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FROM FANDOM TO THE FINAL FRONTIER

ESCAPE ARTIST: RICHARD COYLE

GREAT ESCAPE: WHERE NO ONE HAS GONE BEFORE

Stardate 2285, on the Surface of the Planet Ceti Alpha VI

Initially, the planet had seemed perfect.

Upon their arrival, Commander Chekov and Captain Terrell thought the sixth planet of the Ceti Alpha star system was uninhabited—a forlorn, lifeless rock that might hold some interesting mineral samples but little else.

For once, this was a good thing. The planet seemed an ideal candidate for Project Genesis.

The two officers had beamed down to the planet's barren surface from the *U.S.S. Reliant*, a Federation starship involved in the top-secret Genesis project. Genesis would be a technologically advanced, revolutionary attempt to bring failed planets back to life, to make green what was once little more than

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sand and rock baked solid by nearby stars. But Genesis, Chekov knew, carried its biblical name for a very good reason. In creating life, it would first destroy every living thing on the planet—that is, if anything were alive down here to begin with. That’s why it was critically important—indeed, essential—to take a complete survey of the planet, to make absolutely certain that there were no life forms hidden beyond the reach of the *Reliant’s* scanners. So the two men had beamed down to scan it from the ground.

But, Chekov now wondered, if the scanners were correct and the planet was barren—if Ceti Alpha was a “dead” system and a potential target for Genesis—why were they now standing in front of a series of well-worn cargo containers? And how was it possible, Chekov wondered fleetingly, that one of the containers contained a group of refugees from the Eugenics Wars of 1990s Earth? Even more perplexing was how the group’s vicious leader, a notorious rebel and murderer, had managed to survive. It was all too incredible, too impossible. Yet it *was* possible because it was happening.

But no matter. Now it was far too late. They were trapped. There was no time to get on his wrist communicator (his “comm”) to send a warning to the *Reliant* or to the Genesis scientists on Space Lab Regula One. No time to tell the ship to forget about him or about Captain Terrell. No time to instruct the crew to immediately and totally destroy the planet from orbit.

Chekov didn’t bother to reach for his phaser. He had no illusions about blasting his way out, no dreams of possible escape. And he had no expectations of receiving mercy. Thoughts like these didn’t occur to him. In fact, as he faced what he had

absolutely no doubt was his end, one word, and only one word, went through his mind:

Khan

Give the Man His Props

Sitting in the darkened theater, Richard Coyle knew without a doubt that Chekov, of course, would survive. Perhaps a little worse for wear, but he would make it.

Captain Terrell, on the other hand, was a goner.

Not immediately, Rich knew, but eventually: The actor who portrayed Terrell (Paul Winfield) was just too well known to die so early in the film. Terrell was no Yeoman Johnson, *Star Trek*'s proverbial sacrificial lamb, the show's stock character in virtually every episode whose sole purpose was to accompany a regular cast member to a new planet and be killed off in the first five minutes.

Rich watched with rapt attention as Terrell was infested with parasitic "Ceti eels," which would burrow sickeningly into his ear canal and through which the villainous Khan—portrayed by the inimitable Ricardo Montalban, at the height of his *Fantasy Island* fame—would control Terrell's mind, ordering him to kill Admiral Kirk. And he knew that Terrell, in resisting Khan's mind control, would ultimately turn his phaser on himself rather than kill Kirk. It was an effective plot development, Rich felt—suitably scary; futuristic, yet believable. And the Ceti eels, which looked like well-armored leeches, or perhaps miniature armadillos, were interesting.

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Easing further back in his seat, enjoying the coolness of the theater, Rich wasn't the slightest bit worried about Chekov—or poor Captain Terrell, for that matter. He was more concerned with the look of those wrist comms. He was hoping they would get an all-important close-up, a shot that would show all those working LEDs and displays crammed inside those tiny cases. He hoped for a shot that would give the comms their big scene and would perhaps help them become part of “Trek legend.”

But it didn't happen. He didn't get the shot; at least, not then. He had spent days designing and building the wrist comms in his workshop, by hand, along with many of the other props used in the film. He truly felt his props were ready for their close-ups. And not because he wanted the recognition, necessarily.

But because he was a *huge* fan.

