

*Zane Sharp recalled from Bakersfield to Transition ...*

Due to hacker activity somewhere in Belarus, a crucial narrative segment filed by CedrosCM did not arrive at the Narrative Section filing desk two floors below Truffington's office. Instead, the document spent several weeks ping-ponging between the Narrative Section security firewall filters and an underground server network in Bulgaria. The network was a conduit for funneling illegal cigarette-smuggling profits into Swiss bank accounts, thence to fund Chechen rebels.

No one noticed the missing narrative, however, because of the excitement surrounding Arthur Compton's escapes, the Queen's displeasure over Bakersfield and the aliens in the first place, not to mention Truffington's alleged *abduction* by the aliens. The fate of Zane Sharp had fallen into the terrible, yawning cracks of the *news cycle*. In short, nobody cared.

Thus abandoned, Zane Sharp was effectively marooned at the Sleep-Eze Motel in Bakersfield—no money, no credit card, no ID. Rather than sleep in an oil field drainage ditch, he had taken to loping through the dark, robbing liquor stores to generate income, a skill he had learned after graduating from the Juvenile Detention Center in Biloxi, Mississippi. Zane was actually starting to enjoy his new lifestyle when a few packets of emails, previously denied service—65 million bits per packet—suddenly were delivered to inboxes throughout the UK. Freed from the limbo logjam, CedrosCM's narrative popped out of its cyberspace holding pattern and into the Narrative Section filing desk computer, where it was duly labeled, formatted and filed.

Now things would be moving fast for Zane Sharp—so fast, in fact, that Zane lost consciousness before he could finish swallowing the slug of Wild Turkey he had “liberated”—along with the contents of the liquor store cash drawer—in his latest heist. He did not know that he was flying through a worm-hole at close to the speed of light—losing speed off the top-end to the occasional, sweeping corners and dogleg turns—or that he would lose crucial portions of his memory in the process, or that he would wake up strapped to a gurney at Transition, looking into the bright-blue, compassionate eyes of Clive Harbaugh.

A red light was blinking on the wall behind Zane Sharp's gurney, next to some gauges, digital displays and tubes.

"Hello, Zane. Welcome to Transition. Are you awake, guy?" said Clive, his face alternating, in time with the light, between a red blush and natural flesh-color. "We've been expecting you—well, we only got word a second ago that you'd be arriving, actually, but we're used to that, what with these wormholes all over the place. What'll they think of next? Anyway, just call me 'Clive'."

Zane Sharp tried to clear his throat to reply, but his lungs had collapsed during the nano-seconds he spent in the wormhole, and had not yet regained their full volume. Zane fumbled at his neck, his hands a deathly white. His eyes began to rotate upward in their sockets, toward the ceiling.

"Here, let me help," said Clive, clapping a plastic mask over Sharp's mouth and opening the valve to an oxygen tank. "Now just close your eyes and take a deep breath, Zane, nice and easy." The pressurized gas hissed through the regulator and the tubing. "Let the *oxygen* do the work," said Clive. "All you have to do is open those lungs. See? It's pressurized! Open up, now!"

Zane shuddered as the cold gas pushed its way into his shriveled alveoli, puffing them out like little balloons. While he'd been talking, Clive had jabbed his patient in the arm with an IV transfusion needle to boost his depleted blood supply—wormholes did that to you. The CO<sub>2</sub>/O<sub>2</sub> exchange picked up its pace in the swelling lungs, as color returned to Zane's hands and excess blood drained from his face. Clive glanced briefly at the various meters, then turned his attention back to Sharp.

"Wow, look at you! Why, that's excellent! You're a good breather, Zane. Now do it again. There you go, open those lungs for me. Again! Deeper now, deeper! That's marvelous. I'm proud of you, Mr. Sharp." And for the rest of the shift Clive ministered to Zane Sharp as if he were Clive's own beloved grandpa, or Oscar Wilde.

Three days later, Zane Sharp was ambulatory, eating solid foods and allowed to shuffle down the corridor and back, unassisted.

"I must say," commented Clive one afternoon, "you're a real banger, you are, Zane. A miracle man!" And he made notes to that effect in Sharp's file. Clive was dedicated to his work 110%, but he was not so much of a stickler for stuffy, pointless rules. So, when

Zane Sharp asked to use the desk phone in Clive's office to call Mississippi, Clive readily assented. "Just write down the number and the time, Zane, and we'll let Narrative foot the bill. God knows they can afford it."

