

## Restoration

by James Lynn Smith

Gary Masons pushed the door open, looked back and said, “See you same time in two weeks.” He let the door close, descended the stairs, and came out on the street. June Swartz, Psy.D., had been confronting, questioning, and a general pain in the rear for the last half year. But today their session had been mostly pleasant. He stood in front of the street-level entrance for a moment, wondering if he wanted to stop by Phil’s Pub or go straight home.

An uncanny feeling crept up his spine. He heard the abrupt gunning of an engine and squealing of tires. A dark car sped straight for him. Panic stabbed his gut as he leapt backwards into the recession for the door. The car jostled onto the sidewalk over the spot where had stood, glanced off the side of the brick building, and careened back into the street. Heart thumping, Gary craned forward and watched the auto speed away. It was over too fast to see a license plate.

“Crazy nut,” he shouted, “What are you smoking?” Passers-by momentarily stopped, gazed at him and the abraded building side. Then he remembered that last week, in front of Baker’s Deli, he heard a loud crack and saw a round hole nearby in the front glass. His brows knitted. *Maybe not just a stray bullet after all.*

\*

Gary opened his apartment door and entered. It didn’t make sense. His outer life was too ordinary for sinister intent against him. It had to be mere coincidence. He volunteered service to the community: Food Pantry, Habit for Humanity, phone reception for PBS fund drives at the local TV station. That should not create enemies. There were no fellow workers to have disagreements with, thanks to an

inheritance that funded him each month. Recollection of employment prior to the inheritance seemed distant, matter-of-fact. Only a picture the building where he was a media technician came to mind. *Time flies. And memory details too.*

He went to his study, sat at the PC, and pulled up the continuing file of ideas, questions and experiences from the last half year he often discussed with Dr. Swartz. Her face came to mind. *Long, lustrous blond hair. If she were not my analyst I would...*

Opening the last file he began typing in events concerning the speeding car and the incident at Baker's Deli. He knew Dr. Swartz would suggest paranoia was at the root. He still had more work to do although medication he took was now at the lowest dose. Gary's life was mundane but his dreams were not—not this last year. *Always upset when I wake. Feel I'm supposed to do something important.* He recalled his last discussion with Dr. Swartz.

\*

“So why are you disturbed when you awaken?” She asked. “Your dreams have you working with people doing important things, going to school, and creating beautiful art.”

“It's the overwhelming sadness afterwards. It contrasts with my real life. Feel I'm supposed do something important, but there's this barrier. Also I wonder why I have so few friends but feel like something is watching me. I'm afraid that I might...”

“Harm yourself?”

“That or something else radical.”

Dr. Schwartz brushed a strand of hair back from her forehead. “What do you think the barrier is between you and your sense of success?”

“I don't know. It seems there is something to find out before I'm free to move forward, and I can't imagine what it is.”

“Gary, I am going to recommend you read *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* by Dr. C. G. Jung. It’s translated from German and is basically memoirs of his life. It may help.”

Gary made a note of the title.

“One other thing, you previously told me of dreams where you were trying to hide a dead body. You felt an obligation to keep it from being discovered. Why did you feel that way?”

“That was troubling. Don’t remember dreaming I killed the person. It seems the onus to get rid of it was present at the dream’s beginning.”

“Or else your memory of the beginning was wiped out.”

“My dreams are bizarre.”

“Dreams usually are. Segments of both waking experience and the subconscious. That last part is what we must bring out. As Jung called it, the ‘shadow’ aspect of personality.”

\*

Jung’s book was something to look forward to. His search must go on. Anything else would be despair. June—Dr. Schwartz—was his only guiding light. He was capable of interacting with others. But the purpose of his life must be determined before he even had the desire. *With no idea of what you’re about, what personality do you wear?*

He stood and walked to the window. Outside he saw a hawk circling in the sky. Abruptly, the hawk swooped down on a smaller bird and snatched it away. “You know who you are.” Gary said. “You know you’re a predator and that justifies your actions. You are sane, worry free.” *And I am not.*

\*

One year earlier, Christopher Johns, the director of BAIMS listened to the lecturer and viewed the projected material politely. It was another Megoceanic,

Inc. in-house training class which reviewed how his company fit into the industrial consortium. When Johns advanced from Chief Engineer to Director of BAIMS, his dream was bearing fruit. But all he needed to know about the consortium bureaucracy was that it was intangibly complex and backed by some of the world's richest people.

