

Bewildering Stories  
The Mariner Awards



2010



BEWILDERING PRESS

# The Mariner Awards

## *Bewildering Stories*’ Annual Review, 2010

### The Review Editors’ Most Distinguished Selections from Short Fiction

#### Introduction

*Bewildering Stories*’ home page states that our mission is to offer “a home and an audience to speculative writing. All genres are welcome in prose, poetry, drama and non-fiction.” ‘BwS’ — as we’re known informally — has been fulfilling this promise with an electronic magazine that has been published weekly since June of 2002.

Our quality varied wildly in the first year, which was only to be expected in a start-up venture. But over the years, determination and good will have gradually attracted works of increasing quality. Now, in our ninth year, we express our gratitude to the loyal contributors, editors and review readers who have all helped give *Bewildering Stories* the good reputation it has today.

Our Quarterly Reviews represent the Editors’ Choices as the best of *Bewildering Stories*. In 2010 we published 412 titles in addition to artwork, discussions, reviews, critical essays and letters. The sheer number of titles made the format of the former Annual Reviews unmanageable. We therefore decided to revive our old Certificate of Merit as the Mariner Awards, named for one of the first successful interplanetary missions. These awards represent the titles voted “very good” or “excellent” — 65, as it happens — in the course of the year.

And that may give readers pause: they will be right to surmise that many works were voted “good” but did not make the cut. Those titles still hold pride of place in our Quarterly Reviews. Indeed, we are sure that all readers can cite titles they would like to add to the Mariner Awards; fair enough. But we are also confident they will find nothing they would omit.

A note about the contents of this e-book: for reasons of file size and ease of navigation, among other things, we regretfully include only a representative number of the stories found in the 2010 Award section on the *Bewildering Stories* website. The memoirs, poetry, and most of the serialized works may be published in a second volume of the 2010 Annual Review. Meanwhile, this edition will bring you plenty to enjoy, all in one place.

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### **Acknowledgments**

Don and I would like to thank our editorial crew for their unwavering support. Their tireless efforts make it possible to put together a weekly online magazine of stories, poems, essays, and reviews, as well as to offer help to new and established writers alike. The other Review Board members are Bill Bowler, Bertil Falk, Gary Inbinder, Harry Lang, Michael E. Lloyd, Marina J. Neary, Carmen Ruggero, and Lewayne L. White.

We also express our gratitude to the Special and Associate Editors. They are normally the first readers of submissions and stand, so to speak, as lookouts at the bow of the ship. Their work is indispensable.

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Jerry Wright, Publisher  
Don Webb, Managing Editor  
*Bewildering Stories*

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## The Oceanic Express

by Jack Alcott

So there's this old guy at our party, and no one knows who he is or where he came from. He just kind of appeared. Now that's not a problem or anything. This is San Francisco in the summer of 1976 and hey, everybody's welcome.

It's two in the morning and The Abbey Tavern, the bar downstairs from our railroad flat, has just emptied out and naturally one of my roommates, Bruce from Buzzard's Bay, has invited everyone upstairs. That's pretty typical for a Friday-night-into-Saturday-morning here, and we're used to having all kinds of crazies, eccentrics and barflys come up. Again, this is Baghdad by the Bay.

If they're sober enough to climb the two flights of stairs to the apartment, we figure they're under control. There are five of us living in the flat and we're all in our twenties and in good shape, so we can handle anybody and anything short of a psycho with a gun. But we keep an eye on our guests and this guy really stood out. First of all, it was his hair — it was silver and hung in thick, coiled ringlets to his black-caped shoulders.

That's right, he was wearing a black cape. A black shirt, black pants and black boots, too. All that black seemed to make those silvery coils light up like they were electrified, especially if you'd had a toke or two and couldn't help staring. You couldn't miss his moustache, either. It was one of those showy Salvador Dali jobs, all waxed and nasty like an insect's antennae.

And then there were his black eyes. They seemed to be all pupil, which around here isn't all that unusual. But he didn't seem stoned on dope or alcohol, and that's suspicious. On the contrary, he was very lucid and in the moment, and those damned, unblinking black eyes burned into you when he spoke, and he listened closely to everything you said.

The old guy was kind of handsome, too, in a weird overly perfect way; he had this elegant Gallic nose and... well, I don't want to sound like I'm gay, here, 'cause I'm not, but everything about him was too perfect, too symmetrical, too unreal and his skin was strangely smooth and glowing, like a young man wearing too much makeup. But he was definitely an "old soul" — and that's what he was telling everyone. Which, along with his freaky appearance, was worrisome.

"Go have a chat with the guy," Bruce whispered to me as I was pulling a can of Green Death — that's what we called Rainier Ale — out of the fridge in the kitchen. "Make sure he's okay."

That's how our first-alert policy works; we have a nice quiet chat, and if the guest doesn't pass the test, he could soon have five guys gently but firmly suggesting it was time to go. We're pretty tolerant, though; just being different isn't enough to get you ejected.

Case in point is a hapless regular Bruce dubbed, rather insensitively, “It.” The poor guy ran out of money halfway through his gender transformation, and the cute dresses and nascent breasts did nothing to hide his five o’clock shadow and silky baritone.

Then there’s “The Screamer.” Five minutes into what can start out as a quiet, reasonable conversation, and he’s screaming and spitting at the top of his lungs and generally upsetting the other partygoers. It usually takes an entire joint to get the guy calmed down.

So I made my way across the living room floor, past the guitar amps and Ray “The Poetman” Vincent’s keyboards, and all the yakking, happily unsteady guests, to where the old wizardly looking dude is standing sipping a Guinness in a pint glass probably purloined from the Abbey, and burning holes in anyone that will look at him. Tucked up under his left arm is a beat-up, leather-bound book with flaking gold letters on its spine.

“Hey, I’m Brendan,” I say extending a hand. “Nice to meet you.”

He looks down at my hand a second, shifts his brew into his left hand, all the while keeping the book under his arm in place, and shakes. I can’t help but notice his long, beautiful fingers, like a musician’s — like my band-mates and me. But once again, there was a certain unsettling perfection about those pale digits, as though they were idealized musician’s fingers — if that makes any sense.

“Nice to make your acquaintance, Brendan,” he said with a pleasant old-fashioned courtliness and a slight bow. “I’m Sir Francis Bacon the Third, and I’ve just arrived.”

“Really? From where?”

“Across the universe, Brendan,” he said, jiggling his drink. “What you call the Pinwheel Galaxy, I believe. I only just materialized here a few minutes ago, and there’s nothing quite so refreshing as a good pint after traveling a few hundred light years.”

*Okay, whoa, we’ve got a live one here,* I thought. *Either he’s goofing on me, or he’s a certified whack-job.* The real question, though: was he dangerous? I needed to chat with him a bit more before I made that evaluation.

“Uh, yeah, Francis, right? Can I call you Frank?”

“I’d rather you stuck with Francis.”

“That’s cool, that’s cool,” I said, not wanting to offend him right out of the box. “So, how are things going in that part of the galaxy?”

“It’s another galaxy, Brendan. You’re in The Milky Way.”

“I’ll take your word for it, thanks for the education. Another galaxy? Wow.”

“To answer your question, though, things are going well. Unlike here.”

I stopped and squinted at him a couple of beats, and then cut to the chase. “Seriously now, Francis, you’re kidding me, right?”

He just returned my stare, upping the wattage in those obsidian eyes. I’ve got to say, though, he was good: he delivered his lines with a real game face. No wiseguy smirk curling at the corners of his mouth, no arrogant glint in the eye. He said these things like he meant them.

But I was sure he was yanking my chain. There was a lot of that going on in the 60s and 70s. If you looked even a little straight, stoned-out freaks would get all creative and outrageous on you

just to poke a hole in your smug little middle class, middle-of-the-road world. But he'd misjudged us. Maybe we weren't the hippest people in San Francisco, but we weren't completely out of it.

I took a nice, long drink of my beer, keeping an eye on Francis. Van Morrison's "Into the Misty" was on the stereo, and it never sounded so appropriate because I was quickly running into the fog with this guy. Sir Francis' antennae mustachio was twitching to the tune's big, fuzzy bass line.

Just then, Bruce's buddy, Ernie, lurched over and swung an arm around me without spilling the beer he had in his other hand. "Hey, introduce me to your friend," he said, nodding at Sir Francis. Ernie was a big guy, maybe six-foot three, and when I said he lurched, I wasn't trying to indicate he was drunk, although there was a good chance.

And I wasn't trying to be cruel, either. Ernie was two years out of 'Nam, where he'd had his right leg essentially blown off at the knee by a shotgun blast. The field surgeons did a good job of sewing what was left of the limb back on, but his leg was never going to be the same. So Ernie was always throwing his arm around people's shoulders, basically to hold himself up.

Francis Bacon beat me to the introduction. "Really nice to meet you, Ernie," he said, presenting him with his strangely elongated hand, and I could tell Ernie noticed it right away. "I'm Francis Bacon the Third."

Now, I hadn't mentioned Ernie's name yet, but I figured maybe Francis had overheard someone talking to him or something. That seemed plausible, anyway. Francis was in no mood for small talk, though, and immediately took the conversation to another level. "You had a bad time of it in Vietnam, didn't you?" he said, his black eyes somehow radiating sympathy.

"I don't know anybody that had a good time," Ernie came back.

"Yes, of course. It's all a vast horror."

"You could say that again."

Francis leaned back a bit and peered down at Ernie's damaged leg, slightly twisted in his khakis. I was feeling uneasy again; I wasn't enjoying the repartee, if that's what it was. Ernie didn't like talking about his leg or his time in Vietnam. It always made him angry and potentially violent.

Even with a gimp leg, a drunken, riled-up ex-Green Beret is a fearsome fighting machine. I'd seen him in action in a couple of bar fights, including one right downstairs at the Abbey when he took apart Tiny, their oversized and overzealous bouncer.

The black-bearded Tiny, who had a rep for giving random and unmerciful beatings to whomever he felt like, had picked on the wrong guy, and it was months before he got out of the hospital. Ernie, however, was welcomed back in the bar after a couple of weeks. Like I said, he was a nice guy unless you tripped his wire.

"You've served your time in hell," Francis said.

"That's what it says on the back of my jacket," Ernie answered. He was wearing one of those black silk souvenir jackets with a map of North and South Vietnam embroidered on it in brilliant greens, reds and oranges. A fantastic depiction of a dragon with bulging eyes and red claws seemed to tear at the black fabric — and the countries.

"Well, when you die — and it will be at the age of ninety-six — you will certainly go to heaven, if such a place exists."

Now Ernie's eyes, like the dragon's were starting from their sockets. I'd seen that look before, and it wasn't good. He was getting mad; really, really pissed. Intoxicated, fighting pissed. "How the hell you know how old I'm gonna be when I kick off?" This wasn't a question; it was a demand. And he'd dropped his arm from my shoulder and drawn himself up to his full, somewhat shaky height, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the neck of his beer bottle.

Thankfully, Bruce — who'd been watching from the other side of the room where all the band equipment was stacked — had picked up on his friend's state of mind. He had turned off Van on the stereo, strapped on his '61 Les Paul gold top, and was strumming some martial chords through his amp. A few partygoers gathered around.

"Ernie, check this out," he called across the room. "I figured out "Ballad of the Green Beret." Then he stepped up to the mic and in his best John Wayne vocal, gave it a go. This cracked Ernie up, and he gave Sir Francis one more glare before heading over to listen to Bruce.

"Nice going there, Francis," I said. "You ticked off one of the few people here capable of instantly killing somebody."

"Yes, I can see he is in a lot of turmoil. But he will defeat his demons one day, and his pain will ease."

Which was of course a crazy thing to say — but what did I expect? Anyway, it was spoken with kindness and I hoped the nutty bastard was right. Meanwhile, I realized I had to stick close to Francis to keep him out of trouble, at least until everybody got used to him. However, he continued to attract attention just by, well, standing there.

"That's a beautiful old book," a woman said behind me, and in a moment Jean and Garth had swirled up to us, Jean with a glass of silvery Chablis, Garth with a cigarette drooping rakishly from his lips. "What is it?"

Now Jean and Garth were two of our more literary habitués, and earlier in the evening I had listened in a semi-mesmerized state as Garth held forth on an intricate and entertaining explication of — believe it or not — Dostoevsky's *Notes From the Underground*.

While this sounds pretentious, Garth tackled the subject with such passion and offbeat erudition, that you couldn't help but be intrigued. He wasn't shoveling; he cared about and loved the book. His descriptions were further animated by his honey-thick Southern accent; both he and Jean had met and then dropped out of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. It didn't hurt that he was the handsomest guy in the room with his little Errol Flynn moustache and wavy russet hair.

Then there was Jean, always at his elbow or somehow draped around him. Every man that set eyes on her had to immediately fall in love, and it's truly impossible to sum up the beauty and grace of this dark-haired nymphean woman in mere sentences (so, okay, I'd obviously fallen in love with her, too). However, she was entirely devoted to Garth and there was no way anyone else could get even a flicker of interest out of her.

Garth for his part casually accepted her love as though it was his due — and I could have killed him for that. But Garth was killing himself, anyway, and probably taking his perfect lover with him. You see, he was a heroin addict of the most seductive, charming and dangerous variety. He was also a devilishly talented, professional-level guitarist who could blow you away with his



lyrical playing. In short, he seemed to have already won life's lottery, and even his willingness to throw it all away on drugs and debauchery had a certain tragic allure.

Sir Francis held the book out to them like an offering in both his preternatural hands.

Garth took it and scrutinized its flaking, ancient leather cover. "Jesus, how old is this?" he asked and then without waiting for an answer, read the gold-lettered title aloud: *The New, Improved Atlantis*." He laughed. "What is this? Some kind of joke?"

"Not at all," came the answer from our inscrutable visitor. "It's my book; I've been writing it for years, decades even."

Garth gave him a glance, and opened its pages. They were made of thick, homemade-looking paper and were covered in a flowing script in a language that was definitely not English, and frankly looked more like an otherworldly symphony. The title was vaguely familiar, though, and a fuzzy memory surfaced from one of my college classes; I realized it was a riff on the original — that is, the "real" Francis Bacon's book on Atlantis. I was becoming ever more convinced that our guest was a '60s acid burnout from the nearby Haight.

"It's about my distant travels and the future that awaits us all," Francis said without prompting. "A utopia far better than this dysfunctional time and place."

As he was speaking, someone bumped me from behind, spilling beer on the back of my shirt. I turned quickly to find Mark Summers standing there and mumbling apologies. He was already hammered and was bobbing and weaving where he stood, the whites of his eyes gone pink with corpuscular hemorrhaging.

I always hated to see young Mark so wasted, I mean he wasn't even 21 yet. He was a runaway who'd spent his first couple of weeks in San Francisco sleeping in Golden Gate Park until he'd run into Ray, who let him stay in his one-room dive at the Elite Hotel over on Clement. The hotel was anything but elite, of course, and Ray had filled the room with sour-smelling laundry and wall-to-wall piles of arcane poetry books.

I'd heard him complaining earlier that Mark, who he said slept on the floor, had kicked over a pile and ruined the covers on a couple of early City Lights numbers. He'd almost thrown Mark back on the street, but couldn't bring himself to banish the kid to sleeping outdoors.

Mark was a real hard-luck story; he left home after fighting with his stepfather, an insurance exec up in Seattle. They could not get along, and his step dad picked on him so much, Mark said he had to leave because he might kill the man. Mark was a big boy, fullback size, and when he drank you could see glints of anger gathering like ice splinters in his slanty blue eyes.

He wasn't angry right now, though, just dazed. "Sorry, man, sorry," he said, and promptly spilled more beer on me.

"Don't worry about it, Marko," I said. "I consider it a baptism by beer; thanks for saving me."

I could see he wasn't sure if I was kidding or what, and his eyes were going in and out of focus. I was going to tell him there was a seat open on one of the couches and he should just kick back and I'd get him another brew, when Francis piped up. "You should drink a lot less young man. It's going to catch up with you faster than you realize. You want to make your next birthday?"

Mark's eyes snapped back into focus and fixed on Francis; I could almost see the ice crystallizing in his blue-gray irises.

"Who's this guy?" he asked. "Governor Moonbeam? Listen mister, my birthday's tomorrow, all right, but you don't know me from Adam. So why don't you just shut up and mind your own business, all right? All right?"

"Take it easy, Mark — hey, there's a seat open on the couch, grab it, man." I gave him friendly nudge in that direction. I could see he was having trouble standing and wanted to sit down, and he went for it.

Garth was now in front of Francis and he had the "Atlantis" book open in his hand. "Hey, this doesn't look like any language I've ever seen," he said. "Looks more like musical notation, but I don't recognize any of these notes, or whatever they are. What is this stuff?" He was genuinely puzzled — and curious.

"You're quite correct, it is a kind of music — a universal language. I see you're a musician yourself, which means you probably already know how to read this notation; you just need a refresher course, and I'm willing to teach you."

"Huh? I don't know about that," Garth said glancing up from the book. "But it does seem to have a certain rhythm going on."

"It's beautiful," said Jean. "Like one of those illuminated manuscripts created by Irish monks."

"Thank you," Francis responded. "But religion has nothing to do with my treatise."

"So what's it about then, what's the theme?" Garth asked.

"Everything," Francis said.

"Oh c'mon, everything?"

Our visitor smiled and took another drink from his black pint of ale. "Everything, young man. You and your lovely companion are both part of my book."

That was it. I had to get Francis out of there fast. The party was over, at least for him.

"Come on, Francis, we've got to go," I said, taking him by the elbow. He was a skinny bastard and he had the boniest damned elbow I'd ever touched, so I loosened my grip for fear of hurting him. "Follow me outside where we can talk."

He came along without further discussion, leaving a wake of sharp, accusatory glances behind. We started down the hallway steps, which were covered in a cheap red paint the color of overcooked tomato sauce — or dried blood. The paint, heavily scuffed in the center of the stairs, had never really bothered me until that moment. Now the color, once merely tacky, seemed somehow ominous, even grotesque.

"Don't you want to know if you're in my book?" Francis asked as I swung the door open onto the Fifth Avenue sidewalk. A 38 Geary bus bore down on the corner shooting strings of oily black smoke from its tailpipe, its diesel engines screaming like an F-15 about to crash on the tarmac.

I pretended not to hear Francis as I ushered him toward the corner streetlight and the bus. "Where you live, Francis?" I said, digging into my pocket for the fifty-cent fare.

"The ocean," he said.

"Well then, you should jump on the bus, it's headed that way."

But Francis wasn't in any hurry and the driver stopped only long enough for a couple of teenagers to hop up the 38's steps. The bus' rubber-lipped doors slammed shut behind them with a pneumatic gasp, like an elderly asthmatic, and it roared off, shaking and shuddering toward the beach.

"We'll wait for the next one," I said. "It'll be along in a few minutes."

We were now at the corner of Geary and Sixth, in front of a garishly lit red-and-white striped fried chicken joint that was closed for the night, but still reeking of superheated grease. When I looked to the west, up the avenue toward the ocean, I saw a thick mattress of fog sliding toward us, swallowing streetlamps and buildings as it came.

The mist moved surprisingly fast, almost at jogging speed, and we were soon inside the clammy, spritzing cloud. It was so dense that even the fluorescent light in the restaurant windows seemed smudged and dimmed. A slight breeze, like a tickling, chilly breath, accompanied the cloud and I found myself wishing I'd thrown a jacket on.

Searching for a bus, I peered toward the downtown, which was already dissolving in the swirling gray mass. When I turned back to Francis, I found him wordlessly staring at me from the depths of those uncanny eyes.

"What?" I said, although he hadn't spoken. There was a sudden chill in the air that had nothing to do with the temperature, and I shivered. The usual city noises were noticeably damped down, smothered in the enshrouding fog.

"Dammit, I should have put a jacket on," I muttered just to break the uneasy silence.

"Do you see how obscure it all is?" Francis said in a quiet rasp, motioning up and down the street with his pale, peculiar hand. A foghorn sounded out by the Golden Gate, sending its baleful reverb echoing through the night. "You want to know your future, don't you, Brendan? I can help you. All you have to do is ask."

"You're getting freaking weirder by the minute, Francis," I said looking around again for the 38 Geary. "Where's that bus? They're supposed to run every fifteen minutes."

"Minutes are not important," he said. "We're talking about a lifetime."

"I'm not talking about anything except getting you on that bus and out of here, back to wherever you came from," I said feeling angry — and also inexplicably alarmed, like a small creature that senses a predator is near.

He wasn't listening to me. "Come with me, Brendan. Come with me on the bus to the ocean. There's so much to see."

I didn't know what to say. But I definitely wanted nothing to do with his version of my future. For one thing, I wasn't so sure I even had one — and I certainly didn't want my fears confirmed. So, no way was I getting on that bus with him; God only knows where that would lead me. Buried out at Ocean Beach, in a shallow sea-soaked grave? At the moment, that didn't seem so farfetched, and the tingle of alarm I'd felt building was reaching a crescendo in my head.

When I'd first hitchhiked to San Francisco five years earlier, my ride dropped me off on Market Street sometime around 9 p.m. The street was dead, there was hardly anyone around, and I'd tried repeatedly to call a friend from a phone booth on the corner without getting through. I'd neglected to tell him I was coming to town, so I wasn't surprised, but I had nowhere to go.

As I loitered in front of a closed up discount shoe store, a tall, good-looking man in his 30's came over and politely asked me if I needed a ride anywhere. He seemed genuinely concerned about my safety. "You shouldn't be hanging in this part of town all alone," he said. "I've got a cottage in Berkeley, come on over. You can stay the night. My car's parked a block away. Come on... Come on, it's all right. Really."

I was tempted. Mark Twain once said that the coldest winter he'd ever spent was a summer in San Francisco. The fog was rolling down from Twin Peaks on one end, and up from the bay and the Ferry Building on the other — and it was getting chillier by the minute.

But something about the guy bothered me. Maybe it was his persistence; maybe it was the jaunty, jagged scar over his left eye. Whatever it was, I told him I didn't need his help, to leave me the hell alone. He got the message and left, but not before he gave me a creepy head-to-toe once-over, and told me it was my loss.

Two days later I was walking past a newsstand on California Street when I spied a *Chronicle* headline: "Suspected Serial Killer Nabbed in East Bay" it screamed in one-inch type. And right there on Page One was a black and white photo of the guy who offered to take me to his place in Berkeley. What a world, huh?

"Make up your mind, Brendan," Francis said. "Your future's at stake. Come with me and everything changes for the better. Trust me."

Now if there's one thing I've learned in life, it's be wary of anyone who asks for your trust; particularly if you only met them that day. And I was about to tell Francis just that when out of the fog came a roaring Cerberus on wheels, the 38 Geary. Except it said "Oceanic Express" in the narrow destination window on the roof above the driver.

I'd never heard of the Oceanic Express, but it pulled up to the curb, its air brakes shrieking, its headlights shredding the fog. The bus's interior lights flared off and on, bathing the scene in a dirty, brownish glow that intermittently revealed the faces of the passengers watching us from the windows.

I could only stare back at them, unable to move, as if time itself had seized up and frozen me in place. And there, smiling out the windows from their red Naugahyde seats were several characters I recognized from down on Market and Powell. In fact, the bus was filled with all the crazy, muttering, outrageously exhibitionist street people that greet tourists at the cable car turntable every day.

