be returned. At least this word-processor is mine; at least the world of Jules, Vince, the Baron and Cherry is mine.

---

*When Jules was convinced of something, he was unshakeable in his conviction. And he was convinced that he knew the skydiver. Unfortunately, he knew no more than that. Jules did know, however, that sooner or later he would remember the identity he sought. It had happened before. He would be walking down the street, or flying along in his antigrav car, or just sitting at the bar and bullshitting, and then – zap! – the name would pop into his head. It was quite uncanny.*

*Jules' thoughts drifted to Cherry, Vince's girlfriend. It would be true to say that Jules lusted after her, but he respected Vince (or rather, the huge weapon Vince carried in a shoulder-holster) and had thus far done nothing but admire her from a distance and be pleasant. A mental image of the pneumatic and curvaceous Cherry suggested the evening's entertainment.*

*Jules called Vince on the videophone, waking him from a post-prandial slumber. "Yo, Vince," he said to the vacant face appearing on his screen.*

*"Whassup, man?"*

*"You busy?"*

*"No, man."*

*"Wanna go see Cherry?"*

*"Sure, man."*

*Jules picked up his blaster and checked the power-pack level.*

*"Get your shit together, boy. I'll pick you up in ten."*

*Vince rubbed his bleary eyes. "Sure, Jules."*

*Vince was waiting on the sidewalk when Jules' antigrav car sank to a landing in front of him. As he lifted the gull-wing door and climbed in, Vince said, "I ain't so sure this's a good idea, Jules. You know Keep. He an' the Baron, that's bad news." He sank into the*

bucket seat and buckled up. "An' you wantin' to go with our pieces."

Jules piloted the vehicle straight up to the requisite traffic lane. "Hey, the Baron never said Keep's place was off-limits. An' everyone know 'bout you and Cherry." He patted his awesome weapon in its holster. "Everything cool, man."

Vince was not convinced: "Aw shit, Jules. I just gotta bad feelin', you know?"

It has been three weeks. Today, my first giro arrived. I have not shaved since signing on. Janet accuses me of becoming a slob. And she is quite right. What reason do I have to take care over my appearance? If Janet didn't do the laundry, I wouldn't be wearing clean Y-fronts and socks. I have decided I may take up smoking – but for the fact that I have never smoked and the expense is prohibitive. Already I spend too much money on drink: I have become a connoisseur of supermarket own-brand lager.

Yesterday we had baked beans on toast for dinner. Janet called it 'economising'. As I sat at the dining table, staring down at the little round orange objects on my plate, I realised I had reached my nadir. Surely I could sink no lower? Strange that such a state of affairs should be signified by a foodstuff as mundane as baked beans. I glanced across at Janet on the other side of the table. To look at her you would not know that our life has become depressing, that our meagre savings have all but gone, that repossession of the house appears to be only weeks away. Janet dresses as she has always dressed; her make-up as perfect as it always is; the house as spotless (but for the desk in the spare room on which my word-processor perches) as it has always been.

Janet urged me to eat. "Go on, they're good for you," she told me.

The irony of it, that my strong female should appear in my life and not that of my fictional characters. How very Nineties. She is, I now realise, the centre around which my life revolves.

I have never really given much thought to my wife, not since the days of our romance. We enjoyed the same things, we both had the same definition of a 'good night out'. She was pretty, and knew how to dress to her strengths (and, I now realise, still does). She said I "made her laugh". We were a good couple.

Now? Now, she no longer laughs at my jokes. Now, I go down the pub with my 'mates' and she stays at home and watches television. Now, we live in each other's blind spot, and it is our effects on each other's lives of which we take notice. I have sorely neglected my wife. Adversity has brought out the best in her. I need only look in the mirror to see which side of my character has come to the fore since being made redundant.

*Adversity has  
brought out the  
best in her.*

Jules and Vince, side by side, stepped into Keep's nightclub. Maintaining an even pace and set expressions, they strode through the foyer and into the club proper. They halted just inside the entrance, surveying the scattered tables ringed with revellers, the scurrying staff, the stage with its minimally-clad cavorting cabaret dancers.

A large figure in garb similar to their own stepped in front of the two enforcers. "Yo, Vince," he growled.

"Adam," acknowledged Jules. "How's it hangin'?"

