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Join us for our **launch party** (Saturday, 5pm, in Mouton Cadet) to hear Zoë Sumra and John Gribbin read from their new books and be interviewed by Peter R. Ellis, with Q&A and refreshments! Find us at other times in the Vendors Room (Bourg). We offer below an extract from Zoë's book followed by an extract from John's book, to whet your appetite.



THE WAGES OF SIN UNDERSIDE BOOK 2

by
ZOË SUMRA

CHAPTER FOUR



Bodies waited only for as long as no one wanted to bury them. With Merissa recumbent in the morgue and set to stay there, Connor led the way off-planet in a tiny convoy of two: *Shadowmark*, his personal Hamadryad-hull light freighter, and Atalanta's tiny hired Fey – hired, apparently, so that Calad couldn't work out where she had gone.

"Where's your ship?" Connor asked over the radio as soon as they had transited from atmosphere to zero-gee.

"Flying a tow round a few mining stations on autopilot. I hope Calad got tired and dusty before heading home."

Most autopilots could not travel through E-R Bridges from one planet to another, but there were ways to jemmy the things to permit Bridge transit. Travelling through a Bridge that way verged on suicidal, but if one's ship were empty all one risked was the money – of which Atalanta was not blessed with large quantities: the money in their marriage was Calad's. Atalanta's people had land and a pedigree, but no real wealth.

As the artificial gravity slowly wound up, Yasmine entered the flight deck, having used her cabin bunk as an anti-G couch during take-off and transition. She had changed into Neuvième casual clothes: loose wrap-on trousers and a thigh-length tunic, both of them white, with a lightweight white scarf tossed over one shoulder. Either she'd expected a bereavement while she was away or she'd bought a few dozen feet of white cotton that morning. Could easily be the latter. Connor had seen Éloïse convert thirty feet of silk into a shawl and trousers with the aid of a sewing machine, a pair of scissors and some embroidery thread in the space of an hour and a half, when she'd needed to accompany him to a meeting with an easily-impressed bigwig, her children had played dress-up with her formal clothes, and the mining station where they were stuck lacked a proper boutique.

He motioned Yasmine to a chair at the nav desk, and rose from the copilot's seat – Marcello was piloting – far enough to turn on the radio. Atalanta picked up within moments.

"Have either of you had any bright ideas about the amazing teleporting body?" he said.

"I wish there were such a thing as teleportation," Atalanta answered, her voice slightly distorted from the space between them. "However. Illusion rarely fools cameras, even if there were any traces, and there weren't."

"Certain techniques can work," Yasmine said, hands clasped in a demure pose and eyes lowered. Connor frowned. Without Atalanta physically present, there was no need for that level of formality.

"Nine times out of ten," Atalanta answered, "people forget to use those techniques. Besides, we both checked for trace. Nothing."

"Did you dye your hair when you went out?" Connor asked.

“No one stopped me,” she said, with an air of mild exasperation. “Not your security, not the police. Neither did port security hassle me as I went to my ship.”

“You are a young and vaguely attractive female.”

“Security staff are trained to watch out for young and vaguely attractive females on the prowl.”

“In my experience they often forget.” He smiled sourly at Yasmine’s incredulous gaze. “When we land on the Septième again, I hope you spend at least a few minutes enjoying feeling like the less dangerous sex.” Marcello side-eyed Connor at that. He’d been to the Neuvième before – maybe not often enough.

Yasmine cleared her throat. “Pritie called me while we were in phase transition. One of Elissal’s women came to her full of gossip this morning.”

That could have been an interesting discussion. Trier was a racketeer new to the scene, prickly in her doings and keen to pry trade from more established names. “How much gossip?”

“The woman wanted info on your deal with Cliff Enterprises.”

Connor laughed aloud. “I wish I had a deal with Cliff –”

“Because Merissa was sharing a table with not one but *three* of their team, and they all seemed very happy.”

