

<boldtype>

<short story>

(...continued from Part I)

*Joan said, 'I mean what
are we doing here?
Reflecting on the world
or illuminating it?'*

Luke parked his Chevrolet Celebrity on the fifth floor of the studio car park and rode down in the elevator with two minor executives in track-suits who were discussing the latest records broken by "'Tis he whose yester-evening's high disdain." He put on his dark glasses as he crossed the other car park, the one reserved for major executives. Each bay had a name on it. It reassured Luke to see Joe's name there, partly obscured by his Range Rover. Poets, of course, seldom had that kind of clout. Or any clout at all. He was glad that Henna Mickiewicz didn't seem to realize this.

Joe's office: Jim, Jack, Joan, but no Jeff. Two new guys were there. Luke was introduced to the two new guys. Ron said he spoke for Don when he told Luke that he was a great admirer of his material. Huddled over the coffee percolator with Joe, Luke asked after Jeff, and Toe said, "Jeff's off the poem," and Luke just nodded.

They settled in their low armchairs.

Luke said, "What's 'A Welshman to Any Tourist' doing?"

Don said, "It's doing good but not great."

Ron said, "It won't do what 'The Gap in the Hedge' did."

Jim said, "What did 'Hedge' do?"

They talked about what "Hedge" did. Then Joe said, "Okay. We're going with the sonnet. Now. Don has a problem with the octet's first quatrain, Ron has a problem with the second quatrain, Jack

and Jim have a problem with the first quatrain of the sestet, and I think we all have a problem with the final couplet."

Alistair presented himself at the offices of the *LM* in an unblinking trance of punctuality. He had been in the area for hours, and had spent about fifteen quid on teas and coffees. There wasn't much welcome to overstay in the various snack bars where he lingered (and where he moreover imagined himself unfavorably recollected from his previous *LM* vigils), holding with both hands the creaky foam container, and watching the light pour past the office windows.

As Big Ben struck two, Alistair mounted the stairs. He took a breath so deep that he almost fell over backwards--and then knocked. An elderly office boy wordlessly showed him into a narrow, rubbish-heaped office that contained, with difficulty, seven people. At first Alistair took them for other screenplay writers and wedged himself behind the door, at the back of the queue. But they didn't look like screenplay writers. Not much was said over the next four hours, and the identities of Sixsmith's supplicants emerged only partially and piecemeal. One or two, like his solicitor and his second wife's psychiatrist, took their leave after no more than ninety minutes. Others, like the VAT man and the probation officer, stayed almost as long as Alistair. But by six forty-five he was alone.

He approached the impossible haystack of Sixsmith's desk. Very hurriedly he started searching through the unopened mail. It was in Alistair's mind that he might locate and intercept his own letter. But all the envelopes, of which there were a great many, proved to be brown, windowed, and registered. Turning to leave, he saw a Jiffy bag of formidable bulk addressed to himself in Sixsmith's tremulous hand. There seemed no reason

not to take it. The old office boy, Alistair soon saw, was curled up in a sleeping bag under a worktable in the outer room.

On the street he unseamed his package in a ferment of gray fluff. It contained two of his screenplays, *Valley of the Stratocasters* and, confusingly, *Decimator*. There was also a note:

I have been called away, as they say. Personal ups and downs. I shall ring you this week and we'll have--what? Lunch?

Enclosed, too, was Alistair's aggrieved letter-unopened. He moved on. The traffic, human and mechanical, lurched past his quickened face. He felt his eyes widen to an obvious and solving truth: Hugh Sixsmith was a screenplay writer. He understood.

After an inconclusive day spent discussing the caesura of "Sonnet"'s opening line, Luke and his colleagues went for cocktails at Strabismus. They were given the big round table near the piano.

Jane said, "TCT is doing a sequel to 'Tis'."

Joan said, "Actually it's a prequel."

"Title?" said Joe.

"Undecided. At TCT they're calling it 'Twas'."

"My son," said Joe thoughtfully, after the waiter had delivered their drinks, "called me an asshole this morning. For the first time."

"That's incredible," said Bo. "My son called me an asshole this morning. For the first time."

"So?" said Mo.

Joe said, "He's six years old, for Christ's sake."