The organizational charts showed multiple companies. Behind the holding entity, but not shown, was a black hole where he knew powerful figures were at work. Mainly altruistic, based on projects and research, it was this feature that drew him to Megoceanic, the consortium member that hired him. He also knew that the black hole contained an industrial equivalent to the CIA, sad but necessary.

When the training was over he returned to his office to interview a candidate for employment. While waiting, he toyed with his Newton's cradle, a string of suspended balls that transferred momentum in an interesting way. If the end ball was pulled back and released to smack into the others, it stopped cold and only the ball at the far end swung out. Then the end ball swung back down, smacking into the others, and only the first one swung out again. The process repeated automatically for a time. Johns bought it as an office toy.

When a guard brought the candidate to his office, Johns pushed the toy aside and looked up. "Have a seat Buford. I know HR talked to you, but I wanted to give you an overview before you meet other employees."

"Thank you Dr. Johns. I've been looking forward to being here."

"Call me Chris. I'm not much on formality."

"Chris, got it."

"BAIMS is an acronym for Bio-Assisted Intelligence Monitoring System. Here's what that is. Harmless implants of electrodes in various sea life convey signals of alarm, food scents, deep vibrations, and other awareness. We also have instrument sensors placed in the ocean to detect acoustical disturbances, water

density, salinity, temperature layers, and chemicals. But animal brain signals augment this information.”

“How do you know what the brain signals mean?”

“That was the genius of this project. Neural network software correlated animal signals with our instrument sensors. Artificial intelligence then enables interactive reports on ocean status.”

“How are signals collected?”

“Through underwater sonic transmissions. Surface transponders convert them to microwaves for direct or satellite reception.”

“Why is this project all underwater?”

Chris sighed wearily. “Man-made and natural activities threaten life. There is a consortium program called ‘Restoration.’ Some call it a doomsday project. It’s for preparedness to survive global war, biological imbalance, climatic change, volcanic pollution, and more. The best chance for survival is undersea. We have a small colony down there now.”

“Shouldn’t the government be doing this?”

“What government? Remember this is a ‘doomsday’ scenario. Only a select few could escape to preserve humanity and a few other species.”

“But short of Armageddon, does BAIMS have other benefits?”

“Definitely. This is its most important value. Bio-assisted sensing is coordinated right here and displayed on huge wall screens and graphs. This worldwide system can track enemy submarines, undersea weapon testing, volcanic activity, terrain shifting, and food fish migration, to name a few. This helps avoid war, unpredicted tsunamis, starvation, and more.”

“Sir you must be proud.”

“The grandeur of this project overcomes me. For example, the porpoise brain is extremely advanced in acoustic processing. So much that we have to

display that information visually. I've gazed at our screens of ocean current densities, and the beauty of form and color almost brings me to tears."

"You're saying things some would claim is confidential, at least enough for rumors."

"I'm purposely not telling you details. But yes, rumors exist."

"You're not worried?"

"Not my job to worry about that."

The deputy director, Jenny Baines, knocked on his door with a guard."

"Chris," she said, "Fred here will take Buford around to visit the crew now."

Chris rose and shook Buford's hand. "Good meeting with you, Buford. We'll be in touch."

After the two men walked away, Jenny said, "Your statement about not being worried over rumors: Why is that?"

Chris smiled. "Rumors abound. If details don't escape, a rumor doesn't hurt much. Our consortium's black hole gurus add to it and make the rumor so ridiculous it's on a level with Bigfoot."

"Plus, our goals are altruistic." Jenny said. "Who would actually want to use information against us."

"Unfortunately, a lot would. I *am* concerned about spies sneaking out real details. There are companies that don't want us to provide our benefits to humanity. They make vast fortunes from conflict, starvation, and resulting chaos with weapon sales and mercenary militias."

"Of course. I wasn't thinking. We have something that must be protected at all costs."

"How about joining me in the break room for a cup of coffee? Then let's ask our techs about the specs on the latest acoustical transmitter."

As director, Chris was like an electric circuit, making the rounds and talking to employees. His attention, even when Chief Engineer, was so riveted on BAIMS that he never sought marriage. But he was impressed with Jenny and selected her to be his second in command. She wasn't technically savvy, but her social sciences background and years in law enforcement enabled her to coordinate people who were. And she was a vivacious brunette with wavy hair and a svelte figure. He felt lifted when she was near and often took her on short conference trips.

