

Steve lurched into the living room, his head pounding and bright lights flashing in front of his eyes as he groped through the darkness for his easy chair. The television flickered on, softly illuminating the room with a bluish glow.

"Need some light?" Samantha asked.

Steve threw a sidelong glance at the screen, but didn't answer. He stumbled, then collapsed into the soft leather of his favorite easy chair, his eyes shutting tightly as lightning flashes of pain ripped at his mind.

"You don't look so good, Steve," Samantha said.

He opened his eyes slightly and stared at the screen as he pulled a cigarette from the pack in his pocket. Samantha stared back, her eyes filled with concern.

"Another migraine?" she asked.

Steve lit up, squinting through the smoke at the image on the screen. Samantha was half sitting, half kneeling, an inhabitant of some kind of strange landscape. Behind her was a lake, its surface smooth and glassy, except for the places where dead trees pierced through and stood bleached and forlorn, their empty limbs reaching in vain for the sky.

Samantha stopped staring at Steve and looked off into the distance at something unseen. Wherever she was, it was getting close to sunset.

Steve took a long puff on his cigarette, then exhaled slowly, watching as the smoke rolled in a thick cloud toward the television set. In the darkness, the smoke picked up the blue from the screen, then curled upward as it lost speed.

"Yeah, another migraine," he finally replied. He put the rest of his cigarettes and his lighter on the table beside his chair, then closed his eyes and began to sift through the events of the last 24 hours.

He'd been working in his office, and was more than halfway through another sixteen hour day. The design firm he worked for was coming up on a project deadline and he was trying to finish a job that was due later in the week. A pre-deadline headache was throbbing at the base of his skull and he knew that if he kept pushing, he'd be crippled by a painful migraine and wouldn't be able to work as long as he needed to.

Deciding to take a break, he picked up his coat and made his way out of the office. He stepped out into the cool October air, then set off with no particular destination in mind.

The throbbing at the base of his skull began to subside as he walked in the fresh crisp air, and by the time he reached the local mall, he was feeling a lot better. He'd skipped lunch, so he entered the mall and headed for the food court. After wolfing down a quick meal, he lit a cigarette for dessert and began to stroll past the stores.

Steve rarely ever went shopping for anything besides food because he put in a lot of time at work, and although the hours he was putting in were paying off monetarily, he was usually too beat at the end of the day to go out and spend any of his hard-earned pay. Now he felt like a schoolboy playing hooky as he wandered in and out of the stores, forgetting about his project and just browsing for the heck of it.

It had been so long since he'd

bought something fun that he decided if anything caught his fancy, he'd buy it because he deserved something special for all the hard work he was doing. He wandered through several stores, but couldn't find anything he even remotely wanted. He was about to give up and head back to the office when a display in an electronics shop caught his eye.

"Hi! I'm Mike! Can I help you?"

Steve turned to the salesman. The question had come from a clean-cut kid wearing a suit and tie. Steve guessed that Mike was probably one of those enthusiastic wiz-kid types who was more than eager to show you how stupid you were by explaining how anything in the store worked, and this guy would probably do it in excruciatingly minute detail. Mike was also the type of person who didn't mind wearing a tag on his lapel that said, "Hi! I'm Mike! Can I help you?"

Steve looked down at the television that he was standing in front of. He'd been seduced by the set from the moment he'd laid eyes on it, which was odd since he rarely had time to watch TV. When he did have some time, he was content to watch the \$60 black-and-white portable he'd bought when he was in college. But the remote-controlled, big-screen, stereo television that he was now looking at was something he felt he really needed. The picture was clean and sharp, the color rich and saturated, and the sound coming from the twin speakers was fantastic. It was the "something special" he was looking for.

"I'll take it," Steve said.

Mike the salesman dropped his jaw.

Everyone in the store had been trying to sell one of these models, but the sets were state-of-the-art and were extremely expensive. The few potential buyers that Mike talked to seemed content to wait until the newness wore off and the price came down. After spending so much time trying to sell one of the sets and using every trick in the book to persuade someone to buy, Mike hadn't said anything more than "Can I help you?" and was now sitting on a fat commission. He'd also be getting a pat on the back from his boss for succeeding when everyone else had failed.

"Any chance I could get it delivered tonight?" Steve asked.

Mike hesitated for a second. The store normally wouldn't deliver the set until the next day, but the commission and the recognition he'd get for making this sale were too much to risk losing. And besides, he had a friend with a pickup who owed him a favor.