Phil said, "My son called me an asshole when he was five."

"My son hasn't called me an asshole yet," said Jim. "And he's nine."

Luke sipped his Bloody Mary. Its hue and texture made him wonder whether he could risk blowing his nose without making yet another visit to the bathroom. He hadn't called Suki for three days. Things were getting compellingly out of hand with Henna Mickiewicz. He hadn't actually promised her a part in the poem, not on paper. Henna was great, except you kept thinking she was going to suddenly sue you anyway.

"At once Sixsmith showed himself to be a person of some candor. Or it might have been that he saw in the younger screenplay writer someone before whom all false reticence could be cast aside."

Mo was saying that each child progresses at his own rate, and that later lulls regularly offset the apparent advances of the early years.

Jim said, "Still, it's a cause of concern."

Mo said, "My son's three. And he calls me an asshole all the time."

Everybody looked suitably impressed.

* * *

The trees were in leaf, and the rumps of the tourist buses were thick and fat in the traffic, and all the farmers wanted fertilizer admixes rather than storehouse insulation when Sixsmith finally made his call. In the interim, Alistair had convinced himself of the following: before returning his aggrieved letter, Sixsmith had steamed it open and then resealed it. During this period, also, Alistair had grimly got engaged to Hazel. But the call came.

He was pretty sure he had come to the right restaurant. Except that it wasn't a

restaurant, not quite. The place took no bookings, and knew of no Mr. Sixsmith, and was serving many midday breakfasts to swearing persons whose eyes bulged over mugs of flesh-colored tea. On the other hand, there was alcohol. All kinds of people were drinking it. Fine, thought Alistair. Fine. What better place, really, for a couple of screenplay writers to...

"Alistair?"

Confidently Sixsmith bent his long body into the booth. As he settled, he looked well pleased with the maneuver. He contemplated Alistair with peculiar neutrality, but there was then something boyish, something consciously remiss, in the face he turned to the waiter. As Sixsmith ordered a gin and tonic, and as he amusingly expatiated on his weakness for prawn cocktails, Alistair found himself wryly but powerfully drawn to this man, to this rumpled screenplay writer with his dreamy gaze, the curious elisions of his somewhat slurred voice, and the great dents and bone shadows of his face, all the faulty fontanel of vocational care. He knew how old Sixsmith was. But maybe time moved strangely for screenplay writers, whose flames burnt so bright...

"And as for my fellow artisan in the scrivener's trade: Alistair. What will you have?"

At once Sixsmith showed himself to be a person of some candor. Or it might have been that he saw in the younger screenplay writer someone before whom all false reticence could be cast aside. Sixsmith's estranged second wife, it emerged, herself the daughter of two alcoholics, was an alcoholic. Her current lover (ah, how these lovers came and went!) was an alcoholic. To complicate matters, Sixsmith explained as he rattled his glass at the waiter, his daughter, the product of his first marriage, was an alcoholic. How did Sixsmith keep going?

Despite his years, he had, thank God, found love, in the arms of a woman young enough (and, by the sound of it, alcoholic enough) to be his daughter. Their prawn cocktails arrived, together with a carafe of hearty red wine. Sixsmith lit a cigarette and held up his palm toward Alistair for the duration of a coughing fit that turned every head in the room. Then, for a moment, understandably disoriented, he stared at Alistair as if uncertain of his intentions, or even his identity. But their bond quickly re-established itself. Soon they were talking away like hardened equals--of Trumbo, of Chayevsky, of Towne, of Eszterhas.

Around two thirty, when, after several attempts, the waiter succeeded in removing Sixsmith's untouched prawn cocktail, and now prepared to serve them their braised chops with a third carafe, the two men were arguing loudly about early Puzo.

Joe yawned and shrugged and said languidly, "You know something? I was never that crazy about the Petrarchan rhyme scheme anyway."

Jan said, "'Composed at--Castle' is ABBA ABBA."

Jen said, "So was 'Tis.' Right up until the final polish."

Jon said, "Here's some news. They say 'Composed at--Castle' is in turnaround."

"You're not serious," said Bo. "It's released this month. I heard they were getting great preview reaction."

Joe looked doubtful. "'Tis' has made the suits kind of antsy about sonnets. They figure lightning can't strike twice."

