

# ASIMOV<sup>®</sup>

Isaac

## SCIENCE FICTION

MAGAZINE

\$1.75 AUGUST 1984

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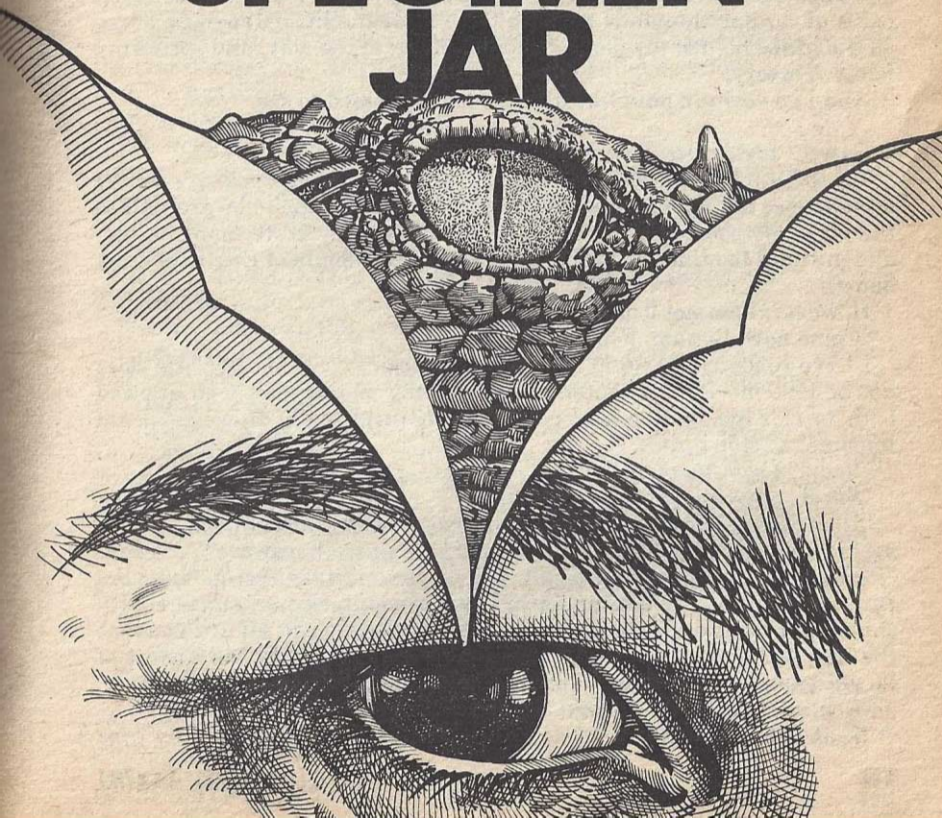


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The author of this  
strange little tale currently  
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two Ace anthologies, *Magic for Sale*  
and *Pawn to Infinity*, and in  
Warner's *Perpetual Light*.

by Daniel Gilbert

# IN THE SPECIMEN JAR





And then it bites my heart.

Quarantine is a twilight zone, an empty casket. The eight month voyage from Xeno-IV is a roman candle delight in comparison to this room. Space is indeed vast and lonely, but the infinity of six weeks in this ten-by-ten isolette is to space what a merry-go-round is to a Mobius strip.

And then it bites my heart.

Medicos in iso-suits are on top of me before I am aware of any pain. This quarantine room reads me as if I were an electroencephalographic comic book, a cardiac-monitored cartoon. *Aye, but it is necessary*, spake They Who Command. *For thou hast brought back with thee a parasite.* So I look at my fingers and look at my toes and I see no parasite, know no parasite, *feel* no parasite, and I ask the screen in my isolette, whom I have taken to calling Milton, I ask, "Is this parasite lost?"

And then it bites my heart.

Ungawa! It is a cold fever, as my chest locks and my arms cramp and gnarl. I am thrown to the floor. The medicos come rushing in, and long before my head smashes concrete I see in a slow-motion shot that they are jabbing me, plugging me in, ripping off my clothes, and even between peals of cardiac thunder I manage to wink at the little Japanese nurse as she grabs hold of my dong, wrenches it out of the way, and spears my femoral artery.

And I go down in pain like a dead monkey tossed to sea.

"Beep," says Milton.

"Beep," I say back. Dr. Kamikaze Nip, whose image appears on my screen, does not appreciate this frivolity. He wishes me to be grateful to the small persons of noble heritage who fished my craft from the sea, and grateful too that he speaks a reasonable facsimile of English for my benefit.

However, I am not fooled.

"Come now, Benton. Feeling better?"

