

For D'APA 22

(and selected others)

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COPROLITES

I'm not sure I approve of what I'm doing this issue, but I have reasons and I'm willing to explain them. The reasons will probably be more meaningful if I first tell what I am doing. It isn't anything unprecedented in D'APA. Several others have run fictional segments, excerpts, serial installments, etc. However, there are major differences between those and what I'm doing. For one thing, the fiction that I am printing in this issue of Coprolites is not intended to be funny (entertaining, I hope, but not funny; there's nothing satirical about it). Also, this is a complete story, not a mere idea or outline; and it is complete in this issue, not a serial.

As to WHY I've decided to do this . . .

Well, this is a story written for the Writers Workshop. I had hoped to have it finished for the July 14 session. Matter of fact, I did have the first draft finished, but in retyping it with carbons I found it necessary to make more revisions than I'd anticipated, so in a very real sense I'm still at a crucial stage of working on the story. If I stop now and turn my full attention to Coprolites, the story will cool off and harden and be more difficult to handle when I get back to it. On the other hand, during D'APA week, I cannot imagine myself not working on Coprolites. So I asked myself a very sensible question: "Why can't I work on the story and on Coprolites at the same time, by making the story a part of Coprolites?" and I came up with what I consider a very sensible answer.

The Workshop has adopted a new policy. We now try to get copies of each story circulated to the members in advance, so the session itself can be used for analysis and criticism. Previously the stories were read during the session. So, Workshop members are going to get a copy of Coprolites 22 instead of the double-spaced story manuscript they could normally expect from me. For their benefit, the story starts on Page 2, continues to the end, at which point the regular chatter of Coprolites resumes for as many pages as I have time for.

Workshop members may ignore the rest of the zine. D'APAns may ignore the story. (I must tell the D'APAns, though, that this story should have been in the Back-to-Sex issue, because it is a very sexy -- well, anyway sensuous -- story.

Needless to say, I invite criticism. Workshop members will, in the normal course of events, try to tear the story apart sentence by sentence, detail by detail, character by character. I hope D'APAns will take similar pains. My personal feeling is that the story may be vulnerable particularly in the area of scientific accuracy; so anybody who can point out major howlers will win my resentful but undying gratitude.

Again I emphasize: this is not fan fiction. I have hopes of professional publication and I'm asking that the story be judged by professional standards. If it falls short, I want to know where, why and how.

With that understanding, then, I present . . .

SOFTNESS, AS IN A SENSUOUS FANTASY

by Don Thompson

He lay on the mound of cloud-stuffed cushions, naked, warm and tingling, with Tammy beside him, clad in filmy gauze and seeming to radiate a gentle vibrancy. She raised herself on one arm and looked down at him, a curl of her black hair caressing the curve where neck and shoulder blended, her dark eyes cloudy, her lips puffy.

She said, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" and the sprinkle of freckles across her nose danced in amusement. She did not smile.

"Not any more," said Lucas Orbison. "If I ever was. But why should I have been, ever?"

She shook her head, still unsmiling, but did not speak; there was no need. He knew what she meant. It was more than just the difference in their ages.

But he said, "No. That's all nonsense. It doesn't matter now. All that matters is you. And me. Us.

"Forever?"

"Always."

She looked at him, her eyes clearing slowly, and after a time her lips parted in the slightest of smiles.

She said, "You're awfully nice."

"And you're so very sweet."

She moved so that the tip of her right breast brushed the tip of his nose. He raised his head the necessary fraction for lips to touch nipple, the protective flimsiness of garment dissolving in the moist warmth of his breath, so the contact was flesh with tender flesh.

The gentle tingle in Lucas intensified to an almost electrical surge. He became achingly aware of his body -- not the ache of fatigue but of joyful passion, straining for release. He felt the blood pounding through his heart and along his veins, tantalizing nerve fibers as it went, engorging erectile tissue, swelling it, enlarging it to a sleek, rigid implement of love and gratification.

Lucas moaned, and Tammy clutched his head tightly against her breasts, murmuring, "Make it forever. Make it last forever."

Lucas felt that he could. His body was strong, lean, solid; he gloried in his power and endurance. He had never felt more completely in control of his physical being, more fully alive.

He tried to adjust his body to hers, but the cushions on which they reclined were slipping away from beneath them, and they began to fall, grasping at each other as they floated through the feathery cushions . . .

* * *

Charlotte said, "That's incredible! It's not just seeing -- it's being!" She pushed the heavy head clamp up and away. "But what's he doing now? What's happening? He isn't . . ."

"Just resting," Gregg said. "He's slipped into unconsciousness."