Yasmine fiddled with her jack for a moment, and Connor blinked as a photograph flashed up inside his eyeball. Yes, that was Merissa, on the far right, smiling up at a clean-cut young man just as shy and engaging. Her black, curly hair bushed around her shoulders and down her back, accentuating her thin cheeks and her prominent collarbones. She seemed happy, indeed.

If she had been happy, the other woman in shot had been downright delighted. She was laughing straight at the photographer – Trier’s lieutenant – eyes shut and head tossed back. Long, straight, dark hair slicked down the sides of her face to vanish behind her back, hair that was glossy with health and life, as was her deep bronze skin. A foreigner: mostly New World by the cheek shape, but not entirely, wearing a Septième-cut shirt in too fine a cloth for her environment.

Her hand rested on a man’s arm: a New World pureblood man, the oldest of the four in the picture by a good few years, with hair once short caught back into a tiny plait as if he’d tried his best to fit in to Septième fashion. Plump upper body, heavy shoulders and a few facial lines: he was smiling at the foreign woman with a degree of fondness that suggested a long relationship.

“It is worth asking,” Yasmine said. “Even if you threaten to tell their bosses what they were doing: make a night on the drink seem worse than it was. If they’d only talk to you...”

“I’ll try them when we get back,” Connor said. “If I take you, with your wings out, they might even tell me the truth.”

“Why would they lie?” Marcello said. “Why would they want to?”

“To save face,” Atalanta said quietly. “The Union says it’s cosmopolitan, but that can mask a distrust of foreign ways. Anyone who’s been to Port Logis knows exactly how much the Union, as an entity, tolerates other people’s cultures.”

Given that they tried to wipe the Neuvième’s out, went the unspoken addition. Given that the Circle therefore threw them off the Neuvième, and still kills their people because of the atrocities committed at that time – acts the Union wouldn’t even describe now as atrocities, during wartime.

There was a fundamental disconnect between many cultures: the Septième’s mercantilism lay closer to the Union’s ethos than Port Logis and the Circle Neuvième, between the two galactographically, was to either. So far Connor hadn’t had much chance to leverage that similarity.

“Commercial secrecy,” he said, “for a team that arrived escorting warships. Desire for privacy. Desire to avoid any further upset – if, for instance, one of those three backed a chair over a Kriastan’s tail they’d want to dodge any publicity at all till they’d left planet.”

“You’d have to get very drunk to do that,” Atalanta muttered.

“Too drunk to –”

To murder a Septième girl?

“The boy centre right,” Yasmine said, “next to Merissa, is the one Pritie saw her with earlier the same day.”

Marcello, eyes still on the sky ahead, grunted. “If she hadn’t died I bet she could have fed us a

truckload of gossip, straight from the spout. Some foreign half-dick boozes with a Septième girl, she'll screw him for something."

"Not all foreigners –" began Yasmine.

"Both of you shut up," Atalanta said, sharp-voiced. "Does no one think it slightly suspicious that a very high-tech weapons team was out with a girl who was then smuggled – dead or alive – back into her apartment without showing up on a security camera?"

"Your people's tech trends even better," Connor said. "Do you know of a camera blocker discreet enough to edit a couple of people out of a picture while leaving the rest of the images flowing?"

"I don't know all technology inside and out."

Was it Connor's imagination that she stressed the 'all'?

It took the ships ten hours to fly up Mirquest's Highway to the Bridge. Connor had hoped to be asleep for the crossing. As usual he got his timings wrong and woke up to the muted hum of engines changing phase.

The warning bell was muffled in his quarters: why in hells' names did he persistently wake up for crossings? Better to look at the Bridge than not, given that he was awake anyway. He rolled off his bunk, pulled on trousers and tunic – Neuvième house-clothes rather than Septième wear – and went to the flight deck.

Marcello had gone from the controls: Yasmine sat in his place. "Didn't like not watching it either, huh?" Connor said.

"I'll hear it no matter where I am, so I might as well be the first to know it's over." She raised an eyebrow at him. "I knew you and Logan had some Augury, but I didn't realise Bridge travel was that bad for you."