Adam grunted. "S'okay."

"Mister Keep aroun'?" Vince asked, deciding it might be wise to

avoid him if possible.

"He busy tonight, boys. Outta-town customer. Big bucks."

"How 'bout Cherry?"

Adam shrugged. "She busy too, Vince. You don' wanna disturb her."

Jules smiled brightly. "Hey, no problem, man. We gonna get us a drink, okay?"

Adam stepped to one side, and Jules and Vince made their way around his muscular bulk to the bar.

For several long minutes they sat, perched on stools, sipping their domestic beer. "We come all this way," said Vince. "An' we don' get to see Cherry."

"You see her at home."

"So why we come, man?"

Jules grinned, his teeth flashing in the darkness, a beacon of good humour. "You know I tol' you I seen the skydiver before, man? Well, I seen him here." It was a blatant lie – Jules had thought of nothing but the prospect of seeing Cherry in her 'working' clothes. But, bizarrely, the moment he uttered this untruth, he felt a zap! rattle around the inside of his skull and knew it to be true. In mounting amazement at his own prescience, he scanned the room and... grabbing Vince's arm, squeezed his biceps. "Vince, you seein' what I seein'?"

"I dunno, Jules," said Vince slowly. "What you seein'?"

Jules pointed at a figure drinking alone at a table beside the dance-floor. He was sitting side-on to them. He was well-dressed, his silver lamé jacket reflecting, in glittering shards of fractured light, the lasers that fought each other's straight and shining blades above the dance-floor. His face was only partially-lit by the small saucer-shaped lamp in the centre of the table. Despite his smart accoutrements and the poor lighting, despite the umbrella'd cocktail he lifted to his mouth at intervals, he was easily recognisable. "The fuckin' skydiver," breathed Vince.

Jules called the barman: "Yo, Deke!"

"Yeah?"

"Who's that guy down there? Silver threads."

Deke peered along Jules' pointing arm. "Called Murgatroyd," he said. "Works for Keep."

"We gonna go see him," Jules told Vince.

"Whaddaya wanna see that piece of shit for?" asked the barman.

"Business, Deke," said Jules.

"Yeah, an' none of yours too," added Vince.

Jules and Vince rose from their stools and casually sauntered into the crush on the dance-floor. A sea of shuffling bodies parted before them as they approached Murgatroyd's table. If Murgatroyd was shocked when the dancers suddenly parted to reveal the menacing figures of Jules and Vince, he hid it well.

"Gentlemen," said Murgatroyd, half-rising to his feet. He sank back down. "To what do I owe this dubious pleasure?"

"You got something what don' belong to you," said Jules, glaring at the seated Murgatroyd. "You got that crystal, an' that belongs to me and Vince here."

"Crystal? What crystal? I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about." Murgatroyd's teeth glowed in an easy smile.

Vince spoke up. "If Keep finds out you crossed the Baron, you're one dead fucker, deader than if you did fall seventy storeys. Hand over the crystal and we don' say nothin'."

Murgatroyd sneered. "It was Keep that had me take the crystal, you fools. Who do you think he's entertaining right now? Only the Shadow of the Belt. With the Shadow in his pocket, Keep will soon be bigger than the Baron."

"No crystal?" asked Jules sadly.

"No crystal," sneered Murgatroyd.

Vince shot him, pulled out his awesome handgun and blasted a smoking hole between Murgatroyd's eyes.

"Shit, man," declared Jules. "It was my turn."

The show on the stage stumbled and faltered, a ragged line of high kicks as the dancers lost their rhythm. The revellers on the dance-floor froze. The thudding music careered on, but no-one was

listening. All eyes turned to Jules and Vince, and the corpse at the table, its face a blasted smoking ruin. Adam suddenly appeared, looming over them. He was furious. "What the fuck you do that for?" he yelled. "You dumber 'n shit-robots." He sighed. "Mister Keep's gonna have a fuckin' fit."

"Don't matter," said Jules glumly. "We're dead, anyhow."

"Whaddaya say that for?" asked Vince.

Jules rounded on him. "If Keep's got the crystal for the Shadow, then he ain't gonna give it up for the Baron, and the Baron is gonna waste us for screwin' up."