"Operator?" said Zane, his voice still raspy. "Uh, Gimme Biloxi, Mississippi, will ya? I wanna talk to Ruby Randolph down there, and if you cain't find Ruby lemme talk to her sister Obeah Randolph. Well, cain't you just look it up?"

After some back-and-forth, Zane heard seven scratchy rings, and suddenly Ruby came on the line.

"Ruby? It's Zane. Well, I don't rightly know where the hay-el I am, tell ya the truth. But I need you to do somethin' for me, right quick. I'm gonna need for Obeah to do a little voodoo for me. Yeah, you heard me, don't play dumb. Voodoo. You know—*Do, do that voodoo that you do so well!*—like that old song. Uh huh, now you got it. Well, hell, Ruby, it's about all she does anymore. Well, lemme talk to her then. Thanks, Ruby."

Zane looked around the clinic, then spoke in a near-whisper: "Hey, Obeah! I need you to find out whatever you can about where I am and what the hay-el happened to me. Well, you're gonna ask *Chango*, what else? Never mind what it costs. Sacrifice *two* chickens then, hay-el, make it a dozen, and I'll pay you back double when I get home. I need this fast, Obeah, I gotta get outta here, y'unnerstand? And listen up: *Find out the names! I need the names of whoever the fuck's behind this-here shee-it. Why? 'Cause I need to pay 'em a visit!*" Then, resuming his normal voice, Zane said, "Now, listen: Here's the number where I'm stayin'. Call me back soon's you get the names from Chango."

Sharp, now spent from this flurry of activity, dropped the phone into its cradle and shuffled back to his gurney for a fresh hit of oxygen and some apple juice.

*Owl Man returns Truffington's call ...*

Sir Randall Truffington III was no stranger to the knife-fight tactics, the political infighting, of high office—long-distance sniping, close-up backbiting, jockeying for position, pompous posturing and all that rubbish. But Truffington held himself to a *higher* standard, or so he liked to imagine—strong as steel, and just as supple. In this virtue he was assisted, no doubt, by his chaste, three-minute egg on dry toast in the morning, and his liberal, self-prescribed doses of high-priced scotch in the evening.

Truff of the steady hands. Good old Truff. Nothing ever gets to Truff. Until now, that is.

Darby was off digging up files at the Transition archives while Truffington remained behind. Seated at his desk, fingers steeped in that brooding way of his, he contemplated what increasingly appeared to be a dangerous situation slipping out of control. Closing his eyes, he was struck by a bizarre fantasy image—himself sitting tied to his office chair, gagged, listening to the sound of a hissing fuse that smoked and sputtered its way toward a bundle of dynamite sticks placed directly under his chair.

He shook off the fantasy, opened the side drawer of his desk and withdrew the antique Shriners' silver pocket flask—pancake-shaped, hand-engraved—he kept stashed behind the containers of pencils, rubber bands and paper clips. He removed the knurled silver cap, raised the heirloom vessel to his lips—“hair of the dog” he always said—and jumped a foot into the air, spilling brandy over the desktop as his telephone buzzed like a bumblebee.

“Jesus and Mary!” shouted Truffington, capping the flask, whisking a tissue out

of its leather box to mop up the spill and grabbing the phone—all in one fluid motion.

“Who the hell is this?” he screamed like a banshee into the receiver.

“Is this Sir Randall Truffington III, or the Hound of the Baskervilles?” came the quiet voice.

“Owl Man? Is that you? Jesus, you scared me!” Truffington was flushed and sweating.

“You asked me to give you a hoot, Truff. That’s what I’m doing. What’s on your mind?”

“Just one second, Owl.” Truffington pressed the mouthpiece to his chest, uncapped the flask and tossed back a quick gulp. “OK, Owl Man, I’m back. Listen, I’m glad you called. I’ve got a hell of a situation here and I’m going to need your help.”

“What’s going on?” Owl Man was his usual, unruffled self.

“Before I do that, Owl Man, can you answer one question for me? Don’t you *ever* get ruffled?”

“No, not really, Truff. Not good for the digestion. Now, what’s going on?”

Truffington launched into a feverish account of the current fiasco surrounding Arthur Compton, CedrosCM, Zane Sharp, the space ship, the Queen, the withdrawn and suspended narratives, and so on—a situation that was far more distressing than he had realized.

“Something’s going on that I can’t put my finger on. Maybe it’s that old bugger Compton, who just doesn’t play by the rules.”