"It isn't as bad for us as for Weavers." Connor took the copilot's seat and stared out at the Bridge ahead: a vast cleft in space, blacker than any night, with occasional flecks of green coruscating across it. Yasmine would see those flecks predominantly as white and blue, with tiny additions for each other magic thread she could use, and would see them as brighter stripes, like an aurora. "Consider, though, that demi-mages can't control our magic."

She wrinkled her nose. "Logan seems to work with his rather than fighting it –"

"He gets Augury bursts playing chess, on a battlefield, and, apparently, when negotiating awkward social situations with people he's never met before – though if he hadn't played some of those right, another battlefield would have resulted. But he did play them right. Even your aunt Amalie likes him."

"She doesn't like anyone, the haughty old bat," Yasmine muttered, though she kept her eyes lowered, for Amalie had been married.

"She comes close enough." The Bridge was too close for Connor's comfort, though not close enough for transit. From here Connor could see its four anchor points straining in space, struggling to maintain orbit against the Bridge's vastness – the Bridge that sought to collapse to nothing. He touched the radio control next to his head. "Atalanta? Are you going first or are we?"

He heard her sigh from a mile or so away. "I'm not going to chase off somewhere completely different on a job."

"I didn't say you would." He waited, with Yasmine slowing *Shadowmark* to a crawl, till she muttered something incomprehensible and accelerated past them.

Her ship slid into the Bridge and vanished. Yasmine counted twenty seconds, aloud, then fed a final boost out of the fusion engines and, as their ship slid up to the Bridge, threw over the singularity drive. Connor braced himself – and *Shadowmark* fell into the Bridge.

The world turned inside out. From far away, he heard a wild animal howling, desperate to rend its prey: the magic, Éloise had told him, though he'd already known. Will-o'-the-wisp danced off the ship's nose, a parody of puppetry, and Connor dragged his eyes from it and to the shielding readout. Depleting at a steady, predictable rate. The only thing that kept the magic from eating them all alive –

– and the blackness parted and the ship slid out over Port Logis.

Connor let out a breath and re-hailed Atalanta. "Shall we convoy down?" No pirates here – they

wouldn't live long enough to make a single hit – but she might want to put off arrival.

"I'm not yet at the stage when this *Guild Weaver* is happy driving alone into the seat of *Circle* power. I'll convoy."

Yasmine switched *Shadowmark* to zero-gee engines and set the accelerator to reach eighty percent of their max speed, which was fifty percent of Atalanta's. On-planet radio had come online. It was late at night in the capital city, but that had never stopped Logan from doing anything. Connor opened a text feed and typed, IN-SYSTEM. CALL ME IF AWAKE. CC. Twenty seconds later his jack phone went off.

"How's things?" Logan said down his ear.

"Interesting in a number of uncomfortable ways. How's your wife?"

"Upset." The line had a three second lag due to the distance between ship and surface. It made it hard for Connor to identify deliberate pauses. "I think she's not sure what to –" The jack muted for a couple of seconds and came up again. "Sorry," Logan said. "Toddler wanting to know why I'm whispering. Ellie was already sick of having one dead parent."

"That's a strange way to put things."

"If you were expecting sentimentality, you'd – *assieds-toi*." The last was at full volume, spoken aloud instead of murmured into a jack's delicate microphone. Connor winced and rubbed his ear.

"I thought the twins slept through."

"It's Nicky. He has episodes."

"I'll be down in ten hours," Connor said, "maybe a little less. Atalanta's with me –"

"Good. Calad went looking for her on Reacher's Crest: he's furious."

"– and so is Yasmine."

"I heard Ellie had sent her over."

Connor grunted, side-eyeing Yasmine. "She's going to a bathhouse."

Logan laughed. "I'm not surprised." In the background Connor heard him wave a jingling toy at his son. "We're at the flat. Come to ours when you get down – there are a few quarrels brewing."

"Gisele?"