I have repeatedly told Dr. Sushi Chopsticks to call me Ben. He does not believe me when I contend that only my mother has been allowed both to call me Benton and retain her natural teeth. However, I am impotent to stop him.

"Beep," I say impotently.

"Surely you can do better than that."

"How do you know that the beep you hear is not a malfunction of your sophisticated if not shoddily constructed Japanese hardware?" I smirk. "Perhaps I am attempting to divulge to you military secrets, and the American Consulate is using microwave transmissions to interfere with the communication? In fact, I have been attempting to inform you that the new KD-9 warhead utilizes a Beep Beep Beep at the very heart of its guidance system. You admit this is a revolutionary design?"

"Benton," says Dr. Sukiyaki Sake, but I must continue.

"I can't seem to get through to you from this quarantine cell." My eyes

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narrow as if preparing to betray a strict confidence. I lean closer to the screen. "Did you know that white women are able to Beep Beep Beep *three times* before they touch the floor with their tongues?" I nod gravely to tell him that as incredible as this sounds, it is nonetheless true.

He sighs. "We've isolated the parasite."

"Stop! Please! The secret sauce is a combination of Beep, Beep, and a dash of Beep." I shake my head profoundly. "There. You dragged it out of me, you inscrutable Oriental, you." Even though this news does make me feel like talking, I cannot stop doing this to Dr. Hari Kari Eggroll, because I neither like him nor trust him.

"As you say, Benton. Please call when you are prepared to listen."

His hand comes up toward the screen as if, with honorable Samurai restraint, he is going to compromise his anger, reach out of the screen, and tweak my nose mildly. But he simply twists the knob on his screen and Milton goes blank.

"Beep Beep Beep," I am heard to say.

"There is an alien living in my body."

I cannot help but wonder if Dr. Origami Wanton has ever toyed with the idea of replying, "Beep Beep Beep" when I offer a serious declaration. If so, he has shown admirable containment.

"Essentially so."

"Therefore," I continue, weaving strategically my polemic web, "I am an inhabited world and am due protection under the Non-Terran Preservation Act of 2006. Or do you intend to send mercenaries to my sinus cavities to begin the illegal exploitation of my natural mucosa?"

"None of the above, Benton."

"Is it sentient?" This question, being neither sarcastic in tone nor denigrating in content, takes him aback.

"As far as we can tell, yes."

I wonder just how far they *can* tell, and just how they can tell at all, and I realize that they cannot. Therefore he must be teasing me.

"You are teasing me."

"This organism feeds on the products of its host's cephalic processes." Dr. Zori Zero has earlier informed me that he is Japan's preeminent Extra-T microbiologist—this, the rationale behind my Consulate's decision to leave me in his care. I am unimpressed. "Your brain, Benton, is a virtual treasurehouse of these products—acetylcholine, GABA, nor-epinephrine. The parasite wants nothing to do with your gastrointestinal tract, but instead thrives on these physiological counterparts of thought. This is why your perceptions are affected."

"Startling Stories and Thrilling Tales of Indeed Much Wonder. There is nothing wrong with my perceptions."

"I see."

"You are evil, Dr. X, and everything they say about you is true, though I admit this information was supplied me by your close and trusted confidant, Beep Beep Beep."

IN THE SPECIMEN JAR

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"We would like to schedule surgery for this afternoon."

I have lost, quite abruptly, my stoic facade, my calm veneer, and I suspect that within the smoldering slave-pits of Dr. Evil X's black heart he is joyous because of this.

"We've postponed this as long as we dare, Benton. I'm afraid your psychological condition may deteriorate rather than improve. You may already have sustained permanent damage."

"Beep."

He reaches for the knob.

"Wait."

"You are listening?"

"With the intensity of a Buddha, Oh Wicked Master."

"Removal of the parasite is imperative, Benton. Without it you'll be dead within a week. You will kindly sign your consent?"

I consider and realize that though I am frightened by the thought of surgery, I am frightened more so by this first real awareness I have yet had regarding my condition. If there *is* something—someone—inside me, someone nasty and foreign and alien, then he is someone whom my unconscious mind has most articulately described as icky. If he does exist, I do in fact wish to evict him.

"And you'll begin blacking out again."

Oh that Evil Sinister Dr. Evil X and his Truth Serum! That Lost Island of Dr. X and his Mad Evil Truth Serum that turns cats into dogs! I am undecided.

"Beep," I say, knowing this will buy me time.