"Crystal? What crystal?" asked Adam, looking from one enforcer to the other.

"Long story," said Vince.

"Fuck, we dead," said Jules.

A ripple of fear ran through the spectators on the dance-floor, beginning at the far edge of the room and sweeping inexorably towards Vince, Jules, and Adam. It broke upon the edge of the crowd of clubbers and they blundered aside, revealing a small doll-like man expensively dressed and bejewelled. A tangible sense of menace floated about him like bad cologne. Behind him towered a tall and saturnine man in a ridiculously tight spacer's suit. Buried in this man's long-armed embrace was Cherry, all curves and flashes of flesh. She bobbed up and down, and gave Vince a quick wave and a cheerful grin. The tall man glowered down at her.

Coming to a halt beside Adam and steeping his be-ringed fingers, the diminutive Mister Keep peered up at Jules and Vince with beady black eyes. "Evening, boys," he said.

"Evening, Mister Keep," returned Jules and Vince dourly, in unison.

"So what's going on here, then?" He peered up at the body slumped at the table. "Is that Murgatroyd? Tut, tut, what's he done now?"

Vince and Jules looked down sharply at Keep. The small man met their gaze openly. "If the Baron is going to put a hit on one of my associates, I do wish he would do me the courtesy of letting me know." He smiled, a lightning flash of perfect white teeth and it was gone. "So what exactly did the late Murgatroyd do to warrant such an ignominious end?"

"We come for the crystal," said Jules. "What Murgatroyd stole from us."

"Crystal? What crystal?"

"He said you tol' him to take it."

Keep pulled apart his steeped fingers and laughed lightly. "I did no such thing. Murgatroyd has done no business for me for several months. I tolerated him, but only just." This last clause was said in a voice suddenly hardened. "Now suppose you boys explain what you've been up to?"

Jules did the honours: "The Baron sent us to get this crystal, see, for Captain Ra, only Murgatroyd here took it from us. So we come to get it back."

"And what's on this crystal?"

"Freighter shit - timetables and lists of cargoes."

"And why would I want this crystal?" asked Keep.

"For the Shadow." Both Jules and Vince were failing to follow this conversation. They knew they were missing something, but they couldn't quite see what it was passing them by.

"Come now, boys, do you think me crude? Besides, the Shadow here has his own: quite excellent network of ground agents."