"Sure, and then some. A boil between Amalie and her great-aunt flared up – the great-aunt's dead, but she had eight children all of whom had kids of their own. Dominic had had a lid on it for longer than Ellie's been alive. Now they're all posing and it's getting noisy."

Very noisy, if Connor knew the Falavières, and if Logan mentioned gloves being removed he'd be speaking literally. Neuvième folk fought honour duels as often as Kriastans. Legend said Aelin Carrow had forged the first peace between Kriastans and humans: if he'd sent his deputy, Mikhail Ablissan, to assist, Connor would not have been surprised. He'd been a Circle Weaver of the Neuvième, though not of Port Logis.

"So long as my job doesn't follow me here, I'll be happy."

"You might be unlucky. What's the problem?"

"A convoluted explanation that will wait till we're not on time lapse. Suffice it to say that I have two problems, which I thought were separate till a few hours ago."

After a longer pause than was natural, Logan said, "OK. Later. Say hi to the others."

"Will do. Tell Éloise I'll pay my respects as soon as I can." He cut the call.

As he'd spent the past five hours sleeping, Connor retreated to his study and spent the next five hours working, then gave himself another brief nap to try to reset to local time. It didn't refresh him that much. When he returned to the flight deck Marcello was back in the pilot's seat.

"You've a string more business letters," he greeted Connor. "And a garbled note from your brother. Was Mister Logan Cardwain on baby duty last night?"

"If you're not careful he'll have you looking after the twins when we land. Last time I was there they kept trying to climb into ponds, and fountains. If you let his daughter drown you'll be lucky to get a choice of which limb Logan rips off first."

And his eldest son? Connor privately added. But it had always been about Gaia, with Logan, not about Kas, and increasing numbers of sons had changed nothing. Connor would have felt sorry for little Kasimir if his mother hadn't favoured him over his sister – as a Neuvième woman was

expected to do.

“When he’s left off his Port Logis stay –”

“Oh, we’ll have the whole lot of them back sooner than you want, Number Four included.”

Marcello grimaced. “One’s bad enough if the one’s Gaia. Remember how she tried to fly off with Tam Waiter’s shuttle?”

“I remember the yelling.” Most of it from Gaia and Logan, yelling at each other, though she was three years old and barely thigh-high on him: Kas had contributed a portion, misguidedly trying to rescue his sister from their father, as had Nicky, a baby at the time, reacting to the others. “Providing my niece restricts her kleptomania to other gangs’ belongings, I’ll be as happy as possible.”

“Oh, she didn’t want to *steal* it, she wanted to *play* with it. Has anyone given her a flying lesson yet?”

“Logan –” the ‘anyone’ of Marcello’s fancy, for Marcello shared a healthy fear of Logan with over half of Connor’s staff – “says she’s too short to reach the controls and he’ll have to wait another year or two.” Marcello half-snorted. “She’ll be getting three-weapon combat training when she’s five,” Connor added, “why not flying?” And Kas, he wanted to add. *And Kasimir: To them, they are an ‘and’!*

He’d no children: he had little right to call out Logan and Éloise for behaving like Neuvième parents. Sighing, he opened his message box.

Status updates, actions significant enough to require his sign-off: those things were usual. Not usual was a note from Pritie encrypted twice.

Unprecedented fuss and dashings backwards and forwards within the Cliff Enterprises team. Observed hostility between Cliff’s representatives and Martinez’s senior enforcers. Sudden increase in police activity throughout the capital. House to house searches, without explanation as to what the search was for: hard words between the Cliff guards standing over the new ships and the ‘port defence squad. Silence from Martinez.

Connor closed the message. Maybe it was safest, for a couple of days, not to be there. For him, but not necessarily for his crew...