"That's really something! I could actually feel what he was feeling. God! Do they all have sex dreams? Is that the only form pleasure-fantasies take?"

"Oh, not at all. In fact it's almost as common to get no fantasy at all -- just a sort of fuzzy, rosy glow. Of the actual fantasies, sex is most common, followed by eating. But of course not everyone is able to fantasize as vividly as Lucas. Look here."

He indicated a section of the enormous instrument console in front of them, but then said, "Well, no, that won't mean anything to you. But here..." He picked up the printout and among the array of lines and squiggles indicated two near the center of the sheet and

traced them back. "Here. Stimulus. Response. Here's the peak for the hypothalamic stimulation. And here, nearly seven seconds later, is the peak of pleasurable sensation in the fantasy."

"That's a long lag?"

"Very. The average seems to be around two or three seconds. Of course we haven't done enough of these to know for sure, but we think it just takes that much longer to build up a solid, convincing fantasy."

Charlotte nodded. "Sort of a pity about him, isn't it? He could be the world's first great . . ."

"What?"

"Well, surely somebody's thinking about the commercial possibilities of this thing? Of putting a dream monitor in every home and developing specialists, stars, people who become world famous because they can create sexier dreams, or maybe even more horrible dreams than anyone else."

"These aren't dreams."

"Okay, fantasies. The public will call them dreams."

"I suppose so. But it seems to me that until they develop some way to record the fantasies, there's not much can be done with them."

"Are they working on it?"

"I'm sure they are. I wish they'd hurry. It'd certainly simplify my job."

"You don't like monitoring?"

"It's not that. But trying to describe some of these fantasies, to put them into words . . ."

"I didn't realize you had to do that. How are you going to handle that one he just had?"

"It's already done. That's what makes it so tough. It has to be done immediately, while it's happening -- a running account."

"That's impossible. Isn't it?"

"Almost."

"When does he get another jolt?"

"When the computer decides he needs one. Probably soon. They've been coming with increasing frequency; he obviously doesn't have much time left."

"How long has he been hooked up?"

"More than 36 hours now. Funny thing, the prognostication at the start was for only about twelve hours."

"That has interesting ramifications, too."

"It does, indeed. That's an aspect of it that we're deeply interested in. But so far we get no definite pattern. As many have gone under the prognostication as over."

"Who's Tammy, by the way? Pure fantasy? No, I'll bet she's real. He has latent but very strong guilt feelings about Tammy."

"That's very perceptive of you."

"Is she in all his fantasies?"

"Most. Oh-oh; ready? Here we go again. You may not want to follow these all the way through. They could start getting considerably less pleasant."

"I'm staying."

They both adjusted the bulky clamps to their heads.

* * *

He floated on his back in a pool of water that licked icily at every nerve and muscle in his body. A hot sun gushed from the liquid-fire sky and with alternate heartbeats sent surges of flame boiling through his blood, radiating from his skin, sizzling as it melted the frigidity. Hot-cold steam blurred his vision.

Hot. Cold. Hot. Cold. Warm. Cool. Warm. Cool.

Gradually they blended; the sun warmed the water, and the water cooled the sun. The mist cleared and he could see the green-smooth, tiled edges of the pool and the smooth white slanting bottom. He floated in the tingling water.

There was a girl in the pool with him -- a girl with flowing black hair and sparkling blue eyes and bouyant breasts that floated high in the wavelets as she tread-paddled toward him.

His heartbeat quickened at sight of her, and he smiled, though she did not.

They came together in the water, not speaking, their hands lightly on each other's waists, pulling themselves closer together, closer, until they were touching, closely, the entire length of their naked bodies.

Lucas drew deep breaths as he felt the power throbbing in his belly and loins, felt his flesh hardening, elongating, pulsating with joy. He smiled triumphantly.

As Tammy whispered, "Forever?" and he replied, "Always," he began a gentle upward thrust.

But the water abruptly boiled, losing all buoyancy, turning instantly to a thick, writhing steam through which they fell, drifting apart, reaching for each other as they tumbled. . .

* * *

As he lifted the headset, Gregg said, "See what I mean? That one was quite short and with almost as much pain as pleasure. The pain is becoming steadily more intense, so the computer has to apply increasingly heavier doses of stimulation."

"Which becomes steadily less effective," Charlotte finished. "And it would be against the law I suppose to give him any other kind of anesthetic?"

Gregg shook his head. "It would invalidate the test -- part of which is to determine how effective hypothalamic stimulation is as a terminal anesthetic."

"I keep forgetting. The dreams -- sorry, fantasies -- are only an interesting by-product. Of no medical or commercial value at all?"