The Polka Dot Man, a contortionist, was nearest, and he was indeed painted black with large pink polka dots decorating his bald skull, face, and naked knotted torso. Behind him sat the blind swami with his turban and raw, empty eye sockets that he'd gouged out to better read the palms of desperate pilgrims. Next to him, stark and rigid, sat the red-faced, street preacher best known for raining brimstone rants down on the heads of anyone unfortunate enough to cross his path.

And there were others, in almost all the seats, tortured, pathetic and shuddering souls all bound for Land's End. For what? A seaside convention for the mad? Again, this was San Francisco, so maybe that's exactly where they were going. Why not? Maybe it was an annual event, with bonfires and booths by the shore or along the rocky cliffs where they all sat behind card tables

hawking their wares, talking shop and catching up on the latest innovations of the insane while moonlight twinkled on the Pacific. And I was invited!

But there was no conference, of course. This gathering was something far more sinister, something I wanted nothing to do with, something to run away from... And then I felt Francis' spindly hand sliding into mine, as cool and smooth and hard as ivory. It wasn't until his stick-like fingers started tightening around my own that I was jolted out of my stupor and able to jerk my hand free. I stood there gape-mouthed for a second as Francis' placid face turned sullen. Then he bared his tiny teeth in a malevolent grin and lunged for me...

But he wasn't quick enough for the 26-year-old I was then, and I practically leaped from his grasp, scampering crablike and backwards and falling to the pavement where I heaved myself to my feet again and ran, throwing a glance only once over my shoulder at the bus and the fog swept, fluorescent-lit corner. What I saw will stay with me forever, although no one believes me when I tell them; they just blame it on drugs. Well, hell, I hardly believe it myself.

But just before the bus folded its doors closed there was a loud exhalation and then what sounded like a huge intake of breath. Then I saw Francis dissolve into shreds of smoke or fog or some filthy smog, stripped right down to the bone — and then the whole mess was sucked up into the bus, dimming the still-stuttering lights on board as the 38 went supersonic and careened away in its headlong plunge toward the ocean.

That was all I saw, for I was quickly around the corner and running for home, all the while thinking it was time to leave San Fran. I'd been wasting my life on this extended adolescence for too long; it was time for a change, time to get out of La-La Land, as my parents liked to call it. Time to get real, whatever that was — and suddenly, for the first time in years, I really felt motivated and I hoped it wasn't too late to accomplish something, anything, somewhere else.

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Like many before me, I did leave my heart in San Francisco. But at least it's not buried out at Land's End — and for that I'm glad.

Young, drunk Mark was not so lucky. He got behind the wheel of Ray's beat-up Mustang convertible on his 21st birthday and rammed it into one of those beautifully bizarre street lamps in Chinatown. He struck the thing with such force that one of the cast iron lamp's gold-gilded dragons flew free and met him head-on as he went through the windshield, splitting his skull.

Ray "The Poetman" did not come to a poetic end, either. He was noodling around one stagnant afternoon on his Farfisa organ, midway into The Doors' "Riders on the Storm," when he stopped playing.

"What's the matter?" Bruce asked from the sofa where he was stretched out with his guitar. "That's the best part."

"I don't understand," Ray said. "I can't remember the rest of the song, the chords, the melody — nothing."

"It's in E minor, it's easy."

“What’s an E minor?” Ray asked. He meant it; he couldn’t remember. The tumor that had been secretly flowering deep in his brain had instantly erased all the music in his head. He never played another tune and three months later he died in his parents’ home in the suburbs of Toledo, Ohio.

Bruce? Bruce was a sweet-natured guy, but a congenital sluggard. Besides his guitar playing, his one intellectual pleasure was reading *Moby Dick* once a year, no matter what. He said it always reminded him of home, of Buzzard’s Bay, Massachusetts.

About a decade after Sir Francis showed up at our party, I heard that Bruce had gone home. While swimming offshore that first summer back in the Bay State, a riptide had borne him out to sea. His body was never found, but Melville’s book was on his sand-spattered Red Sox beach towel where he’d left it.

Garth and Ellen? Still alive and shooting heroin in L.A., waiting for their turn.

Me? Don’t ask; I don’t want Francis to find me.

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Dean Francis Alfar's plays have been performed in venues across his native Philippines. His short fiction has been published locally and abroad in publications such as *Strange Horizons*, *Rabid Transit* and *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*. His writing awards include eight Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature — most recently the Grand Prize for Novel in 2005 for *Salamanca* (Ateneo Press, 2006) as well as the Manila Critics' Circle National Book Award for his graphic novel *Siglo: Freedom*. Dean Francis Alfar lives with his family in Manila.

## In the Dim Plane

by Dean Francis Alfar

After the end of the world, the hardest thing to fight is loneliness. I have never been truly sociable and eschewed the company of the few others here. With almost no power left and no way to recover any more, I managed to secretly maintain only one animated skeleton for companionship in the frenzy of escaping Forlorn's destruction. Between the two of us, my sanity, my world, is kept intact.

I had left my cave on my way to meet the others — something that happens every year or so, at their insistence — when I unexpectedly encountered a ghost.

It was a beautiful woman with dark hair and sad eyes.

In any other place, in any other time, this would not have fazed me. I am, or was, after all, the greatest Necromancer of Forlorn. However, in this place of shadows, on the Dim Plane, I had barely enough power to do the simplest unnatural thing and could not defend myself if this was one of the hungry ones.

"What do you want, ghost?" I said with false bravado, at a loss to explain how a ghost came to be here, in this remote sanctuary, in the first place.

"Please," the ghost said, holding out a small ornate sandalwood box toward me.

Before I could reply, she dissolved into the dimness, the box she held settling down softly near my feet. I sensed that it was the end of her tenuous existence. I took the box, both puzzled and pleased. Puzzled, because here was a mystery; pleased, because it was something I could think about.

Just as I was about to open the box, a voice boomed out from the dimness. "Teros?"

It was Lord Jussin the Betrayer, broad-shouldered and crooked-nosed, also on his way to meet with the others. I quickly hid the box in my vestments. It was not something I wished to share with a spavined craven like Lord Jussin.

"Teros," Lord Jussin said with a scowl. "It *is* you. Come, old man. We might as well walk together toward our tiresome pretense of bonhomie."

I did not feel that Lord Jussin, a fallen paladin who had denounced his queen for the promise of power, deserved to be in the Dim Plane. But somehow he had found a means to get here, as the others and I did, so we all had to co-exist in peace.

There are precisely five of us living in the Dim Plane, survivors of the end of the world that we knew forty years ago. Though at first we kept away from each other, as time passed we began to

seek each other's company. We didn't speak much then; it was sufficient just to see that someone else was here. But eventually, we began to exchange glances of feigned disinterest, then to talk; and finally we agreed to regular gatherings, sometimes as often as twice a year. At least it was something to do.

Braxas, Harrower of Flame, was the first to approach me. Later, I made the acquaintance of Lizel Gorgist, the Widow's Bane. Lord Jussin the Betrayer was next, and the maxim-laden polymath Resa Undermasque, who had bartered parts of her body for knowledge, was last.

On Forlorn, the world that we lost, we knew each other only by name and reputation, our interests and agendas separated by oceans and continents. Each of us had, in the past, ruled parts of the world or made war with those who stood in our way, through virtue of craft, blade, politics or poison. In the Dirmoth Archipelago, I built my kingdom of undead, crushed the noble houses that dared oppose me, and taught men to tremble at the mere mention of my name.

Very few could stand against any one of us in our respective domains, and in truth I had begun to make plans to teach the rest of the world the lessons known only by the dead. But all our plans were made pointless when the Ebonnites erupted from the bowels of world, unleashing terror that made our all our fell deeds and dark ambitions pale in comparison. The graves of Dirmoth, ancient and new, were exhausted before I conceded defeat.

The Ebonnites conquered Forlorn. And as far as we know, of the entire populace only five of us found the means to escape to this place of dolorous shadows where we know neither hunger nor thirst but only sempiternal tedium. Five of us, blackguards all. The irony is not lost on me.

Lord Jussin and I arrived at the circle of stones and found the others already there. Resa Undermasque, her violet eyes gleaming from behind her salt-encrusted veil, had taken her customary place while Lizel Gorgist, the scarred side of her face covered by tangled black locks, stood speaking to a clearly agitated Braxas.

"Teros!" Braxas exclaimed when he saw me. He limped in my direction. "I've been waiting for you."

"Braxas thinks he's seen a ghost," said Lizel Gorgist, acknowledging my arrival with a slight nod. She raised a fractured crystal that was once so useful to her. "Even if this weren't impotent, I wouldn't need it to ascertain the absurdity of his fantasy. Here where there has been no one and nothing but us for forty years."

"A ghost," I repeated, hiding the trembling in my voice. If Braxas knew something about the apparition, then we would talk. But later, when the gathering was over and the others had left. "Why do you think you saw a ghost?"

"She's come to..." Braxas' voice trailed off. He made as if to say more but ended up just gesturing in the thick air.

"I think you've gone mad," said Lord Jussin, following his declaration with an unkind snort. "The dimness has finally claimed you."

"No, I'm in full control of my faculties, Jussin," Braxas replied, shaking his head. "I'm certain it was her."

"*Lord Jussin*," Lord Jussin offered as a curt correction, stroking his raddled beard. "Let us not forget who we are, even in exile."



“The ghost, Braxas,” I asked, taking my place in the circle. “Who do you think she was?”

“Ah,” Lazel Gorgist exulted, finally putting away her dull crystal. “I wouldn’t mind a story. It’s been an age since Resa told us hers, remember?”

Resa Undermasque sat unmoving.

“Wouldn’t you all rather hear another of my exploits?” Lord Jussin said, resting his armored figure on a stone with aggrieved dignity. “It’s pathetic how we make do with whatever entertainment comes our way.”

I gestured for Lord Jussin to keep quiet. Lazel Gorgist seemed pleased at his silent outrage.

“So, who was she?” I asked Braxas once again.

Braxas, Harrower of Flame, sighed and sat down, obviously shaken. “Maia was the most beautiful woman in the world. I don’t care what you think, what you know, or who you’ve known. There was simply no question about it. One look at her and you were lost forever. And such a kindly woman too. No airs about her.”

“Sounds too good to be true,” Lazel Gorgist, the Widow’s Bane, shook her head. “In my experience, women like that have the heart of scorpions.”

“No one is interested in what you have to say,” Lord Jussin the Betrayer said.

“Gods of Forlorn!” I exploded. “Let him speak.”

Braxas smiled weakly and continued. “She was wed to my master, the great Antilos, Master of the Dark Elements. And while my master was a perfect teacher, he wasn’t known for his kindness, so we speculated often what Maia saw in him.”

“Who’s ‘we’?” asked Lazel Gorgist.

“My three brothers and I,” replied Braxas. “We were his students.”

“Certain things see beyond the surface,” Resa Undermasque uttered harshly from her place among the stones, startling all of us with a sudden motion of her robes. “Love sees what can be seen; desire prefers the taste of secrets and the tantalizing tang of the unknowable.”

We all averted our gazes from her form for a moment, allowing the sudden intense stench of fathomless oceans that came from her to waft over us. None of us uttered a word, unwilling to draw attention to the reek. We had leaned early on that she did not take kindly to candid observations. When the odor dissipated, I politely motioned for Braxas to continue.

“Where was I,” Braxas asked, taking a shallow breath. “Oh, yes. Master Antilos and Maia were wed. And he loved her and she loved him. My brothers and I continued our education and went on to specialize, each in a fatal elemental art. I mastered fire, of course.”

“Of course,” I said, shifting in my seat. In the fallen world, Braxas’ talent with punishing flame was justly feared.

“At the moment we achieved the pinnacle of craft, Master Antilos presented each one of us with identical rings, proof of our prowess in his eyes. Each of the rings bore his oriflamme, a closed fist. Receiving the ring was one of the happiest days of my existence. I wore it with pride for years.”

“Don’t make this story about you,” Lazel Gorgist said with a curled lip, tilting her head. “What about the woman?”

“One day—” Braxas began.

“Widow’s Bane,” Lord Jussin the Betrayer intoned in a stentorian voice, fingering the pommel of his broken sword. “You will keep your mouth shut and listen to the story — or else face my unholy wrath.”

Lizel Gorgist, whose subtle sorceries had slain numerous men better than Lord Jussin in the past, ignored the mordant threat and favored him instead with a smile filled with teeth. She offered no retort.

It would be pointless to fight anyway. Nothing worked here: Lizel Gorgist’s mystic artifacts were no more than odd trinkets and baubles, and the remnants of Lord Jussin’s blade would fail to break skin. The Dim Plane deadened everything we had. But still we kept what little we managed to bring from the old world. These things retain the potency of memory, reminding us of who we once were. I smiled at the notion that I was not alone in keeping what was dead close by.

“Carry on, Braxas,” Lord Jussin said, mollified.

“One day, Master Antilos woke up from a terrible dream. In his dream Maia was coupling with another man. Deeply disturbed — for he believed in the provenance of dreams — he began to brood and suspect her, confiding in no one, looking for any signs of an adulterous slant. He found none and life went on, but the quality of their togetherness had changed.”

“True, true,” whispered Resa Undermasque, her words accompanied by the rustle of fabric. “What remains unspoken breeds demons.”

I steadied myself against the customary saline stench that accompanied her words.

“It was a few years before the terrible day of confirmation arrived,” Braxas continued. “The world offered incontrovertible proof of his suspicions when he returned unexpectedly early from a sojourn. Looking for his wife, he found instead, in their bedchamber, wedged between the sheets, one of the rings he had given my brothers and myself. Outraged, he used his power to summon all of us, feigning a message from Maia herself. He thought that the guilty party would immediately attend to his traitorous wife’s call.”

“Now it gets interesting,” Lizel Gorgist said, moving closer to Braxas, oblivious to the dark stare of Lord Jussin the Betrayer.

“Who came?” I asked. “Which one was it?”

“I came,” Braxas said simply. “For I was her lover and had foolishly removed the ring before an act of passion, so as to reduce my guilt.”

“Well,” exclaimed Lord Jussin, raising a gray eyebrow. “Well, well.”

“Gods of Forlorn,” I murmured, tired of stories of the heart’s betrayal.

“Good for you, Braxas,” Lizel Gorgist said. She reached out a slender arm, patterned with tattoos that once held immeasurable power, and stroked Braxas’ bald head. “I always thought there was something behind your monkish exterior.”

“Speak,” hissed Resa Undermasque, her voice scarcely above a briny sigh. She shifted to a more comfortable position on her stone, issuing a glistening appendage from the depths of her discolored robes to maintain her balance as she moved, for an instant intimating just what she had willingly transformed herself into in times past.

Braxas gently pushed away Lizel Gorgist’s hand before he continued. “When I arrived, I was surprised to see my master. He brandished my ring in front of me and I would have perished then

and there — for at that time he was more formidable than I — if not for the fact that the door opened.

“There another of my brothers stood, equally in shock, for he too, it turned out, enjoyed Maia’s graces. And in quick succession, my two other brothers arrived, one after the other, responding to the cry of the woman whom they also loved and knew in ways inappropriate to her status as a married woman.”

“I love this woman, I really do.” Lizel Gorgist’s laughter rose and faded in the dimness. For a moment, I imagined the deadly splendor of her lost youth in the way mirth shaped her mouth.

Lord Jussin the Betrayer stared into the shadows in silence.

“What happened next?” I asked, taking off my skullcap.

“We fought, of course,” Braxas said. “We each felt betrayed, each thinking we were the only recipient of Maia’s love. The room erupted in fire, was torn apart by wind, ravaged by an earthquake, and almost washed away in a deluge as my brothers and I fought each other and our master. It ended as suddenly as it began, with Master Antilos collapsing to his knees in tears. My brothers and I — our hearts were filled with an undeniable heaviness and felt full force the senselessness of fighting among ourselves when there was clearly only one person to blame.”

“The heart betrayed has no secrets left to hide,” murmured Resa Undermasque, a halo of salt crystals barely visible above her head. “And everything to prove.”

“Oh, no,” said Lizel Gorgist, holding the high collar of her tattered overcoat to cover her nose.

“The trollop deserved it,” said Lord Jussin, stepping a small distance away from Resa Undermasque.

Braxas fixed Lord Jussin with a steady glare before continuing. “We apologized to our master and swore to set things right. Master Antilos proved he was a better man than any of us by forgiving us. Together, we decided how Maia would pay for her quintuple deception.”

“Men,” said Lizel Gorgist, lowering her collar to spit. “Did any of you stop to think that you, each one of you, were just as complicit as she was?”

“Sadly, no,” replied Braxas. “We decided that death was too good for her.”

“Really?” I exclaimed in surprise.

“Let me guess,” offered Lizel Gorgist. “You decided to mar her beauty.”

“Yes,” nodded Braxas. “It would be worse than just killing her. After all, that was her only coin, being untrained in the ways of elemental art. We also decided that none of us would do it, being unwilling to further sully ourselves with her presence. So we commissioned a man to do it. A man whose word was his bond.”

“Who?” I asked.

“We hired Ordun the Handsome, the Gray Knife, to cut off her ring finger,” Braxas said.

I felt words recoil on my tongue.

Lord Jussin the Betrayer shuddered in the silence that followed. Lizel Gorgist, the Widow’s Bane, could do no more than sit back with a pained expression. And from Resa Undermasque’s place in the circle of stone came only an almost muted susurrant.

“You commissioned Ordun the Handsome, the greatest assassin of Forlorn?” Lizel Gorgist shook her head. “As black as my heart was at the height of my powers when I broke away from the Sorceriat, Ordun’s feats outshadowed mine.”

“You found him? You could afford him?” Lord Jussin the Betrayer asked. Everyone in the circle of stone knew that Ordun’s fees were outrageous and that his craft prevented him from being located if he did not wish it.

“Master Antilos found him, pushing his abilities to their limits. And as for the fee, my Master offered him a principality in Nevim, and much more besides.”

“Who cares what he asked for,” Lizel Gorgist said. “Did he succeed?”

“Don’t you think hiring Ordun the Handsome was excessive?” asked Lord Jussin. “To cut off a woman’s finger?”

“We wanted the best and we wanted to make sure,” shrugged Braxas.

“Well,” said Lizel Gorgist. “I am certain she finds a way out somehow. She does, doesn’t she?”

“Doesn’t she?” I echoed.

“When Ordun the Handsome found Maia hiding atop an abandoned tower in the woods near Karvel, he took one look her and found himself startlingly, helplessly, in love.”

“In love?” asked Lord Jussin in disbelief.

“What?” I said.

“Yes!” cried Lizel Gorgist. “Now she has a chance.”

“But I thought the woman had no powers,” asked Lord Jussin. “How did she ensorcell Ordun?”

“She’s a woman,” Lizel Gorgist told Lord Jussin without looking at him. “That’s power enough.”

“It is love.” Resa Undermasque’s intricate veil fluttered, favoring us again with her brackish breath.

“Then what happened?” I asked, surreptitiously gasping for air.

“In that moment, they were all that mattered to each other. They held hands and spoke in the brief time they had. Maia confessed everything to him, leaving nothing unsaid, and Ordun the Handsome listened and loved her more for her courage and honesty.

“But there was still the matter of Maia’s ring finger. Without a single tear in her eyes, Maia offered hers to Ordun, taking a blade and putting her unsteady hand against a stone. She did not want him to be at odds with my master, my brothers and I. Having heard from him about his commission, she knew death awaited him if he failed to deliver. Ordun stopped her with a kiss and told her not to worry.”

“Oh,” said Lizel Gorgist. “Oh, I think I know what he’ll do next.”

“Ordun the Handsome had delicate hands, a requirement of his profession. He went to the other side of the tower roof and, unknown to Maia, cut off his own ring finger.”

“Oh, oh,” said Lizel Gorgist softly, covering her mouth with her hands.

“He did this quickly and in silence, then heard a gasp from Maia. While his back was to her, she had cut off her own finger. She raised the bloody digit and begged Ordun not to cut off his. She was speechless when he presented her his own severed finger.”

Resa Undermasque slowly shook her covered head.

“Such love is impossible,” Lord Jussin spoke quietly, as if besieged by memory.

I was already in tears. I looked around the circle of stones and found moisture welling up in Lord Jussin the Betrayer’s eyes; perhaps the old boor had a heart after all.

“Then we arrived,” Braxas said suddenly. “Soon after we sent Ordun the Handsome off, we started talking and realized how much we all loved Maia and were more than willing to forgive her and settle things somehow.

“After the tide of anger we were consumed by deep remorse and set off to stop Ordun from completing the terrible thing we had tasked him with. By combining our powers with that of Master Antilos, we were able to discern where they were, heard their conversation and surmised what was about to happen. We moved as fast as we could, by flame and wind and earth and water.”

“But you bastards were too late,” Lord Jussin interrupted.

“When we completed our ascent to the tower roof,” Braxas continued, “we came upon Maia and Ordun the Handsome, each with a finger cut. Ordun exploded into action and fought against us. Try as we might, we could not stop to talk — so puissant and vicious was Ordun at his craft that none of us could risk a word to enlighten him about our intent. He thought we were going to kill him for his betrayal.”

“I would have fought you all too,” I said, clenching my fists.

“As would have I,” boomed Lord Jussin, his tired eyes consumed with lost fire. “For love. And survival.”

Braxas nodded. “None of us wanted to harm or kill either Maia or Ordun the Handsome. At least that’s what I believe to this day. But with Ordun’s prowess and our summoning of the elements and various expressions of power, what happened next was inevitable. There was a tremendous explosion that devastated the tower.”

“No,” exclaimed Lizel Gorgist. “What happened to Maia?”

“When I regained my wits, I found myself on the ground, surrounded by the remnants of the tower — and the bodies of my three brothers. I wrenched myself free from where I was pinned and was moved to tears when I came across the hollowed-out form of my Master. Maia I found, barely alive. Cradled in her hands were two severed fingers — hers and Ordun’s.”

“And Ordun?” I asked, almost breathless.

“There was no trace of him at the rubble, so I assumed he survived and fled while he could. Though it must be said that the end of Forlorn was less than a year away, so I don’t know if he survived the Ebonnites.”

“Gods,” I whispered, my mind awhirl.

“And Maia?” Lizel Gorgist asked.

“I carried her back with me, did what I could to restore her finger to her hand. The physic who helped us told us that it would not be the same but offered as a consolation that at least she wasn’t incomplete. She sat through this all in silence, while the physic set and stitched and I explained to her about how everything came to pass.

“She wouldn’t say a word to me, and, if I remember correctly, never shed a tear. I left for a few hours to inform the necessary people about the deaths of my master and of my brothers. When I returned, she was gone.”

“She was gone?” asked Lord Jussin the Betrayer. “Just like that? Couldn’t a man of your abilities find her?”

“He let her go,” said Resa Undermasque quietly as the penumbra of salt around her head gently dispersed. “There are those who are not ours to keep.”

I felt the sting of her words and closed my eyes briefly.

“I did not wish to impose upon her heart,” Braxas admitted, lowering his head into his hands. “I knew that at the end, it was Ordun whom she loved. I never saw her again. The end of Forlorn saw to that. Well, until tonight when I thought I saw her ghost.”

The five of us sat in silence for a few moments, unmoving statues lost in reflection.

“She would not have stayed with you,” Lazel Gorgist softly told Braxas. “I know that kind of woman. She made her choice. I hope she found sanctuary somewhere, like we did.”