"So we're going to San Diego this time?" She bent close to see the brochure.

"Yes, Dynamic Acoustic Solutions— DAS—is the consortium host. I'd like to see who we will be working with." He noticed the subtle fragrance she was wearing. *Good choice.*

\*

The next day, they flew into San Diego and hailed a cab for the hotel where DAS was hosting. In the mirror, Chris noticed a dark green car he had seen when entering the cab. Despite several turns the cab made, the car was still behind them. "Jenny, we seem to have a green vehicle tailing us."

She turned and looked behind them. "Suppose it's another conference attendee?"

"Possibly. Maybe I'm a little anxious about the meeting."

In a half hour, they pulled into the hotel entrance and went in to register their rooms. Chris noticed a swarthy man with a hooked nose step out of the green car and come into the lobby. The man never approached the reception desk, but loitered about, occasionally glancing at them.

\*

After a quick breakfast the next morning, Chris and Jenny picked up their prepared pass badges and went into the conference room. After introductions and preliminary announcements, a DAS employee named J. F. Truman came to the

podium and gave his presentation concerning acoustical holography at DAS.

During a recess he came out into the semi-secure lobby. Chris followed to introduce himself and ask him about instrumentation used. After talking a few minutes, he noticed the hooked nosed man standing nearby as if listening. He wore a pass badge with the company name Tabort, Inc.

“Truman,” Chris said, quietly. “There’s a guy near us with a badge that reads Tabort. Do you know a company with that name?”

“No, I don’t. Maybe it’s a new addition to the consortium.”

“Maybe. But don’t say anything that’s confidential while he’s around.”

After a bit more restricted patter with Truman, Chris was fed up and decided to confront the man. He looked directly at him and moved forward with intent to question him. The man met his eyes, abruptly looked at his watch, and walked hurriedly away as though he were late for an appointment.

“Jenny, Chris said, “I’m going to follow hook-nose from the green car. I feel like he’s up to something.”

A line creased her forehead. “Be careful, Chris. We need you at BAIMS.”

Chris hurried through the crowd, barely keeping his eye on the receding figure. He followed the man from the conference facilities down a wide corridor with plush carpet, past a hotel gift shop, and to a lounge. The man headed straight to a table with another man and a woman. Chris turned his face away and slipped in, sidling past the crowd to a partition near their table. The partition had small open spaces through which he could see without attracting attention. He produced a small ear speaker with a tiny directional mike which he aimed at the table.

“So what kept you Hook?” the man at the table said. “Sit your ass down and tell us why we have to wait on you.”

“The consortium has guys I’d like to know more about. Like that Chris Johns character that heads the BAIMS project.”



“What did you learn?” the woman asked.

“Not much. He was talking to this Truman fellow from DAS.”

“Right, that’s not much.” The other man said. “But we’re here for your list of moles so we can create glowing resumes and recommendations to get them through the BAIMS Human Resources.”

“Patience. First there is me, Horace Gibbons, then Alfred Jones...”

While he named the potential hires to infiltrate the BAIMS, Chris scribbled them down on a scrap of paper. The writing was illegible, but good enough to jog his memory later when he could record them properly.

“Hey, man,” the woman said. “Give us a written list. Think we have photographic memory?”

Horace sighed, showing his frustration. “Can’t do. We never list our agents on paper. You’ll have to hear them again and memorize them. You know the rules.”

“That’s ridiculous,” she said.

Horace rolled his eyes, passing his line of sight briefly over the partition where Chris stood. Then he frowned and looked back to the partition.

Discovered, Chris spun around to leave and stumbled into a waiter. Both fell to the floor, the waiter’s tray crashing down and dishes shattering.

Jenny walked in at that moment and tried to size up the situation. Her eyes darted toward Horace pulling his coat open for the pistol in his vest holster. She yelled, “Chris, he’s got a gun.”

People screaming and rushing for the door did not dissuade the shooter. Three shots rang out. One went into the wall, one in Chris’s shoulder and one in his head.

Jenny saw the shooter and the other two dash away. She ran to Chris and bent over him. Grimacing, she looked up. “Quick, somebody call 9-1-1.” Despite

the head wound, she noticed slight movement.

\*

Hours later Jenny saw the doctor coming from the surgery center. She tossed her unread magazine aside and rushed to him. “Doctor, how is he?”