Don't Look Back Short story collection

by

John Gribbin
Science Fact – Science Fiction

Don't Look Back



It was the audio cube that started it. Richie Jefferies – his birth certificate said ‘Richard’, but he was just the generation to have been ‘Richie’, after the Beatles’ drummer, since they burst on the scene when he was eight – had been waiting for them to perfect the damn thing for twenty years. CDs were all very well, but they were bulky and all too easily damaged. This, at last, was the perfect medium for the serious music lover. The entire output of the original Beatles, digitally remastered and stored in a cube the size of a sugar lump. Of course, the new music was all very well, in its place. But it lacked the vibrancy of the rock originals – and with the digital reprocessing, you could practically hear a pin drop in the Abbey Road studios. There was stuff in here, according to George, the only survivor from the quartet, that they hadn’t been able to hear on the original analogue tapes in the recording studio itself, back in the sixties. The same computer enhancement that cleaned up the pictures from Charon, applied to something practical for a change. As far as Richie was concerned, the best thing ever to come out of the space programme.

Of course, space was old hat now. Last century's thing. All the cutting-edge-of-technology stuff revolved around the time probe, where Richie worked as a communications engineer. Reasonable hours, good pay. If you could tolerate the bureaucracy, an ideal job, giving him ample time for his hobby. But at 53 he was coming up for retirement, with the prospect of time weighing heavy on his hands. What he needed was a project to get his teeth into. Something in audio; something like the job that had been done on the Beatles tapes – only, where could a freelance get his hands on any worthwhile old material that wasn't already owned by one of the Japanese communications groups?

Part of the problem lay in Richie's somewhat narrow definition of the term 'worthwhile'. Apart from the Beatles, there were only three artistes he seriously thought worthy of the skills he had to offer. Elvis, Buddy Holly, and Bruce Springsteen. And of the three, only Holly had actually worked with John Lennon. The *Double Diamond* album, Lennon's come-back at the end of the seventies, after, as legend claimed, Holly had turned up at the Dakota apartment, guitar across his back, and practically dragged the recluse out of his shell. The tour in '81, which Richie had not only caught three times in the States, but had followed to London for the Wembley Stadium gig. Holly, Lennon, Jerry Allison on drums and Klaus Voorman on bass; the best gig of the rock era, even before their friends joined them onstage. And the songwriting partnership that flourished into the nineties, with Lennon's roughness tempered by Holly's softer approach in a blend that surpassed even Lennon's early work with McCartney. 'Holly-Lennon' – the credit on more hit records than any other composing team, ever.

But they were gone, and nothing like them would ever be seen again. All the post-78 stuff was just as legally tied up as the Beatles stuff, and had, in any case, already been given the treatment by the big studios in Leipzig. Besides, it was too sophisticated for Richie's wants. What he wanted – what he needed – was a challenge. Something older. Lost tapes from the fifties, maybe. A real challenge.

Idly, he pictured the period he'd like to reproduce with modern technology. He could pinpoint it exactly. Holly's first solo period, in 1959. After the first split with the Crickets; before the band reformed. The 'Winter Dance Party Tour', through Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa. Where Holly had sung anything and everything, even played drums for Dion's band. If only somebody had taken a tape recorder along to one of those gigs, and left the tapes in a time capsule to be opened fifty years later. They'd just about be due to be discovered.

Richie, slumped before his console, eyes half-shut, suddenly snapped upright, fully alert. *If only*
...

He leaned forward, touched a pad. "Jefferies. Logging out. I'm heading on home, don't feel so good. I'll take an early night, hope to be in in the morning."

Back home, he checked out the dates in John Goldrosen's massive *Buddy Holly, His Life and Times*. The memorial volume published after Holly's tragically early death in '97, at the age of 61, was just about the definitive history of the rock era, a labour of love based on interviews with everyone from Niki Sullivan, who'd played with the great man before he was famous, to his nineties protégés, Heartbeat. Since Holly had played with, or written for, just about anybody who was anybody from 1957 to '97, it was small wonder that Goldrosen had travelled more than 50,000 miles researching the book, and spent three years writing it. But out of the half million words in the database, Richie was interested now in just a couple of thousand.

