LACUNAE

The rhythm of life.

BY WILLIAM MEIKLE

What Frank Green did wasn't difficult. All it took was a large amount of computing power and many weeks of meticulous research in musty book stacks. By mid-July he felt ready to test his findings.

He wasn't sure quite what he'd found, but the pattern was unmistakable. For most of recorded history, people have been disappearing without trace, often right in front of astonished friends and acquaintances.

The pair of professors tasked with reviewing Frank's work proved sceptical in the extreme, even after he showed them the simulation — the one that tracked the lacunae over time and space, the one that then predicted where and when these holes in space and time might occur. But two days later Frank was in Alberta, standing outside his tent where he'd bivouacked halfway up a deer trail at nearly 6,000 feet, still stunned that they had said yes.

"Trust us son," Professor Wagner had said. "We've had stranger requests. Just bring back good hard data. That's what the bean-counters like."

And there lay the problem in a nutshell.

How do I collect data on the absence of something?

It wouldn't be for want of trying. He was armed with cameras, EMF meters and as much computing power as he was able to carry around with him. Now all he had to do was wait, and trust in his theory.

As he lay in his tent that night he pondered the wisdom of even being here. Yes, it might prove his theory. But there was also a chance, a very real chance, that he too would become one of the *disappeared*, just another name on a list of unsolved vanishings. It was a chance he was willing to take, for if he was right, he was on the verge of solving some of the great mysteries, from the missing Roman legion all the way to the *Marie Celeste*. Fortune and glory might wait just around the corner.

As night fell he daydreamed; of book deals and chat shows, of front-page headlines and TV appearances. He found that he was too energized to sleep and eventually, after an hour of

tossing and turning in his sleeping bag, he got up and checked over some of the cases that had brought him to this place. He spent the next few hours studying the apocryphal tales surrounding the Flannan lighthouse in

Scotland, and the supposed disappearance of three of the keepers in 1900 — another dot on his map.

He'd worked for many long hours on the map, approaching it from many angles, looking for a pattern, a rhythm that might correlate the disappearances with some physical aspect that could be measured by his instruments. He'd cross-referenced his pattern with changes in the magnetic field, with sunspot activity, with lunar cycles, even with daily fluctuations in the stock market. He only hit the jackpot when he took into account the orbit around the Sun, and the long variations caused by the precession of the equinoxes. He found that there was a certain region of space that, whenever Earth passed through it, caused the now famous disappearances. The scale of the vanishing seemed to depend on how close the planet brushed against this spatial anomaly. And it was that anomaly that Frank hoped to measure over the coming day.

He finally fell asleep with dreams of

fortune and glory, and woke at dawn to a sparkling clear morning, and the sound of his meters clicking.

It was happening. It was really happening.

The air tingled, as if suddenly supercharged with static, and the hairs Frank's arms and neck all stood up at once. Reality seemed to slide and slip, as if the very fabric of nature was melting and becoming blurred. Frank struggled to focus on his equipment, but that too seemed to blur and fade, so much so that no meter readings were possible.

Just bring back good hard data. That's what the bean-counters like.

Frank wailed. His dream of glory was fading fast, and without data all would be for nothing. He scrambled among the equipment, desperate to reach his laptop. He was so preoccupied that he failed to notice that the world outside his tent had gone.

The laptop went away just as he put a hand on it. Blue static ran across his skin and crackled like damp sticks in a fire.

Frank blinked. In that time, he too went away.

He floated, in darkness filled with swirling fog containing occasional flashes of blue lightning. There was no sound, but there was a profound feeling of being at rest, of being *cod-*

dled by the thick fog.

There was no panic, and Frank's curiosity overcame any sense of fear. He examined the timing of the lightning, hoping once again to discern a pattern, a rhythm that he might identify and use to find a way out of his predicament.

The fog started to part and clear. A blue haze hung ahead of him, and Frank drifted towards it, carried by an unseen tide. He was eagerly awaiting what would come next.

Right up until the moment when the blue haze parted and a vast mouth filled with banks of razor teeth opened up.

He realized his main mistake even as the jaws clamped shut at his waist.

There was one rhythm common throughout nature that he'd failed to take into account.

Feeding time. ■

William Meikle is a Scottish writer resident in Canada with 10 novels published in the genre press and more than 200 short-story credits in 13 countries.

JACEY