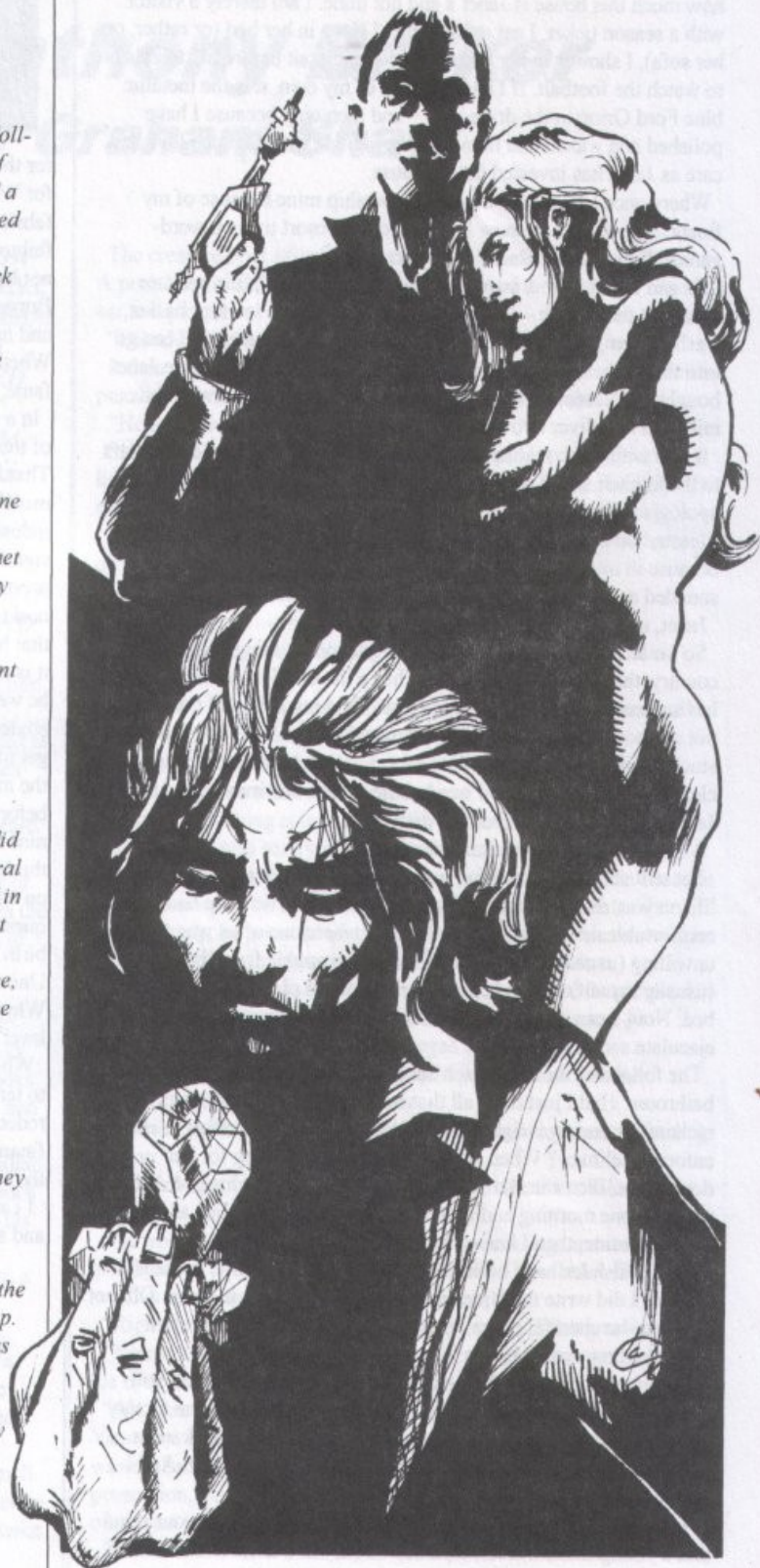
Adam, meanwhile, had moved around the table and was rifling the corpse's pockets. He found what he was looking for, and held it up. Keep saw him and gestured at him. Jules and Vince spun round as Keep said, "Is that what you were after?"

"The crystal!" exclaimed the two enforcers.

"Give it to them, Adam. Now, boys, please leave my club quickly and quietly. I'll deal with the body. And tell the Baron he owes me."

"Yes, Mister Keep," said Jules.

"Sure thing, Mister Keep," said Vince.



There has been a reconciliation. Vince and Jules have found their crystal and it struck me that I had one of my own to retrieve (how very New Age). For the first time in a month, I shaved. Afterwards, I felt so much more cheerful, as if the razor had rid me of my worries along with my whiskers. My beard was the barometer of my despair.

Janet, needless to say, was surprised. It was too soon for her to be pleased at the change. I also determined to change my life. As a result, certain things had to go. No more tinned lager from Tesco. No more days spent slouched in front of the word-processor. So, dear reader, I must say goodbye soon, and return to the real world.

But there are words that must be written yet.

As I look about me, I realise that it has never occurred to me before how much this house is Janet's and not mine. I am merely a visitor with a season ticket. I eat at her table, I sleep in her bed (or rather, on her sofa), I shower in her bathroom, I stretch out before her television to watch the football. If I have a home of my own, it is the metallic blue Ford Orion in the drive-way – and then only because I have polished and waxed and hoovered the vehicle with as much love and care as Janet has invested in this house.

Where once I may have thought ownership mine because of my financial contribution, now I can no longer resort to such word-games. I do not contribute; I have no finances.

If I can look in my drawer and find a pair of socks, it is because Janet put them there – took the dirty ones from the laundry basket, washed them, dried them, and folded them in the drawer. If I can go into the kitchen and make myself a cup of coffee, it is because Janet bought the Nescafé and put it in the cupboard, arranged with the milkman to deliver two pints every morning.

It was with these realisations filling my head that I went downstairs to the kitchen. Janet was at the sink, washing the breakfast dishes. I apologised for my behaviour. I told her I needed her. I was not proud. I feasted on crow and humble pie. And I hated myself as I did so, because in my hour of need I was simply parroting words that sounded as though I were after nothing more than sex.