"No one said that. It's just that at this stage, and in the experiments I happen to be working on, the focus is on something other than the fantasies themselves -- their content, I mean. Though the reason I have to describe and record the content is for the psychiatrists. And believe me, I wish a psychiatrist were at least sitting in on this particular case."

"How much about this subject do you know?"

"Lucas, you mean? Oh, quite a bit. They always give us the complete file on a subject and have us study it. Helps to make sense of the fantasies, if any."

"So you do know who Tammy is?"

"Sure. Didn't I say so? I'll tell you about her afterwards. Or better still. . . Maybe I can let you meet her."

"Oh? Could you do that?"

"I think so, if you'd like. Get the clamps on; here comes another one."

* * *

At the front of the darkened room a screen glowed and flickered as color slides smoothly succeeded one another, while at the rear a tape recorded female voice droned to the accompaniment of taped music.

Lucas would have had to bend far to the left, away from Tammy,

to see the screen clearly; and to hear the words distinctly he would have had to quit listening to Tammy's heartbeat.

He sat in a deep overstuffed chair with Tammy beside him on the broad arm of the chair, her left arm holding his head tight against her breast. His right arm encircled her waist, his hand touching the bare skin beneath a light sweater. His left hand rested on her bare thigh under a short skirt.

She bent her head slightly to kiss the top of his head. He raised his head the fraction necessary to kiss the tip of her breast. His lips felt the nipple through the soft cloth, and he wished his breath could dissolve the fabric.

He inhaled, wishing, wishing, wishing; and Tammy gave his head another squeeze and whispered, so softly he almost lost the words:

"I wish we could stay here like this forever."

And he replied, first with, "Then let's do; always," and then more emphatically, with hand pressures, pulling her even closer and moving his right hand higher under her sweater, higher, higher, along cool skin as smooth and soft as molten marble.

His heart thudded, and he wondered when she would pull away or place a restraining hand upon his hand; but her flesh was pliant, her body yielding, and his hand advanced, sandwiched deliciously between cream-textured skin on the palm side and cottony cloth on the other. The cloth offered gentle resistance, was easily overcome.

Her breast was as sweet to his hand as ripe melon to the tongue. She said, "You're awfully nice."

"And you're so very sweet."

He was aware of the joyful aching of his body, of the blood flashing like electricity through his veins, throbbing, surging. Then searing.

Pain found him.

His blood flamed. A gasp fanned a spark and ignited his lungs. Invisible hammer blows smashed his groin. Arm and leg bones cracked and crumpled and liquefied under unbearable pressure.

He tried to hold on to Tammy, but she was being torn away from him and they were both plummeting through swirling darkness, dense and merciful.

* * *

"Is that it?" Charlotte asked.

Gregg indicated a screen where a trail of light flickered, and in the same gesture he pointed to a smaller screen where the symbol "O" blinked rhythmically.

"Is as far as the computer is concerned. It has decided that further stimulation would have no effect."

"But Lucas is still alive. Are we likely to get any more fantasizing from him?"

"Stay tuned. We'll get whatever thoughts he has from now on in, fantasy or not. But he's awfully near the end. If we're -- if he's -- lucky, he'll just slip away now, while he's unconscious. But he's a tough old bird. He's put up more of a fight than anybody would have guessed."

"Tough old bird. How old? I've had the impression that he was a fairly young man. Thirties or forties, anyway."

"Certainly has young thoughts -- fantasies -- doesn't he?"

"How old?"

"I was wondering when you were going to get interested in him. You've been mostly caught by Tammy, but after all he's the star of the show -- as you even mentioned."

"How old is he?"

Gregg held up a hand, wiggling the fingers slightly while his eyes scanned the banks of screens and dials.

"I'll tell you all about him: age, place of birth, occupation, more than you want to know. I'll tell you all about Tammy. But first I'd like you to tell me what impressions you have gotten of him -- as an unbiased, impartial, objective observer."

"Why?"

"All part of the data-gathering process; the psychiatrists will be interested in it. And I might as well get some use out of you, to justify my smuggling you in here."

Charlotte hesitated. "Don't tell me more than I want to know about him. I don't think I like him very much, really. He's . . . soft. Do you know what I mean? Mushy inside, somehow. All his dreams -- fantasies -- have a cloying, sticky sweetness. And he has this fixation, almost, about breasts. He's very sensuous, but not really sexual. Breasts but no cunt. He has the desire, but every time he tries to . . . oh! I see! Impotency. Old age. I'm sorry, I guess they're not the fantasies of a young man, are they?"