The Obsessed

There are, of course, millions of *Star Trek* fans. There are probably tens or perhaps even hundreds of thousands of hard-core aficionados in what is known in Trek circles as “fandom.” Most of these “Trekkies”—or “Trekkers” as many prefer to be called—grew up watching the original show in reruns, became equally obsessed with the *Star Trek* movies (of which, according to a widely held Trekkie belief, only the even-numbered ones are any good), and went on to obsess over numerous sequels and tangentially related TV shows such as *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, *Deep Space Nine*, and *Babylon 5*.

But Richard Coyle didn't begin his career as a studio prop maker who simply ended up falling in love with *Star Trek*. It was actually the other way around. His life has followed a more circuitous and unlikely path, one that began when he was a young science fiction "freak" in 1950s North Las Vegas, Nevada. His science bent sent him into the dead-end TV repair business as an adult, wound its way through the *Star Wars* franchise, led him to his first *Star Trek* conventions, his first homemade costumes and model ray guns, and then finally handed him his ultimate escape: A phone call from a stranger, asking him if he might be interested in building props for the movies, and mainly for science fiction movies.

There's no magic formula for turning a hobby into a career, of course. Often it's simply a lucky break or a chance encounter that sets the wheels in motion. But even offbeat hobbies can morph into unusual careers with some shoe leather and hard work. Still, unchecked obsessions can play havoc with personal relationships even *before* they turn into jobs: Rich's obsession had unintended consequences for his marriage. But that's getting ahead of things. To really appreciate his journey to the "Final Frontier," you need to start at the beginning, with a geeky, asthmatic kid who was obsessed with Flash Gordon.

From Vacuum Tubes to Vulcans

Unlike most of today's Trekkies, Richard Coyle is old enough to have grown up watching *Star Trek* during its original network television run, from 1966 through 1969. He was born in 1948 in New Hampshire, to the somewhat unlikely pairing of

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a mother who was an English teacher and a father who was a trucker. The odd match made for a somewhat unusual child. Instilled by his mother with a love of reading, especially science fiction, Rich as a youngster had a fairly advanced command of language (the mixed blessing of living with a high school English teacher), and he found that if he wasn't careful, he could easily "talk above" his peers. His father's wanderlust resulted in a family dragged across the country, often pulled by a 1952 Chevy pickup towing a 35-foot mobile home thousands of miles. The family moved around a lot, staying for a few years at then-remote places like Reno and Las Vegas. With little money, the Coyles usually ended up living in dusty, forlorn trailer parks on the outskirts of towns. Young Richard often found himself at odds with the children living around him, a little too smart in many ways and never in one spot long enough to fight things out or make lasting friendships, always the odd new kid in the park.

The desert states of Nevada, New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado were a hotbed of UFO sightings and alien abduction tales in the late 1950s, and there was a general sense that people who took much interest in outer space were eccentric weirdos, if not full-fledged wackos. "In the 1950s," Rich recalled, "science fiction was definitely *not* cool." Afflicted (though at the time not diagnosed) with severe allergies and recurring, debilitating asthma attacks, afraid to talk about his science fiction passion with other kids, Rich instead lost himself watching early sci-fi TV shows like *Rocky Jones Space Ranger*, *Flash Gordon*, *Twilight Zone*, and *Outer Limits*. He spent countless hours on his tiny bunk bed in a cramped trailer poring through the novels

of Robert Heinlein. “*Have Spacesuit, Will Travel* was probably my all-time favorite book,” he remembered. “It was all about this kid who wins a secondhand spacesuit in a contest and goes all over the universe with it, and of course saves the earth and humanity!” Heinlein, often referred to as the “father of science fiction,” wrote many of the books that later came to define the genre, including the groundbreaking *Stranger in a Strange Land* and *Starship Troopers*. (Oddly, he also invented the water bed.) “Heinlein was a huge influence on me because he wrote ‘juveniles,’ these wonderful sci-fi stories that usually had kids or teens as the protagonists, which were a great read for a teen,” Rich said.

Unfortunately, like many young men of the era, Rich’s life was interrupted by the war in Vietnam. “I was 19 in 1967, and not being in college, I was 1-A, virtually assured of getting drafted,” he said. At the time, the thinking held that it was better to enlist than be called up. “I did not want to fight in the war, knowing my health was poor, and that I did poorly in what little sports I had done in school, so I figured by enlisting I might be able to get a noncombat posting.” As it happened, his frequent asthma attacks made it nearly impossible for him to make it through basic training, and he was repeatedly hospitalized with upper respiratory infections. (However, during his Christmas furlough, Rich married his high school girlfriend.) The Army, after two more tries, finally got him through basic and then sent him to Fort Gordon, Georgia, to learn to operate the Teletype. Arriving on the verge of another illness and hospitalization, he was unable to complete even this physically undemanding training. It soon became apparent that he was not cut out to be a soldier.