“But don’t your ‘rules’ just add up to an *unlimited fictional narrative*—wide open, but for the minimal daily word-count? Why shouldn’t the same principle of *narrative*

*freedom* apply as much to a character like Compton as to an author? Nobody ever said it was just a one-way street.”

“Mmmm, yes, perhaps. But, as I say, there’s some ‘extra’ factor at work here. I almost think it’s—this is absurd, I know—but it’s as if there’s something, emmm—”

“Sinister?”

“That’s it! Yes! Sinister! Definitely something sinister is going on.”

Owl Man, still on the line, said nothing.

Truffington continued. “On top of it all, Owl, Darby brings me this preposterous theory—promulgated by Arthur Compton, I might add—that the *whole thing is fiction*. I’m afraid Darby might be losing it, or else Compton is trying to bring us down. He claims that *we are all being narrated*, by you and someone named “Heron Man.” It all sounds so bloody bonkers, if you ask me. Said you had something going called the ‘Owl and Heron Press.’ I told him he was nuts, of course. Anyway, don’t breathe a word of this to the Queen. Absolutely essential. Mum’s the word.”

“Well, by nature, Truff, the owl family, the *strigiformes*, are taciturn, but I wouldn’t say we’re secretive, exactly. For example, the Great Horned Owl, *bubo virginianus*—“

“Oh, spare me the taxonomy lecture, Owl! I don’t *care* about your relatives, your Aunt Hooty, your Uncle Hook-Beak or your Cousin Light-Feather. Let’s get back to the business at hand, shall we? Look, you’re the dream expert. That’s why we pay these exorbitant sums—”

“It’s a modest retainer, Truff, considering the value of dreams,” corrected Owl.

“All right, this *retainer* then. But now you’re going to earn your pay. I want you

in London ASAP. Let me know when you're coming and I'll have Darby send our driver Darwin in the Bentley to meet you at Heathrow and drop you at your usual digs. Then—uh—we've got to—uh—”

For the first time in his life, Randall Truffington III had run out of words. Owl Man waited, in vain. Then the Owl began cooing Truffington back to himself, from whatever hell he had fallen into. Tears had actually gathered—well, a faint moisture—in Truffington's eyes. He pulled out a hanky and blew his nose.

“Sorry, Owl. Don't know what got into me. Bit of a rough patch, you see. Didn't realize. Won't happen again. Stiff upper lip and all that. Not like me. Not—”

“Stop it, Truff!” barked Owl Man. “Have another snort of brandy from that old Shriners' flask you keep in your desk. Here's what we'll do. I'll send you my dates, and then you're going to book seats for me and my friend, Heron Man. But you'll also be booking several more seats for some other friends of mine—Fex and Coo and, let's see, Sal and Sally—and my beloved Jasmine. Possibly more. Of course, whoever can come will need lodgings, transportation, meals, cigars for Fex, and we'll need some beanbag chairs and—”

“Are you crazy, Owl? What kind of a circus do you think I'm running here?”

“It's not a circus we're talking about, Truff. What you'll be running is ... a *ceilidh*.”

“*Ceilidh?*” retorted Truffington. “You mean a—?”

“That's right,” said Owl. “An old-fashioned Scottish party, with music, dancing, poetry, story-telling and, in this case, *dream-telling*. In fact, it's going to be a *ceilidh of dreams*.”

“Well, well, well,” sniffed Truffington, shaking his head. “Ever since I met you, Owl

Man, I've had my doubts—plenty of them. But now I can finally say you've gone completely, barking mad.”

“Not at all, Truff. Listen, you're having problems with your narrative, right?” Truffington hemmed a reluctant assent. “And it's a *fictional narrative*, right?” More hemming and humming from Truff. “Something's jamming the works but you don't know what, correct?”

“Yes, but—”

“Please, let me finish. It's a well-known fact that nothing clears the air so much as a *ceilidh of dreams*. First, you loosen up the characters by suspending all the narratives for a while, like an “intermission.” No deadlines, no threats. Make them comfortable, ply them with booze. But then, as the *ceilidh* progresses, you slowly open them up to the fictive world of dreams, and there's nothing like it! As the ancient Chinese sage said, *‘The clouds pass and the rain does its work, and all individual beings flow into their forms.’*”

“Hmmm, yes, I see,” said Truffington, who saw nothing at all, but didn't want Owl to know. “Well, you may bloody well be right, Owl. I must say, you haven't disappointed me in the past. But what about this—*this lot* you're threatening to bring with you?”