"ABBA ABBA," said Bo with distaste.

"Or," said Joe. "*Or...or* we go unrhymed."

"Unrhymed?" said Phil.

"We go blank," said Joe.

There was a silence. Bill looked at Gil, who looked at Will.

"What do you think, Luke?" said Jim.
"You're the poet."

Luke had never felt very protective about "Sonnet." Even its original version he had regarded as little more than a bargaining chip. Nowadays he rewrote "Sonnet" every night at the Pinnacle Trumont before Henna arrived and they started torturing room service. "Blank," said Luke. "Blank. I don't know, Joe. I could go ABAB ABAB or even ABAB CDCD. Christ, I'd go AABB if I didn't think it'd tank the final couplet. But blank. I never thought I'd go *blank*."

"Well, it needs something," said Joe.

"Maybe it's the pentameter," said Luke.
"Maybe it's the iamb. Hey, here's one from left field. How about syllabics?"

At five forty-five Hugh Sixsmith ordered a gin and tonic and said, "We've talked. We've broken bread. Wine. Truth. Screenplay-writing. I want to talk about your work, Alistair. Yes, I do. I want to talk about *Offensive from Quasar 13*."

Alistair blushed.

"It's not often that... But one always knows. That sense of pregnant arrest. Of felt life in its full...Thank you, Alistair. Thank you, I have to say that it rather reminded me of my own early work."

Alistair nodded.

Having talked for quite some time about

"Upstairs we're very confident. We think it's going to be a big summer poem."

his own maturation as a screenplay writer, Sixsmith said, "Now. Just tell me to shut up any time you like. And I'm going to print it anyway. But I want to make one tiny suggestion about *Offensive from Quasar 13*."

Alistair waved a hand in the air.

"Now," said Sixsmith. He broke off and ordered a prawn cocktail. The waiter looked at him defeatedly. "Now," said Sixsmith. "When Brad escapes from the Nebulan experiment lab and sets off with Cord and Tara to immobilize the directed-energy scythe on the Xerxian attack ship--where's Chelsi?"

Alistair frowned.

"Where's Chelsi? She's still in the lab with the Nebulans. On the point of being injected with a Phobian viper venom, moreover. What of the happy ending? What of Brad's heroic centrality? What of his avowed love for Chelsi? Or am I just being a bore?"

The secretary, Victoria, stuck her head into the room and said, "He's coming down."

Luke listened to the sound of twenty-three pairs of legs uncrossing and recrossing. Meanwhile he readied himself for a sixteen-tooth smile. He glanced at Joe, who said, "He's fine. He's just coming down to say hi."

And down he came: Jake Endo, exquisitely Westernized and gorgeously tricked out and perhaps thirty-five. Of the luxury items that paraged his slender form, none was as breathtaking as his hair, with its layers of pampered light.

Jake Endo shook Luke's hand and said, "It's a great pleasure to meet you. I haven't read the basic material on the poem, but I'm familiar with the

background."

Luke surmised that Jake Endo had had his voice fixed. He could do the bits of the words that Japanese people were supposed to find difficult.

"I understand it's a love poem," he continued. "Addressed to your girlfriend. Is she here with you in L.A.?"

"No. She's in London." Luke found he was staring at Jake Endo's sandals, wondering how much they could possibly have cost.

A silence began its crescendo. This silence had long been intolerable when Jim broke it, saying to Jake Endo, "Oh, how did 'Lines Left Upon a Seat in a Yew-Tree, Which Stands Near the Lake of Eastwaite, on a Desolate Part of the Shore, Commanding a Beautiful Prospect' do?"

"Lines?" said Jake Endo. "Rather well."

"I was thinking about 'Composed at--Castle'," said Jim weakly.

The silence began again. As it neared its climax, Joe was suddenly reminded of all this energy he was supposed to have. He got to his feet saying, "Jake? I guess we're nearing our tiredness peak. You've caught us at kind of a low point. We can't agree on the first line. First line? We can't see our way to the end of the first *foot*."

Jake Endo was undismayed. "There always are these low points. I'm sure you'll get there, with so much talent in the room. Upstairs we're very confident. We think it's going to be a big summer poem."