"I'll drop it off after work," he said.

Steve paid for the TV, gave Mike his address, then walked back to the firm and worked until another migraine forced him to stop. He left the office just after sunset and by the time he got home, it was all he could do to drag himself into the living room and drop into the easy chair. He dozed off with the headache pounding at his brain, and woke to the sound of knocking at his door.

Mike and his friend were there, the television in a big box sitting on the ground between them. They moved it in, hooked it up and turned it on. Mike gave Steve a quick lesson on how to work the remote control, then he and his friend said goodbye, leaving Steve to play with his new toy.

He flipped through the channels,

switching from movies to sports to music to news to educational shows and back again, staying with a program until he got bored with it, then channel-hopping until he found something else he liked.

As the night wore on, the colors and sounds began to melt into one another. Steve flicked the remote control mindlessly while his eyelids drooped and his breathing slowed to the deep rumble of pre-sleep. He'd almost dozed off completely when the sound level on the TV jumped.

"Hello, Steve."

His eyelids snapped open and he

playing along with the game.

"My name is Samantha," she replied. "The 'how' part of your question is a little harder to explain. Why don't you go to bed and I'll see you tomorrow afternoon? I'll show you then."

"Because I won't be home tomorrow afternoon," Steve said. "I'm going to be at work."

Samantha smiled. "Wanna bet?" she asked, then the television shut off.

"That kid is really clever," Steve thought as he got up out of his chair. "I ought to surprise him a little by taking this thing back and telling him that

GHOST IMAGE

Story and photos by Bill Hughes

watched as the blurry face of a young woman floated on the screen, then popped into focus. She was staring straight at him. Steve had the eerie feeling that she was in the room with him and could actually see him.

He stared uncomfortably at the screen. The young woman stared back at him, but didn't say a word. Steve sat frozen in his easy chair, his heart racing as he fought to catch his breath. He was trying to figure out what to do next, then a smile crept across his lips.

"I was dreaming," he thought. The young woman's face was still on the screen, and Steve contemplated watching to see what kind of program she was on. But it was late, so he lifted the remote control, turned the set off, and resolved to take a vacation as soon as he finished his current project.

He rested for a minute, and was just pushing himself out of the chair when the TV set popped back on.

"That wasn't very nice. How would you like it if I slammed a door in your face?"

Steve fell back into the chair, his eyes widening. The young woman was back on the screen, staring at him, a mischievous smile on her lips.

"My name is Samantha," she said.

Steve sat in his chair, confused. Then a light went on in his head. "Mike! It has to be Mike!" he thought. "He hooked up the TV so that he could send a signal to it, and now he's playing a practical joke."

"Can you hear me?" Steve asked the girl on the screen.

"Yes," she replied.

"Tell Mike that the joke's over,"

Steve said, pleased with himself for solving the puzzle so quickly.

"It's not Mike," Samantha said.

Steve smiled at her. "Then who is it?" he asked sarcastically.

"It's me," she answered.

"Then exactly who are you and how are you doing this?" Steve asked,

I don't want it because there's a strange woman in it that talks to me."

He put the remote control on top of the TV, then touched the cabinet with his fingertips. It was still warm. "Sweet dreams," he whispered, then he went to bed.

When he woke up, he decided that he definitely would tell Mike that he was going to return the TV, just for the pleasure of outsmarting him. He was also looking forward to seeing the kid's face fall at the thought of losing a big commission. But his little joke would have to wait until he was finished with his project.

A cold front had moved in overnight, bringing dark clouds and a sharp cutting wind along with the colder temperature, so Steve bundled up in a heavy coat and wool scarf as he left his house. It was six in the morning and still dark out as Steve got into his car. He started it up, turned on his headlights and quickly forgot about Mike, Samantha and the TV set as he drove to work. By the time he opened the door to the office, his mind was working full speed on his project.

As usual, he was the first one in, so he turned on the lights and started a pot of coffee, then took off his coat and scarf, uncapped his favorite drawing pen and got to work on the job he'd left unfinished the day before.

He'd been working for seven hours when the tiny lights began to flash in front of his eyes. Fifteen minutes later, a vicious migraine was ripping at his brain.

Steve capped his pen, picked up his coat and scarf and left the office, resolving to come back later that night when his head had cleared. Dark clouds scudded across the slate-gray afternoon sky as he stepped out of the front door and made his way to his car. It was so dark that the streetlights had come on, and Steve turned his headlights on as he started the car.