“I am taking a chance, Truff, I'll admit it; but if my owl's intuition is correct, your narrative troubles will benefit from a little *cross-fertilization*—precisely what my friends will provide, Fex especially.”

“Very well, Owl, you win again. But tell me one last thing. What is this business about you and your ‘Heron Man’ narrating the narrative—Compton, CedrosCM, the



Queen, me, the whole lot?”

“Oh yes, Truff, it’s true—in principle. Well, that’s it, then. See you soon, Truff. I’m looking forward to the *ceilidh*. And make sure there’s plenty of Macallan on hand!”

“Hmm? Oh, the Macallan. Sure, Owl, sure. I’ll order a case. See you soon, then.”

Truffington rang off, reached for his Shriners’ flask and leaned back in his chair. A few minutes later, Owen Darby walked into the office, sweating like a rodeo bulldogger, arms piled high with files.

*Compton Goes Shopping ...*

Compton was still muttering about the old bat Crossworthy not having a computer as he stepped into the brightly silvered environs of the local Apple store. As he approached the counter, he had an inspired impulse.

“Yes, ma’am, how may I assist you?” The short young man looked to be about 10 years old, but Compton assumed he was of legal age and knew what he was doing.

“Listen, young man, I want one of those spot hots, you know, a top o’ the lapper, and I want to spare no expense, just get me the best one you have for use in one of those computer cafeterias. Can you do that quick as a flash?”

“You bet, ma’am, coming right up.” The kid disappeared for a few minutes and returned with a set of snappy looking boxes.”

“This should set you up real fine; you’ll dazzle the internet café crowd, you will, particularly a lady of your ... well, how shall I say, your many phases of life under your belt, as it were. Will you need help seeing how all this works.”

“No, sonny. All those phases of life, as you put it, add up to knowing how to do things. So, I’ll manage just fine.”

“That will be eighteen hundred and ninety six pounds—that’s with the discount.”

“Discount?”

“Oh, yes, we always give a 15% discount for those with many phases of life notched on their rifle as it were.”

“I see. Well, here’s my card.” Compton handed him old lady Crossworthy’s credit card and hoped there’d be no snags. He’d practiced her signature enough times for it to pass scrutiny so it must be something else.

The frown of the face of the clerk told him there was a snag. He was about to bolt when the young man explained.

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but the computer says you’re over limit—by quite a lot, actually. So I’m afraid your choice of all the bells and whistles will have to wait for another day, unless you have cash. Tell me, what are you going to be using a computer for?”

“Writing. Just plain and simple writing but with a connection to whatever it is one connects to send the writing along to its victim.”

“Victim?”

“A joke, son, a joke. You need a few more phases of life, it appears.”

“Well, ma’am, we do have what you might find satisfactory for your minimal demands. It’s used, but has been expertly refurbished, and it is a top o’the lap model, as you put it, and I can put this into your hands right now for an amount that your credit card company will accept. It’s only forty pounds plus VAT, of course. It’s a bit of an off-market brand, as it were, but quite functional, and we guarantee it for 10 days. Shall I wrap it up?”

“By all means, my good fellow. By the way, what is the brand name?”

“It’s called *Transition*, ma’am. It was intended for those transitioning from older lines to the newer but not yet affordable lines. Never quite caught on.”

*Arthur Compton flexes his—her—fictional muscles ...*

By the time Arthur Compton, aka Nurse Agatha Crossworthy, let himself into his—her—flat with his—her—computer purchase in hand, his—oh, hell—*her* pancake make-up was streaked with sweat and her eye-mascara was smudged and running. So, she dropped the parcel on the small hide-a-bed couch and went immediately to the loo to check her appearance in the mirror.

After a few deft touch-up strokes with some pink cotton puffs she'd found in a glass jar on the shelf—and a quick whizz (American slang that spells “relief”)—she felt refreshed and ready to write. This would be the beginning of her bold act of retribution against all the monsters at Deathling Crown Lottery, well-deserved punishment for their misjudgment of Arthur Compton, CEO of Reticular Medicinals, aka Nurse Crossworthy.

She opened the parcel, tossed the wrappings on the floor, and withdrew the various components of her—oh, hell—*his* purchase at the Apple store—cables, AC/DC adapters (hmmm, that's funny, thought Compton) and the like.