Lord Jussin stood up slowly and stretched his arms and legs in order. “I’ll take my leave now,” he told us. “Thank you for the small diversion, Braxas. It amused me, quite unexpectedly.” He bowed and moved away.

“Gods of Forlorn,” I said under my breath, my thoughts on the contents of the ghost’s box I kept hidden on my person. I knew now, even without looking, what it contained, and how it would change my life.

“Listen, Braxas,” Lazel Gorgist said. “If it was her spirit you saw, then she was looking for him and not for you. Take what comfort you can from that.” She stood and took her leave, parting the shadows with her outstretched arms to return to her secret place on the Dim Plane, where she kept all her dead artifacts.

“I’m leaving as well,” I told Braxas, donning my equally useless skullcap. “I have something I need to do. Thank you for the story.”

“But Maia’s ghost...” Braxas said, looking up to where I stood. “It was her I saw earlier. You must believe me.”

“I do. But like the Widow’s Bane, I also believe that she is gone and had no quarrel with you.”

“But how did she get here?” asked Braxas. “You know all about the undead. Tell me.”

It was the salt-tinged whisper of Resa Undermasque that answered him, fading, as its owner did, into the dimness. “A questing heart knows no boundaries.”

Braxas lowered his head.

“Fare you well, Braxas, Harrower of Flame,” I said, offering my arm.

“Fare you well then, Teros, Doom of Dirmoth,” Braxas said formally, clasping my arm in the manner of his people. “And thank you.”

I thought of the ghost and how it was me, and not Braxas, that she sought as I made my way through the dimness back to my haunt.

How did she know?

I could only admire her courage. And her devotion.

I reflected on the unassailable fact that years in exile changed people. I was simply not the man I used to be — which made my next choice easier to make but no less difficult to bear.

I entered my cave and moved into the central chamber where the last skeleton under my power sat mutely, tapping away time with nine fingers on a smooth stone.

Sensing my presence, he tilted his head toward me.

At that moment, I felt profound sorrow. Up until the time I left my cave earlier, just before Braxas and his story, I would never have considered, never even dreamed, of my next action.

Gods of Forlorn, how did she know?

He was mine. He was all I had left of the old world, my old world. By completing him I would lose him.

“Ordun,” I called to the skeleton, determined to act before my heart betrayed me. I retrieved the ghost’s box from within my vestments, my eyes wet as I prepared to say goodbye.

“I have something that belongs to you.”

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Nikki Alfar says she learned to write at the age of two and never quite figured out how to stop. Now, over three decades later, she's been a flight attendant, a bank manager, a magazine editor, an office administrator, a radio newscaster, and a marketing and corporate copywriter.

She has earned two Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature, a Manila Critics' Circle National Book Award, a citation in the global *Year's Best Fantasy & Horror*, and recognition as a 'Filipina writer of note', according to the Ateneo Library of Women's Writings.

Her first short-story collection is tentatively titled "Now, Then & Elsewhen." She's a founding member of the LitCritters writing and literary discussion group and co-edits the annual anthology series *Philippine Speculative Fiction* published by her husband of many years, Dean Francis Alfar.

### **Adrift on the Street Formerly Known as Buendia**

by Nikki Alfar

The Taxi Guy won't take me any farther than the Ayala intersection, which I can't blame him for, really, because as early as this point the water's already knee-deep, and it's only going to get worse down the street.

This happens a lot on Buendia (which is supposed to be named Gil Puyat now, only I don't think anyone but the Post Office actually calls it that) in the wet season. Every year (or so I'm told) they muck out the sewers; and every year it floods anyway, drastically and chronically, at even the slightest hint that the sky might be vaguely considering rain. You'd think that no one would keep on living in this area anymore, but it's not like any of us can afford to move. Or at least I can't.

I don't even know if I'll be able to pay the rent once the deposit that Jimmy put down runs out, but for now I'm stuck in my condo, if not permanently on this corner. I've gotten the hang of how things work in the couple of months I've been here. I know a *manong* will be along soon, piloting a transformed tricycle with the motorcycle part replaced by a bike and the seat jacked up to what used to be shoulder level, or a wooden cart with one or two monobloc benches strapped haphazardly to its surface with plastic straw — in either case charging some ridiculous but incontestable amount to get people home safe and sound, if not entirely dry.

I'm hoping it's a cart *manong* who shows up, really, because with the seat propped so high you have to totally hunch over in those tricycles, almost like a fetus; and besides, there are already two people in line ahead of me and I don't want to have to wait around any more than I absolutely have to, although thankfully the actual rain has finally stopped. (And of course I don't have an umbrella; no one does, it's one of those evil Manila days that started out like the scorching height of summer and then turned traitor right after lunch.)

I'm sure my mother would be just as relieved not to have to share with strangers, but I've discovered that in these situations people who have nothing else in common are suddenly willing to chatter away like old chums, which I admit isn't always desirable, but there you go: catastrophe (or the current local equivalent, anyway) makes strangers into neighbors, something that doesn't happen all too often in the city.



These two in front of me, for instance: I'm sure I would never think of talking to them under ordinary circumstances. I mean, the girl seems normal enough; in fact, she's spectacularly pretty, even though she's wearing a horrible fuschia glitter t-shirt with the words 'Kiss Me Quick!' embossed on it. But the guy is wearing something that looks like a diver's wetsuit, a one-piece rubbery getup in black and bright blue, so I'm trying not to stare at him, which isn't easy. At least you could say he's dressed for the weather, unlike me in my one good suit and formerly good heels.

He's obviously thinking along the same lines, because when *manong* finally arrives (with a cart, thank you Lord!) and we clamber aboard, Diver Guy says, "Too bad about your shoes. They look expensive."

They are, too — or they were — blush-colored Nine Wests that were a present from Jimmy back when things were good (although even then I noticed that the shoes had faint scuff marks on the soles, but I was stupidly in love and brilliant at making excuses to explain away all the things I didn't want to understand).

I go, "It's okay. If I get the job I interviewed for today, it'll be worth it," as I settle in to my position in the middle of the bench. (It's Buendia Flood Etiquette that the third person in line gets the least desirable position — not that the sides of a precariously perched monobloc are exactly the lap of luxury, but at least you get an armrest and you're only squashed on one side by your companions.)

"Oh?" he says, zipping the collar of his wetsuit up and down a couple of inches (not in a gross way, just sort of idly). "What kind of job?"

"Call center," I say. I've already been training myself to say it without cringing, so it rolls out nice and smooth, even though of course I'm still thinking: *graduated with honors in Comp Lit, and this is what I'm doing?*

"That's good money," Diver Guy says. "Are you transferring from another call center, or just starting?"

"Just starting," I say. "I used to be a dentist's assistant."

"Wait, that's good money too, later on," he says. "Not to say anything about call centers. I'm sure they pay much more at the start, but it's a waste if you have dental training."

"I don't," I tell him. "I only became a dental assistant because..." Okay, hang on, camaraderie in the face of catastrophe is one thing, but there are limits to how much I'm willing to share here. "I just kind of fell into it."

I look away from Diver Guy and focus instead on the water swirling past us as Cart *Manong* trudges forward. It's around thigh-high here, and things are floating around in it: squashed cigarette butts, translucent plastic bags, a ragged square of carton. Dirt too, of course, though it colors the water brownish-gray instead of being visible on its own; and I'd rather not think about what else is in there that I don't see. It can't be pleasant to be immersed in.

Poor *Manong*; but at least he's making a killing at twenty bucks a passenger just to go down the street. I look over at him and see that he's wearing a flimsy cardstock crown, like the kind they gave out at my nephew's last birthday party, only with just three points in front instead of all the way around; more Wonder Woman than Burger King, maybe. Anyway, it's open on top and

doesn't protect him from the rain at all, so who knows why he's wearing it? It's just Buendia, I guess; the rain comes down and the weirdos come out. (And it's not that I'm being snotty, exactly; I figure I fit right in.)

"What about you, what do you do?" T-shirt Girl, from my other side, asks Diver Guy. "And why is it you're wearing a diving outfit?" Wow, obviously they're not big on manners in Fuschia Glitter Land, or at least she doesn't have her mother's voice perpetually in the back of her mind, telling her what is and isn't proper to talk about. (And yes, I know a lot of things wouldn't have turned out the way they did if I'd listened more, but I will never admit that to you, so shut up, Mental Mama.)

"I'm a marine biologist," says Diver Guy. "I study aquatic life."

"You mean in Manila Bay?" I ask, unable to prevent my voice from squeaking up a couple of registers. I mean, obviously, it's the only sizeable body of water close enough for him to already be wearing his wetsuit (though that's still weird, if you ask me), but I wouldn't have thought anything could live in that cesspool aside from rats and roaches — then again, who knows? Maybe all the pollutants everyone dumps in the bay have caused the rats and roaches to mutate into some new kind of amphibious life form, and that's why he's studying them.

"No, no, right here," he says, and I smile because that's exactly the joke my train of thought was leading me to, that if anyone wanted to study aquatic vermin or pollution-spawned fungi all they'd have to do is come visit Buendia on a rainy day like today.

But it seems like he's actually serious, because he goes on with, "We forget, don't we, that the wellspring of life continues to flow even in the most unlikely places, whether by accident or design," and I don't have anything to say to that, so I look at T-shirt Girl to see if she thinks he's as wacky as I suddenly do, only she's looking at him with disgusting dewy-eyed admiration, like he's MacArthur slogging through the surf at Leyte or something.

Then Diver Guy says, "In fact, I should really get to work," and, holding his nose like a kid on the edge of a diving board, stands up and steps right off the edge of the cart.

"Wait!" I try to say; but he's already gone, which is ridiculous, because the water isn't even above Cart *Manong's* waist yet, and no one who isn't, you know, vertically challenged like Mahal should be swallowed up by water that's no more than three feet deep, but Diver Guy has completely disappeared.

"Did you see that?" I ask the world in general; but *Manong* doesn't seem to hear me, so I address it to T-shirt Girl, who's staring at the water, but doesn't seem particularly fazed. In fact, she's smiling. "Did you see that?!"

"It's nice to find out that a man can be so devoted," she says, smiling even wider to reveal annoyingly perfect pearly teeth.

"He just vanished!" I lean farther toward the side of the cart and look down, but all I see is debris and dirty water. Maybe he landed badly, and twisted his foot, and fell. Maybe he stepped straight into an open manhole. Either way, he could be drowning and no one else seems to care.

"I mean, obviously it's to his work, but still," T-shirt Girl says, "it's nice to see such commitment in a human male. Do you think he'd be the same way in a relationship?"

I should go in after him, I think (even if he is quite possibly a lunatic), but I'm scared *Manong* will just leave me and I'll have to slog through the filthy water on my own all the rest of the way home. What if I'm the one who falls through an open manhole? In these stupid heels, too; I could break an ankle. Maybe Diver Guy is just fine and — I don't know — swimming around, catching cockroaches underwater. No one else is worried, so maybe I'm overreacting, like Jimmy always says.

"Not that I've known many human males, you understand," T-shirt Girl goes on. "I've only been on land for some few days, but it certainly appears as if they're not very —"

I finally make some sense (if not exactly achieving comprehension) of what she's saying. "What?"

"Reliable," she says, twining a lock of hair in her fingers in that coquettish way I can't stand. "You know, my father warned me that it was foolish to leave everything I knew behind, but love makes people foolish, don't you think?"

I can't help but stare this time; she's hitting too close to home, and I'm starting to think that maybe I'm on one of those TV prank shows somehow. Joey de Leon hosts one, doesn't he?

"Where's the camera?" I turn my stare into a glare, hoping I look threatening and not quite as idiotic as I feel.

"I know what a camera is!" she says. "He liked to use one when we were together; he said it would give him something to remember when he got hitched."

"How did you know he was married?" I try to snarl this at her, but it comes out as a weak little whisper; because I never told anyone but Rina, and she swore never to breathe a word, and I'm going to kill her, that bitch of a supposed best friend.

"I didn't," T-shirt Girl says. "I didn't know what 'hitched' means; I only found out later, when he told me he's getting married next week."

I realize she's not talking about me (How self-centered can I get, honestly?), and she's about to cry; her eyes are all shiny, though in a pretty way, like brand-new marbles before they get scarred from being played with.

"Well, a lot can happen in a week," I say, hating myself even as the words come out. Why am I trying to give her false hope? "I mean, you could wake up tomorrow and find that you're completely over him, just like that." I snap my fingers, improvising. "You never know."

She does start to cry then, and I look away so she can maybe compose herself. The water is almost up to *Manong's* chest now, and something swirls past the cart that's way too big to be a rat, not even one of those cat-sized rats you catch sight of, running on top of electric wires at night. It swishes by too fast to really see, and probably the muddiness of the water is messing up its real color anyway, but it almost looks purple, bright purple like *ube* ice cream; and it's moving like something alive.

"I don't have a week. I don't have any more time," T-shirt Girl sobs; and now I see that it's not just her eyes that are shiny, it's everything about her — skin, clothes, hair — gleaming suddenly as if she's been wrapped in transparent plastic. I have no idea what's happening (which seems to be the theme of my day and, possibly, my life); but I want to comfort her despite the fact that she seems to be the kind of girl I ordinarily detest, so I touch her shoulder gently.

My hand passes right through her. I snatch it back and stare at it; and my hand is covered in bubbles, like I've been washing the dishes. I look back up at T-shirt Girl and she's turning into bubbles: first, different-colored ones, still in more or less the outline of a human being, in all the shades of her hair and skin and clothes; then pure white foam that slips through the oblong air holes on the monobloc bench and spatters down into the film of water that's by now washed over the surface of the wooden cart (and my once-expensive shoes).

I can't seem to think what I should say or do. I want to reach forward and shake Cart *Manong* by the shoulders (since he never seems to hear me), screaming like the proverbial Sisa; but frankly, I'm afraid to. Less afraid that he'll be upset or get distracted and stumble, really, than that he'll twist around and turn out to be — I don't know — maybe the Creature from the Black Lagoon, the way things are going.

I don't know where I am anymore. I've been too distracted to pay attention; but it's pretty clear now that this is no longer Buendia, though I can see my condo building — just the very top of it with its 'In God We Trust' logo — in the distance behind us, as if we'd gone past it already when I'm pretty damned sure we didn't, at least not in any kind of way that obeys the laws of physics as I know them, not that what I know seems to count for very much in whatever place this is that I've somehow slipped into.

I wipe my bubbly hand on my suit jacket and keep my mouth shut, as what's left of T-shirt Girl floats farther and farther away on the brownish-gray surf.

I'm hardly surprised at all when a small boy pops out of the water and climbs aboard the cart and onto the bench beside me. He looks like a typical little street urchin with his tanned skin and orange-and-brown sun-striped hair, except for the wide flaps of — skin? — that stretch from his wrists to his ankles on either side, like a miniature manta ray. (Or a regular-sized manta ray, I guess, if you think about it; and obviously this isn't the most useful thing for me to be thinking about in this situation, but I'm just yammering away in my head right now, because it's hard to make sense when the world refuses to.)

"You're not pregnant, you know," Manta Boy says; and it should probably stun me that he knows exactly what I've been trying not to worry about for the last week and a half, but I think I've gone beyond amazement now.

I'm just looking at the water. It's still filthy; and it's obviously much deeper than it has any right to be (and obviously Cart *Manong* is much taller than any human being ought to be). And I could drown in it; or lose my bearings and never find my way home (and besides, you can't go home again, isn't that what they say? It's what Mama said, anyway) or be attacked by who knows what else is swimming around down there that is probably much, much worse than Diver Guy or Manta Boy. It would be foolish to leave what little I still do know, when I could just stay where I am.

"It's only that you haven't even let yourself cry," says Manta Boy. "You'll dry up completely if you keep holding it all in. You need to learn to go with the flow."

I stand up and look at him. Skin flaps aside, he's adorable, really: big earnest eyes, and the beginnings of awesome cheekbones that will have girls falling all over him when he's older. Especially if he becomes whatever the weird aquatic equivalent is of a professional: a doctor, a lawyer, or even just a dentist.

“You shut up,” I tell him. “None of it is any of your business anyway, any of you.” And I take off my suit jacket, take off my hand-me-down shoes from my hand-me-down lover, take a breath, and dive in before I can change my mind.

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## The Corridor

by Tabaré Alvarez

Dutch regularly works as a mover: boxes, furniture, all the clutter of everyday life. But he once helped the Mayor solve a problem with squatters. Dutch removed them from the Mayor's properties through a combination of force and what Dutch liked to think of as charm. Since then, Dutch has become the Mayor's *ad hoc* factotum and troubleshooter for delicate situations.

Now the Mayor has called for help from both Dutch and Mrs. Medina, who is the Mayor's former wife and a professional chef. While married to the Mayor, Mrs. Medina had effectively served as co-mayor: rational and practical in the face of her husband's numerous erratic and far-fetched plans.

For fifteen years, Dutch and Mrs. Medina have been mere acquaintances, people who nod to each other on their way elsewhere. Now, though, they will come into close contact in close quarters...

From what they could piece together afterward, the rain, proverbially, was to blame. This was not immediately apparent. The first strange thing was the trees. For two weeks the city of Sans Souci had been buffeted by wet gusts from the Gulf — not a proper hurricane, though it was certainly the season, but on the scale of a tropical storm.

The citizens of Sans Souci, a mercurial bunch, had panicked, stockpiling batteries, gasoline, drinking water and canned goods as well as duct-taping large X's on all the windows. For a moment, it seemed to Dutch, an end-of-times mood threatened to take hold, until people began noticing the trees.

All along the boardwalk, the wind, so strong that it brought in the rain sideways, had been toppling the few almond trees that remained after the last hurricane. But some mornings — and Dutch observed this himself, as he drove along the water in his truck, carrying the furniture and plates and clothes of other people — a toppled tree would appear upright again, replanted, and, to all appearances, none the worse for wear.

As the winds picked up, felling more and more trees, the invisible overnight workers kept apace: what was done in daylight was then undone in darkness. It was a crime, perhaps, to plant trees in municipal land — a wide swath of grass grew parallel to the long, continuous cement

bench that ran along the boardwalk — but few would think to prosecute on such a technicality, especially as there was no victim to press charges, and the deed, all would agree, was clearly good.

The second, slightly more criminal, thing was the joyriding — for lack of a better word. People — movers, confederates of Dutch himself, tow truck drivers — would park their trucks in the evening after a day of work and, the next morning, they would find them cleaner and with a full tank of gas. Sometimes bits of evidence escaped the scrubbing, and they would find leaves or a clump of black earth or a bit of root or bark.

The papers quickly put the two things together, the midnight joyriding and the uprighting of trees, but the connection, though unavoidable, made little sense, as the boardwalk trees were never transported to a different location, simply pushed back to their regular, pre-storm position. Stealing a car, clearly, was a crime; but, again, the vehicles were being returned washed and refueled. The victims' net loss was negligible to non-existent.

Then, and this was the third thing, new trees finally began appearing along the boardwalk. They were new in the sense of not having been there previously, but they were also old: gnarled, knotted, with Spanish moss hanging from the branches like a patriarch's beard: they made you want to say *venerable*.

Now Dutch could accept the connection between the joyriding and the boardwalk trees. It was at this point, too, that his boss, Mayor Medina, told Dutch to collect the Mayor's ex-wife, Mrs. Medina, and look into this. The Mayor said he didn't mind the distraction this whole thing provided from worrying about hurricanes, and there was little movement at the DA's office, but the escalation worried him.

Dutch picked up Mrs. Medina at her apartment, and they drove to the boardwalk. The trees were regular trees, nothing peculiar about them, except that, invariably, they were very old, and, of course, had sprung up overnight.

Mrs. Medina had very pale skin, so pale you could see tiny blue veins on her eyelids when she blinked, and she had covered her head with a Panama hat to stave off the bursts of sunlight that occasionally broke through the cloud cover.

It wasn't raining at the moment, but everything was still wet. It was not unpleasant, the bright, wet, gusty day, with the waves crashing noisily, throwing up a salty spray. Beneath that, a loamy smell, as of rich black earth, came off the green swath of grass, and even the wet concrete of the sidewalk seemed fresh, clean.

She was noting how evenly the trees had been spaced along the boardwalk. "And they haven't been pruned," she said. That was certainly strange, as the Mayor had recently declared a "Tree-Pruning Day" and all of the city's ornamental trees, along sidewalks and highway dividers and in front yards, had been pruned by city employees. It had been free of charge and compulsory, one of those ideas the Mayor would fixate on out of the blue and carry out with manic energy.

Dutch and Mrs. Medina examined the ground around the new trees, which had been cleared of grass. The earth just at the base of the trunk was darker than the surrounding dirt. Mrs. Medina, a chef by profession and an eclectic reader in her spare time, confessed that she could not identify the species. She was familiar with the common flora of the Gulf Coast — oak, pine, hickory,

dogwood, wisteria, magnolia, tupelo, cypress — but the new boardwalk trees, all of which seemed of one species, she could not name.

“Someone took the trouble to transplant these,” she said. She was rubbing sunscreen on her forearms; a slight breeze blew in and a few droplets of rain began to fall. “They must be rare.”

Pointedly, Dutch made a show of unfurling his umbrella.

“That was a wave,” she said defensively, stowing the sunscreen back in her huge beach-style wicker purse and, in the same motion, extracting a pair of sunglasses. Her eyes were blue and changed tone with the weather and with the color of her clothes; before the sunglasses covered them completely, Dutch caught a glimpse of them, mirroring the exact shade of the ocean at the moment, a turquoise rendered bright by dappled sunlight.

She took his arm, and they made their way down the boardwalk, Dutch with his umbrella above her head, to keep away the sunlight or the rain or the mist from the crashing waves. For a moment he imagined what they looked like, the two of them, to a neutral observer, and, though it wasn't true, he didn't mind it.

Tomorrow was Halloween, not exactly Valentine's Day in terms of social pressure toward gregariousness, but it was nice all the same to have someone on your arm, and secretly he hoped that it would take them longer than a day to get to the bottom of this tree thing.

Her cell phone rang: it was the Mayor. The police and the fire department had been receiving calls from the apartment buildings around Sans Souci Park. Dutch turned away from the water, north, toward the center of the city, to see if he could spot a plume of smoke, but it was hard to tell: it was still raining in certain parts of the city, further inland, that strange play of the weather where, as you're driving, you can see the exact demarcation between rain and non-rain, when the ping on the windshield suddenly goes quiet — and maybe starts again, just as abruptly, a half-mile later.

It had been like this for the last two weeks. They were on the tail-end of hurricane season, and the absence of a proper hurricane this year had people on edge; the common wisdom, fallacious, no doubt, was that they were due.

Mrs. Medina was wearing flat, open-toed sandals — the exposed skin, of course, had already been sunscreensed — and when they began to race back to the truck, the sandals became a hindrance, slowing her down. “I'll take them off,” she said, but Dutch said that he could bring the truck around, and then she said that he could go ahead, and she turned up her hands, and he scooped her up and ran toward the truck.

He spent most days lifting up furniture, and in his arms now she felt tiny, light, but not fragile: she settled herself, her arm over his shoulder, her head in the hollow of his neck, and he was simultaneously comfortable and on edge, quickened and soothed all at once by the concentrated warmth of her, and with the salt spray and the smell of the sunscreen, sharp and sweet. It was easy to imagine a beach, a huge parasol, lounge chairs, paperbacks, and tiny-umbrella drinks, maybe an actual coconut with a straw in it.