Holly had left the tour after the gig in Moorhead, Minnesota on February 3, 1959, with a bad head cold that had affected his singing during the two shows. Flying home to New York, he'd stayed out of the public eye until spring, emerging with his first post-Crickets album, the million-selling *True Love Ways*. So Moorhead was out; Richie didn't want tapes of Holly singing with a head cold. But everything had been fine – except the weather – the night before in Clear Lake, Wisconsin. After several weeks on the road, the show was firing on all cylinders. That, Richie decided, was the date to aim for – taking suitable precautions to wrap up warm, since Goldrosen's account reported that Holly's drummer, Charlie Bunch, had suffered frostbite when the band bus broke down in the snow one night early in the tour.

Choosing a recorder was a minor problem. Richie had several antiques, but nothing right for the period. Besides, a fifties tape machine really might be a little too basic. He settled for a '65 Uher. Only a pro would know it was slightly beyond the state of the art in '59 – and how many pros would he be likely to find in Clear Lake, Wisconsin, at a rock concert on a freezing February evening? The temptation to pocket a Sony Cubic was almost too much, but he respected the people who'd drawn up the anachronism rules. If he was caught in the act, but clean, he could hardly face anything worse than a slightly earlier retirement than he'd anticipated. But if he was caught dropping anachronies into the past, it would be a Federal matter.

The clothes were no problem. He could pick them up out at the project. All he'd need then would be about five minutes alone with the Beast – not too difficult to arrange for a communications engineer. If everyone who was supposed to be on observer duty simultaneously got an override request to be somewhere else, who would know, except the Central Processor? And with a little tweaking, the CP would forget it even before it happened. Since a Trip didn't occupy any real time in the here and now, he just had to set the remote, walk through the beam and out the other side. Only, to his subjective time the walk through the beam would take about five hours, and would include an opportunity to record one of the great 'lost' concerts. Using old-fashioned analogue tape on a primitive battery-powered machine. Then, he could clean it up digitally, cube it, and – well, of course, he could never let anyone know. Could he?

Hell, cross that bridge when the time comes. For now, there was a chance not only to tape Holly, but to see him and hear him live, once again. It might not quite be Wembley '81, and he might be 53, not 25, but he felt, once again, that old tingle down the spine, just thinking about it. "Let's do it, Richie, now," he muttered under his breath, thinking "or I'll get cold feet, and never do it."

He not only got into the hall, the Surf Ballroom, early – he got in free, thanks to the policy of the manager, Carroll Anderson, of allowing 'parents' in as his guests, to reassure them that the kids would get up to no mischief under his care. As for the tape machine, Anderson was impressed by its compactness and the quality of its sound reproduction, and happy to let Richie make a tape "for the kids". No problem.

The problems came later.

Nobody but a pro could tell the anachronism of the Uher. Hell, how was he to know the kid was a pro? Sure, he'd become a studio whiz in the sixties. But he was just 22 now, brought up in the back of Texas, with a good-ol'-boy accent you could cut with a knife. Why didn't Goldrosen's goddam biography tell you Holly had been dabbling in studio technology since he was seventeen?

It was only three numbers into the first set that Richie noticed the bespectacled drummer repeatedly looking his way. By the time Holly returned to lead his own band into action, the musician's interest was sufficiently obvious to prevent Richie melting into the young fans around him. Holly beckoned Richie forward to the centre of the stage, where the youngsters happily made way for anyone who was the object of their idol's attention, sang two verses of "Rave On" straight to Richie's microphone, and at the end of the set announced to the crowd that tonight's show had been recorded by a big New York radio station and that y'all might get to hear yourselves on the radio if you were real lucky.

An audio expert, and a joker as well. At Holly's insistence, the band hauled a reluctant Richie backstage to play them the tracks. The Uher, he explained, was the latest thing from Europe. He ran a radio repair shop, down town; his kid brother, in the army in Germany, had sent him the machine for his birthday.

They seemed to buy the story. The trouble was, Holly wanted to buy the machine, as well. Or at least, get Richie to let him have the tapes. They sounded real good, almost as good as the stuff he'd recorded with J.I., back at Bobby Peeples' garage in Lubbock. Wow. Whatever had happened to old Bobby?