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Returning home with a wife and now out of the service, Rich fell back on the job he had been doing out of high school, working as a gas station attendant. In the 1950s, with the automobile storming the country, such jobs were widely available, and he became “one of those guys who came out and filled your tank, washed your windows, and offered to check your oil in the hope of selling you some, or finding other service work you needed.” He also performed minor automotive repairs, a skill he had picked up as a kid in a family with little money to spend on such extravagances.

He began jumping around from job to job at gas stations (“Changing jobs was the only way to get a raise, and the other stations loved stealing someone’s worker,” Rich said), now with son Robert and daughter Karen, and he thought about trying to buy a shop of his own. “I was looking for some kind of business that I could own, where I could work for myself,” he recalled. “I was of the generation that learned to work early. At 10 I was doing yard work, mowing lawns; at 12 I got a paper route; at 14 I had worked up to a scooter route, with more than 100 customers.” But with a wife and two kids, he soon found gas stations were not willing to pay a living wage (at one point he was earning \$2 per hour), and he was forced to work 60-hour weeks just to make ends meet. He visited a local employment office looking for a way out and was informed that he qualified for a program called “Vocation Training,” and he was sent to a trade school for training in heating and air-conditioning.

But in Phoenix, he soon found, such a career presented a problem. “The summers were great, with constant work installing and fixing air-conditioners,” he remembered, “but the

winters were dead. There was just no work putting in heating systems in the desert. The work was way too seasonal for me. I had work for only about five to six months out of the year.” Though he picked up valuable mechanical and electronics skills that would later serve him well, he was tired of work that was feast or famine. So, once again, he changed course, and he went back to the employment office hoping for something better.

Already a huge fan of television, Rich saw opportunity in TV repair. “You have to remember, in the 1970s, people still had these wood cabinet TVs with vacuum tubes, and these things would burn out once a year,” Rich said. With his electrical and mechanical training, it was relatively easy for him to learn electronics and TV repair, and since most manufacturers used universal tubes, the repair path was clear: He could buy tube stock in a kit for a thousand bucks, get a picture tube tester and a pickup truck, and go into the TV repair business. The choice seemed like a smart one. Particularly in the desert southwest, people would stay in their air-conditioned homes and watch hour after hour of TV during the sweltering daylight hours. It was a great gig, for a while. Color TVs were all the rage, and there was a booming business in selling and fixing used color televisions.

But the job had other, side benefits for a sci-fi fan: lots and lots of TV watching.

“I watched *everything!*” Rich laughed. “*Star Trek*, *Twilight Zone*, *Outer Limits*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, this show about a robot called *My Living Doll*—really anything I could, lots of reruns even then. I remember that I had put up this huge antenna on the roof of my house. *Star Trek* played locally in Phoenix, and then 30 minutes later, a Tucson station would

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show another episode in reruns. Almost immediately I discovered that if I ran out and repositioned the antenna just as the early show ended, I could grab the Tucson signal. I quickly added a powered antenna rotator to allow me to turn the antenna remotely inside the house. I would watch the local TV airing, and then a second rerun right after. Two hours of *Trek* a day!” Unfortunately, he almost immediately made a disappointing discovery. The Tucson station was cutting scenes to fit in more commercials.

He had already memorized the episodes.

Once Upon a Time . . .

In the late 1970s everything changed for Rich Coyle.

A confluence of two key events sent Rich down the path that would eventually cause him to leave his itinerant nine-to-five work life and make *Star Trek* his living. The first event was a change in the electronics industry.

As with gas stations in the 1970s, modern technology had finally caught up with television manufacturing. By the mid-1970s, manufacturers had progressed to solid-state electronics, eliminating the need for tubes that could be relatively easily (though not cheaply) replaced by technicians. “Starting in the 1970s, as a technician you had to buy all these special modules, which were specific to the manufacturer, and worse, these new solid-state TVs were not wearing out as fast as the old hot-tube-driven sets,” Rich recalled.