“We extracted the bullet from his shoulder easily, but the one that hit his head went in at a severe angle and spun around against the inside of his cranium. Although his brain suffered severe trauma, the bullet did not actually go through it. We resected some bone and removed the bullet from the opposite side of his head. Intracranial tubes are relieving the edema seeping into the dura mater. We’ve already transferred him to the ICU.”

Clyde Jones, CEO of Megoceanic, came alongside Jenny. “Doctor, is it possible to venture a prognosis at this time?”

The doctor took a deep breath. “We think he’ll live, but he is bound to have problems. Will he eventually recover? It will be a long hard road.”

Jenny’s brow creased with concern. “Would he likely have worse problems with memory, movement or vision?”

“It’s wait and see at the moment.”

A policeman standing nearby came over. “Ms. Baines. We’d like to continue the interview with you. Can you come downtown and look at some mug shots?”

“Okay officer, I’m coming.” She looked back. “Clyde, I’ll be in touch.” Despite Jenny’s self control, she was heartbroken at the prognosis—and scared.

\*

A few weeks later Jenny went to Clyde’s office to discuss the issues. “For a while he lapsed into a coma,” she said. “But days later he came around and could actually speak a little. I was so happy until I realized he had no idea who I was nor any concept of Megoceanic or BAIMS.”

Clyde frowned.

“We don’t know when or if he will regain his memory,” Jenny said. “But we’ve got to promote that possibility.”

“Yeah. Meantime you have to pinch hit for him in the director’s office. Also it bothers me that the shooter knows Chris saw him. We found a list with a few names on it, but it’s illegible. I guess Chris was in a hurry. Might be industrial spies or intended saboteurs. If this hook nosed guy finds out Chris is still alive, he will try to finish him off. You too.”

“Police think the guy may be Horace Gibbons, once served as a private eye, but then got thick into interstate crime. The FBI came in on this. They might want a witness protection program set up for Chris. I saw the shooter briefly but only recall that he was left handed when holding the gun. And I didn’t hear any names. The FBI hopes Chris will be a witness if his memory returns. But how can a man with no memory fit into a witness program? He wouldn’t know what to look out for.”

“I don’t think he ought to be in a regular program for that reason. Plus we would be denied any access to him. Our consortium has contracts with the government and a lot of our guys know FBI folks. I think we can influence them into letting our security handle this, provided we keep them in the loop. Unusual I know, but here’s where the consortium has an advantage.”

“In what way?”

“We could do our own version of the witness protection program. If Chris thought he was someone else, he could convincingly live elsewhere and no one would be the wiser. We would create a new identity and feed data and photo details to Chris under hypnosis. We have a company doing cognition research in such things right now.”

“I’m concerned that an alternate identity may conflict with his memory recovery.”

Clyde paused a moment. “I know, but the first priority is to keep him alive. If his memory doesn’t return, at least he’d have an identity, and he’d be safer to be known as someone else, anyhow.”

“We need people to watch him without being noticed.” Jenny added. “Also he should have income, so we could convince him he lives on an inheritance.”

“Okay. Also we ought to have one of our company people meet with him periodically, face-to-face, so we can get a better report on how he’s doing and whether his memory is coming back. Might invent a bogus ID for the company person, like a therapist or something.”

“Let’s rename Chris ‘Gary,’” she said. “That was my favorite cousin’s name.”

“Whatever we decide, we need to work with the FBI and these cognition research guys.”

\*

Jenny became Acting Director at BAIMS but kept in touch with activities involving Chris. She saw a complex, realistic life scenario being created for him. He was placed under sedation for a trance-like state in an audiovisual environment, repeatedly exposed to photos, videos, data and sounds to create artificial memories. Later, actors reinforced the artifice and situated him with seeming normalcy into an apartment in a nearby suburb. Thus Gary Masons was ‘born’ into a life with an unreal past. To police and FBI, he was an unlikely witness. To Megoceanic, he was a memory-impaired genius, flying in a dubious holding pattern.

\*

Gary Masons finished his gym workout and showered. After dressing he decided to go to Phil’s Pub for a beer. He limited consumption on workout days, otherwise he would have at least two. Feeling chipper this afternoon, his spirits lifted even more as he entered Phil’s and heard the revelry, aided by two wall TV’s

blaring audience cheers from a concert and a football game. When his eyes adjusted to the darker room he saw an unfamiliar, redheaded bar attendant approach.