Whatever happened, Richie knew he had to keep tight hold of the recorder. The tapes, along with himself and the machine, would be pulled back by the Beast in about an hour from now. Let Holly

have them, bury them deep in his baggage, and they'd simply be gone in the morning. Untraceable. But he daredn't let anyone with any kind of expert knowledge get a good look at a machine from six years in their future.

The tour manager announced that the bus was ready to leave. Holly wanted to hear some more of the tapes. He called Carroll Anderson over. That idea they'd discussed earlier, was it still on? Anderson shrugged. He'd made a few phone calls. There was a guy at the Mason City airport, Roger Peterson, who could fly three of them on to Moorhead, if they really wanted to go. But it was a filthy night; Anderson thought Holly had changed his mind, and was going to ride in the bus?

No. No. He'd changed it back again. He was gonna listen to these tapes for maybe half an hour; and anyway, he thought he had a cold coming on. Could Mr Anderson, please, get back on the phone and fix everything up? Then maybe Mr Anderson could drive him out to the airport? The bus could leave now. Let them suffer the 400-mile journey. In a couple of hours, he would be tucked up in a nice warm bed.

Richie, trying to remain inconspicuous, frowned. There was something wrong here. That kid was certainly a smooth operator. Polite as any southern gentleman, but somehow everyone jumped when he whispered "frog". But that wasn't the problem. Richie shook his head, trying to clear it. He felt rather peculiar. What was it now? Oh yes. *There was nothing about flying in the biography, not until tomorrow night, when Holly pulled out of the tour.* Puzzled, he scarcely noticed the bickering among several of the singer's associates – resolved when two that Richie recognised from the show, his namesake, Richie Valens, and the big man, the Big Bopper, stayed with Holly while the rest scrambled for the bus.

He had to get out of here. But how? Richie played the tapes some more, desperately seeking for an out before the Beast hauled him back. When Anderson returned with the car, he was so relieved that he simply thrust the tapes into Holly's hands, told him he could keep them, and practically sprinted out of sight around the corner of the car park. He had a bad feeling that he had not been as inconspicuous as the Project would have liked. In fact, he felt bad all over. Richie leaned against the wall, then slumped to the ground. He felt *really* weird.

There was nobody there to notice when he, and the Uher, simply faded away.

It was the audio cube that started it. Richie Jefferies, listening to *The Beatles Complete* in his home studio, got to daydreaming about all the really great artistes who'd never had the benefit of the technology. Among the clutter of rock memorabilia on the wall, his eye caught the framed poster-size blow-up of the Clear Lake *Mirror Reporter* from 1959, recording the death of three rock 'n rollers in a plane crash, following a gig in Clear Lake, Wisconsin. Buddy Holly, now. By all accounts, he would have known what to do with any recording medium. What a loss. But he was dead, and that was it.

Of course, there were people around who weren't dead, but might just as well be. Or who might be dead, for all anyone knew. The eternal rock mystery, that gave the headline writers something to do every year or so – was John Lennon still alive? What was it this month – the Great Garbo of pop? or the Howard Hughes of rock? Whatever, the business empire built by Yoko continued to function long after her death, and the lawyers said Lennon was alive, though he hadn't performed since the mid-seventies and hadn't been seen in public since her funeral in '99.

Now, thought Richie, sipping his scotch. If someone like Lennon had made a few recordings even as long ago as the eighties, and they were halfway near as good as the stuff he'd done before, then with modern technology they could be tweaked up to sound as good as – well, as good as anything Clapton had done, for sure.

Trouble was, Lennon hadn't recorded anything in the eighties. If only somebody had gone along to him in the Dakota, maybe in the middle of 1979, and had a little chat to him. Got him back into the studio.

Richie, slumped in front of the mixing deck, eyes half-shut, suddenly snapped upright, fully alert. *If only ...*

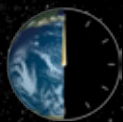


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AUTHOR		TITLE	SCIENCE FICTION	FANTASY	SUB-GENRE	AGE
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