While alive, Compton had never been particularly adept at computers. He had been surrounded by secretaries and sycophants, and besides, he had his IT man, Germond Fauchet, the bloody Frenchman who was so good with all this electronic crap that Compton didn't dare dismiss him, which he would have dearly loved to do. But retaining Fauchet permitted Compton, as CEO, to concentrate on what he called “the big picture”—cooking up deals with the Canadians (Saskatoon had been a big winner), gaining market share among the Central American banana republics and, Compton's big dream, playing the “China card,” like Nixon.

As Compton watched the refurbished Transition laptop boot itself up, which seemed to take forever, he thought about how he was going to open his fictional narrative assault on DCL. He was about to formulate his first, devastating sentence when the computer, encased in pink plastic, made a pinging sound and a yellow smiley face appeared on the screen.

“Hi, what’s your name?” said the screen. “Do you have a moniker for me?” it continued, grinning fatuously.

Compton’s face started turning that old familiar bulldog-red that he’d been so famous for around the office.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” he shouted at the happy face on the screen.

The hard-drive began to whirr and the happy face turned suddenly sullen, as if pouting. “Well, you don’t have to be so silly about it,” the face said. “We just need to establish your identity—for security purposes, of course.” Then the pout disappeared and the face began smiling again, hovering on the screen like a yellow balloon in a light breeze.

“What fucking security business are you in, anyway?” was Compton’s gruff retort.

Suddenly, in a humorless, authoritarian tone, the face said, “If you do not provide the proper identification within 30 seconds I will be forced to shut down this computer. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

“Wait, wait! My fucking name is Arthur Compton, CEO of Reticular Medicinals!” Compton waited, glaring at the impudent screen.

“Mmmmm, nice try, Charlie, but not quite,” said the happy face. “According to my records your last name should start with a ‘C’, has eleven letters, and ends in ‘Y’.”

“What?” said Compton. Then, remembering the credit card purchase with the stolen ID, he smiled broadly and winked at the screen. “Oh, yeah, I get it.” He ratcheted up the pitch of his voice, boosting his bulldog growl as much as he could into a more female range. “Yes,” he squeaked, “why, my name is Nurse Crossworthy.”

The happy face grimaced, but acquiesced. “Well, I don’t know anything about the nurse part, but ‘Crossworthy’ does match my records. OK, I’ll let you in this time.”

“Finally,” grunted Compton.

“Now,” said the face cheerfully, as if laying the table for a child’s birthday party, “what would you like your password to be?”

“My what?”

“Your password— P-A-S-S-W-O-R-D. Your private security code. Like a key. It has to be at least 8 characters long and include one number.”

“Oh, OK, OK. Let’s see, how about—‘*Compton 1*’?”

“Sorry. No capital letters and no spaces allowed,” said the face, sounding impatient.

“OK,” said Compton, wondering if he would ever get past this fucking face.

“How about ‘compton1’ then?”

“I’m sorry, but the password you have chosen is not strong enough. For security purposes, please select another. Otherwise, you might be in danger of contracting a virus, or something worse.”

This went on for twenty-five minutes before the happy face on the screen finally accepted Compton's password, which turned out to be *betelgeuse\_95zx?%\$*.

At long last, the smiley face said "Bye-bye, and have a great day, dude, or dudette—whichever!" And Arthur Compton was ready to start writing up his vicious assault on DCL. He typed a few keys and a stream of dimly lit letters slowly appeared on the dull screen. The effect was not exactly in-your-face striking, but at least the attack had been launched. Compton rubbed his hands eagerly and continued typing.

*'Twas a dark and stormy night. Trees shook in the angry wind and the window-shutters banged loudly as Lord Truffington called for hot milk with brandy. Truffington had had trouble sleeping lately. It was because of this bloke Arthur Compton, who scared the shit out of him, and—'*

Before Compton could finish his opening narrative, the phone rang. He looked at the device, another pink thing, this one decorated with frilly gold trim. Hesitating, he decided to brazen it out and answer the phone.

"Hel—" he began to grumble in his Compton bulldog voice, then quickly shifted to his Nurse Crossworthy squeak, repeating sweetly and hesitantly, "He—Hello?"

"My name," came the quivering, high-pitched, indignant voice across the line, "is Nurse Agatha Crossworthy. I believe you have my keys, my purse, my clothing, and are holed up in my flat like the evil fiend you are. What is your explanation?"