“What’ll it be?” she asked.

“Miller Lite and a cold mug please.” When she turned to leave, Gary noticed a man at the end of the bar that seemed familiar. That was strange because, for whatever reason, almost no one was familiar to him. The man had a deep tan and a prominent nose that reminded him of a hook or an eagle’s beak.

The bar attendant went past the counter end, pulled a Miller Lite from an iced container and turned back. She stopped by the man at the end to say something, and both of them looked at Gary. The man gestured with his left hand.

He could not overhear their quiet conversation, but for some reason he felt paranoid. Pulling cash from his billfold as she sat the beer and mug down, Gary said, “I’m just here for one, no tab. Go ahead and take this now, please.”

“Thanks buddy, come back soon.”

Without looking, Gary felt as if the man continued to stare at him. He poured his beer slowly, impatient for the foam to break up. After three swallows, he turned toward the man, who instantly diverted his eyes to the TV. Gary turned back, waited a minute and took another swallow. Without moving his head, he cut his eyes toward the counter end. In his peripheral vision he saw the man was gone.

He took a way home that was crowded with pedestrians. Short cuts through alleyways did not feel right at the moment. At his apartment building, he mounted the stairs to the second floor. Feeling relief, he entered his apartment, turned on the TV, and plopped down on his couch.

\*

For the next few days, Gary only went out for groceries and the gym. He prepared meals, worked at his PC station, and watched traffic from his windows.

Then something unusual happened. A van pulled up outside and workers began bringing furniture upstairs to his floor. He looked into the hallway and saw an open door at a nearby apartment. A redheaded woman stood nearby, directing the struggling workers toward the interior. When she turned so he could see her face, he felt a start. She was the new bar attendant at Phil's Pub, the one talking to the man with a hooked nose. Closing his door, Gary wondered what to do. If he did nothing, his imagination could provoke paranoia again. *I've got to face this anxiety.*

He walked into the hallway and approached the woman whose back was to him. "Hello, I'm Gary Masons. Moving in?"

She jumped. "Oh—you spooked me. Yes, I'm Ruby Schmidt." She extended her hand.

"I believe I've seen you before. Do you work at Phil's Pub?"

"I fill in once in a while. Just do it for Phil. His staff is notoriously unreliable."

"Yeah, I can imagine." Gary thought her comment was strange. He had recently talked to Phil, and the man couldn't praise his staff enough. Even used the word "reliable."

"I'll let you get on with your move-in now. Let me know if there's some way I can help."

"Thanks fella—Gary—I'll do that."

He went back to his apartment and mulled it over. The best way to diffuse his discomfort was to know more. *I'll find some reason to keep talking to her.*

\*

The next morning his doorbell rang. Upon opening the door, he found Ruby standing there. A soft, light blue T-shirt and white shorts revealed a curvaceous shape. Her hair was long and wavy and its color matched her name.

“I know this sounds corny as hell, but I’m out of sugar. Could I borrow a cupful ‘til I have time to go for groceries?”

At first Gary was speechless. *Is this cliché intentional?* She appeared so unabashedly honest that the request was amusing. *Maybe she’s a little attracted to me.* Then the spoiler thought arose that his loneliness made him vulnerable. *I’ll simply play this card. See where it leads.* “Please come in. I’ll look in the cupboard now.”

When he returned from the kitchen, she was comfortably sprawled on his couch with no apparent need to rush. She looked up. “How do you like living here?”

“It’s nice. Maybe too nice. Little happens here.”

“You need someone to help you liven things up.”

“I think I hear a bit of an adventuress here. Where are you from?...”

\*

Their conversation, with a few drinks in between, lasted for an hour. It reached the point where both were all smiles and Gary could ask the question in the back of his mind.

“When I first saw you at Phil’s, you stopped to talk to a man at the end of the counter. What was that about?”

Ruby’s face dropped all expression. Then she looked at her wristwatch. “Oh—look at the time. My sister is supposed to call me to see how the move went. Abruptly she went to the front door and with a wave said, “Bye.”