Janet, unsurprisingly, was unmoved.

So I matched heart with deeds. In every home throughout the country, the male of the household has a list of DIY chores that he has succeeded in putting off for years. I had my list. And I did them. I put up those shelves. I fixed that squeaking door. I unfastened that stuck window. For the first time ever, I persuaded Janet to help me clean the car. Together, we weeded the garden and mowed the lawn. Janet cooked, and I washed the dishes.

And I found myself back in Janet's bed.

Yet still she held something back. (I apologise for inflicting my sex life on you, dear reader). We have had good sex, we have had comfortable sex, we have even had sex where one of us was unwilling (usually her) or one of us was incapable from drink (usually myself). In the beginning, I set out to pleasure my wife in bed. Now, I can no longer remember what is on my mind when I ejaculate.

The following morning, I felt Janet watching me as I headed for the bathroom. Had I just done all that back-breaking labour simply to reclaim my conjugal rights? Had I deceived her in an effort to end my enforced celibacy? When she found breakfast waiting for her downstairs, then she started to believe I might have changed. When I woke up one morning and found myself making breakfast as though it were routine, then I knew I had changed.

Vince and Jules have been good for me. I see that now. Perhaps in the end, I did write the Nineties space opera I set out to write. Oh, not the gung-ho cheerful prose I originally envisaged, but there is a happy ending. And it is this:

Tomorrow, I am going to look for a new job. I am, after all, still young, and my experience in the financial department at the factory will stand me in good stead. Somewhere out there is a desk in an office with my name on it. It only remains for me to find it. And I shall not give up until I have done so.

I know what you're thinking, dear reader: it has crossed your mind that a young finance clerk, a person so (to use a term beloved of SF fans) *mundane*, leading such an oh so ordinary existence, seems an

unlikely author of what you have just read. But then, of course, I too, in that person, am a fictional creation. There are layers and layers.

The truth? There is no Janet. There is no semi-detached house in an un-named Midlands town, with a Ford Orion in the drive-way and a rented television in a corner of the living-room. (Incidentally, I also loathe baked beans). There is no green-screened word-processor –

*My beard was the  
barometer of my  
despair.*

for the record, I am using a Compaq LTE Lite/20 laptop and Word for Windows 2.0. However, not everything in this story has been a fabrication. I, the true writer, am present in every word (as I could not fail to be). If I have deceived you, I beg your forgiveness. This has not been a mere intellectual exercise, an attempt at 'futfic' in a Burgessian mode, but for me too a catharsis. Like Vince and Jules and my un-named author, I also have been searching for something. Whether it is meaning in my life, I cannot say. It is certainly not fame, achieved through the pages of a science-fiction magazine.

In a similar fashion to Janet's anonymous husband, I too am a child of the mid-Eighties, gained my majority during the heyday of Thatcherism. The choice of a finance clerk in a hosiery mill was not a mere whim; I grew up in a town dominated by mining and the hosiery industry (although I chose hosiery since the product is such an apt signifier of late Twentieth Century society – it is such an *industrial* product, made wholly of artificial fibres, as functionally useless as a necktie, and designed only to enhance those aspects of womankind that have no bearing on their contribution to the world we share). But it is at that point that I and my fictional author part company: whilst he went on to meet Janet at work, and later marry her, I became a student in Higher Education in an ugly West Midlands town. I did not get made redundant. No, on the contrary, I found myself unemployed the moment I was qualified for work. I spent nine months on the dole before getting a job abroad (and this, dear reader, is truth). It is those nine months that this story is intended to exorcise. Time and again, I think back on those endless days in the bedsit, scrabbling to survive on what the Government considered equitable. And the same question occurs to me every time: *why?* How could the country of my birth be in such a sad state that it could not find gainful work for a University graduate? Why was I forced to flee the UK to get a job? Why was the fall-out from the Eighties so damaging on a personal level?

When I know the answers to these questions, or perhaps, have come to terms with never knowing the answers; then, like Jules and Vince, redeeming themselves in the eyes of the Baron; like my fictional finance clerk, rediscovering the love of a good woman; maybe then, I too will have found a crystal of my very own.

I can only hope it contains nothing so prosaic as cargo manifests and shipping timetables.

FIN