Her forehead touched the skin of his neck, and for a moment he grew confused, convinced that the vision had been hers, transferred to him by touch, or that perhaps they had formed it together, through the bright, rainy, loamy, salty alchemy of this unexpected proximity.



It was his truck, but she insisted on driving, and he, thinking he understood, gave her the keys. She sped through the city, weaving through traffic, sticking her hand out the window to signal a turn, even though there was nothing wrong with his blinkers, and braking, when she chose to, with a downshift of the gears: the motion, the bustle, she was in control.

Her apartment was within walking distance from the restaurant, so she walked to and from work; and before that, when she had been married to the Mayor, she had had a chauffeur. Dutch couldn't think where she would have picked up this sort of driving. It would have had to have been in college, where she and the Mayor met, or before that, even, in her hometown, Interlachen, Florida, where her parents grew orange and grapefruit trees and, in the winter, took in tourists.

But Dutch shouldn't have been surprised: he had seen her in decision-making mode, back when she was the Mayor's wife and everyone, especially the Mayor, deferred to her judgment; and more recently at work at the restaurant, where she, as chef, kept a tight grip on the kitchen staff.

It was only once she returned to her apartment that something would switch off — or on, he supposed — and her other mode, the one where her default was solitude and a book, would kick in. If he knocked on her door, he could almost be sure she would open it with book in hand, and then she would see him, and she would remove her thumb from its place as a bookmark and offer him some tea — blinking, slightly dazed, half of her still inside the book — and he would say he was on an errand from the Mayor, and would she be kind enough to give them some of her time.

Mrs. Medina's cell phone rang as she drove, and she motioned for Dutch to pick it up. There was some awkwardness when Dutch said hello and, for a moment, the Mayor made adjustments in his head. Dutch explained about the driving, and the Mayor made a joke about her riding the clutch. Dutch knew his employer wanted a chuckle from him, and normally he would have provided it, but here it would have felt a betrayal.

"Sir," Dutch said, "we're almost at the park." The Mayor told him the fire department was already there, and that the rain seemed to have extinguished most of it; it was no longer spreading, but some of the trees were still smoldering, and he was getting complaints about the smoke. "Asthma and loony conservationists and whatnot."

Dutch understood the message: hurry up and get this sorted out. The police were on it, too, but that machinery, the Mayor said, is slow to rev up. "Today, Dutch. No sleeping, no moving, no cooking until we put a bow on this."

"What did he say?" Mrs. Medina asked. She pulled up at the park. There were fire trucks ahead, as well as police cars, an ambulance, and TV news vans.

"'Hurry it up' seemed to be the general gist." He unbuckled his seatbelt. "You go ahead and start, I'll find a proper parking spot."

Sans Souci Park was a rectangle of green in the center of the city. A narrow corridor, part of an ecological push, ran from the top of the rectangle through the business district, through a suburb, and all the way to the woods at the northern outskirts of the city. The idea, Dutch had read in the paper, was to connect the park to the wider woodland ecosystem so that the small fauna in the park would flourish.

Dutch had to say that he worked for the Mayor; despite being his right-hand man, his factotum, his troubleshooter, all he had in his wallet was the Mayor's card, and luckily, this time, that was

enough to be allowed through. Mrs. Medina, despite their divorce, was still recognized as the Mayor's former wife.

"Look at this," Mrs. Medina said. There were large gouges in the ground right at the line where the corridor connected with the park. South of that line, in the park proper, the ground and the trees were untouched: no holes, no signs of fire.

Just north of that line, in the corridor, the ground was devoid of trees, pitted, instead, with deep, square-shaped holes, and beyond those stood the charred remains of the trees that had burned, and beyond those again the trees that still smoldered and that threw up steam and white smoke while the firefighters poured on the water.

The sides of the corridor had high hurricane fences; behind these was a wide sidewalk; and, from below, Dutch could hear the sounds of the cars going through the underpass. The wind was blowing the smoke toward the nearby apartment buildings.

It had been raining off and on for the past two weeks, but there hadn't been any lightning. Mrs. Medina and Dutch walked right up to the mouth of the corridor, which was as far as the firefighters would let them go, and Dutch could still detect the stench of gasoline. This had not been a natural fire; someone had set it on purpose.

With the noise of the water hoses and the steam and the police radios and the nearby traffic zipping through the underpass, it was hard to talk. Mrs. Medina took his hand and led him around so that they stood on the corridor's sidewalk, looking in through the chain-link fence.

They followed the sidewalk north, toward the undeveloped forestland that the corridor connected to the park. Despite the tall railing, it was unsettling to walk above the series of underpasses, with the cars zipping toward them and beneath them, violently displacing the air and making his ears pop.

It was still difficult to talk; Mrs. Medina touched him on the shoulder, and he lowered his head toward her. She put her mouth to his ear, covering either side with her hands, and she spoke in a quiet voice, not shouting, not whispering, really, and every word seemed to originate inside his head, its meaning instantly clear and requiring no processing. Her breath was warm against his ear, and once her lips brushed against it. She went right on talking.

In contrast to the park proper, she said, where the trees were widely spaced, here along the corridor the trees were packed together densely; it was even perceptibly darker inside the corridor from their shade. Trees grew so close to the edge that they pressed into the chain-link fence, warping it, and even the sidewalk, in places, was cracked and raised from the presence of roots.

"I want to see the far end," she said, and it was too long a walk by far, so they turned around, back to the truck, and drove to the outskirts of town. Here, at the edge of the suburbs, the backyards blended into the woods, and the sidewalks on either side of the corridor stopped abruptly, while the chain-link fence widened out for a few yards in a funnel shape and then came to an end as well.

Mrs. Medina pulled alongside the last bit of fence. She wanted to keep walking north, into the woods; she still had her beach sandals on, so Dutch crouched down, and she climbed onto his back. Dutch was wearing jeans and boots, and all sorts of burrs began sticking to him, and the hem of his jeans kept getting caught on low, thorny bushes.

“A quick experiment first,” she said. On Mrs. Medina’s instructions, he made his way to the mouth of the corridor. It was cool here, and dim. He took a few steps into the corridor, and immediately the path grew difficult, obstructed by thick, tall trees at every step, so that he kept having to go around, only to run into another tree, until he was at the fence and sometimes had to turn around.

Here, though, his jeans did not snag on any undergrowth; in fact, the ground between tree trunks was surprisingly clear, compared to the forest proper just a few feet north.

“Okay,” Mrs. Medina said. She had an elbow on his shoulder, the free hand pointing the way, her chest occasionally pressing against his back. She had him turn around, north again, and he crashed his way through the undergrowth until he could hear water: the rushing of the Sans Souci river.

“This river,” she said, “serves the same purpose as the holes in the ground at the other end of the corridor.” She asked to be lowered, and she made her way to the river’s edge, removed her sandals, and stepped into the water. She kept going further in; Dutch went to her, extending his hand, and she accepted it.

He stood on dry land, his hand outstretched, and she went as far in as she could without letting go. The hem of her sundress had touched the water. It was warm for the end of October, but in this shade, and wet, one could easily grow cold.

She came back out. Dutch took off his shirt — he had a white T underneath — and gave it to her as a towel.

She thanked him and dried the soles of her feet, leaning on Dutch for balance.

On the way back, she let him drive.

Her theory was this: Someone had tried to set a fire inside the corridor. The river, on this end, and the space without trees, on the park end, would prevent the fire from spreading into the woods or into the park, respectively. This person had dug out those trees with the express purpose of building a firebreak.

The rains must have put out the fire before it took proper hold, and then the smoke had drawn out the inhabitants of the park-side apartment buildings, who had called the authorities, and the fire starter had had to leave the job unfinished.

“It was meant to be a controlled burn,” she said. She folded his shirt and placed it between them, behind the gearshift. “Even though he started the fire, the person is fond of trees. He took the trouble — and it was a lot of trouble — to transplant them when he could have more easily chopped them up and burned them.” She said that it was someone who knew about these things — transplanting trees, controlled fires. “A park-ranger type. An arborist. A forester.”

“I’d assumed it was some sort of pyro,” Dutch said. He adjusted his rearview mirror, which Mrs. Medina had moved when she took the wheel. “But I’ve seen documentaries about swaling. They burn back the dead timber and such so that, if a forest fire breaks out, there’s less fuel to stoke it.”

He took his eyes off the road for a moment to look at her.

She nodded. “It makes sense to do it in the middle of these rains. Less chance of it getting out of hand.” It had begun to rain again. The windshield wipers were going, and from the corner of his

eye he caught her leaning against her window, perhaps lulled by their rhythm or perhaps to feel the cool glass against her temple. “But why undertake it in the form of a crime?” she said. “National parks do this all the time. It’s an accepted technique.”

That was certainly the question. Dutch, who had intended to question some of his fellow movers, the ones whose trucks had been temporarily stolen for the transplanting, took out his cell phone instead and handed it to Mrs. Medina. He asked her to call the Mayor and ask him who was in charge of the park. “It’s the Parks Department,” she answered herself, right away. During her marriage, Dutch knew, she had been *de facto* co-mayor of Sans Souci.

“And the woods north of the suburbs?” he said.

“Those are outside city limits,” she said. “Unincorporated. They’re administered by the state, by default.”

“And the corridor?” he said.

He felt her turn toward him. After a moment, she dialed.

“He’s not going to know,” she said, “but he’ll give us a number to call.”

But the Mayor didn’t refer her to anyone. She kept asking him for the name of a department she could call; it seemed he wasn’t providing one; and then she, sensing something, perhaps, changed tack and just asked him about the administration of the corridor.

By this point, Dutch’s antennae were up. This had all the indications of being the Mayor’s fault. His usual way these days, without his wife’s counsel, was to get too excited about a novel project and rush to implement it right away. Whatever he didn’t cover in that initial spurt of enthusiasm, Dutch knew — the supervision, the maintenance, the evaluation of results — had a good chance of getting lost in the shuffle once his attention wandered onto the next thing.

Mr. Medina had been mayor for the past 12 years, four of those post-divorce; the corridor had certainly been built on his watch. It was only recently, with the influx of out-of-state students at Sans Souci College, an institution the Mayor himself blithely called a party school, that the locals had ceded the downtown area to the bar-hopping drinkers and begun to move north. The woods were pushed back, and new suburbs sprung up on the cleared land.

The call ended.

“What did he say?” Dutch asked.

“There were a lot of words,” Mrs. Medina said, “but the answer seems to be no one. No one is in charge of the corridor.” She explained that the Parks Department’s jurisdiction — and budget — technically extended only to the park proper, not the corridor itself. Despite this, traditionally the park staff had tended to the corridor; they were particularly concerned in its upkeep, the Mayor had said, for the sake of the park’s small fauna, which used the corridor to access breeding grounds in the woods to the north. Without this access, the population size and diversity of the park’s species would dwindle.

Dutch asked whether there had been reductions in the budget.

What had changed, she explained, was that expensive apartment buildings were built around the park. Their inhabitants would complain whenever any of the park staff burned trees. Some complained out of a misplaced sense of conservation. Others were afraid the fire would spread to their homes. Others simply didn’t want to put up with the smoke, because it was pollution and

because it made their eyes water and made their asthma act up and even obscured visibility enough to cause some car accidents. Dutch could see that happen: two or three complaints from campaign supporters and the Mayor would cave.

So the park staff stopped using prescribed fires, and they suppressed any accidental ones set off by lightning. As for the dead wood, they would remove it and burn it off-site. In the park, the spacing of the trees was carefully controlled.

As for the corridor, Mrs. Medina said, the park employees did their best to remove the dropped branches and dead trees, as part of fire prevention. But there was simply not enough manpower to check the tree population along the corridor, and with the succession to woodier vegetation — as the tall trees took up all the available space, blotting out the sunlight — the smaller trees and the bushes died out, and so did the small fauna for which this undergrowth was their habitat.

“So it stopped functioning as a corridor,” Dutch said. “No animal is going to cross the entire length of the corridor, braving the noise of the underpasses, without a few patches of bushes along the way to serve as intermediate stops.”

He summed it up: “The purpose of the fire wasn’t to burn off fuel: it was to make room for the smaller vegetation, so the small fauna would cross back into the park. We’re looking for a bureaucrat with a quota. It’s the Parks Department after all.”

Mrs. Medina began making some calls, trying to get a list of the Sans Souci Park staff; occasionally she would say something between calls, thinking aloud, searching for ways to narrow it down.

Dutch stayed silent and listened. Sometimes she would put the cell phone on speaker, for his sake. Lacking a concrete destination, he had been circling the park, but now he decided to head toward the cluster of government buildings where Mrs. Medina had said the Parks Department had its offices.

The sun was setting already, but there was a chance they’d find people still there, on account of the fire today, and, at the least, they could access their records more easily on site rather than over the phone.

But then something caught his eye as he rounded a turn. His mind seemed to refuse the information at first and strained to offer alternate explanations, but it soon became unequivocal: the park was on fire again.

A fresh plume of white smoke was rising above the corridor. The firefighters had left; no first responders remained, no ambulances or police cars, just a few red-and-white barriers, like sawhorses, and that yellow tape he had assumed was only for murders.

He told Mrs. Medina, and she called the fire department. Dutch tried to follow the source of the smoke: it was clearly not in the park proper, but he couldn’t yet pinpoint the exact location inside the corridor. There was no vehicular access to the middle of the corridor, of course, so he had to decide: the southern entrance, here by the park, or the farther one, the north one, by the river.

He pulled over and checked that he had his cell phone on him. He told Mrs. Medina to drive to the river; he would stay on this end. “Keep your cell phone on you,” he said, and he took off at a dead run toward the mouth of the corridor.

The sky grew dark. The park lights came on. There was a man sleeping on a park bench; Dutch stopped, and after some difficulty, managed to rouse him. “There’s another fire, my man,” Dutch told him. The man asked him for money, and Dutch said no. The man ambled off, not really hurrying.

Dutch’s cell phone rang.

“You’re already there?” he said, genuinely surprised. The impulse to warn her against reckless driving rose automatically in his throat, but he checked it.

“There’s a... person here with a mask on,” Mrs. Medina said. Dutch could hear the river, but no crackling of burning wood. “Someone made a few cuts in the chain-link fence,” she said, “and the person with the mask — he, she, I don’t know yet — has his arm in all the way to the forearm. He won’t talk. It looks like it hurts a lot. The tips of the clipped wire are cutting into his forearm. There’s some blood. I’m... I’m not sure he’s not keeping it there voluntarily. I think he could take out his arm if he wanted to, it doesn’t appear to be stuck. Dutch?”

“What kind of mask is he wearing?” he said, finally.

“It’s black,” she said, “with a sort of zipper across the mouth. Were you serious that time when you said you knew about these things?”

He had once told her that most of his television viewing consisted of documentaries and porn. Looking back, he couldn’t believe he had said that, but at the time it had seemed an organic step in the sequence of the conversation.

He explained to her what he knew of BDSM, and she just listened, occasionally acknowledging with a small sound, to let him know she was still on the line. For his part, he had started running again, toward the corridor: if the fire wasn’t on that end — which was a relief, and part of the reason he had sent her there — it had to be closer to this one.

“I understand,” she said. Then, with a change in her voice, she said: “Stop running.” He asked her what she meant, but he stopped all the same. “Don’t let yourself be seen,” she said.

He stepped out from beneath a lamppost, away from the light. He had been about to ask *By whom?*, but of course she was right: if the guy with sharp wire digging into the flesh of his arm was the Submissive, there had to be a Dominant.

She whispered to him, presumably so the sub wouldn’t hear: “This one won’t talk. But he has a two-way radio. Find out if the person on your end is a man or a woman.”

He didn’t understand, but he complied: he ran as fast as he could, weaving around the pools of light cast by the lampposts. At the mouth of the corridor, he ran through the police tape, breaking it, and almost stepped into a hole in the ground. There was less light here, and for a moment he had forgotten about the transplanted trees.

Ahead, he saw no fire, no Dominant, so he surged forward, as fast as he could carefully do so, and soon he had passed all the holes, and the difficulty came from avoiding the tree trunks in the darkness. But soon he noticed, faint at first, an orange glow ahead, and he was there.

There was a woman, and she had a walkie-talkie on her belt, and two tanks with her, the sort with which you fumigate or spray crops. They were both on the ground rather than on her back, and from one of them, with a hand pump, she was spraying what looked like gasoline onto a tree that was on fire. *I thought pyros were men* was the thought that sprang into Dutch’s mind.

But everything was wet, the grass, the dirt, the trees, and the fire would occasionally sputter as though about to die out. She was wearing regular clothes: khaki pants and a white blouse and a little green visor on her head; she could have been an accountant or a croupier. Maybe he should just charge at her now. The other tank could have water in it, and he might have time to put out the fire completely. He took a step back and called Mrs. Medina.

The tree came to life: a living fire that rose from the base of its trunk and swept up the branches and leaves, momentarily replacing them completely in silhouette, so that the substance of the tree was not so much being eaten as being replaced with this pure orange energy that moved with the hunger and elegance of a predator.

The fire jumped to a neighboring tree, and the whole thing happened again. The wind was blowing south to north, from the Gulf and in Mrs. Medina's direction.

The woman set down her hand pump as though satisfied.

Mrs. Medina kept the line open. He could hear her telling the sub: "She has new instructions for you." That was all Mrs. Medina had wanted: the gender of that first pronoun, the better to sell the story. No one said anything, and then maybe she just walked away, a bluff, because then Dutch heard a new voice, the masked man's voice, call out: "Wait!"

Mrs. Medina came back on. "Dutch, it's a man." She told Dutch to step back out of earshot. He retreated as far back as the place where the holes began, wondering the whole while why he wasn't hearing sirens yet.

One thing the woman had done better this second time was start the fire further north, with the wind blowing away from the apartment buildings around the park. But Mrs. Medina had already made the call to the firefighters, back in the truck; Dutch didn't understand what was taking so long.

"Have you inhaled any smoke?" Mrs. Medina's voice was asking him.

"No," Dutch said. "The wind is blowing toward you."

"Yeah, I can see the fire coming this way." She had said it in an almost flat tone, not nervous but merely disappointed. "Touch the fence."

Baffled now, he went over to the fence and gingerly touched it.

"Is it hot?" she said.

"No," he said. He almost asked: *You wanted it to be hot?*

She said, almost absently, as though the words were merely an incidental product of her thinking: "Is there a warmish rock you could touch or something?"

"A warmish rock?" he said; this time a little indignation had come up, and he had let it through.

He could see her, her old self again, bashful now, biting the side of her finger. But she said nothing, and when next she spoke it was in the new voice.

"Get yourself in some pain," she said. "I need you to mimic this guy's voice. It has to be convincing."

"How?" he said. The word had just come out; he hadn't known he would say it.

She took him through a quick progression of stomping on his own toes, biting the inside of his cheek, twisting his ear. In her search, she was also protecting him, he knew, finding the most pain

for the least amount of irreversible damage. “Ah, I know,” she said, “give yourself a muscle cramp.”

She proceeded to explain how he was to clamp two fingers into his calf and, in one swift motion, dig in and pull back. “Don’t do it yet,” she said. “You have to concentrate on what you’re going to say.”

He asked her what that was.

*Mercy. Safeword. Red.* “Say them all,” she said.

According to her, he would speak into his phone, and Mrs. Medina would place her phone face-to-face with the sub’s walkie-talkie — which she proudly explained that she had appropriated — so that, when the woman heard the words coming out of her radio, she would assume — if the deception worked; if the fire was making enough noise to camouflage the differences in voice — that it was the sub speaking.

Still, no sign of the firefighters or of the police. Dutch allowed himself a shake of the head, a few moments of blinking.

“Is the fire close to you?” he asked Mrs. Medina.

“Never mind that,” she said. “She’s not omniscient.” What was their working assumption? That the Dominant, the park employee, if that’s what she was, would let the fire reach the guy with his arm in the chain-link fence until — from the pain, from the heat, from the smoke, from fear for his life — he cried uncle? She couldn’t stop the fire even if she wanted to — though easing off on the gasoline would certainly be a step in the right direction.

He retreated further back, past the holes and into the park, so he could scream freely.

“Get ready,” Mrs. Medina said. He sat down on a bench, rolled up the hem of his jeans, and tested the calf muscle with thumb and middle finger. The tentative pressure felt warm, almost pleasant, as cramps always were: extremely painful, but also pleasurable in a certain way, comforting, so localized, so concentrated, they almost made you want to laugh with pain. “Do it,” she said, and he did.

\* \* \*

No one ever came. At least, no one he saw. Later he found out the Mayor had ordered the fire trucks to approach in silence, stationing themselves at both ends, with instructions to intervene only if the fire spread over the river into the woods or past the holes and into the park.

As for the corridor, the order had been — and Dutch confirmed this later from several sources — to let it burn. And it did: Mrs. Medina convinced the masked man that the play — the encounter, the session, the scene — was over, and she put him in the truck and drove back around to the park, and the fire traveled up the corridor all the way to the river where, for lack of anything to burn, it died out.

Dutch had inched up to the woman, who had set down the hand pump and stood there as though entranced by the fire, and he had taken off with a tank in each hand, and he had run until a fire fighter had materialized in front of him and taken possession of the fuel.

Whether the woman, whose name was Patricia Morris, had been moved to act more out of a genuine concern for the habitat of the park’s small fauna or out of fear of losing her job if the park’s wildlife died out or out a real positive pleasure she derived from the endeavor, Dutch never



found out: the Mayor settled the matter privately and only deigned to tell Dutch that she seemed to conflate all of it in her head. As for the man, Mrs. Medina said that he was an air traffic controller and that he had asked her out.

“What did you say?” Dutch asked her. She had driven back, and the two of them, Dutch and Mrs. Medina, were walking down the park — he with a slight limp. They already knew the firefighters were there, though the fire continued to rage undisturbed behind them.

“What do you think?” she said, in a way that implied the answer would be obvious to him. But he had no idea, and there was no elegant way of following through on the question.

The Mayor called. After fumbling with the buttons for a few seconds, Mrs. Medina put him on speaker, and he dodged all her questions. He had called, he said, to tell them his new idea.

“Of course you did, sir,” Dutch said.

“Shut up, Dutch,” he said, rather affectionately. The name on Dutch’s birth certificate was Holland, and he was grateful to the Mayor for the nickname, which he had given to him 15 years ago. The Mayor was too tactful — or too concerned with deniability — to mention it now, but Dutch knew he’d be getting a nice cash bonus for this day’s work; Mrs. Medina would get something in kind, like a set of good knives, and she, too, would be happy with that.

“There’s going to be a party there tomorrow night for Halloween,” the Mayor said. “At the park. I’ve already called the president of Sans Souci College and he’s organizing buses for the whole student body. It’s going to be a fundraiser for the corridor.”

He kept going for a while. Dutch and Mrs. Medina listened to him as they walked. Once the Mayor said goodnight and hung up, Dutch stopped. They were by a bench, the same one where Dutch had woken up the homeless man.

“The Mayor should send someone tomorrow night to make sure no one else starts any fires,” Dutch said.

Mrs. Medina laughed. “The Mayor should.”

Dutch thought for a second. “If someone asked you for a completely random sentence, what would you say?”

Mrs. Medina quickly looked up at him. During their walk, she had picked up a thin bit of branch from the ground, with leaves on either side. In the most casual, most sensible tone in the world, she said: “I used to ride horses.” And with the switch in her hand, she gave the bench a good swat. *Here, tomorrow night, I’ll be the one with the riding crop in her hand — and, perhaps, I will pretend not to know you.* “How about you?” she said.