Gary stared after the closed door. *That was swift.* He stood, saw the sugar-filled cup still on the side table and something else—a brochure about a company called Megoceanic. It was filled with photos of company sites and activities. One was a room with screens bearing various underwater views and colorful graphs. As he looked, he felt dizzy and a strange nostalgia flowed through his chest. *How did*

*this get here? What does it mean?*

In retrospect, he realized something about his conversation with Ruby was odd. She asked little about his personal history, as though she knew all she needed to, or didn't care. When he asked about events in her past, she answered quickly, sounding a little rehearsed. Then she would redirect the topic to impersonal items like movies, exotic foods or city politics. *Maybe I'm feeling paranoid again.*

\*

Late afternoon the next day, He opened the blinds and looked over the cityscape. A few lights were coming on in the buildings, and clouds stacking from the day's heat were darkening underneath. *Might rain tonight.* He looked at the street below and saw someone by the lamppost holding a cell phone to his left ear. The man looked upward and Gary's heart skipped a beat. It was the dark man with the beak.

Backing away from the window, He stumbled to the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. *If this—I'll call him Hook—comes up here, could be trouble.* The bottle of tranquilizers was still there. But instead of grabbing for some, he slammed the cabinet door back and stared at his reflection in the mirror. "You can't run for these things every time something strange happens. Get a grip." Turning from the cabinet, he went to his front door and cracked it open to peek out and listen for any steps ascending the stairway.

Instead he saw Ruby's door open. She came out wearing a light jacket and jeans. After pulling the door key out of her purse she hooked the strap over her shoulder. The turning motion of locking the door caused the strap to slip off and the purse fell onto the floor. A compact spilled out with another, larger object. She hurried to pick up the larger object first. It appeared to be a snub-nosed .38 revolver.

He ducked back inside as perspiration beaded his forehead. *Call police? Sit*



*tight or run like hell?* The uncertainty grew. What if he ran into Ruby? Is she working with Hook or afraid of him? If Gary encountered her, would she shoot him or share her protection? If he saw Hook what would he do?

*Trust no one and take action.* He went to the kitchen and selected a medium sized butcher knife, wrapped it in a small hand towel and stuffed it under his belt along his right side. Opening his front door, he looked around and moved rapidly to the back stairwell. After pausing to listen at the intermediate landing, he went down and into the parking lot. He approached his car, unlocked the door and crawled in.

On the right passenger seat something grabbed his attention. A small object containing a line of steel balls suspended from a cradle with strings. *Where'd that come from?* Though feelings of both familiarity and strangeness assailed him, he tore his attention away. *Got to stay focused.* Where to go was a question, but anywhere would give him time to think without feeling trapped.

He pulled out of the lot and headed toward Shoreline Drive, a route that calmed him when he felt confused. After driving two miles he merged onto Shoreline Drive and looked in the rearview mirror. An SUV, headlights on, approached rapidly from the rear. He moved into the slow lane so it could pass. The SUV came alongside, much too close, as if to force him off the road. Gary pressed the accelerator and swerved into the fast lane. The SUV did the same. Glancing at the rearview he saw a hand extend out the driver's window holding a dark object.

A flash came from the object and he realized it was a gun. In the brief light from a streetlamp he recognized the driver as Hook. Glancing at the mirror again he saw the man unfasten his seat belt so he could better maneuver the weapon. A crack from the pistol was followed by a metallic ping in the back of his car. Panic almost seized him before an idea flickered through his mind.

Making a sharp turn off Shoreline Drive he steered toward the bay's ship docking area. By now it was nearly dark and he paid close attention only to what was directly in front of him. He hoped the manic pursuer behind would do the same.

Gary stepped on his accelerator and veered onto Wharf Five, a wide concrete structure that looked much like a street. At the end was a barricade sufficient to keep personnel from falling off, but not a speeding car. A cargo ship was edging across just beyond the end of the wharf. He stomped on the accelerator again and his follower did the same. After checking his seat belt, Gary pressed buttons to roll windows down. Only feet from the barricade, he slammed on brakes and braced himself as his car rammed through the barricade and plunged into the water below. Hook's SUV never braked nor encountered the barricade. It sailed over and beyond Gary's car, plowing into the thick metal side of the ship at the water line.

Gary detached his seat belt and waited until water pouring in the windows nearly submerged his car. Then he exited an open window and swam to the surface. No more than three car lengths from the wharf, he swam to a ladder and climbed it. In the light of a turning beacon he saw a mass of crushed, wrinkled metal slowly sinking down the side of the ship.