“Service was dropping off yearly, and in some cases due to cheaper and cheaper color TVs, it was becoming cheaper for

the consumer to just buy a new TV than to pay for a repair.” The TV repair business, Rich realized, was on its last legs. He needed to find something else to do before the repair work dried up completely.

The second event occurred in 1977 and was, in one sense, much more prosaic. It was just a movie. But for millions of sci-fi fans like Richard, it was an event that would change their lives. It was to become a pop culture phenomenon. It was a watershed event in marketing and merchandising. It was a huge leap to technical and special-effects hyperspace. And, for fans of science fiction, it was much, much more. It was the instantaneous liftoff to legitimacy they had been craving for so many years. It was an almost casual shrugging off of the sci-fi stigma. And, perhaps most important, it offered a path to social acceptability.

It was *Star Wars*.

And it was *HUGE*.

There had been other successful science fiction films before *Star Wars*, of course, including the Kubrick classic *2001: A Space Odyssey*. But the impact of *Star Wars* can't really be overstated. It made hundreds of millions of dollars (\$300 million by one accounting), and that kind of money demanded respect. It also offered the first real look at how special effects could be used onscreen to tremendous success. Its mythic overtones, its pitched battle sequences between good and evil, its memorable costumes and characters—even its stilted dialogue and mediocre acting—all played a role in the film's tremendous impact, both culturally and commercially. It also ushered in, for better or worse, the era of the movie tie-in, the now ubiquitous merchandising of Hollywood films. The toy company Kenner went

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on to make hundreds of millions on its *Star Wars* tie-ins, and George Lucas made billions. (It was a development that would both help and hinder Rich's career.)

The impact on science fiction fans, in particular, was different. The enormous popularity of the movie was almost like sci-fi's "coming-out party." With this one film, the public attitudes toward and the perception of sci-fi had been inextricably altered. All of a sudden it was OK to be a science fiction fan, to talk in public, in mixed company, about "blasters" and "light sabers," about "warp drives" and "'droids." It was actually *cool* to talk about space travel!

The success of *Star Wars* led Hollywood producers to begin throwing money at anything sci-fi. Some films, like 1979's *Alien*, became classics of the genre. Others, like *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, released the same year, were less well received by critics. Part of the problem, no doubt, was that every new sci-fi film of that period—*The Ice Pirates*, *The Last Starfighter*, *Flash Gordon*—was, understandably, compared to *Star Wars*, and generally unfavorably.

But reports of warring cast members, a budget that had swelled to over \$40 million, and a special-effects team that was fired halfway through production didn't help the new *Star Trek* film. Neither did the fact that there was no real villain to root against (a plot device that future sci-fi filmmakers realized was an essential piece of the genre).

Even Trekkies seemed disappointed. "Among fandom, there was another name for *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*," Rich said. "It was often referred to as 'Star Trek: The Slow Motion Picture.' I mean, it was just slow." And there was a very good

reason the film, onscreen, seemed thrown together. It had been. Paramount had been working on reviving the *Star Trek* television show, intending on bringing back the original cast for a new TV run. With the outsized success of *Star Wars*, the studio decided to make a movie instead. Sets had already been built or partially built, and to save money—which was later overspent on special effects—the story line was shoehorned to fit a “big film.”

But for Rich and other sci-fi fans, both *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* and *Star Wars* served as bonding mechanisms, a way for fans of the genre to celebrate its success.

“I remember the day I saw the *Star Wars* trailer. I could *tell*. I said ‘I have to see this film!’ It was unbelievable. It just didn’t look like anything I had ever seen before. (And I *had* seen them all up to that point, even *Star Maidens*.) It looked so much better, so much more real.” So he found himself in the first line to see the first showing of *Star Wars* at the Cine Capri in Phoenix. Then he saw it again. And again. And again. Twenty-five to thirty times in all. “Whenever I had to go into town to get TV parts, I would time my trips so I could catch another showing,” Rich recalled. “I mean, this was way before VCRs. You couldn’t watch movies in your home in 1977, so if you wanted to see a movie more than once, you went to the theater.” *Star Wars* played at the Cine Capri, nonstop, for a year.