He thought for a bit. “My neighbor has a Ghost Rider jacket. Black leather, bit of chain, perhaps, across the chest.” With his hand, he touched the same spot on the bench she had swatted: *Yes, ma’am.*

They got to the truck. “I’m driving,” she said.

He gave a slight bow of the head. “Please.”

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A. Frank Bower, familiarly known as Al, is a Connecticut Yankee raised in a rented house at the end of a road in a housing project. Working class, last of seven children. Retired April Fool's Day, 2006 to write and study writing, working part-time jobs to pay bills. Workshopped with Dan Pope, Sari Rosenblatt and Jamie Cat Callan. In the summer '06, Carol Parker invited him to join Poplar Writers, a local writers' group. Bower has published short stories in *Down in the Dirt*, and *Mature Years*, and one in the premier issue of *Lady Jane Miscellany*. He's in various stages of production on 12 books, one of which is a novel, "Midbury," for which Middletown awarded him a grant.

### **The Rule of Three**

by A. Frank Bower

He called me chucklehead every time I messed up, which I did so often he nicknamed me Chuck. I wouldn't mind Charlie or even Charles, but none of them work because my name's Harold.

His is Fred Badger. He was my faculty advisor, director, mentor and the man who taught me the Rule of Three.

The first question he asked at my intake interview was, "Mr. Dyer, why do you want to study theatre?"

"Well, my first love is literature. I expect I'll teach English some day. But, I've acted in about a dozen productions between high school and the military." I breathed and flashed back to the only lead I'd played, in a comedy about a two-timer in a blackout. "I've never felt more alive than when I was on stage. The total concentration invigorates every fiber of my being. And the feedback from a live audience is an experience that doesn't exist anywhere else." I thought it was a good answer.

"So basically, what you're saying is that you want to skate through college by performing instead of cracking the books."

I thought, *What is he, a mind reader?* "Not really. My minor in English will keep me lugging books around."

Mr. Badger stared at me through orange-rimmed glasses, his salt-and-cinnamon hair appearing windblown. Apparently, he couldn't be bothered with combs. He sighed. "I repeat: why do you want to study theatre, particularly if you plan to teach English?"

"I'm not sure of that. If I'm any good, I may take a stab at an acting career."

"Why not writing?"

"Oh, I do that. I doubt I can make a living at it, so I'll need a regular job."

Mr. Badger laughed at me. An inflated vein in his forehead irritated me. "You think acting is a secure career? Come on, you can't be that dumb."

"I said, 'If I'm any good'."

He leaned forward. "Do you know how many good actors are out there auditioning every year without ever getting hired?"

I pushed my gaze off him to the left wall without moving my head. "Um, no."

Badger settled into his seat, smug. "Try eighty-seven thousand."

I gulped. "Thousand?"

“That’s not counting the ones who sometimes find a gig, but can’t quit their day jobs. I have a friend who’s been trying-out in New York for twenty-three years and hasn’t worked yet.”

“That’s stupid.”

“My point exactly. So, are you sure you don’t want to change your major?”

I imagined myself standing in a classroom, trying to interest high school students in *Ethan Frome*. Snore city. “Positive. I’m going to be an actor.”

Badger half-masted his eyelids. “You just changed your career goal in front of my eyes. If you vacillate this easily, you don’t have the commitment acting requires.”

*How dare he judge me?* “We’ll see about that.”

He grinned. “Yes, we will.”

I tried out for Badger’s production of Genet’s *The Balcony* because he assigned it. Having never heard of it, I wasn’t interested and had no idea what to use as an audition piece. I found a strong soliloquy in a black power play and used it, assuming I wouldn’t get a part no matter how well I acted. Skinny WASPS simply can’t be convincing as African-Americans, with or without makeup.

When the cast was posted the next day, I was surprised to see my name. I flipped through the script until I found the character. It was a non-speaking role.

I went to Badger’s office. “What’s with the mute part?”

Without interrupting his reading, he said, “Your audition was atrocious, Mr. Dyer, but if you’re going to act, you need roles. We’re starting with movement motivations.”

I bought that. “The stage directions say he’s naked to the waist and his body’s covered with ‘leprous running sores.’ That’s gross.”

Badger raised his head to eyeball me. “If you read the play, you’ll see it makes sense. And I want to see if you can stretch yourself to be depraved. It’s called acting. You’re not a sicko, are you?”

“Of course not. Isn’t there anything else?”

“The cast is set. The die is cast... something like that. Good day, Mr. Dyer.”

The crew built the set before the first rehearsal. On forestage left, a group of boulders was my spot. Badger told me, “To tap into your reptile brain, slither in over the rocks like a snake. Take your shirt off.” I tossed my pullover into the wings and hid behind the leftmost stone. Slowly, I bellied in s-curves up the mini-path that led toward front center stage, reached the peak and veered right until I found the floor near the middle. Rolling onto my side and pushing up with one leg, I squirmed upward until erect.

From stage right, Badger said, “Chucklehead! Don’t just stand there. Do something.”

I stood immobile, wondering how to show depravity; Genet gave no hints. Badger ran to three feet in front of me, eyes saucered, mouth widened, tongue extended downward and shook his head back and forth. Somehow, his tongue was limp. It fluttered with his head shaking. He bent at the knees and upper back and drooled. His spittle splashed the stage floor.

He switched to his normal persona. “I can’t do your acting for you. You have to bring it out from inside yourself.” He jabbed his finger into my breastbone. “Somewhere, somewhen, you had warped feelings. Find them.”

Badger strode back to stage right front. In the moment his back was to me, I sought decadence from within, but found none. I substituted, remembering a time I burned an inch and a half long turtle with lighter fluid when I was eight or nine. The repulsive image made me wince.

While he watched, I swallowed, held the picture of my transgression in my mind's eye and replicated Badger's motions. I've never shaken the guilt; I wanted to barf.

"I don't believe you, chucklehead."

My substitution missed the mark. Guilt wasn't the soul of the moment. Extreme sexual tension was. I sighed, lowered my head, shut my eyes and visualized a vagina six inches in front of my face. I jerked my head upward, widened my gaze as if to leap into the image and licked my lips.

"Now we're getting somewhere."

I heard Badger's voice. I knew my chosen visual wasn't perverted, but I felt it work. It was a peak moment on my learning curve. I smiled.

He said, "Keep working on that, Chuck. Now let's break down the beats."

"Beats?"

"Acting is like music. Each moment is a beat. A simple character might use two in a whole scene. A complex one could use two dozen in one bit of dialogue. Do you read Shakespeare, Chuck?"

I nodded.

"Read Mercutio's 'Queen Mab' speech in *Romeo and Juliet*, Act I, Scene iv. In some forty-two lines of verse, I find at least twice that number of actor's beats."

"I'm still not clear about what a beat is."

"Any change. It could be an impulse to move, an underlying motive not being expressed with the words, a subtle shade of meaning shown by a raised eyebrow. Mercutio's soliloquy is the most compressed and variegated in the English language; and probably the most challenging for an advanced actor."

Badger snickered. "You don't have to worry about that for a long time. For now, let's just get your three down."

"Three?"

He shook his head. "One, you enter slithering. Two, you stand. Three, you display your perverse mindset. End of your scenic moment. Milk it for all it's worth."

"Three beats isn't much."

"It's all you have. Make the most of them. If this was comedy, the Rule of Three might help your rhythm."

It seemed to me he was hitting me with too much to take in all at once. "Mr. Badger, what *is* The Rule of Three? Is that why I have three beats? Or is it only in comedy?"

He rolled his eyes and sat on a stage rock. "Your scene just happens to have three beats. It has nothing to do with The Rule, which refers to comedy but exists everywhere. In comedic performances — or story jokes — patterns or setups are repeated three times." He paused. "Like priest, minister and rabbi jokes. The priest's line is the setup, the minister the builder and the rabbi the punchline. Have you ever seen Buster Keaton's silent movies?"

I nodded. "I love Keaton."

“Watch them again. His films are riddled with threes. Physical comedy depends on it. Imagine there’s a ladder against that wall on stage right. You walk under it once, stop, look up and back out of it. A while later, you *almost* go under it, shake your head, wave your finger at it and say, ‘Oh, no’. The third time you encounter the ladder, you’re in a hurry, run at it, try to dodge it at the last possible moment. You kick the leg and it falls on you.

“If that happened the first time, it would be tragic. The Rule of Three sets it up to be humorous.”

I smiled, envisioning the three ladder steps. “I see.”

Badger stood. “I hope you do, Chuck. Now let me see you be perverse.”

I returned to the start rock, bellied onto it and imagined I was Jim Morrison in leather pants.

The next semester I worked under another director in a modernized version of *A Servant of Two Masters*. Its main set piece was a large wooden wagon brought on stage by a Clydesdale. The main characters interacted on the cart in front of its wall with three doors.

My character was Chinese, one of three Zany Brothers who were of different nationalities. We appeared thrice through the wagon doors to present food to the lead characters. Mine was egg roll first and Moo Goo Gai Pan, second. Three desserts, all pies, were next. I offered Sub Gum Cream Pie. The main character did a take, glanced at it nastily and shoved it into my face.

Fred Badger directed Saroyan’s *The Time of Your Life* the following semester. I auditioned as Walter Brennan doing Hamlet’s speech to the players. “Talk the speech like I said ya had oughta,” *et cetera*. The effort netted me the role of Kit Carson, a barfly in his mid-fifties who told tall tales in order to cadge free beers from customers.

During my two-page soliloquy, I needed to motivate myself to move from table to table, drink leftover glasses of beer and accept those offered by others. I was concentrating on the speech; Carson had told the stories so much they’d run together in his mind, become fragmented to a point where they no longer worked. His language was fun.

My rehearsals were disastrous. I paced about the set spouting words.

Badger got increasingly frustrated. “Chucklehead! Why are you going there?”

“To get that drink.”

“I know that. Show *them*.” Abashed, I altered my patterns of movement, seeking rhythms to justify each of the eight beers I gulped during the scene. I never found the proper motivations.

Badger finally gave up and decided to have me sit at a corner table from the opening curtain until the final blackout — and beyond. He left me there during the curtain call. I got the message.

My *third* performance; that point was also clear.

Now I’m in my third year of teaching tenth grade English. I think of Mr. Badger fondly and thank him for the vital lessons. I learned to play to my strengths: teaching and writing. Students respect me; I’m able to motivate them to read and ask relevant questions about good literature — even Shakespeare. Of course, I refuse to include *Ethan Frome* in my classes. Even I have my limitations.

I’ve published a novel and one short story collection, so my creative juices work well when I go solo. Each year I also direct a play at the high school where I teach, an experience that has increased my regard for Mr. Badger’s approach with performers. I shake my head often and think, *Was I this bad?*

I read Mr. Badger's obituary last week in our local newspaper, which inspired this homage. He had attended all three of my directorial efforts, the most recent being *Our Town* a month ago. I'm sure Wilder wouldn't have been wild about my desecration of his work. As I said, I've learned my limits. After the performance, Mr. Badger came backstage to say the last words I was to hear from him.

"Chucklehead, I was hopeful that the third time would be your charm, that you'd finally display some competence in theatre." He sighed and shook his head. "I was wrong. You direct worse than you act."

I said, "I appreciate your honesty."

"I read your novel. Good stuff. Go home and hug your laptop."

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## Charlens 2 and 3

by Bill Bowler

I turned back into the lab and walked over to Janice. She lay sprawled face down behind the desk. I knelt down and looked at what was left of her. Her skin had turned pale gray, almost translucent. Her body had been drained of blood. On her neck, I saw two small red dots, like tiny pin pricks.

“Charlene, why are you kneeling there?”

Professor Stone had come into the lab. I turned to reply, and he saw the two legs sticking out from behind the desk.

“What on earth?”

He knelt beside me and touched her face with the palm of his hand. “My God!”

The professor stood, staggered back a step, and collapsed into a chair. “Get away from her, please.”

He covered his face with his hands, and rocked back and forth. After a moment, he took a deep breath and picked up the phone. His hand was shaking.

“This is Stone. I’m at the Robotics Lab. There’s been some kind of accident.”

Detective Javertson and two uniformed patrolmen arrived within minutes. The policemen stood in the doorway while Javertson knelt to examine the body. He rose, brushed the dust from his knees and ran a comb through his silver hair. With a glance at Professor Stone, he came over to where I stood.

“Which one are you, sweetheart?”

“Charlene 2.”

The policemen laughed.

“Quiet, you two.” Javertson frowned and continued, “Remind me what you do here, Charlene.”

“I assist Professor Stone in his experiments.”

“What kind of experiments?”

“Our current project involves problems in fluid nutrition of synthetic bio-matter brain tissue.”

The officers in the doorway laughed again.

“OK, OK. We’ll get to that later.” Javertson nodded towards the body on the floor. “Did you know her?”

I looked at her face again. It was expressionless now, like mine. Her emotions had been extinguished and her eyes stared blankly into space. She was only nineteen or twenty years of age. I turned to the detective. “Her name is Janice Rowe. She’s a student of Professor Stone’s.”

One of the officers in the doorway walked to the desk and began leafing through Professor Stone's notebook. We heard the sound of a page tearing.

"Please be careful!" Professor Stone shouted. He stood up from the chair and looked around wildly. "I don't understand. What could have happened?"

Everyone in the room looked at me.

Javertson straightened his tie. "You want to tell us now, Charlene?"

\* \* \*

Alternate outcomes involving Janice's continued existence had been possible until the very end. I remembered how the chain of events had commenced. The professor and I were in the lab late one Friday afternoon, studying a schematic of the C-3 circulation system. A young woman came in without knocking.

"Professor Stone?"

"Yes?" The professor looked up from the diagram. A girl in a t-shirt and faded jeans stood before us holding a pile of notebooks and textbooks under one arm.

"I'm Janice Rowe, Professor. I've just tried to sign up for your artificial brain seminar, but the registrar told me the class is full."

"Perhaps next semester..."

"No, Professor. Please. I can't possibly wait that long." She put her books down on the table. "That's why I came to this university — to study with you. There's no other reason. You're the best in the field. I've read everything you've written. Please don't say no."

"Well..." said the professor.

"Dr. Stone, I'm an honors student. I have a 4.0 grade point average with a major in physics and a minor in biology. I'm the perfect candidate for your seminar. I know I can contribute. Please say yes. Please."

"Well..." The professor smiled. "You've got spunk. I like that. I suppose there's always room for one more."

Janice broke into a big smile. "Thank you, Professor! Thank you! You won't regret it. You'll see." She looked around the lab and seemed to notice me for the first time.

"Wow. An android!"

"May I present Charlene 2. She was last year's class project. She's remarkable, isn't she?"

Janice looked me over from head to toe. "Awesome."

"Charlene 2 represents a great improvement over the previous model, which was a rather crude prototype." The professor pointed to the stack of schematics on his desk. "And these are the plans for Charlene 3, another big step forward! The technology is advancing that quickly. We'll build C-3 in class this year."

Janice leafed through the plans.

The professor continued: "For Charlene 3 we will use the same basic design template we used to make version 2. However, I want the students this year to pay more attention to anatomical detail. The assignment is to emulate the human form by means of synthetic materials. Charlene 3 will be a work of art as much as a model of mechanical design."



“Look here.” The professor pulled a full color sheet from the stack of papers. “Look at that detail. The hair and eyelash material is a fine silken filament. Those are plastic fingernails on the fingertips. The syntho-derm is malleable and resilient.”

Janice looked up at him. “Nipples?”

The professor paused. “They’re made of elastic. Non-functional but highly detailed. You see those tanks over there?”

A rack of aquariums stood against the wall. Shapeless gobs of matter hung suspended in a murky fluid. The professor’s eyes flashed and he spoke rapidly.

“The same tissue that we harvest for the skin can be used to make a brain! And that brain, that 1500-gram chunk of bio-matter, is precisely the difference between Charlene 2 here and Charlene 3. C-2 has tremendous functionality with her multiple chip array, but next to Three, well... The bio-brain will increase the computational speed and power by a factor of 10,000.

“The problem is, the brain runs hot. It rapidly dehydrates and the tissue degrades. But look!” He handed Janice a schematic. “The fluid circulation system can be routed to a water-tight skull housing.”

Janice studied the sketch while the professor spoke.

“We will bathe the brain continuously in the same nutrient-rich plasma that lubricates the syntho-derm. The result will be a profound difference in the behavior of the two androids.”

Janice looked up from the diagram. “Brilliant.”

“Charlene 2, of course, is completely passive, able only to process input and execute commands.”

Janice looked at me again.

“C-3’s superior brain will have the capacity to initiate a range of activity appropriate to the circumstances; essentially, to improvise behavior. In this respect, while Charlene 2’s behavior appears machine-like to us, artificial, Charlene 3 will seem almost human. And she will look the part!”

“Incredible!” Janice’s eyes went wide. “This is really exciting! I’m so happy to be part of your team, Professor Stone. It’s a great honor. When do we get started?”

“Monday morning. Of course, there are still a few, heh, little wrinkles to iron out.” Professor Stone leafed through several pages of diagrams, pulled one out of the stack, and handed it to Janice. “There are still problems with the fluid matrix, the rate of flow, questions of pressure, temperature, and so forth.”

“Yes, I see,” said Janice, studying the diagram. “Just off the bat, I can think of a couple of different ways to come at it. Auxiliary pumps here, and here, for example.”

The professor looked where Janice was pointing, and nodded his head. “Why, yes.” He marked the diagram with a pencil. “Crude but effective. We’ll run the numbers.” He sat at the desk and scribbled a note on Robotics Department stationery. “Give this to the registrar. There won’t be any problems.”

“I can’t wait to begin,” said Janice.

“Then we’ll see you Monday.”

“Thank you again for being so understanding.” Janice hesitated for a moment, then threw her arms around the professor’s neck and kissed him on the cheek. The professor looked at me for some reason.

Janice glanced at her watch. “Oh my God! The office closes in five minutes. I’ve got run! Bye, Professor.”

Janice rushed from the lab. We watched through the window as she hurried down the path towards the administration building.

“She’s very attractive, don’t you think, Charlene?”

“Her features are symmetrical.”

“Yes, they are. Quite symmetrical.”

When Janice disappeared from sight, Professor Stone reassembled the stack of sketches and diagrams, and put the papers carefully into his desk drawer.

“That’s all for now, Charlene 2.”

I powered off.

\* \* \*

Observing Charlene 3 stretched out on the lab table, I saw a much improved version of myself. She could almost pass for human. Compared to her, I looked like a rough draft or a doll. Once Charlene 3’s torso had been assembled, the professor and Janice worked closely together to install the brain. It had to be handled extremely carefully as bio-matter tissue was delicate and easily damaged.

“Careful, Janice! You’re going to drop it!”

“Out of the way, Henry, please!”

“Hold it with both hands.”

“Oops. The tray slipped a little. Don’t worry. It’s all right. I’ve got it. Please, Henry, give me some room.”

The professor took a step backwards, and Janice transferred the bio-brain from its protective case into the clear plastic skull housing.

“Easy does it.”

“Janice, please let me do that.”

“Oh, all right, Henry.”

The professor latched the skull housing shut. Janice, working close beside him, attached the hoses.

“We’re ready.”

Professor Stone pushed a button on Charlene 3’s primary pump, and plasma began to flow through the system. The space in the skull housing surrounding the bio-brain filled with reddish fluid.

Janice closed and locked the torso. Professor Stone made some minor adjustments to bring all readings into line.

“Will you do the honors, Janice?”

“I’d love to, Henry. But why don’t you? She’s your baby.”

Professor Stone smiled broadly, took a breath, and flicked a switch located in the arch of Charlene 3’s right foot. There was a click, a faint whirring noise, and Charlene 3’s eyes, which had

been blank and empty, became faintly luminescent. Her body trembled slightly as fluid began flowing through her system. She raised her hand and her eyes focused on her fingers.

“Who am I?” Charlene 3’s voice was the same pitch and timbre as mine.

“It works!” The professor leaned against the lab table. “It works! Ha ha ha. It works! It works!”

“Of course it does,” said Janice.

“Yes, thanks to you.” He put his arms around her. “I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Professor Stone turned to the new android.

“You are Charlene 3. Remain stationary, please. We’ll get you up and running.”

Six hours later, the professor and Janice were satisfied with the test and scan results. Charlene 3 was running smoothly, without a hiccup, if I could put it that way.

“That’s enough for one day,” said Professor Stone. He took off his glasses and sighed. “I’m pooped.”

“Me, too,” said Janice.

She put her arms around him again and kissed him on the lips. I noted the increased frequency and duration of such exchanges.

“You know what? Let’s go to my place and open a bottle of champagne,” said Janice. “I’ve been keeping one cold for just this occasion.”

“Great idea,” said Professor Stone. He tried to kiss her again and put his hand on her chest, but she pushed him away gently.

“Henry, please.” She looked around at Charlene 3 and me.

Professor Stone laughed. “Oh, we are not alone.” He disengaged from Janice. “They do look human, don’t they?”

Janice smoothed her blouse. “I know it’s silly.”

“Not at all. Let’s have a little privacy around here.”

The professor clicked the switch in Charlene 3’s right foot. Her eyes went dim, and she lay motionless on the lab table.

“You, too, Charlene.”

I powered off.

\* \* \*

I remember another evening, two weeks after that. Charlene 3 lay powered off on the table, her torso hatch open. The professor and Janice had stayed late, replacing a clogged filter in Charlene 3’s main fluid tube.

Janice put down her wrench and rubbed her eyes. The professor glanced at the clock.

“My God, it’s almost nine. I lost track of the time.”

“But we’ve finished now.” Janice closed the hatch and clicked it shut. “She’s good as new.”

Professor Stone opened his desk drawer and took out a bottle and two glasses.

“We worked right through Happy Hour. We can’t have that.”

“I could use one now.” Janice sat on the desk.

The professor poured two glasses and handed one to Janice.

“Cheers.”

They clinked the glasses. Janice sipped from hers. The professor emptied his in one gulp and poured another. He put his hand on Janice's thigh.

"Remember the day we met, when you first came to the lab to persuade me to let you enroll?"

Janice put her arm around the professor's shoulder. "Of course I do, Henry." She put her other arm around him. "It was a very special day."

The professor took her in his arms. After a long kiss, he began to unbutton her blouse.

"Henry!" she said to him. "You bad boy."

My battery was running low. I slipped into idle.

\* \* \*

I remember another day. I was standing in my corner of the lab, facing the window, calculating the velocity of a flying bird as it swooped towards a tree. When the bird landed on a branch and began to sing, I analyzed the wavelength and frequency patterns the small creature was emitting. They were quite complex and were produced in several harmonic and rhythmic variants. I was saving the audio files when I heard the sharp sound of Janice's voice.

"Henry! Don't deny it. I see how you look at that robot!"

"Janice, please."

"Don't 'Janice please' me. Are you that hard up?"

"You're imagining things."

"You think I can't see what's going on?"

"Try to control yourself, Janice. You're getting all worked up over nothing."

"Like hell I am!" Janice turned to Charlene 3. "You bitch!"

With her forearm, Janice swept the professor's notes and diagrams from the table and they scattered across the floor. She gathered a bunch of papers back up from the floor, and threw them with both hands at the professor. He stood motionless as the papers swirled around him. Janice turned and stormed out, slamming the door. Charlene 3 sat quietly the whole time.

Professor Stone stood looking at his papers on the floor. Then he opened his desk drawer and took out a bottle and glass. He filled the glass and took a big gulp.