"No, we're very confident, too," said Joe. "There's a lot of belief here. A lot of belief. We're behind 'Sonnet' all the way."

"Sonnet?" said Jake Endo.

"Yeah, sonnet.'Sonnet'."

"'Sonnet'?" said Jake Endo.

"It's a sonnet. It's called 'Sonnet'."

In waves the West fell away from Jake Endo's face. After a few seconds he looked like a dark-age warlord in mid-campaign, taking a glazed breather before moving on to the women and the children.

"Nobody told me," he said as he went toward the telephone, "about any sonnet."

The place was dosing. Its tea trade and its after-office trade had come and gone. Outside, the streets glimmered morbidly. Members of the staff were donning macs and overcoats. An important light went out. A fridge door slammed.

"Hardly the most resounding felicity, is it?" said Sixsmith.

Absent or unavailable for over an hour, the gift of speech had been restored to Alistair--speech, that prince of all the faculties. "Or what if..." he said. "What if Chelsi just leaves the experiment lab earlier?"

"Not hugely dramatic," said Sixsmith. He ordered a carafe of wine and inquired as to the whereabouts of his braised chop.

"Or what if she just gets wounded? During the escape. In the leg."

"So long as one could avoid the wretched cliché: girl impeded, hero dangerously tarrying. Also, she's supernumerary to the raid on the Xerxian attack ship. We really want her out of the way for that."

Alistair said, "Then let's kill her."

"Very well. Slight pall over the happy

ending. No, no."

A waiter stood over them, sadly staring at the bill in its saucer.

"All right," said Sixsmith. "Chelsi gets wounded. Quite badly. In the arm. *Now* what does Brad do with her?"

"Drops her off at the hospital."

"Mm. Rather hollow modulation."

The waiter was joined by another waiter, equally stoic; their faces were grained by evening shadow. Now Sixsmith was gently frisking himself with a deepening frown.

"What if," said Alistair, "what if there's somebody passing who can take her to the hospital?"

"Possibly," said Sixsmith, who was half standing, with one hand awkwardly dipped into his inside pocket.

"Or what if," said Alistair, "or what if Brad just gives her directions to the hospital?"

Back in London the next day, Luke met with Mike to straighten this shit out. Actually it looked okay. Mike called Mal at Monad, who had a thing about Tim at TCT. As a potential finesse on Mal, Mike also called Bob at Binary with a view to repossessing the option on "Sonnet," plus development money at rolling compound, and redeveloping it somewhere else entirely--say, at Red Giant, where Rodge was known to be very interested. "They'll want you to go out there," said Mike. "To kick it around."

"I can't believe Joe," said Luke. "I can't believe I knocked myself out for that flake."

"Happens. Joe forgot about Jake Endo

and sonnets. Endo's first big poem was a sonnet. Before your time. 'Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art.' It opened for like one day. It practically bankrupted Japan."

"I feel used, Mike. My sense of trust. I've got to get wised up around here."

"A lot will depend on how 'Composed at--Castle' does and what the feeling is on the 'Tis' prequel."

"I'm going to go away with Suki for a while. Do you know anywhere where there aren't any shops? Jesus, I need a holiday. Mike, this is all bullshit. You know what I *really* want to do, don't you?"

"Of course I do."

Luke looked at Mike until he said, "You want to direct."

When Alistair had convalesced from the lunch, he revised *Offensive from Quasar 13* in rough accordance with Sixsmith's suggestions. He solved the Chelsi problem by having her noisily eaten by a Stygian panther in the lab menagerie. The charge of gratuitousness was, in Alistair's view, safely anticipated by Brad's valediction to her remains, in which sanguinary revenge on the Nebulans was both prefigured and legitimized. He also took out the bit where Brad declared his love for Chelsi, and put in a bit where Brad declared his love for Tara.

He sent in the new pages, which three months later Sixsmith acknowledged and applauded in a hand quite incompatible with that of his earlier communications. Nor did he reimburse Alistair for the lunch. His wallet, he had explained, had been emptied that morning--by which alcoholic, Sixsmith never established. Alistair kept the bill as a memento. This startling document showed that during the

course of the meal Sixsmith had smoked, or at any rate bought, nearly a carton of cigarettes.