The thing that would forever change Richard’s life happened at that very first showing of *Star Wars*. While leaving the theater after the *Star Wars* screening, Rich spotted a flyer posted on a wall. It advertised a *Star Trek* convention (a “con”) that was coming to Phoenix. George Takei (Lt. Sulu on the show)

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would be there, as would a few other cast members. But for Rich, the name of one special guest jumped off the page. Robert Heinlein was scheduled to appear. Instantly, Rich knew he would attend.

Getting Outed

Star Trek cons had been around for some years by then, but they really enjoyed their heyday in the late 1970s through the 1980s. “I remember I walked into my first con, and I got to shake hands and talk with Robert Heinlein, which was really great, a highlight of my life. But then I looked around and I saw all these people in costume, people dressed like *Enterprise* crew members and Klingons, and characters from other sci-fi shows,” Rich said. “You have to understand what this was like for me. I had been a social outcast, a techno-geek, in hiding most of my life. In the past, I had worn a tiny—and I mean tiny—*Star Trek* insignia on my shirt collar. When I would run into someone else wearing one, we’d have to go off in secret to talk about the show, so we wouldn’t be ostracized. Or beat up by the school bullies. It was almost like we were criminals. But here were all these people, these fans, celebrating openly,” he said. “It was like I had found heaven.”

Immediately excited about the “costuming,” Rich learned it took two distinct forms in fandom: hall costuming and masquerade costuming. Hall costumes were less elaborate, typically the tight bodysuits worn by *Enterprise* crew members. (“If anything led to my total downfall, hall costuming was it!”) Masquerade costumes were typically those depicting the show’s

aliens or odd life forms, with full headpieces and prosthetics, and full space suits, and full Darth Vaders. These outfits were too big and hot to wear all day, so each con had a “ball” for judging the best masquerade costume.

Though he was no tailor, upon getting home Rich immediately set about making a costume for himself. Cutting and pasting from various items around the house, he put together a Flash Gordon outfit: A T-shirt with a lightning bolt, a shiny black gun belt three inches wide, and bloused black pants. Black “Beetle” boots completed the ensemble. But his pièce de résistance was a “working” ray gun. “I took a toy Johnny Eagle Mugumba automatic pistol made by Topper Toys; I pulled off the slide and replaced it with a rounded compact dynamic microphone body.” He then dissected a Meco *Star Trek* communicator electronics board to get at the beeping sound part and then hooked it up to the inside of the microphone body with an aluminum knob from a 10-turn pot so that he could change the sound. “I added an aluminum radio knob drilled out, and stuck in a plastic rod and a light on the barrel,” he said.

Finally, he attached the gun to his hip with the microphone’s hanger. It was an invisible “mystery holster,” and it looked almost exactly like the ones used on *Star Trek*. He called his creation the “Beldorn Blaster.” (The name was an inside joke. Rich liked the geekish irony of calling a big, “powerful” ray gun a “BB gun” for short.)

At his next con, he decided to enter the masquerade contest. His Flash Gordon get-up garnered hoots and hollers—most of the audience was too young to remember the German-made TV

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show of the early 1950s that Rich had watched as a child. And, apparently, his costume's lack of a *Star Trek* or *Star Wars* theme didn't help his case. A touch peeved, Rich pulled his Beldorn Blaster from its holster and began "shooting" at audience members, especially the hecklers, and the jeers turned to wild applause. "Remember, this was back in 1977, and a 'working' ray gun was almost unheard of," Rich said. After the ball (he didn't win), conventioners crowded around him. Where had he found that gun? He had made it *himself*? Could he build more? How quickly? How much would one cost? Fans and dealers wanted to buy (and in many cases resell) them.

Later, trying to walk through the dealer's room, Rich was repeatedly stopped and asked to show off the only working ray gun at the con. "The dealers there didn't know whether to love me or hate me," he remembered. "I was drawing these huge crowds everywhere I stopped, but I was also taking business away from them: A mob looking at a ray gun was not buying comic books."

Up to this point, Rich had never thought of himself as a prop maker or wondered about becoming one. He had always been good with his hands and electronically savvy, but it had never occurred to him that there might be people willing to pay money—a lot of money—for ray guns and replicas of the gear used in their favorite movies. Suddenly, it was as if a gate in front of a long-closed road had been magically opened. "I began to build the blasters as fast as I could, and then I traveled to cons, many in California, to sell them. I was getting \$100 to \$125 apiece, but I was only able to build five or six in time for a con at first. And it took weeks to make them."