"Don't try to analyze it. That's what the psychiatrists are for. Any other impressions?"

"No, I guess not. Except . . . well, this last fantasy. I did get the strong impression that it was real. Something that actually happened."

"Very perceptive indeed," Gregg said. "Anything else?"

"No. Now are you going to tell me . . ."

"Seventy-six."

"Oh. Oh, for heaven sakes."

Gregg said, "Softness. Yes, I see what you mean. I hadn't really noticed it myself. I'd been more impressed by how tough he was. Would you like to know what he's dying of?"

"I don't think so. What? Cancer? Pneumonia? Do people still die of pneumonia?"

"Not that I know of. Not Lucas, anyway. No, about ten months ago Lucas fell off a roof. Trying to rescue his great-grandson's model airplane. He slipped, broke both legs and an arm."

"But ten months ago!"

"Oh, that's not what killed him. Actually, he'd pretty much recovered from that. But that's what brought him to the hospital, and that's how he found out about our hypothalamic stimulation work and got his name on the volunteer list. He was dismissed a week ago."

"And fell off the roof again?"

"Close. Fell down a flight of stairs, trying to negotiate them on crutches. Broke his back this time, along with some internal injuries."

"Damn you. You are telling me more than I want to know. You make me feel so . . . what? Cheap. Cold. Heartless."

"Forget it. No need for you to feel like that. I deliberately hadn't told you anything."

"No, but just the same."

"Are you ready to hear about Tammy now? Or maybe you can guess who Tammy is?"

"Oh, God! Well, not his wife, obviously. I presume he was married, if he has a great-grandson?"

"Wife died a couple of years ago. He's been living with his granddaughter and her family."

Charlotte's eyes roamed the instrument bank, resting on the screen across which flowed the feeble pulse of light that represented the life of Lucas Orbison.

She said, "How long ago was that scene we just had? The reality that it was based on?"

"Fifteen years, about. I haven't pinned it down exactly."

"And the great-grandchildren are how old?"

"The oldest is eight."

"And so Tammy can't be more than about 30 right now?"

"Twenty-nine."

"Which means that she was 14 when she was snuggling up on the arm of her grandfather's chair and letting him fondle her tits."

"It may not have happened quite that way. All we have is Lucas' fantasy-memory. His version. We could ask Tammy if you'd like what she remembers about it. I'll have to talk with her after this is over, anyway, since she's the next of kin."

"No! No, thanks. I'd rather not. My curiosity is satisfied. Except . . ."

"What?"

"I'm wondering why you brought me here tonight."

"You'd been asking for a chance to sit in."

"So I had. That's right. And I'm grateful for the experience. This is a really great thing. But I'm still wondering. Why this particular one? There've been others. Will be others."

Gregg shrugged very slightly with a slight shake of his head. "It wouldn't have mattered. They all have a story. But not all of them fantasize as vividly as Lucas. You've accused me of being a coldly detached technician. Unfeeling. Not caring anything about the people involved. I guess I was trying to prove something."

They sat in silence for a while, both of them watching the blinking lights and the wavering gauges on the instrument banks, waiting for the indication that Lucas Orbison had regained consciousness or that his life processes had ceased.

Gregg said quietly, "Listen, I'm sorry if . . ."

But then a needle flickered and rose from the white area of a dial into the black.

* * *

The blackness lifted, and Lucas found himself in a nightmare world of white pain. He lifted a hand to push away the agony that sat like a snarling dog on his chest. The hand that floated before his eyes was not his. It was shriveled and gray, attached to a grotesquely wrinkled wrist, bulging with blue strings. The twig-like fingers trembled as in a breeze. The hand fell to his chest and was devoured by the dog of pain.

Lucas stared up into the whiteness; he turned his head to left and right, but there was no color, no relief of shadow anywhere. His eyes burned, and he almost hoped for a flash of red, but his pain was white, and he was drowning in it.

He tried to trace the pain, starting with his eyes. It was all through his head, in his throat and along both shoulders, both arms; it filled his lungs to bursting and throbbed in his belly and groin. The pain was so thick he couldn't tell whether it extended to his legs.

His heart pounded wildly for a few beats as he started to panic. He tried to get up or at least to get his arms and legs under him so he could crawl away from this horror.

Then, just as abruptly, he became very calm. He lay still. He smiled despite the fury that was tearing at him.

It was only a dream, he knew. A nightmare; and nightmares could be awakened from. If he could only remember how.