Three months later he was sent a proof of *Offensive from Quasar 13*. Three months after that, the screenplay appeared in the *Little Magazine*. Three months after that, Alistair received a check for \$12.50, which bounced.

Curiously, although the proof had incorporated Alistair's corrections, the published version reverted to the typescript, in which Brad escaped from the Nebulan lab seemingly without concern for a Chelsi last glimpsed on an operating table with a syringe full of Phobian viper venom being eased into her neck. Later that month, Alistair went along to a reading at the Screenplay Society in Earls Court. There he got talking to a gaunt girl in an ash-stained black smock who claimed to have read his screenplay and who, over glasses of red wine and, later, in the terrible pub, told him he was a weakling and a hypocrite with no notion of the ways of men and women. Alistair had not been a published screenplay writer long enough to respond to, or even recognize, this graphic proposition (though he did keep the telephone number she threw at his feet). It is anyway doubtful whether he would have dared to take things further. He was marrying Hazel the following weekend.

In the new year he sent Sixsmith a series--one might almost say a sequence--of screenplays on group-jeopardy themes. His follow-up letter in the summer was answered by a brief note stating that Sixsmith was no longer employed by the *LM*. Alistair telephoned. He then discussed the matter with Hazel and decided to take the next day off work.

It was a September morning. The hospice in Cricklewood was of recent design and

construction; from the road it resembled a clutch of igloos against the sheenless tundra of the sky. When he asked for Hugh Sixsmith at the desk, two men in suits climbed quickly from their chairs. One was a writ-server. One was a cost-adjuster. Alistair waved away their complex requests.

The warm room contained clogged, regretful murmurs, and defiance in the form of bottles and paper cups and cigarette smoke, and the many peeping eyes of female grief. A young woman faced him proudly. Alistair started explaining who he was, a young screenplay writer come to... On the bed in the corner the spavined figure of Sixsmith was gawkily arranged. Alistair moved toward it. At first he was sure the eyes were gone, like holes cut out of pumpkin or blood orange. But then the faint brows began to lift, and Alistair thought he saw the light of recognition.

As the tears began, he felt the shiver of approval, of consensus, on his back. He took the old screenplay writer's hand and said, "Goodbye. And thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

Opening in four hundred and thirty-seven theaters, the Binary sonnet "Composed at--Castle" did seventeen million in its first weekend. At this time Luke was living in a two-bedroom apartment on Yokum Drive. Suki was with him. He hoped it wouldn't take her too long to find out about Henna Mickiewicz. When the smoke cleared he would switch to the more mature Anita, who produced.

He had taken his sonnet to Rodge at Red Giant and turned it into an ode. When that didn't work out he went to Mal at Monad, where they'd gone for the villanelle. The villanelle had become a triolet, briefly, with Tim at TCT, before Bob at Binary had him rethink it as a rondeau. When the rondeau didn't take,

Luke lyricized it and got Mike to send it to Joe. Everyone, including Jake Endo, thought that now was surely the time to turn it back into a sonnet.

Luke had dinner at Rales with Joe and Mike.

"I always thought of 'Sonnet' as an art poem," said Joe. "But sonnets are so hot now I've started thinking more commercially."

Mike said, "TCT is doing a sequel and a prequel to 'Tis' and bringing them out at the same time."

"A sequel?" said Joe.

"Yeah. They're calling it 'Twill'."

Mike was a little fucked up. So was Joe. Luke was a little fucked up too. They'd done some lines at the office. Then drinks here at the bar. They'd meant to get a little fucked up. It was okay. It was good, once in a while, to get a little fucked up. The thing was not to get fucked up too often. The thing was not to get fucked up to excess.

"I mean it, Luke," said Joe. He glittered potently. "I think 'Sonnet' could be as big as '-'."

"You think?" said Luke.

"I mean it. I think 'Sonnet' could be another-'."

"-'?"

Luke thought for a moment, taking this in. "'-'...", he repeated wonderingly.

New Yorker, 1992

< author page
< boldtype

Use of this excerpt from *Heavy Water and Other Stories* by Martin Amis may be made only for purposes of promoting the book, with no changes, editing, or additions whatsoever, and must be accompanied by the following copyright notice: Copyright © 1998 by Martin Amis. All rights reserved.