A Mixed Marriage

The cons were something to see: a sci-fi stew of kids, adults, hobbyists, curiosity seekers, and serious dealers making serious cash. And the activity wasn't limited to the convention halls. "I remember there used to be 'blaster wars' after hours, with all these costumed fans running around 'shooting' each other," Rich laughed. The "battles" would even spread to the cheap hotels surrounding the convention centers, with fully kitted-out "heroes" and "aliens" chasing one another in dank, shabby motel hallways and parking garages. Things got so bad that in the middle of the night, the airline flight crews who stayed at these hotels would complain about the noise.

By 1979, Rich was sometimes hitting two conventions a month, often away from home for a week at a shot, making enough money to finance the next trip. While con-going was tremendous fun, Rich came to realize he was spending a lot of time on the road and a lot of money paying for space on dealer tables, hotel rooms, gas, and upkeep on his van. As much as he loved going to the cons, he also had a wife and children at home that he needed to support. Seeking a better path to steadier income with less travel, at one con he caught up with an editor at *StarLog* (a sci-fi fanzine) and made a pitch: Rich would wholesale the Beldorn Blasters to the magazine, which would in turn sell them in its pages. A well-placed ad led to a flood of orders.

But all the travel, especially around the holidays (always the best times for a con), and lack of real money began to take a toll on his marriage. The *StarLog* deal, though promising, had come too late. By 1980, his wife had made an ultimatum: Stop the "silliness" or they would separate.

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“We had always been in what’s known in fandom as a ‘mixed marriage,’” Rich said. “I was a sci-fi fan, and Sharon definitely was not. She had tolerated my obsession early in the marriage, but when it began to really take over my life, that was the last straw. But by that time we had nothing in common but the bills and the kids anyway.” Sharon’s initial idea was for her and the kids to live in one section of their duplex and Rich to live in the other, the one in front with his workshop. But Rich, tiring of this arrangement, made a few calls and soon took off to stay with sci-fi friends in LA, the center of West Coast Fandom. At that point, both Rich and Sharon realized the marriage was essentially over. “It was your standard divorce. She got the house and the kids; I got what I could fit in my van.” Rich loaded up the rest of his tools and equipment and drove back to California, to be closer to the center of the con universe. He lived out of his van, or crashed on the sofa of another fan.

If You Build It, They Will Con

While his personal life was in turmoil, professionally things were about to take off. In early 1981, he received a phone call from a guy who had tracked him down through a dealer at a *Star Trek* con. The man worked for a company, based near Los Angeles, called Modern Props. Modern Props was an outfit that built and then sold (or rented) props to movie studios. Large studios typically built their own large sets, which could be dismantled and reused, but they often subcontracted out the more specialized prop work. Modern Props had found this niche, and it had made many of the specialty props used in sci-fi TV shows and movies.

The man wanted to know if Rich might be interested in building some new props for Modern Props' next job, the second *Star Trek* movie, called *The Wrath of Khan*. His tasks would include building communicators and the drivers for the consoles and wall units used on the bridge of the *Enterprise*. For Rich, it was the opportunity of a lifetime. Though he was scraping by on his income from the con circuit, he now had a chance to be an insider, to get on the sets, to read the scripts, to build the toys! "It was amazing," Rich said, "and what was great about it was that very often, it was actually easier to build the movie props" than his own Beldorn Blasters, since typically the sound effects he had added to his Blasters were all handled by the special-effects department, not the prop makers. What's more, while a Trekkie could be highly demanding and exacting about his gear, Rich found the studios less so: They could always change camera angles or alter lighting to make props look their best or hide any flaws. Rich built numerous props for *Star Trek II*, including Chekov's and Terrell's special wrist comms, "Bones" McCoy's medical probe, light sticks, various electronic drivers for the consoles in the Regula One Genesis lab, Kirk's "box" communicator, and many others.

Unfortunately, the work on Trek props didn't pay very well either, and Richard and his girlfriend Jackie (a fellow fan he had met in Los Angeles, now his second wife) lived out of Rich's 1974 Chevy van, which they parked in front of the woodworking shop. "We used the building's bathroom and took sponge baths out of the shop sink," Rich recalled. "I had a 19-inch Zenith color TV in the van, and a bed, so we were not too hard up, and after all I was doing Trek, so I was very happy at the time."