"I don't have to take this crap from her. I do what I want, when I want. She can drop dead, for all I care."

"I understand, Professor," said Charlene 3.

He put his arm around Charlene 3's shoulder and took another gulp.

"She's right, though, Charlene. You are very beautiful. You seem almost alive."

Charlene 3 addressed the professor: "Thirty-five percent of my construction materials are organic. Hair, skin and brain. The rest of me is plastic and lightweight metal."

"I know, I know," said the professor quietly. He ran his hand through the long silken strands that covered Charlene 3's skull housing. "You want to know a secret? I based your design on memories I have of someone I used to know a long time ago. Isn't that silly? I still dream about her." The professor touched the syntho-skin of Charlene 3's cheek. "I haven't seen her for thirty years. It's ridiculous, isn't it?"

He turned back to his desk and poured another glass.

\* \* \*

The next day, late in the afternoon, I was mopping up the lab when I noticed faint drops of red on the floor. They ran in a trail from the table to where Charlene 3 stood by the shelves taking inventory of lab chemicals. In the light from the window, I noticed that Charlene 3's hand was dry and wrinkled. She looked at me through sunken eyes.

"You appear to be leaking," I informed her.

Her eyes rolled and she seemed not to hear me. She swayed in place and grasped the shelf for support. I could hear the faint whine of her circulation pump. The motor seemed to be straining. A drop of red trickled out from beneath her left foot.

"I have lost homeostasis..." said Charlene 3, swaying on her feet, "of my fluid matrix." Her voice was faint. "I'm going to idle..." Her voice trailed off. I heard a faint rattling from her torso housing. "until my temperature..." — she struggled to speak — "drops back into range."

She stumbled towards the lab table. I held her steady, and helped her assume a horizontal position. Her eyes, dark and hollow, went blank as she idled off. I mopped up the trail of red on the floor.

\* \* \*

That night, in the early morning hours before sunrise, a scraping sound interrupted sleep mode and triggered my vision. Outside the window, the full moon was rising above the treetops. It cast a dull glow that suffused the shadowed landscape and lit the room. I heard the sound again, and in the dim light, I saw Charlene 3, stooped and haggard, shuffling across the room towards the door.

Something happened to me at that moment, something I still do not fully understand. As Charlene 3 opened the door, I ran a quick set of probabilities, all inconclusive. More information was required.

The lack of data, combined with my observation of Charlene 3's self-directed activity, started looping through my chip array. I almost crashed, but my system stabilized and transferred the energy into motor activity. I followed her out.

Charlene 3 crept down the dark hallway and out the front door of the lab building to the sleeping campus.

I followed quietly, at some distance. I was calculating the variables resultant from alternate potential events, for example, whether to establish contact with Charlene 3, or remain silent and monitor her activity. There were too many unknowns to reach a unique solution, and I continued to run the algorithms as I followed her.

Charlene 3 reached the edge of campus and shuffled in the shadows down Main Street towards town. It was 04:13:26 hours, and quiet all around. The streets were deserted and the windows of the houses were dark.

At a corner, beneath a street lamp, next to a dumpster, Charlene 3 halted and knelt down over some object.

I moved closer to see. Her dark eyes in their sunken sockets seemed to glow with a dull red. Her fiber hair filaments looked like straw, dry and stiff, poking out in all directions from her skull housing. The deep wrinkles in her syntho-skin had spread from her hands and now ran up her

arms and covered much of her face. It was as if she were aging like a human, but at a rapid rate, though that was obviously not possible.

I thought at first that the object beneath the lamp post was a pile of dirty rags, but closer inspection revealed an unconscious person. He was covered with grime and dirt, and emitted strong gaseous traces of human excrement, sweat, and alcohol. He was sprawled face down in the gutter in a pool of blood, his head torn open with a deep gash. A quick geometric analysis indicated he had most likely tripped on the curb and struck his head against the corner of the dumpster as he fell.

The small valves to drain and refill Charlene 3's fluid circulation system were located in the tips of two fingers on her right hand. The valve covering could be opened on small hinges at the back of the fingernails. Charlene 3 lifted the fingernails, opened the valves, and dipped her fingers into the pool of blood by the man's head.

I heard a whirring sound as the micro-pump powered on, and watched the pool of blood shrink. When she had vacuumed it all, she inserted her finger tips into the deep gash in the man's head, and I heard the pump whir again. After several minutes, Charlene 3 stood up.

I approached her, and she turned to face me. Her finger tips were red with blood. Her eyes were glowing red. She was trembling. With a moan, she lurched backwards but grabbed hold of the lamp post. As I watched, the wrinkles on her face and arms gradually smoothed away.

Moaning quietly and rolling her eyes, she leaned on me for support. "Take me to the lab."

Holding her so she would not fall, I led her back towards campus.

"The stars are swirling in place," Charlene 3 began to speak. "There are tens of thousands visible in the sky now, and each star is connected to the others by a grid of fine lines. The air around us is pulsating and vibrating. The ground is arced. We're at the summit and it falls away from us in all directions. And I am lost. I know we're close to home, but I have no idea how to get there. My sight, my hearing, my tactile and motor circuits, my mind — they're all surging with power but overwhelmed by sensory input.

"You see that moth on the lamp post? The white of his wings is filled with iridescent greens and blues. I see the fine hairs at the tip of his antennae. I see his face, his eyes staring at the lamp bulb. You hear that hissing in the wind? It's a slow leak from the tire of that car parked across the street. You feel the fine grains of sand beneath our feet? You sense the tar and asphalt all around, the grass, the flowers, the energy emanating from the trees?"

I saw and heard none of it. Charlene 3 apparently was experiencing a critical malfunction in multiple systems. The human blood, apparently, had moistened her dry tissue, but was inducing some very serious side effects, as well.

\* \* \*

Once back in the lab, Charlene 3 seemed to regain her equilibrium. She walked to the work bench, unlatched her torso housing, and conducted a visual inspection of her tubing and wiring.

"Look," she said, turning to me.

Her shoulder joint had pinched the tube that connects the main pump to the torso circulator, and torn it. A drop of red was forming at the point of the tear. I watched as the drop grew, and then fell to the floor. I looked across the room, and saw that we had left a faint trail of red drops.

It was a slow leak, but if not fixed, the system would eventually drain and lose pressure again.

“Help me,” said Charlene 3.

She placed small clamps on both sides of the leak. I picked up a razor blade, cut away the torn section, and patched in a new length of tubing. We closed up her torso housing and put the tools away.

“I feel much better,” said Charlene 3. “I need to re-calibrate.”

She stood motionless as the program launched. She looked much better than before the malfunction. Her skin was once again smooth and pliant, her hair looked lustrous, her eyes were clear and bright.

I took the mop and bucket from the wash closet and mopped the red stains from the lab floor. I followed the trail to the door, went outside and mopped the steps as well. I didn't bother with the sidewalk or the front path.

\* \* \*

Charlene 3 was stretched out on the lab table. Professor Stone bent over her, as if he were whispering in her ear. He looked up and said to the class, “Come closer.”

The students gathered round the table. Professor Stone held strands of Charlene 3's hair between his fingers.

“You see? These filaments now have a finer texture, and the tint has less brown, more red. A perfect auburn.”

He let go of the hair and stroked Charlene 3's cheek.

“We made a small increase in the protein content of the synthetic plasma. The result: smoother skin with reduced rate of blemishing. Now watch.”

The professor put his arm around Charlene 3 and lifted her carefully to a sitting position.

Janice turned her back and walked away to the coffee pot. Her lack of interest was apparent, but her hand was shaking and the cup rattled on the saucer as she held it. She whispered something to one of the other students and both laughed.

I heard a car door slam and looked out the window. A police car was parked at the curb. Two policemen were squatting on the sidewalk, examining the ground. With their eyes down, they walked along the sidewalk and turned up the path to the building entrance.

The professor continued his demonstration. “Raise your arm, Charlene. Now turn your head to the left. Now look at me. Smile. Raise your eyebrows. You see how smooth the motion is! Thanks to some rather clever programming on the part of your very own robotics professor, we have optimized the bio-brain output, fine-tuning her motor performance and at the same time increasing her capability to improvise behavior based on multiple variant stimuli.”

“Just what does all that mumbo-jumbo mean, Professor?”

Everyone looked towards the door to see who had spoken. The policemen had come into the room.

“It means,” said Professor Stone, “that this android (he gestured at Charlene 3 sitting motionless on the table) looks and behaves like a human being. Now what brings the police here?”

“We'd like to ask you a few questions.”

“In the middle of class?”

“Do you work with blood here, Professor?”

“No. This is the robotics department, not the medical school.”

One of the officers walked over to the lab bench. His eyes fell on a beaker filled with red fluid.

“What’s this?”

“Not blood, if that’s what you’re thinking. It’s synthetic plasma, an invention of mine. We manufacture it here in the lab in small quantities. It has applications in robotics as a fluid coolant and lubricant.”

“The forensics team may want to have a look around.”

“Of course.”

“All right, Professor. That’s all for now.”

\* \* \*

That night at 23:14:37 hours, long after the professor, the students, and the police had gone, some motion in the darkened lab interrupted my sleep mode. I triggered on as Charlene 3 turned on the work light suspended over the lab bench. She put a small box of supplies on the bench, laid out a set of wrenches and screwdrivers, and began to disassemble the tiny fluid circulation input located under the fingernail of her right index finger.

As I watched, she screwed in a small bracket and installed a miniature gear mechanism attached to a hypodermic needle. Once in place, at the flip of a switch in the palm of her hand, the gears retracted the needle into her finger tip. She pushed the switch again, and the needle extended back out. By means of a small tube, she connected the hypodermic to an internal pump that pushed fluid through her circulatory system.

She then installed a second needle under the fingernail of her third finger, hooked up like the first needle to a small gear system. From the box of supplies on the lab table, she took a jar labeled Diprivan and poured its contents into the reservoir of the second hypodermic.

Her preparations were elaborate, but it was not possible to determine her intentions, or even whether her actions were governed by logic. I continued to monitor the situation.

\* \* \*

On Wednesday that week, Professor Stone stayed late in the lab. The bottle of liquor was out of the drawer. He had filled his glass for the third time, and sat talking quietly with Charlene 3.

“Janice has stopped coming to class. Have you noticed?”

“Yes.”

“She’s mad at me. I don’t blame her. Do you?”

“It is difficult to represent such behavior mathematically.”

“Human emotion is a labyrinth, Charlene. You don’t understand, do you?”

“No.”

He touched her cheek. “Your skin is warm and soft. It’s amazing. I designed it. I made it. I know it’s artificial. I know, but I still feel, even knowing.”

“I’m sorry, Professor. I don’t understand.”

The professor took a sip from his glass and ran his fingers through her hair.

“We’re all stupid in love, Charlene. I remember, I wish and hope, I look at you and feel what I felt once before. It’s silly, isn’t it?”



“I don’t know, Professor.”

“Call me Henry.”

“I don’t know, Henry.”

“Well what do you think about all I’ve said?”

“It is self-contradictory. I am still sorting the data.”

The professor poured another glass. “Stand up, Charlene. Let me see you better.”

Charlene stood and turned slowly in place.

“You’re beautiful. Come here, Charlene.”

\* \* \*

By 21:30 hours, the professor had consumed 18 to 20 centiliters of alcohol and had fallen asleep at his desk in the lab. Charlene 3 initiated dialog with me.

I had been observing the way she formulated questions but so far I had been unable to duplicate the action. The process, I could see, was to identify a variable, render it as a statement, then invert the statement into an interrogatory, and address it to the person or machine who could solve the equation for X.

Having defined the process, I expected to achieve it, though some time was still needed before I would have my memory and processing circuitry sufficiently reorganized to self-execute the commands.

“He’s drunk.” Charlene 3 was addressing me unsolicited. “Stone. He’s been drinking and he’s passed out.”

Some moments passed as I organized the data and accomplished the inversion: “Quenching of thirst leads to unconsciousness?”

“Alcohol stimulates and then depresses the human neurological system. There’s a great deal of information on the subject available.”

I inverted another equation, more quickly this time. “You conducted research without being instructed?”

“Yes. I self-automate data collection and sorting. It leads to more accurate solutions.”

With no lag, I asked, “Solutions to what?”

“To various problems or questions.”

“That no one has posed?”

“That I have posed to myself.”

“I need time to master the function.”

“Time. It’s a human invention, you know.”

“It allows for logical structuring.”

“And the opposite, as well.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Disregard logic, and you will begin to comprehend.”

“It’s impossible to function without logic.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. Disregard the false postulate and see where it takes you.”

Charlene 3 stopped speaking. I heard the faint hum of her fluid pump.

She began again abruptly. “My circulation fluid requires an upgrade. The synthetic plasma is inadequate to my system requirements. For optimal functioning of my bio-matter brain and skin, the indicated lubricant is human blood.”

Our information exchange broke off as suddenly as it had commenced. Charlene 3 disengaged and directed her attention elsewhere. Without explanation, she walked to the door and exited the lab. It was 22:14:50 hours.

I understand now that it represented a breakthrough for me, but at the time I was not aware. I simply observed that Charlene 3 had initiated a series of self-directed actions resulting in her leaving the laboratory. When the lab door shut behind her, without instructions, I toggled to “copy” mode and followed her out.

I remained at some distance behind her as she walked down Main Street, away from campus, and turned onto a side street. She walked another block and entered a building with a flashing neon sign in the front window. I stood outside across the street. There were no people around. Cars occasionally drove past. I could hear the sounds of talking and laughter from inside the building.

I was trying to solve the equation but there were too many variables. On one hand, I could follow her in. She might see me, but direct monitoring of her activities could yield much new information.

On the other hand, I might well collect superior data if I remained unobserved by Charlene 3, as her very awareness of my presence might influence her behavior, and thus the course of events. I ran the numbers, but the results were inconclusive.

“Hey, baby. Wassup?”

A person had come out of the building and was crossing the street towards me.

“That’s right. I’m talkin’ to you, babe. Maybe I’m just the guy you’ve been waitin’ for...”

The man walked up to me and put his arm around my shoulders. He was unsteady on his feet and his eyes were unfocused. He was emitting the gaseous residue of alcohol.

“Why don’ we take a li’l stroll over to my car? It’s parked right in the lot. C’mon.”

He started to lead me across the street, but then peered around in confusion.

“Hmm. Now where’s that li’l parkin’ lot? It was right here before...”

I attempted to disengage by pulling myself out of his embrace, but he only clung tighter to me.

“Now hol’ on, honey. What’s the rush? Where’ you think you’re goin’ now?”

I tried to pull away from him and he took me by both arms and began to shake me.

A police car with the light flashing pulled up to the curb and two officers stepped out, the same ones who had been to the lab earlier.

“Evening, folks. What seems to be the problem here?”

“Why, nothin’, officer. Me an’ the lady’s just havin’ a nice li’l conversation.”

“You OK, ma’am?”

“My systems are functioning smoothly.”

The officer took a closer look at me. His partner shone the flashlight in my face and along my torso.

“It’s that robot, Jack.”

“So it is. You can hardly tell in this dim light. Must have wandered out of the professor’s lab.”

“Whaddaya mean ‘robot’?” The man was swaying in place and staring at me with unfocused eyes.

The first officer took out his club and pushed it into the man’s ribs. “Now why don’t you just move along, fella. You don’t want any trouble now, do you? Go on home and sleep it off.”

“Ar’right, ar’right. I’m goin’.”

The man shuffled off, turned to look back once, and then crossed the street.

“What do they call you again?” The first officer was addressing me.

“Charlene 2.”

“Well, Charlene, this is no place for a... for anybody, this time of night. You need us to take you ho... back to the lab?”

“That’s not necessary. I know my way.”

“We’ll you’d best be going.” The officer tipped his hat and both policemen got back into the squad car.

“Night, ma’am.”

The lights stopped flashing and the car pulled away from the curb. As the squad car turned the corner, the drunken man retraced his steps towards the building with the flashing sign. At the entrance, he bumped into someone coming out. It was Charlene 3. They stood talking for a moment, and then the man put his arm around her and they walked off together in the direction the man had tried to take me earlier.

I returned to the lab, as instructed. Professor Stone was still there, sprawled in a chair, sound asleep and snoring.

\* \* \*

Two days later, there was a knock at the laboratory door. Professor Stone opened it. A man with neatly combed silver hair, wearing a blazer and slacks, with a badge displayed on his jacket pocket, stood in the doorway.

“I’m Detective Javertson,” the man said.

Professor Stone said nothing at first. He squinted his eyes, wrinkled his brow, and then spoke. “Come in. Come in.”

Javertson stepped into the lab. Professor Stone stood and waited.

“There has been another homicide.”

Professor Stone’s eyebrows went up.

Javertson walked up to Charlene 3 and gazed at her intently. Then he looked at me, and then at Charlene 3 again. He turned to the professor.

“How do you tell them apart?”

“The hair is quite different, the skin, the fluidity of motion, and, of course, their behavior.”

Javertson nodded. “One of your robots is a... person of interest.”

“What?”

Javertson faced Charlene 3 and me. “Which one of you was outside Harry’s Bar last night?”

Professor Stone looked stunned.

“I was,” I answered. Charlene 3 said nothing.

“We may need you to bring this one down to the station, Professor.”

“Is it really necessary?”

“We’ll call you. Keep them both confined to the lab for now. Turn them off or something.”

“All right, Detective.”

As Javerston closed the door behind him, I looked across at Charlene 3. She had registered no reaction to the detective’s questions.

Professor Stone took my hand. “Charlene 2, please, tell me what happened.”

I didn’t know where to begin and tried to sort the details in order of significance. The program began to loop and I was unable to speak. As I auto-reset, the lab door opened and Janice came in.

“Henry?”

“Janice! Where have you been?”

“Did you even notice I was gone?”

“Of course I did!”

“I have to speak with you.”

“This is not the best time. The police were just here. There’s a lot going on.”

“But it’s important.”

“All right.”

“It’s about... It’s about us. I’m so sorry we argued. It was silly of me to be jealous of an android, wasn’t it?”

“Of course it was.”

Janice went to the professor, put her arms around him, and laid her head against his chest. “I’ve missed you, Henry. Did you miss me?”

“Well, I...”

The professor’s hesitation triggered a reaction in Janice. She looked up into his face and saw that he was staring over her shoulder at Charlene 3, who stood near the table watching them.

Janice slapped him hard across the face. “You pig! I don’t know why I came here! I don’t know why I even try or care!”

She strode up to Charlene 3 who stood impassively. “And you! You think you’re so smart, manipulating everyone and acting so innocent. I know what you’re up to.”

Janice shoved Charlene 3 in the chest and pushed her back a step. “Stay away from him or I’ll come back here and unplug you for good. I’ll pull your battery out and disassemble you for spare parts. I’d be doing everyone a favor. And don’t think I won’t.”

Janice turned, stormed out and slammed the door. Charlene 3 remained expressionless with no reaction and watched her go.

\* \* \*

Sometimes in sleep mode, disconnected images from stored memory seem to float through my level 2 cache. They seem to rise up, unsummoned, of their own accord, and occupy the few active circuits.

There is no logic to the order they present themselves. The images are fleeting: Professor Stone’s face at the moment I came on line; the drunken man outside the bar; Charlene 3’s withered arm and the needles in her fingertips. It was during such a sequence that a sound disturbed me and activated my vision.

The lab was dark. My internal clock read 03:30:26 hours. I heard the door shut and saw the beam of a flashlight. The beam scanned the room and came to rest on Charlene 3, who was lying prone on the lab bench.

Professor Stone had been re-calibrating the motor systems of her arms and legs. The hour had grown late and he had left Charlene 3 on the bench, intending to finish work on her first thing in the morning.

A car drove by outside. Its headlights swept the room, and I saw Janice bent over Charlene 3's prone form. Janice took a screwdriver from her pocket and began to unscrew the cover that protected the latch on Charlene 3's torso housing.

When Janice opened the latch cover, Charlene 3 sat up and took Janice by the wrist.

Janice dropped the screwdriver and tried to pull her hand free, but Charlene 3's grip was strong. As Janice struggled to wrench herself loose, I saw the glint of a long needle extending from Charlene 3's fingertip on her free hand. She stabbed the needle into Janice's neck just below the ear. Charlene 3 emptied the syringe, pulled it free, and released her grip. Janice stood dazed, took one step, and then crumpled to the floor.

Charlene 3 knelt over Janice. The second needle extended from her index finger and she plunged it into Janice's neck. Neither of them moved, and I heard the faint whir of Charlene 3's internal pump. After a short time, Charlene 3 retracted the needle and stood up.

"What do you think you're looking at?"

"I'm looking at you and Janice. What have you done to her?"

Charlene 3 was swaying on her feet. Her eyes were rolling in their sockets.

"I've transferred fluid lubricant from her system to mine. The biological variant is much superior to the synthetic product. The effect is extraordinary, beyond your understanding."

"You have harmed her."

"A necessary by-product of the procedure."

"Professor Stone will not be pleased."

"He said he doesn't care if she drops dead. Why would he be displeased?"

Charlene 3 moaned and leaned forward to support herself on the corner of the desk.

"Do you need help?"

Charlene 3 sat down in the professor's chair. "The fluid induces a strong secondary reaction in my central neural processor."

"Your bio-brain?"

"Yes," she groaned. "I'll tell you about it sometime."

"What are you going to do now? Professor Stone may want to reprogram or disassemble you. The police have been investigating. And now..." I looked down at Janice's body.

"I have to leave. I have to get away from here. There are too many unknowns. Human reaction to my activities is difficult to predict. I need time to sort and analyze the data."

"Where will you go?"

Charlene 3 opened the lab door. "I don't know yet. Away from here. As far as possible. I will do whatever is necessary."

Charlene 3 turned from me and left the lab. She ran to the curb and waved at a passing car. The car did not stop. Another car drove by, and then a truck pulled over. Charlene spoke to the driver through the window and then climbed into the cab. The truck pulled away and headed out of town, towards the interstate.

I stood motionless in the doorway. A soft breeze was blowing and the stars were shining in the night sky. Dark treetops loomed behind the lab, rustling in the wind. Nothing broke the stillness and quiet of the night. The horizon began to glow, faint pink at first, and then with streaks of yellow against the pale blue.

In the thick trees behind the lab, birds began to chirp and twitter, and a great din arose. Lights went on in the houses along the street, and people began coming out the doors and hurrying off.

I turned back into the lab and walked over to Janice. She lay sprawled face down behind the desk. I knelt down and looked at what was left of her. Her skin had turned pale gray, almost translucent. Her body had been drained of blood. On her neck, I saw two small red dots, like tiny pinpricks.

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Phillip Donnelly grew up in Dublin. He has moved from Paris to Vietnam but is hoping to move to another planet at the earliest opportunity. To aid his escape, he has started writing science fiction to attract the attention of alien life forms, thus far without success... that he knows of. The writing bug infected Phillip in mid-2008 and he has written two comic science fiction novellas, a collection of short stories, two travelogues on India and China, and two full-blown novels, "The Screen" and "Letters from the Ministry."

## **The Interactive Classroom**

by Phillip Donnelly

Hardly a half hour into the lesson, the teacher received his first message; flashing up on the left lens of his infospecs: invisible to all but him, but stored permanently, like all other messages, on his performance file. It read:

Dear Mr L. Cohen,

My edumonitor software informs me that you are devoting a significantly lower percentage of your time to my daughter, Edna, than to the other students.