*What just happened?* An intimate familiarity with water and vessel dynamics had bolted from his unconscious and saved him. But he had no recollection of even learning to swim. He began the walk back to his apartment, sure that the dock guards or crew on the ship saw the event and were dialing 9-1-1.

\*

It was nearly 8 p.m. when he arrived at his apartment building. Pausing at Ruby's door he felt trepidation. *Is she in cahoots with Hook?* He knocked anyway and placed his hand on the knife in his belt, still wrapped with the towel. No one answered so he went to his apartment.

After going to the kitchen for a cold bite from the refrigerator, he shed his wet clothes and put on clean, dry shorts. *Eventually, they'll retrieve my car and know my identity.* He then plopped into bed. *Also I need a gun, but...too weary to worry now.*

\*

Gary drifted peacefully. Then he descended to a gentle landing somewhere outside. In the distance he saw two men with badges approaching. He was arrested for leaving the site of a fatal accident. After police shut him in a cell, he saw a device with swinging steel balls clacking back and forth. It was on the floor, but seemed to grow.

“That’s a Newton’s cradle,” a cellmate said. “You’ll be here a long time so here’s the daily news. Just relax.”

When Gary opened the paper, it shrank and became a brochure. One concerning a company called Megoceanic. A photo of a large room with screens containing colorful graphs and ocean displays pulled on his attention.

\*

Gary woke and sat up abruptly, feeling painfully split between two realities. Then he remembered the Newton’s cradle on the seat of his car and eerie sensations about that brochure he saw recently. *This feeling gets worse.* Unable to go back to sleep, he saw it was 10 p.m. and remembered Dr. Swartz had told him to call her at any time he felt alarmed. He picked up the phone and dialed.

“Dr. Swartz? Gary Masons. I’m sorry to call at this time of night but...”

\*

An hour later, Gary stepped out of the cab and went upstairs to Swartz’s office. He knocked on the door and she opened it, a look of concern written on her face. He wondered if it were a professional sham. *How often do clients pull her out of bed?* Her receptionist was absent, as expected.

“I see you are agitated. I’m going to give you something to quieten your nerves.” She brought two capsules and a small water glass. “Here, have a seat.”

He gladly took them and sat down. Then he stood again.

“It’s okay, Gary. If you want to stand or pace, you can sit later. Tell me what’s been going on.”

In a disorganized, halting manner, he managed to talk about the man in the bar, the red headed woman and the car chase resulting in the wreck at the wharf. He tried to explain how objects he saw brought stronger nostalgia and confusion than usual. Finally he covered the dream and how he felt something important was related to Megoceanic. Dr. Swartz did not interrupt, and finally Gary became woozy and plopped into the large, soft chair.

A subtle smile raised one corner of Swartz’s mouth. “It appears you are beginning to recover certain memories. We’ve been waiting to see if it would happen. No one wants to risk a hit if it’s unnecessary, but it seems it will be now.”

He started to stand, but felt unable. Then he realized he had been drugged with something more than a mild sedative. “I don’t understand.”

“Notice your movements are greatly impaired. Speech too, a little. It’s unnecessary to explain anything to you, but it should be entertaining to see your reactions. I need some compensation for being brought out late at night. And the fussy business months ago of removing the ‘therapist’ you were to have appointments with. She was going to keep an eye on you for Megoceanic. They hoped you would recover your memory and go back to the BAIMS project.

“What do you mean?” He said, forming words as best he could.

“You are not Gary Masons. Your real name is Christopher Johns, Director of BAIMS at Megoceanic.”

Gary—now Chris—felt his world turning over. Segments of memory slapped his mind like the steel balls in Newton’s cradle. He recalled his office,

those screens, and Jenny. It was like walking out of a movie into daylight. “Gary Mason’s life was a fiction.”

“Yes, one your employers implanted in your mind while you, hopefully, regained your real memory.”

“What did you do with the real Dr. Swartz?”

“I told you. I removed her before you ever had your first appointment. She wasn’t a real doctor, any more than I am. I disposed of her and continued sending bogus reports to Megoceanic.”

“Megoceanic thinks she’s still here?”

“Yes.”

His mouth moved a little slower as the drug’s effect increased. “But why all this complexity just to get me?”