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Rich discovered that what he assumed would be a side benefit of working in the movie business—visiting the sets—could also serve to dampen the “magic” of moviemaking. “It does kind of disturb your enjoyment of the film, the suspension of reality, once you’ve seen how crudely made most of these sets are,” Rich laughed. “The *Star Trek* skit on *Saturday Night Live*—with the old clothes wringer feeding paper through the wall to look like an automatic printout—was just about dead on!”

The work on *Star Trek* led to prop jobs on many other movies and TV shows, including *Knight Rider* and the short-lived but cult favorite *The Greatest American Hero*. But the real joy came when he was asked to make props for the *Star Trek* franchise, which continued to snowball. Rich went on to build countless props for *Trek* movies, including *Star Trek IV* (he made the famous “Klingon hand disruptor”), *V*, and *VI*, and the television shows *The Next Generation* and *Deep Space Nine*.

Possession with Intent to Distribute

Inevitably, with the huge commercial success of the *Trek* franchise, things began to change in fandom. Viacom bought Paramount Pictures in 1994, and it immediately began cracking down on unlicensed *Trek* merchandise, issuing its infamous C&Ds (cease-and-desist orders) by the box load. *Star Trek* products (uniforms, masks, “weapons”) that were once whimsical mock-ups of the beloved originals were now fraudulent, pirated goods, endangering the sales of the original things (themselves mock-ups of props from the 1960s TV show). “The whole deal

with the C&Ds, the copyright infringement lawsuits and the policing, it all just took the fun out of it,” Rich said regretfully. The overenforcement began to take on almost comic undertones. “I mean, they were busting 12-year-old kids running around with plastic phasers!” All of the “illicit” activity, the unlicensed sale of Trek products, had been tolerated by Paramount when it bolstered fandom and helped support the shows and movies—and, Rich said, the original *Star Trek* in particular owed its return to network television during its second year to the fans, who in a coordinated letter-writing campaign saved the show when it was about to be canceled.

But all of this changed when Viacom got hold of the studio, and it saw the lucrative potential in licensed merchandise and the amount of money the company was “losing” to “bootleggers.” (No doubt Viacom executives had seen the hundreds of millions of dollars *Star Wars* merchandise had reaped for George Lucas and wanted this level of ownership and control.) Admittedly, the sale of Trek merchandise was not just the pastime of hobbyists and show fanatics—there were plenty of non-fans in the business with the sole intention of making a buck. And with the rise of the Internet came the ability to easily and cheaply buy and sell huge quantities of memorabilia across the globe. But the net effect of Paramount’s enforcement action was a precipitous decline in the popularity of conventions. Dealers moved to the Internet—either to dodge enforcement or to broaden their customer base, or both—or got out of the business altogether to avoid steep fines. Though there are still a few cons and other Trek events today, all of the *Star Trek*-related television shows have ceased production, at least for now.

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But Rich has found a way to continue pursuing his dream and still make a living. He now works with Roddenberry.com, the Web site run by Eugene Rodenberry, Jr., son of the late *Star Trek* creator Gene. Rich continues to design and sell show models and replicas, though he is now contemplating retirement (“if I win the Lotto,” he notes). But he’s never lost his love for all things sci-fi. “I’d really enjoy a new Trek series, though the new *Battlestar Galactica* is pretty fantastic. But I still love *Babylon 5*; it was one of the deepest and strongest shows done.” (It’s now off the air, but it is available on DVDs.) “It worked on so many levels, with these multishow arcs and characters developing over multiple seasons,” he said. “I guess you could say it’s kind of like our *War and Peace*.”

To the Future—And Beyond!

Owning his own model-making business, running his own Web site (racprops.com, a site about movie and TV props and the business of prop making), Rich is happy to have lived his escape, happy to work for himself doing what he loves to do. “You know, I’m not rich, but I always made a living,” he said finally. “Most of the other guys in this business come and go. I’ve stuck it out for 25 years now. I have traveled across the country many times, been to so many places, walked onto TV and movie sets, and watched them make movie magic. It has been a great life.” Working with Roddenberry.com,” Rich said, “is akin to a ‘voyage home’ for me. As in the beginning, I’m making props for fans.”

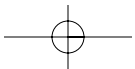
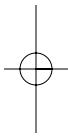
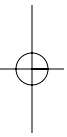




Photo of Mark Divine goes here