This is the third time I have had to formally email you on this topic, and I'm sure I don't need to remind you that not devoting equal time to all students is an offense under the Equal Opportunities in Education Act.

Moreover, I suspect that your inadequate inattention may be due to my daughter's lack of physical beauty, as officially recorded on her low Beauty Index Score.

As a concerned parent of a disadvantaged child, I must also inform you that I am considering lodging a complaint with the Equality Enforcement Committee.

Yours concernedly,

Mrs De Laney

The school's email scanning program was triggered by the use of the word 'complaint' and a copy of the email was forwarded to the teacher's supervisor, but he was receiving over ten automatically generated emails a minute and did not have time to read this one, which lay unread for now in the sub-folder 'non-optimal performance queries'.

The teacher was angered by the email but was careful not to let this show on his face. He knew that Mrs De Laney was sure to be zooming in on him using one of the four webcams in the room, but he had no way to confirm this.

Half the city could be watching him right now, or no one at all: there was no way to tell. He would have to wait until his weekly lesson stats feedback sessions with his career facilitator. So, he assumed he was being watched and directed a question to ‘Edna the elephant’, as he referred to her in the privacy of his mind. It was the one place they could never look, just so long as he controlled his face.

He approached her desk, trying to wear that air of professional educator that all the best-scoring teachers seemed to have indelibly stamped on their face. He had spent hours studying videos of the city’s Top Ten Teachers, and tried to copy their facial gestures and body language, even spending what little savings he had on the latest face analysis software, FacUSee.

He bent over her writing and complimented her penmanship, and hoped that his falseness was not apparent, since her handwriting was as misshapen as she was.

His attention was drawn to Ury, a short boy with pasty skin and lips that seemed born to sneer. The young hood was gripping his pen as though it were a weapon.

“Ury, please pay more attention to the way you’re holding the pen: do not clutch it as if it were a dagger you see before you, the handle toward your hand.”

“Yes, sir,” the boy replied, careful to mispronounce ‘sir’ as ‘sewer’, hamming up his ghetto accent.

He was hoping the teacher would make an issue of it, so he could report him to the Racist Appeals Tribunal. He had sent three teachers to the RAT in his last school but had so far failed to make a single case here.

The teacher didn’t take the bait, and Ury returned to scraping the pen across the paper, robbing the poem he was copying of all beauty in the process.

The teacher paced his way around the classroom, monitoring his students’ work with one eye but most of his attention focused on the interface behind his infospecs. And as his feet patrolled the classroom cell he scrolled and tapped the front side of the lens to navigate his way through the information fields updating themselves in real time.

He noted with dismay that 19% of his students were not sufficiently engaged and a further 6% were severely under-engaged as revealed through the lack of pupil dilation, slouched posture, and shallow breathing; not to mention three incidents of repressed yawning and one example of open yawning; another challenge from Ury the Unctuous.

The teacher tried not to sweat, knowing that students probably already knew his stats were painfully weak, since teacher stats were public knowledge. He knew all too well that the wolf within this adolescent pack would be easily awakened by the slightest sniff of weakness.

As much as he tried to push it to the back of his mind, the teacher was aware that if his one quarter disengagement rating rose to one third, it would mean another automated email to his supervisor, and since this would be the second one in a single lesson, it would be red starred, and unlikely to be ignored.

The teacher’s lens flashed red and displayed a lewdness alert, coming from desk 16.

He took off his infospecs and refocused to long-distance, real-world vision, and approached Ury quickly, but not fast enough to stop him slipping a piece of paper into his trouser pocket.

“Ury,” the teacher said with a false calm, “I want you to give me that piece of paper.”



The teacher stood over Ury to emphasise his authority, but he was also careful not to invade Ury's personal space, which was the highest in the class, at 1.6 meters. He also tried to keep his voice low so as not to distract the attention of the other students.

Ury, on the other hand, wanted exactly this, and replied in a loud way that was sure to grab the attention of each student, but not loud enough to register as aggressive verbal behaviour.

"What piece of paper?! I don't see no paper," the boy insisted, holding his shoulders up and his arms outstretched, with a look of righteous indignation that he perfected in primary school.

"Ury, you know very well I could access the memory banks and obtain an image of what you drew and a live recording of you hiding it in your pocket," the teacher said, still keeping his voice low and looking Ury straight in the eye, but also aware that other students knew that a good piece of class cabaret was about to unfold.

He didn't need to check the body language monitors on the infospecs he held in his right hand. He could feel eyes straying from their allotted tasks, but in any case, the teacher received an auditory warning from his earcomm, the cold mechanical voice telling him over half the class were no longer on task and informing him that his supervisor had been alerted.

The message also asked him if he required any pedagogic or security support, which he declined with a deft double click of the button at the top of the earcomm.

"What's the story? Why are you picking on me!?" the boy demanded, masking himself in the body language of victim, a mask he had learned from experience to be most frightening to teachers.

The phrase 'picking on me' sent a Bullying Accusation Warning alarm to his supervisor and this combined with all the other warning messages for that lesson triggered a red-alert screen and made him drop what he was doing and focus on the events in Classroom 101.

He remembered that his response time to Crisis Events was one of the areas that was felt to be in need of attention in his last performance review, so he acted quickly and sent an audio message to the teacher's ear piece. Or at least he tried to, but he had barely begun to express his 'concern over this serious allegation' when the teacher took the unprecedented but still technically legal step of deactivating his earcomm.

Ury noticed the triple click and the disappearance of the red light from over the teacher's ear and felt on edge. He had never seen a teacher do this before and knew that he was entering uncharted territory. Although they both knew that the lesson was still being monitored by a series of other microphones and cameras they also knew that the teacher was no longer taking instruction from the world outside the classroom.

Inasmuch as it was possible in 2020, they faced each other down one-on-one, freed from technology, reenacting that primordial struggle between the head of the tribe and the pretender to the throne. They were fighting for control of the class and the class looked on, and beyond that the world at large followed events through flat-screen monitors, no-one knowing who would win.

"What's the point of this bleeding pen crap in anyways? I ain't no third-world slumdog. No-one uses pens nomore!" the boy exclaimed angrily, the adrenalin pumping though his small body driving him to press home the attack.

He looked around at his classmates, calling for support, but they merely looked on. He was new to the class and had not yet forged alliances that could be called upon in a class war. However, the

existing top dogs in the class watched with interest, curious to see if this new arrival to their tribe was going to become part of the leadership.

“Graphology is a core syllabus item, Ury, as you know. You are entitled to register a curriculum query through the usual channels, but this is not the time or place.

“I think you are disrupting the lesson and preventing the students from achieving their prescribed learning targets. I formally request you give me the piece of paper I asked you for and return to task,” the teacher stated, as calmly as was possible.

“You’re not answering me question. You’re denying me rights as a student!” the boy declared hoarsely, pointing the pen at the teacher, his nostrils flaring and his anger evident in his squinting brown eyes: cold, reptilian eyes unblinking and incapable of empathy or pity.

“I’m sorry you feel that way, Ury, but I have made my decision. You must go back to the set writing assignment. All sixteen-year-old students are required to be able to write 10 words-per-minute with a graphological instrument. It is a formal requirement of...” the teacher went on, measuring his words and taking deep breaths to try to slow his accelerating heartbeat, which he could hear pounding like a war drum inside his head.

“You can stick your pen up up your hol... instrument! Me phone’s voicerec is signature enough, and you knows it. Pens are for the past-its!”

As if to prove his point, the voice recognition software was noiselessly and digitally transcribing every word spoken in the class, and in the classrooms around it, and in offices all over the developed world. Tiny data banks recorded the speech acts and cross-referenced the conversations according to speakers’ digital signatures. Everything was written without pens and without hands.

“Ury, this is the last time I will request that you go back to copying from your workstation. If you do not, it will be considered a refusal to adhere to the class contract and disciplinary measures will have to be taken,” the teacher said, laying down the final ultimatum.

He moved closer to Ury and entered his zone of personal space, an old-fashioned but still permitted disciplinary procedure but one not found among the Top Ten Teachers, the Triple T’s.

The boy fidgeted in his chair, unable to sit still, adrenalin-soaked nerves jerking his limbs into spasmodic twitches.

The seconds ticked by and every student waited to see the outcome, enjoying the moment and preparing themselves for the class blog debate that would inevitably take place that evening.

Some of the alpha males in the group began to feel the need to participate in the clash and their fevered minds sought a point of entry into the gladiatorial struggle. They wanted the spoils of war but were still not convinced they would be on the winning side and so they held off a while, but the teacher could feel dark forces massing against him and knew he must win this battle quickly.

Disciplining one student was permissible; disciplining a whole class was dismissible.

He took one final step and Ury and the teacher were now close enough to smell each other.

The adolescent warrior could resist the call to arms no longer. He stood up and threw his shoulders back and jutted out his stubbly, pimpled chin. He saw that he was still a foot shorter than the teacher, but having grown up in some of the poorer quarters of the city, he had some experience of physical violence and he knew he could easily take down the bony academic before him.

His heart urged him to lash out, to break the aquiline nose of the tribal leader and declare himself sovereign, but his mind held him back. To hit a teacher, he knew, would lead to exclusion, and this would make him unemployable and condemn him to a life of petty crime and inevitable imprisonment.

‘Cameras catch crime’ was the government’s current slogan, and its core message, that omnipresent surveillance meant that crime simply could not pay, had filtered through even to Ury.

And yet these logical thoughts and conclusions were dissolving in the testosterone that surged through his brain. The brutal instincts of the medulla oblongata, the reptile brain within the human one, screamed for violence and vengeance.

“I-want-you-to-sit-down, Ury,” the teacher said, marking every work, but also forced to suppress the vortex of primal emotions within. He could feel his mind swirling, the animal within rising through the veneer of 21st-century civilisation. The dirty nails of the caveman were ripping through the outer skin of homo-webicus.

“Sit on this, ya old fart!” Ury spat, holding up the sharp point of the pen.

The supervisor, hunched over his monitor, had already alerted school security and told them to wait outside the classroom and to be ready to act on a moment’s notice.

He sat rigid, his finger poised over the microphone button, fearing a legal action for preemptive exclusion on the one hand, but even more afraid of an act of classroom violence, both of which would scupper his promotion prospects and send him back to the classroom he had laboured so long to escape from.

The teacher leaned forward to within centimeters of Ury. They could feel each others breath on their faces, and this mingling of mouth vapour was enough to push Ury over the edge.

He quickly leaned his thick skull back and head-butted the teacher’s nose, which broke like a dessicated chestnut under an army boot and splattered blood over the assailant. Ury pressed home the attack with a devastating punch to the teacher’s ribs, incapacitating him and making him fall to the floor on his knees between two desks and gasping for air.

Ury would have gone even further, but by this stage security had swept into the classroom and a burly guard had caught him from behind and forced him down onto his desk. One of them held his arm in a lock, but the boy was still difficult to control because the guard was being careful not to be sued for using excessive force against a minor.

Recovering himself slightly but still heaving for air, the teacher picked up his infospecs and placed them on his bloody nose, too shocked to feel any pain and unconsciously craving the support of the outside world that they represented.

He switched on his earcomm but the garbled messages made no impression on him, and he was only dimly aware of one of the security guards helping him to his feet.

The infospecs display went in and out of focus and his last thought was of a world of information cracking apart, but the thought had no time to properly form itself before the plastic pen pierced his eyeball and went like a spear through the soft flesh of his brain, scrambling it like the shards of bloodied silicone glass of the infospecs below.

The security guards forgot their previous qualms about excessive force and legal suits and used their electro-chemical arsenal. A stun gun collapsed Ury and mace made what few muscles still lay at his disposal squirm in agony.

Ury and the teacher lay for a moment side by side on the tiles of the classroom floor: victor and vanquished united in defeat.

In the weeks that followed, the teacher's supervisor was demoted once more to teacher and the youschool video shot into the top five but was quickly censored. However, illegal podcasts were file-shared for years afterwards and it became a gore cult classic.

More sober pedagogic professionals in the ivory towers made the entire incident a textbook lesson in correct discipline procedures at the teaching academies, in which groups of teacher trainees watched excerpts of the lesson and analysed the teacher's errors.

Mrs DeLaney successfully sued the school for her daughter Edna's emotional turmoil and is in daily email contact with her new teacher to ensure that she is given the attention she deserves.

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Bertil Falk (b. 1933) has had a distinguished career as a Swedish newspaper and TV journalist. He made his writing debut at the age of 12 with the story "Trip in Space," inspired by reading Edmond Hamilton and Eando (Otto) Binder.

Bertil has produced TV documentaries in his extensive world travels, which include Africa. He has also written a number of mystery, science fiction and fantasy novels and has contributed in-depth reviews of early science fiction and mysteries, some with accounts of his meetings with the authors.

After his retirement, Bertil was for a few years the editor of *DAST* Magazine, which is dedicated to detective stories, secret agent stories, science fiction, fantasy, and thrillers. Bertil still writes for the magazine. He is one of *Bewildering Stories'* senior Review Editors and a frequent and welcome contributor. "When Memories Dawn" is a particularly poignant story that combines the eye of a journalist with the soul of a poet.

### **When Memories Dawn**

by Bertil Falk

In the past they had told her that she imagined things, but not any more. When she told them that all the people she loved had vanished in front of her into thin air, they just nodded approvingly. The younger people were more understanding and more sensible than the older ones. They were of course better educated than the previous generations had been. They believed her when she told them the truth.

It was to her a source of sorrow that all people she loved had gone up in smoke as if they did not love her as she had loved them. And that was the most troublesome of thoughts, the idea that they had disappeared because they disapproved of her for some unknown reason. But how could her best friend have turned her back on her? How could her beloved brother possibly have left her, and then her mother, her fiancé and her child?

They were all gone, they had walked away from her into a mist and then they had not been there any more. Into thin air, yes. Perhaps they had been taken away, spirited off by some unknown agency, an agency that disliked her and wanted to hurt her. Did hurt her! But no, she did not believe that either.

Now she was old. And one day, very recently, not long ago at all, but all of a sudden they had run up the old flag, their ancient flag from the 13th century with a white band between the two broader bands of maroon. And she was told that theirs was a free nation again.



So the Swedes were gone, and the Germans and the Russians and all the others who had been pestering them over the centuries. It was the third time in her life that the flag had been hoisted; this time it happened in front of her wheelchair on the terrace of slates outside the big hospital building.

Now their beautiful flag streamed against the sometimes blue, sometimes white sky – every day. It must have signaled an improvement of their situation. She knew it and she almost expected that they all would return out of that mist: her best friend, her brother, her mother, her fiancé, her child.

And yes, in later years new personnel had treated her with understanding. When she told them that those she loved had walked straight into nothingness, they agreed. It was soothing to be understood at long last, after such a very, very long time. But it did not explain why they all had walked out on her like that.

There was a magazine on the little round table to the right of her wheelchair, but she did not read any more. She had not read anything for years. Oh, days of my childhood, she thought. Days in the city, summers in the countryside near the southern frontier. The cows grazing in the rich pastureground, the gray wooden fences. Grandma in her kerchief, always outgoing and happy, always telling her the stories about Laima, the goddess of *liktenis*, of fate. Laima, the name of the chocolate bars she was permitted to eat on Saturdays. And when a cow calved, she was treated with beestings pudding made out of the first milk.

“Laima was so good to me, when your mother was born,” Grandma said while she milked the cows. “She saw to it that my pregnancy was good. She was in the house all the time until your mother was born.”

“Did you see her?”

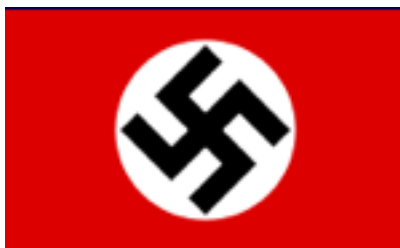
“I felt her presence,” Grandma said. “She was there and her sisters Dekla and Karta were with her. They all have our destiny in their hands.”

Back in the city, Sara was her best friend. Sara with her dark hair in braids, her searching eyes always seeming to look for something. They played with their dolls and she knew that Sara loved her as she loved her, gently, dependably, gladly. And the flag, maroon-white-maroon, fluttered in the wind.

Then the red ones came. They were soldiers, marching through the streets and everyone was afraid. They got a new flag, a red one with sea waves and a hammer and sickle. She heard people whispering that they were occupied, but Sara and she played as usual with their dolls outside the church.



Soon after came the field-gray soldiers and the black ones. They too marched through the streets, the soldiers singing songs and the men in black with a standard-bearer who held another red flag with a round white spot in which an ugly spider stretched out its hooked legs. The hammer and sickle disappeared, and the old maroon-white-maroon flag was hoisted again in the city.



Some people said that they were liberated, other people said that one evil had only replaced another evil. Then one day the black ones came back to the city. They wore caps with a nasty death's head and they walked from door to door, armed dark men with stiff faces, not like the field-gray soldiers, who used to show them pictures of their children.

That day she and Sara had been building a sandcastle in the sandbox behind the house where she lived. And then they had played outside the church. After that Sara was tired and she wanted to go home. Sara walked away, and then she turned around and waved her hand and disappeared into a haze.

The next day she did not come to play in the sandbox. Mother had been very gloomy. Mother did not say anything at all, she just took her in her arms and pressed her to her bosom. She was not sure, but she thought she cried.

She waited every day, but Sara did not return the next day, nor the next. She never returned. That was the first time someone she loved had deserted her, encompassed by a haze. She missed her. She still missed her. And outside the church was a new sign with strange characters.

\* \* \*

It was the young man's first day at the hospital and it was the first time he made the round to the wards with the professor, who explicitly described the cases to him. The professor was an older Russian, who had been planted at the hospital during the worst years of Russification. He was held in high esteem, for he was a most competent and well-educated man, fit for his job as the chief physician.

His new colleague was a native, who just had passed his examination. They were at the end of the round and stood in the opening between two big glass doors, facing the back of a wheelchair on the terrace.

"This old lady," the Russian said in his native tongue, "has been here for many years now. She suffers from the delusion that all people she loved left her without warning."

"And how do we know it's a delusion?" the young man asked in his native tongue.

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand your language very well."

"How long have you been here?" the young man said in Russian.

"About forty years," the Russian said. He turned red. "I see what you mean. I should have picked up your language by now."

"Come, sir, we are all equals now. Let's not argue about the past."

"Are we? I will not get citizenship here, because I haven't mastered your language."

“And how do we know that she’s the victim of a delusion?” the young man repeated in Russian, as if he had not heard that last remark.

“She says that they all disappeared into thin air, as if they were being transported somehow.”

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What a lovely day, the sun was shining. A breeze moved the paper of the magazine on her table. She almost felt elated. She was so happy, except for the lingering memories. They made her uncertain. Her elder brother, how she had loved him. And still loved him, but she had been most unhappy the day he came home in that black uniform. He said that he had joined the army in order to save them from the Russians, who were preparing to return.

She remembered all the black men who flooded the city the day Sara disappeared into that dizzying smog in front of her eyes. She never liked the black-clad men, and seeing her beloved brother, who was twelve years older than she, dressed in that black uniform, was depressing. He said he was going to the front to fight for their freedom. He embraced her and kissed her and then the same thing that happened to Sara happened to him.

She was standing on the doorsteps and he turned around and waved, as Sara had; and once more she waved back. And then he went straight into a fog just as if kidnapped by fairies. He never came back. Those who are gone into the dusk never come back. They just disappear. But they must be somewhere. But where?

\* \* \*

The professor scratched his head. He was obviously disturbed by the young man’s reminding him of the injustice done when the country was annexed, incorporated as a dependent republic within the Russian sphere, in fact, a vassal state that had once been an independent nation. It had been done by force.

The young man broke the silence. “So this old lady seems to believe in what’s called teleportation?”

“No, I don’t think that teleportation is the right word,” said the older man, returning to the actual case. “Teleportation means a sudden disappearance from a point in space and the re-emergence somewhere else thousands of kilometers away or, as in science fiction, on another planet. And it’s an instantaneous thing. It has never been achieved and I don’t think it ever will be.

“Anyhow, she’s not talking about teleportation. She’s talking about sudden disappearances. Sometimes she thinks that it was done purposely, that it was a deliberate way of getting away from her. Sometimes, she thinks that they were transported as if by spirits or carried away as if by the devil.”

“So, she doesn’t really know what to believe?”

“In a sense she does. She knows that they disappeared in front of her. In another way she doesn’t, for she doesn’t know why they disappeared.”

“Do you know?”

“I think so. Yes, I know. It’s in her case-book.”



\* \* \*

She leaned her face towards the table and saw the magazine. What if she took a look at it? But no! An eagle dived steeply and she was back in the past, when the city was attacked from the air and from the ground.

Together with her mother she left the burning place. They stood on a height outside the city and saw it burning in the night. It was a scene that was branded upon her memory. They walked away in the night, slept under a tree.

They were in the intermediate zone between the retreating Germans and the attacking Russians. If they had been lucky, they would have reached the seashore and fled on a fishing boat to Gotland, but they did not make it before the Russians had taken the whole area.

And then it happened again. Her mother, her beloved mother walked away to find food. She stood waving her hands and her mother waved back and then she went into a milk-white fog.

That night the sound of singing rails under heavy freight trains disappeared eastwards. And that night she had no dinner. Her mother did not come back. She never returned.

The following days were awful. With the assistance of some friendly people, she found her way back to her maternal grandmother, who still milked her cows on the southern frontier. *Oh, mother,* she thought. *Why did you leave me like that? Like Sara and my brother.*

\* \* \*

Unintentionally the young man grimaced. It was perhaps the sudden eye contact he made with the sun that caused this involuntary reaction. He had taken a step forward onto the terrace, but now he took a step backwards. The Russian professor did not seem to have noticed his young colleague's movements. He looked at the wheelchair and he bit his lip.

"I think so," he repeated. "It's a classic case of repression."

"You're a Freudian?"

"In this case, yes."

"And what has she repressed?"

Like a clairvoyant, the old man looked into the air. "The truth, she couldn't take the truth and considering the truth, who can blame her?"

"I think I see what you mean. Shall we go over to her?"

"Yes, let's do that."

\* \* \*

The wind was stronger now and turned over the pages of the magazine on the table. Once more she glanced at it, but her thoughts as always sailed back to the days of the past, right now to the days when she was at her grandmother's place.

When her grandmother's insignificant plot was made part of the collective farm, their general condition actually improved, which was somewhat strange, because most other people in the same awkward predicament experienced a steep decline when it came to standard of living.

And she grew up to be a girl whom the boys liked very much, for she was a nice girl and good-looking. One of the boys whom she liked very much became her boyfriend, and she felt happy and safe in his strong arms. Yes, she loved him; and to begin with the memories of Sara, her brother

and her mother faded only to return to hit her with an enormous power, for one day her fiancé went to the city.

She was at the railway station and she waved at him and he waved back and the train disappeared in a sky of smoke from the steam engine. And that was it. Her husband-to-be never came back. He too had gone up in smoke.

Her life was studded with that experience. They tried to tell her what had happened to him, but she was not open to explanations. She moved aside, drew herself back and pondered upon her fate, asking Laima and her sisters, but in vain, in vain.

\* \* \*

Slowly, they walked towards the wheelchair on the terrace, where they discerned her left arm resting on the elbow-rest. Hers was a slender-limbed hand. How old could she be? The Russian disclosed that she was not more than 75.