“My client wanted to know how much you could remember of what you overheard from Hook in that restaurant. If you couldn’t remember, we would let it be. Since Megoceanic thinks you’re so important, there would be a investigation and some risk to my client if you died of unnatural causes. Therefore they hired me to find out about your memory by replacing your ‘analyst.’ Lately they’ve become restless and your memory is coming back, so your removal is necessary.”

“The guy you people had following me is being pulled from the Bay in a crushed car. Only a matter of time ‘til they trace him to you.”

“Not so. I’m not a permanent hire. Once I’m paid, I’m nowhere around here.”

“You take hit contracts.”

“Yes. It’s a pleasure to deflate big shots like you.” Back in the Ukraine, I grew up with *guys* always being tough and controlling. But in this job I can turn the tables.”

“You should know all men are...not the shame.”

“What’d you say—not the ‘shame’? You’re definitely slurring, boy. Oh yes, the drug,” she said with a facetious tone. “You’re back to mamma’s little boy now.”

Chris tried to form words, but felt growing numbness in his face.

“When they find you, I’ll be gone. But you will have a large gaping slit in your throat. I’m going to enjoy this part.” She opened her handbag and retrieved a slender knife. After slicing a piece of paper to show it was razor sharp, she went behind his chair and grabbed a handful of hair. Yanking his head back, she brought the knife to his throat.

Though her visage was upside down, Chris saw the woman’s sardonic smile as the sharp blade pressed slowly against the side of his neck.

\*

He heard the door crash inward. The woman twisted around, and a loud pop produced a round hole in her forehead with red splatter out the back. Her limp body fell to the floor and the knife dropped into Chris’s lap.

“What a sinister bitch,” Ruby said. She put the .38 back in her purse and came to him, kneeling to examine his face. “Are you okay Gary? Looks like you’ve been drugged with some paralytic agent. Nasty stuff.”

He tried to speak.

“Give it time it’ll wear off.” She stood and moved from his view, but he heard her make a call. “Clyde, I’ve found him. Get our guys to hold off on informing the FBI a few minutes. I had to shoot the witch pretending to be his analyst...Yes I said ‘shoot.’ No, she *replaced our* pretend analyst. I know what she looks like and this isn’t her...Body may never be recovered...Yes I have a permit to carry and I know you didn’t want me to do this kind of stuff...Sorry, but I’ll shoot spies all day if I catch ‘em threatening our lives.”

She shut the cell phone and kneeled in front of Chris again. There was a

little more movement in his face. As the worry line across her brow relaxed, she reached up and tugged at her red wig. Throwing it aside, she tousled her dark brown hair and brushed it into a semblance of order with her fingers.

“J... Jenny?” he said.

Her eyebrows went up. “Chris, you’re back with us.” Sobs and laughter erupted as she wrapped her arms around him. When she finally pulled back, there were tears in his eyes.

\*

Two days later Chris sat in his office with Jenny standing nearby. They knew investigations and complications with jurisdiction of FBI, police, and Megoceanic security would probably go on for weeks, but the infiltration of harmful agents into the BAIMS project was stopped. Chris had been able to recall the names on the scrap of paper with his scrawl. Human resources subsequently scrubbed the list of candidates. Police and the FBI were also using the names to get information leading to arrests for murder and conspiracy to murder.

Chris looked at Jenny. “When I thought I was Gary Masons, I kept finding things connected with Megoceanic or BAIMS. Did you plant them?”

“Yep. A brochure, the Newton’s Cradle toy you had here, anything to help you recall the past.”

“When you were ‘Ruby’ what was it you said to Hook in Philip’s Pub? As ‘Gary,’ I imagined something evil between you two.”

“He asked if I knew you. Said you appeared to be someone he was looking for. I told him I had absolutely no idea. You were a stranger to me since I was a temp.”

“You’re a deputy director. How do you get to run around like 007 and shoot so straight?”

“I was once in law enforcement, remember. And I maintain firearm practice

at the range. I finally talked our CEO, Clyde, into taking the director hat for a while. That let me get out there where I could watch for your recovery and see if anyone discovered Gary Masons was really Christopher Johns.”

“I’m lucky you did. The BAIMS project has always been beautiful to me.”  
*More so after you joined me. “You are amazing.”*

He stood and put his arms around her. Jenny turned her face to his and looped her left arm around his neck. With her right hand she closed the blinds over the window in his office door.

\*\*\*

More short stories & readers’ theater scripts at

**[Storylandscapes.net](http://Storylandscapes.net)**