And I see it then. I see it before he clears the screen. It is a weary look, some strange hybrid between disenchantment, disgust, and resignation. I see it and I know this:

*Dr. X is breaking!*

After fifteen hours of silence, I punch a password into Milton and find myself staring not into the inscrutable eyes of Dr. X, but at the dong-grabbing nurse. Ours is as close to a true sexual relationship as I have come in nearly nine months, and I cannot help but feel a whimsical fondness for her.

"I cannot use chopsticks," I tell her, indicating my dinner.

*Nan to ii masu ka?*

"I want a fork."

"Fork?" She repeats it quizzically.

"Fork. Fork."

"A-ha!" She waves a reproving finger at the screen. "No no no." She has obviously muddled the little English she knows. I decide that she is indeed not a woman of integrity and I can no longer feel a gentle affection for her. She reaches for the knob to clear the screen.

"No, no! Dr. Sukiyaki!"

"Sukiyaki?"

"Dr. No Ticky No Washy! Dr. Kabuki! Doc-tor—" I realize that I cannot remember—nor can I remember having learned—the true name of the Evil Dr. X.

"No no no." She giggles and shuts me off but I call back.

"This is Benton," I say sternly. "Connect me to the Mad Doctor at once. I *must* have a fork."

"Sukiyaki?" She blushes.

"Doctor! Slant-eyed butcher wielding scalpel! Yellow barbarian trained in rudiments of surgical technique!" I am beside myself.

"Fork?"

"Goddamned Yankee Doodle You Bet!"

"No no no."

I am raving. What's the word? "Doctor . . . *isha! Isha!*" Her eyebrows jump in comprehension and she cocks her head and smiles. She regards me in a new light, and I realize that perhaps I have been too quick to judge her.

"You speak Japanese quite nicely, Captain." She winks and connects me to the Maleficent Dr. Mikado.

"I cannot use chopsticks."

"You've been using them adequately for six weeks, Benton," he says.

I consider the logic of his argument and realize that he is quite correct. I do not understand why I am suddenly repulsed by the idea of eating with these degenerate Oriental tweezers. However, I mask my uncertainty.

"I have been cleverly faking. I want a fork."

"I imagine one is available at your Consulate. I hate to phone them on so small a matter."

"There is nothing trivial about this," I contend. I explain to this jaundiced miscreant the esteemed Western tradition of fork usage, concluding with a masterful dialogue concerning the relationship of the fork to Christian theology. "The three prongs, you see, represent the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. It is a religious object and I am thus entitled under the Geneva Accords."

"You are not a prisoner of war, Benton."

"Fine. Then let me go."

"But to bother an attaché for a mere fork?"

"The ambassador. I want my fork from the ambassador."

"Certainly not. I cannot call the ambassador."

"He is here to serve American citizens."

"But with a fork?" The Deranged Dr. Awful X covers a smile with a lithe hand. Why is he minimizing the importance of the fork? I realize that this is only the first step in a progressive belittling of my culture that has as its end the acceptance of Japanese ideology. The importance of my demand becomes clear to me.

"I will perform a lobotomy with these chopsticks," I counter.

"But imagine the paperwork," he says.



Aha! I've got him!

"Then my fork at once, scoundrel!"

"Please believe that your ambassador is deeply concerned for your condition, Benton, but I simply must not call him with anything less than news of your consent to surgery. I cannot risk an international incident."

"Do what you must, you less-than-normal-sized mongrel," I say. "But I'll have that fork within the hour!" I clear Milton with a magnificent swooping gesture.

I consider the entire fork incident and realize that it is a cunning ploy on the part of the ambassador to gain my release. I am annoyed also by the lighthearted manner in which Dr. Tempura regards my plight. I pace my cubicle, counting the minutes until my American fork arrives.

When it does I quickly punch through to Dr. Demented X.

"This is the ambassador's own fork?"

"Yes," he says.

"His *private* fork?"

"Yes."

"Well then. You'll know better than to toy with me next time."

"The ambassador asks me to relay a message."

"You may do so." I begin to eat, flourishing my fork for the benefit of the defeated Dr. Wok.

"However, you must first kindly sign these consent forms." Momentarily, documents appear in my message tray. I drop the bowl of ungodly fried rice.

"What did my ambassador say? Please! It may be critical!" I clutch at the screen. "My loyal and divinely-appointed ambassador."

"Please call when the forms are signed."

The inscrutable madman clears the screen and I am left alone with the ambassador's personal fork.

I realize that my only hope for escape is to place myself fully in the hands of my patriotic ambassador, who has certainly engineered this situation to facilitate my release.

"Fine," says Dr. Peking Duck, leafing through the papers. I clutch the fork—the ambassador's fine American-made fork—for the courage it brings me.