One of the joys and beauties of owning my own mimeograph is that I can, if necessary, keep working on Coprolites right up until meeting time or a little before. The first eight pages of this were done early in the week -- mostly on Monday and Tuesday, my days off. It is now 11 a.m. Saturday and I haven't even started to panic yet. However, I will have to slow down and start thinking as I write, because I don't intend to go beyond page 10, whether I've said everything I want to or not.

Some of the things I'd like to talk about, but may or may not get around to, include:

Recent reading, specifically Nine Princes in Amber by Zelazny and The Ancient of Days by Irving A. Greenfield;

A recent visit to the book-lined home in Boulder of Bob Alvis, who recommended The Ancient of Days to me;

A recent visit to San Francisco for Westercon, and some memorable and rewarding conversations with such notables as Bob Silverberg, Frank Denton, Paul Angel, Chuck Freudenthal (who had memories of Chuck Hansen, Roy Hunt and the CFS), Elder Ghoddess, Lois Newman, and many others;

Westercon itself, except that I don't really seem to have much to say about the Con itself; I would end up talking more about the San Francisco book stores, I suspect;

Fred Goldstein's questionnaire.

I'll start with Fred's questionnaire, and I'll start by saying that I am filling out the questionnaire with straight, simple, informative answers, and I hope enough others will do so to give Fred a fair statistical sampling for whatever purposes he has in mind. But my hopes are not high. There's something about this type of survey that invites (nay, almost demands) bright, clever, witty responses, and the hell with accuracy and factuality. Even I, generally noted more for my dry, pedantic decorum than for my sparkling wit, could not resist starting to fill out the questionnaire in this manner:

1. AGE extreme
2. SEX some, but less than previously (see 1.)
3. DEGREES third, following my second arrest for child molestation.

etc., etc., etc.

But I got serious when I got to trying to list my favorites in sf novels, short stories and novelettes. (I am listing favorites, not necessarily the ones I consider best). The novels were fairly easy, but the short stories and novelettes are turning out to be a problem, partly because of uncertainty as to the dividing line.

Anyway, good luck, Fred!

Now, about those books I mentioned, I'll explain why I never finished reading Nine Princes in Amber and will probably never start its sequel, The Guns of Avalon. My bitter disappointment is based largely, I'm sure, on unfulfilled expectations. I cannot forget that it was Roger Zelazny who wrote two of the most powerful and moving stories that I've ever read -- A Rose for Ecclesiastes and The Doors of His Face, the Lamps of His Mouth. In those stories, and in many others, including the novel, Lord of Light, Zelazny displays extreme sensitivity to language. Each word seems carefully chosen both for meaning and for tone. The sentences are put together with a concern for the cadences that will convey just the proper mood for the story. All this subtle skill seems to have evaporated completely in NPIA. It's not something that could have been done only by Roger Zelazny. Any hack could have turned it out -- Robert Moore Williams, for instance, or ... well, I was going to say Lin

Carter, but even Carter would probably not have committed what I consider Zelazny's most grievous fault -- the careless mixture of heroic fantasy style writing and a modern, breezy, slangy style. Yes, I know that this is justified in context: the narrator, the heroic, immortal prince, is an amnesia victim who has been living in exile on Earth for several centuries, so it could be expected for the hero to combine both worlds in his style of writing. What I'm saying is just that Zelazny fails to handle this combination with proper delicacy. The whole book is written carelessly, as though Zelazny doesn't consider it important enough to waste his best writing on.

Therefore I don't consider it important enough to read.

The Ancient of Days is written entirely in present tense, using a technique that I expressed disapproval of just a little while ago, and it ends with the narrator describing his own death. Moreover, I do not for one moment believe that Stonehenge came to be built because the Giver of Life appeared to Ronstrum the Hunter and ordered him to gather his people together and get the job done with no explanation as to its purpose.

However, while I was reading the book I found myself almost believing it. At least I believed that Ronstrum was telling the truth to the best of his understanding, and if I wanted to speculate that maybe the Giver of Life was really a stranded alien, why that was up to me. But the author gives no help at all in rationalizing things. You're told what Ronstrum sees, does and thinks at each instant of narration, and nothing else. This imparts a sense of immediacy that becomes totally engrossing.

TAOD was also interesting to me as a study in compulsion. Ronstrum does not want to be a builder. He's a hunter, and even though he isn't really happy, he sure as hell doesn't want to be a builder. He tries to ignore the orders he's been given, but the voices and the visions won't leave him alone, and he is literally driven to do the job assigned him.

And that's sort of how I feel about writing.

I'm grateful to Bob Alvis for calling my attention to the book.

Now I'm going to quit, and the space below will be used in this and in succeeding issues of Coprolites for address purposes. I'm going to start mailing copies of this a selected few.

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