"My message."

"Oh yes. The ambassador sent this along to cheer you. Benton, he says, 'What do you call an Italian astronaut?'"

I remain stoic, controlling by sheer force of will the finest of muscular movements, determined not to allow my suspicions to betray themselves.

"A specimen," says the incurably Insane Dr. Vile, chuckling. "Do you see? Specimen? Quite a fellow that ambassador of yours—"

"Good evening," I say, and clear the screen. I set the ambassador's

beloved fork on my small table, and spend the next twelve hours mulling the significance of his cryptic directive.

I am shaved for surgery.

The Yellow Menace assumes that this humiliating removal of my body hair will cause me confusion regarding my identity. However, I have stipulated as a condition of the surgery that I be allowed to retain the ambassador's fork throughout the procedure.

Should there be a question later, I will know that I am the man holding the fork.

During the administration of the anesthetic, I dream briefly, and the enormity of Malevolent Dr. X's satanic plot is revealed to me.

He is searching for the physical counterpart of bravery. He is scavenging amongst my bodily organs for that ill-defined *thing* that is stitched of red, white, and blue, that accounts for my stamina during the course of my imprisonment, for my singleness of purpose, for my physical, mental, and moral superiority.

He is attempting to locate that which he sorely lacks in his own constitution.

I awaken from surgery with vision blurred, but this effect has been explained to me previously. I subvocalize my oath of allegiance, assuring myself that no tampering has taken place.

I am whole.

A tremendous white carapace is looming on my horizon, and it is several minutes before I realize that I am scrutinizing the gown-clad buttocks of the small but elegant nurse who was earlier overcome by the majesty of my Occidental dong. I understand that when the time comes, she will have to be done away with—as the rest—but for now, I am able to appreciate the poignancy of her situation.

"It is over, Benton," says a voice which I recognize as that of the Beslimed Dr. Ming Dynasty. "We were able to remove the parasite in its entirety."

The whiteness wiggles off my horizon and I glimpse the Wretched Dr. X standing before a cot in the recovery area, his back turned to me in shame and defeat, his image oddly convexed.

This devious Oriental posture does not evoke my pity or compassion, but rather causes me to embrace the moment when my noble ambassador initiates the raid on this facility, accompanied by the slow-witted Italian *polizie* who, gesturing drunkenly with both hands, storm the doors and gun the personnel, allowing me my freedom.

"A very large one, too," says the nurse.

Who can blame her for taking one last look, when for the remainder of her life she will satisfy herself with the pitifully endowed Orientals?

"Is it completely out?"



I imagine that she could be rehabilitated. I imagine that with long years of therapeutic intervention the foreign ideology could be cleansed from her mind, and I envision her and me standing before the sparkling vista of the free marketplace, awed by the majesty and brilliance of enterprise and deregulation. I am amazed at my own willingness to accept this despicable alien, but realize that this is simply part of what I am.

"Yes, Benton, completely."

"Where is it? *Where?*"

I am momentarily alarmed as I recognize my voice—a brilliant *imitation* of my voice, for I have not spoken. The Demonic Dr. X turns from the cot toward me, and I see my body staring, fork in hand, its appearance flawed by the incision that begins at the forehead and runs like a yellow coward beneath the bandages.

*Dr. X has tricked me!*

The imposter has the fork, the Ambassador's well-known and much-revered personal fork! Oh how cunning is that loathsome Dr. X, how inscrutable! Though it lacks that impervious gleam of defiance in its eyes, that patriotic sneer, the imposter looks like me in every other way. The magnitude of this gambit is only now beginning to be revealed.

A substitution. A takeover. A *master race!*

I see it now. There will be a slow and torturous death for me at the nubile hands of these half-breed monsters. During the raid, the overly-excitable Italians will become confused and save the imposter, who will be extirpated from this demonic island of cats-into-dogs, medalled and medallioned by Congress, and reinstated in the Armed Forces of the United States. One by one, the fighting men of the Great Free Nation will be replaced by slithering barbarian cowards, until the very foundations of liberty and commerce have been undermined.

And with the ambassador's personal fork, there is no stopping them.

I raise my fists in disbelief, but find I am contained by the thick glass walls which curve in and around me.

That fiendish Dr. X!

That Sly Yellow Master of Ancient Oriental Wickedry!

He points a crooked finger at me. "In the specimen jar," he tells the imposter, who is now pale and wide-eyed with the realization that this foul and unholy plan has found its culmination.

"Jesus shit," says the imposter.

And in my jar I jump, and from my jar I scream. ●