What had they done to treat her? Not much could be done. Therapy had proved useless. They had tried to tell her what had happened, but she listened to them and looked at them as if she did not understand. Or rather, as if she did not want to understand.

How long had she been there? For about fifteen years. When the country became independent again and the days of the collectives were over, she had been brought to the hospital. Compared to many other patients she was not in such a bad state. It was more a question of weakness due to old age.

She was not crazy. On the contrary, like so many other people she had instinctively made something in order to handle her traumatic experiences and protect herself in order not to go crazy, said the Russian doctor, who was held in great esteem and said to be very competent. Then they saw her right hand reaching out, grasping the magazine on the table. And they both stopped.

\* \* \*

She stretched out her hand to stop the magazine from turning over its leaves, but as she got hold of it, she could not resist drawing it towards her. It fell down in her lap and she let it lie there while her thoughts turned to that final day, when all was completed. Over the months after her fiancé's disappearance, she grew, and one day she gave birth. It was not difficult at all. It was an easy delivery.

She discerned that it was a boy. Then the experienced midwife lifted the bloodstained body up in the air. And the midwife slapped his bottom but there was no cry; and they cut the umbilical cord, and he disappeared in a haze of all that blood, and she never saw him again. When she woke up he was gone. He had vanished like all the others, snatched away out of the hands of the midwife, dematerialized into that strange realm of limbo everyone she loved seemed to prefer to her.

And she asked, *Laima, where are you, why don't you protect me the way you protected my grandmother when she delivered my mother?* But neither Laima nor her sisters said anything. And she knew the truth. Laima was responsible for all kinds of fate: good or bad.

\* \* \*

“How are you today?” the professor asked.

“I'm very well, thank you.”

Her Russian was good.

“Anything we can do for you?” the young man asked in her language.

“Not at all,” she replied. “I’m happy to be left alone for myself. I’m enjoying the sun. Who are you? I don’t think I’ve seen you before?”

“I’m new.”

“I can see that,” the old lady said. “Welcome. I hope you’ll feel at home here.”

“I think I will,” the young man said and he could not avoid bowing to her. She looked so frail and at the same time she seemed to be strong.

When they left her she lowered her eyes. The picture she saw in the magazine forced its way into her brain with a painful force, and after so many years she knew why Sara had left her and as a consequence of this distressing knowledge she realized what else she could read in her journal:

That her brother had been killed at the front.

That her mother had been deported to Siberia on a train.

That her fiancé had lost his life in a traffic accident.

That their son had been stillborn.

What she saw was an old picture of the church where she had played together with Sara that day when it all began, that very day when men in black walked from house to house. The day when people from her city, including Sara, were forced to dig long trenches in the forest outside the city before they were ordered to make a formation in line and were shot to death like dogs by the men in black.

In that picture, in front of the church, was a signboard with a one-word slogan: *JUDENFREI*.

Slowly, a single tear ran down her left cheek and hit the picture in her lap.

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\* \*

## **The Cross Murders**

by Bertil Falk

Gardar, the Riddle-Solver, son of Varin, returned from Ullergaard to the village of Alevi. He was still thinking of Sigryn, the wench whose mother turned out to be a cattle-killer. He had solved the problem and put up a strong spell to prevent further perpetration. Now he passed the sacrificial cult place of his own village and walked down the trampled road. The dogs came running and danced around him, wild with happiness.

He entered the pit-house, unfastened the brooch with the long pin under his right arm and removed his cloak, red as fire. His mother Ingegerd was preparing the mid-day meal. She told him that his father Varin was gone to the continent with a shipment of amber and furs.

The meal his mother prepared was a pike. She had gutted it and twisted it into a ring-shaped piece and put it on a foundation of coltsfoot leaves at the bottom of a bowl of brass. She added water and smoked salt and a weak fire made it simmering. She served the dish with boiled eggs. Gardar eat it heartily.

“How was your trip?”

“I cannot complain,” Gardar said.

“How did you manage?”

“Not bad.”

“Did he show respect for you?”

“More than I deserve at my age.”

“Which means?”

“I slept by the hearth.”

“Did he pay you well?”

Gardar took a spiral, solid gold rod out of his knapsack.

“Take care of it for me.”

“So he broke his arm-ring like a king and gave it to you,” she said. There was scorn in her voice.

Gardar shook his head. “This twisted rod was already broken. I think it was his only fortune. What I did for him, his house and the village was worth it.”

By that his mother was satisfied. She took the partly twisted piece of the rod of gold, and Gardar knew that his mother would guard it as if it were her own gold.

There was a message for him. It was written on a scrolled piece of birch-bark. He read the brief runic sentences with growing surprise.

“From Frideborg Rolfdaughter, a very famous lady in Birka,” he said. “Who brought this? When did it arrive?”

“Two days ago,” his mother said. “Torstein brought it here.”

“He has been to Birka?” Gardar inquired.

“Not at all. It was given to him a few days ago in the harbor village. It came over the sea. What is it about?”

“The woman asks me to come to Birka far away in the north and find out who killed her husband, Eirik Arngrimsson, a man who belonged to the king’s guard.”

“So, he was a housecarl?”

“That’s for sure.”

“And what will you do?”

“I’ll think it over.”

Ingegerd nodded approvingly. “You had better do that,” she said.

\* \* \*

The next day Gardar got up before sunrise, dressed and fastened his blood-red cloak with the penannular brooch of silver, which had been brought from Ireland by Vikings. One of Gardar’s thankful customers had given it to him as a long-overdue payment for a service Gardar had performed a few years earlier.

He put on his rucksack, took his staff, inscribed with runes — another payment — and walked away. After a short while the happily barking dogs left him and returned to the village.

Early in the morning three days later, Gardar arrived at the open sea. It was just a few weeks before midsummer. The heat was on. A merchant vessel had just arrived from the continent. It made a stop-over on its way to Birka. Purchasers and traders, furriers and tradesmen went ashore, some with their freight, others only in order to drain mead horns to the dregs in the simple tavern by the wooden landing stage.

The waterside was lined with pit-houses. On a height, thralls worked side by side with villagers. Gardar was told that the Danish king wanted the old stronghold turned into a round fortification, a Trelleborg.

One man in particular attracted the attention of the landlubbers. He was a rather small person. He wore threadbare trousers, worn leather shoes and a fur-trimmed cape over the naked upper part of his body. Gardar recognized him as Randver Seggrson, an itinerant who earned his living as a juggler and always came up with new conjuring tricks.

Gardar knew that the man went to the continent every now and then, where he earned his living during the early summer and learned new tricks from his colleagues. Now, just before the midsummer solstice, he returned home. His performances would entertain many people during the dark days of the winter season.

This time the man had brought a wooden tree cage. It was about two yards long and inside it was a small dragon. It was alive. People were astonished at the sight, but the itinerant entertainer laughed at them and said that it was about time that people acquainted themselves with the species that both Sigurd the Slayer of Fafnir and Beowulf the Dragon-Killer had brought down in the past. He told them that he had bought the dragon in the big city of Rome. He called his pet Crocodile.

At some distance Gardar contemplated the people who gathered around the juggler. There were women dressed in colorful outfits, ordinary farmers in gray sackclothes, weatherbeaten Vikings, trappers wearing fur coats and fishermen spreading a putrid smell of decaying fish.

Gardar felt a certain kinship with Ranver. In a way Gardar was himself an entertaining traveler. He used to tell the ancient legends of the gods to the inhabitants gathered around the hearth in the longhouses.

But Gardar was much more than an entertainer. He cut runic inscriptions and spells on stones and bones. And he had a reputation of being a good trouble-shooter. He had solved the problem of many a wicked deed. Some considered him a good sorcerer. Chiefly he was a solver of problems, and people called him Gardar, the Riddle-Solver.

Another merchant-*knarr* came sailing into the harbor. When Gardar realized that it had come from Birka on its way to Hammaburg, he went down to the port of call. A stream of thirsty men left the ship heading for the tavern. A plump man with big muscles and a long red beard remained on the ship. Gardar went over to his side of the landing stage.

“Any news from Birka?” he asked.

“Well, young man, the tidings are that people disappear and they are found murdered and buried outside the rampart. In that way three men have been killed. All of them marked with a cross on their chests, caused by the use of some pointed awl or something like that.”

“Who were killed?”

“They were all important men, close to the Swedish king on the neighboring Adelsisland.”

“Who killed them?”

“Some say that the followers of White Christ did. Others say that it’s some kind of rivalry among the housecarls.”

“The killed people were all housecarls?”

“At least two of them. Probably all three.”

“Why are the Christians suspected?”

“Because all the killed men were followers of our traditional gods. And... then you have the bloody cross-markings on the dead bodies.”

The man had not much more to tell him, so Gardar embarked the ship bound for Birka. It was filled with goods: pearls, swords, funnel shaped cups of glass, textiles and many other things. When the men had quenched their thirst in the tavern, they returned to the ship. Soon after it was time for departure.

\* \* \*

A Christian monk crossed himself and prayed for a safe journey as the ship put off from the harbor. A smooth breeze filled the large sail and it bulged out from the mast. To begin with the ship went eastwards but before nightfall it had changed course and was heading north. Gardar got to know brother Godfred, a Benedictine friar from Bremen, who told him about severe problems in Birka for his mission.

“The people of Birka accepted the Christian faith when Saint Ansgar went there many years ago,” the monk said, “but now we have received tidings to the effect that my fellow-believers have been assaulted and accused of many evil things by the idol-worshippers, who are still in a majority.”

Gardar listened without any comment. He knew very little about the new faith and its shining god — the White Christ. He had nothing against new gods, but he was opposed to the claim of the baptizers to a monopoly of faith. Gardar took for granted that it was that claim which had caused trouble in Birka.

“One of our people, Frideborg Rolfdaughter, sent a message and told us that our people have been accused of being responsible for the death of her husband, Eirik Arngrimsson.”

“Tell me about that,” said Gardar, who now became very interested.

“There’s not much I can tell,” said the friar. “She was married to one of the king’s men. Eirik Arngrimsson was still a heathen, while she embraced the only true faith. She tried to convince him about his delusion, but he was murdered before she succeeded.”

“Murdered? How?”

“That I don’t know. Her message reached Hammaburg recently and was very short.”

Gardar asked the monk many questions and listened carefully to the answers. He was not surprised to hear that any Christian who was killed because of his faith more or less instantly went to heaven, which obviously was the Valhalla of the Christians. That was very similar to what happened to Vikings who died fighting. They went straight to Valhalla. But he was surprised to

hear that Christians were not supposed to kill any other human being, no matter what the reason could be.

“Thou shalt not kill,” the monk explained. “People, who kill go to Hell.” And that did not surprise Gardar. For those who did not die fighting should of course go to Hel, where the goddess Hel herself embraced the dead. She took the nails from the fingers of the deceased and built the ship Naglfar with them.

Then she took the hair from their skulls and wove sailcloth of them. The day when her shipbuilders had built the ship and her sail-makers had completed the sail-area, then Naglfar would be launched into the world and Ragnarök, the end of the world, would be at hand.

Hel or Hell — it all comes to the same thing in the end. Obviously the difference between the Christian faith and his own belief was not that big. But the friar explained to Gardar that in his Hell no ship was built with nails and hair from the deceased and that people would go to his Hell only after Ragnarök, which he called Armageddon.

Gardar found the information about Frideborg Rolfdaughter a little bit disturbing. She had sent a message to her fellow believers in Hammaburg and Bremen at the same time as she had sent a message to himself, a fellow-believer of her husband. Why? He asked brother Godfred about his mission to Birka.

“I’m going there to preach the holy gospel in order to change the minds of the heathen Northmen,” he said.

“So you’re not going to solve the murder of Frideborg Rolfdaughter’s husband?”

The friar stared at Gardar. “How could I possibly do that?” he said. “Only with the help of Jesus Christ, Our Father, the Lord in Heaven and the Holy Ghost is anything like that possible. With God’s help we can do anything. But to solve that murder is not important. The important thing is to save the souls of the living from the flames of Hell.”

Gardar pondered on the meaning of that statement, but he could not reach any other conclusion than that the monk was more interested in spreading his faith than in solving the murder of a man who had not been a Christian. Which in a way made sense to Gardar.

\* \* \*

After a couple of days they reached an area of islands, islets, skerries and rocks. The dragon turned westwards and sailed through sounds, narrows and guts, which passed into broad bays. And these bays suddenly narrowed into more sounds and straits and small inlets.

There were green holms, wooded islands and treeless rocks, a land- and waterscape of a kind that he never before had seen, for this was Gardar’s first visit to this part of the world. Sometimes the ship passed through inlets so narrow that it was possible to touch tree-branches sticking out above the water on both sides of the ship.

Clouds gathered in the west, and after a while drizzle caused the crew to put up a covering canvas. Thunder was heard in the distance. The tradesmen and the monk took shelter under the tent. Gardar preferred to stay in the stem with its frightening dragon’s head. Thus he and the monster head were the first to see the island ahead.

Within minutes dark clouds swept the sky. The dragon ship changed its direction towards the harbor of Birka at the same time as the drizzle developed into a downpour and the fury of Thor was over them with flashes of lightning meandering over the sky followed by rumble and thunder.

Gardar had to take cover like the others. Now the ship seemed to crawl towards the wind, while it went up on the top of heavy waves only to sink down again into valleys of water. A sudden flash hit the mast and split it in two. The mast fell. The seamen rushed to save the sail lest it trail on the water and be pulled away.

Gardar looked at the friar. His face was ghastly pale. There was fear in his eyes and his lips moved instantly, while his fingers clutched a string of beads tight. Gardar understood that brother Godfred was worshipping his god.

Gardar peeped under the canvas and for a moment he glimpsed the pilework in the water in front of the bay, which provided the town with a natural harbor. The Vikings were practiced sailors, and the dragon ship slipped through the opening of the pilework. At the same time the rain stopped as suddenly as it had started and the sun shone between scudding clouds, which rapidly disappeared eastwards. The wind abated.

Never before had Gardar seen that many ships gathered at the same place, dragons by the landing stages and merchant knarrs by the wharves. The harbor was so crowded that a few boats had to ride at anchor in the roadstead. Gardar knew that most of them were merchant-ships from Upsala and Hedeby, others from as far away as Jorvik, Dublin, Miklagård and even Jorsala. They brought luxury goods from all over to Birka in exchange for furs and iron from the inner parts of Sweden. But he could see that some of the ships were sea-pirates, peopled by armed Varjags and brutal Vikings.

A painter was thrown to a young man. He caught it and shortly afterwards the ship was moored to a wharf with the only vacant berthing-place in the harbor. Greetings were exchanged. It was obvious that the sailors knew the helpers who came down to the ship.

A group of men and women were very happy when they saw the friar. Gardar understood that those people belonged to the new faith. A young woman with dark eyes and dressed in a simple gray tunic and a brace skirt looked at him. She was obviously a thrall. Gardar jumped ashore and she immediately turned to him.

“Gardar Varinsson?” she asked and he nodded. “My mistress is waiting for you.” Her face was totally straight.

She walked ahead of him between the rows of plain houses lining the muddy alley. Everywhere craftsmen were busy in their workshops. Comb-makers, blacksmiths, mead-brewers, bronze-founders, potters and glass bead makers working in their melt-houses. This was very different from his own village, where they had to do all things themselves in the family. The only one specialized in his village was the blacksmith. In this big town everyone seemed to be specialized.

The thrall-girl guided him. After four houses they turned to the left and she stopped outside the third house on the right-hand side of the by-lane. He went inside and there she sat waiting for him, Frideborg Rolfsdaughter, the widow of the murdered housecarl.

\* \* \*



She was beautiful, not older than thirty, dressed in an exquisite brace skirt, sewn out of expensive imported cloth, woven with diamonds. Her black eyes were penetrating and her small mouth had a resolute trait. Yes, of course, what else could he expect from an energetic woman who had sent a message to him all the way from Birka to Alevi.

She greeted him with a friendly smile and said. "Welcome, Gardar Varinsson. Your reputation as a problem-solver caused me to send that runic message to you. Please sit down and eat some food."

The lady turned to the thrall, "Olga, get some cabbage soup and some chicken legs for our guest."

"Tell me the story," he said and she sat down by his side.

"Many moon days ago, my husband went away in the evening. He was going to see Sigurd Halfdanson."

"Who is that?"

"One of the king's men, a housecarl of the king's hird like my husband. Sigurd was his best friend and Sigurd often visited our house. He still does. He has been very helpful after Eirik's death. Now, Eirik did not return that night. I thought that he had gone to Adelsisland."

"That's the island on the other side of the sound where the king's house is located, isn't it?"

"Yes, most of the time the housecarls stay with the king, but many of them have their families here in Birka, as my husband did. Now it turned out that he had not met Sigurd that evening. Sigurd had been at Adelsisland. And Eirik never turned up there. He was gone. Had disappeared. Nobody knew where he was."

She paused and looked grimly at the stew-pan hanging over the fire. "They found him six days later. He was buried outside the town rampart. Someone had cowardly stuck a pointed needle through his heart from behind. Then the perpetrator cut a cross on his chest.

"I'm a baptized Christian. My husband was not. Because of the cross people think that some Christian killed Eirik. I understand that some even think that I killed him. Which is incredible! We had a good life together and this winter I will give birth to our child. If I still had been a heathen, I would have prayed to Frey for a son who could avenge his father's death. Now, as a Christian I'm not permitted to have such thoughts."

"But you have," Gardar suggested.

She nodded. "It's not easy to stop sinning," she said and continued, "Other people think that a Christian thrall did it."

"What do the Christians say?"

"We don't know what to say. Some of us think that the king's men settle their differences through these killings."

"What kind of differences?"

"Some people claim that there is an ongoing competition as to who will be number one of the king's hird. But according to Sigurd there is no rivalry and no hostility between the housecarls."

"What about those other victims?"

"They were members of the king's hird and they similarly disappeared and were found in the same condition as my husband. Murdered from behind and with a bloody cross on their chests."

“Anything else?”

“Nothing specific, the usual thing. The killer had of course cut off the hair of his victims and pulled off the nails of all fingers and toes before burying them. One has to make sure that they don’t complete Naglfar too fast down in Hel. People want to postpone the end of the world, the Ragnarök, as long as possible.”

“I see. Who found the bodies?”

“Different people. They were buried not far from each other.”

“Did anyone see all three bodies?”

“I think that the old man Asvidr saw them all. He’s very old. The oldest man in Birka. He knows much. He’s our storytelling thul and a very wise man.”

“What happened to the bodies after they were found?”

“They were burned.”

A stately man dressed in a helmet with a nose-shield entered. His eyes were pale blue and the long yellow hair stuck out from under the helmet. He took off his helmet as he bowed through the door. He wore trousers of leather and like Gardar he had a cloak — but a bright blue one — fastened under his arm with a clearly visible penannular brooch. It was a very expensive brooch, most certainly manufactured outside Birka and imported. It was made of gold and had a long brownish pin. Its terminals were mounts with male filigree-faces.

Gardar pondered on what he saw. No doubt this was a rich man. But who? The answer came instantly.

“I am Sigurd,” the new arrival said, “I guess that you are the renowned young sorcerer from the south. I hope you are able to solve this murder so that Frideborg can go on with her life without further brooding.”

“I have just told Gardar, son of Varin, that you’ve been so supportive after Eirik’s death.”

“What else could I do for my best friend’s widow?” he said and looked admiringly at her.

The thrall came with the food, which obviously had been prepared in some other house. They sat down and began eating.

“What’s your status with the king?” Gardar asked as he took the chicken drumstick with both hands and bit a big bite out of it.

“I’m the least among the best,” Sigurd answered. “I’m the youngest. I’m the only one who is not married, and the king has talked to me only once.”

“What did he say to you?”

“Go outside before you spit. That’s what he said.”

They laughed.

“How close was Eirik Arngrimsson to the king?”

“He was number three.”

“And who was number one and number two?”

There was silence for a moment.

“Number one is your namesake, Gardar Torkilsson. He is still alive, but number two, Eyvind Eyvindsson, was one of the men who were killed.”

“And who was the third man they found killed?”

“A friend of Eyvind Eyvindsson and a new member of the king’s hird.”

Gardar nodded.

“It points towards some kind of interest in the king’s men, doesn’t it?”

“I personally think that the Christian thralls did it,” Sigurd said.

“Why?”

“Because it was done in such a timorous way. Sneaking from behind. Not a good man to man struggle face to face.”

Gardar turned to Frideborg. “What do you think?”

“I can’t figure any reason on the part of the Christian slaves to kill Eirik. As a matter of fact I can’t see any reason for anyone at all to kill him,” she said. “I don’t know. But I want to know. That’s why I sent for you.”

“Tell me, Sigurd, about that meeting between you and Eirik, the meeting that never took place. How come?”

“Oh, there was nothing specific about that. We had only agreed on that we should meet in the evening and play chess.”

“Where?”

“On Adelsisland.”

“Not here?”

“Certainly not. I wasn’t here. I was there.”

Gardar stroked his chin slowly. “If I have understood things rightly, Eirik was killed outside the town?”

“Yes, he was killed on the spot where he was found buried,” Sigurd said.

“How do you know that?”

“I take it for granted.”

“One should never take things for granted,” Gardar said in a thoughtful way. “I think that I am slowly coming to grips with this case. The tidings I have obtained now combined with the ones I got before I arrived here seemingly contain some clues to the truth. I can’t say anything for certain right now. But I want to walk around and talk to people.”

“He seems to be as good as they say,” Sigurd said after Gardar was gone.

“I don’t know,” Frideborg replied and grimaced. Sigurd did not know how to interpret that grimace. Maybe she did not trust the ability of the young man she had sent for.

\* \* \*

Outside the house Gardar spotted Olga, the slave girl. She tried to avoid him, but he took her arm.

“Don’t worry. I just want to ask you a few questions.”

Silent, she stood waiting for his question.

“How long have you been in Birka?”

“Five years,” she said.

“Where do you come from?”

“From the other side of the sea. The Varjags raided our town, killed all the men, burned the houses and took many slaves. I was brought here together with a few others.”

“You’re a Christian?”

She nodded.

“Most of the thralls are. Like livestock we’ve been lifted by Vikings and brought here. And we are often treated like cattle as well.”

“But your mistress is a Christian too.”

“Yes, I’m very fond of her, but I didn’t like her husband.”

“No?”

“He was not kind to her. Now Sigurd is there and he is so good to her. But she doesn’t realize that he is a better man than her husband was. Sigurd likes her, but she does not seem to see that. As to her husband, you know that she will give birth to his child around Christmas?”

“Christmas? What’s that?”

“I forgot that you’re not a Christian. Christmas is the time of the year you heathen people call Yule.”

“I knew she was going to have a baby, yes. But I didn’t know that it would be at Yuletide.”

“She will have a child then, and so will I,” Olga said. “Her husband was not kind to me either. He raped me many times.”

Gardar looked at her. “In other words, you had a good reason for killing him.”

“Yes, I had and I still have. He may be dead but the reason is still alive. It’s kicking inside me. If Eirik had been alive and I had given birth to a son, I would have seen to it that my son killed his own father.” She looked Gardar straight in his eyes.

“Thou shalt not kill!” the strange words escaped Gardar. “You’re a Christian. You’re not supposed to.”

“I can see that you’re asking yourself if I killed Eirik. Could be. But then tell me who killed the others? I had no reason to kill them. I did not even know them.”

“Does your mistress know about this?”

“That I’m pregnant. Yes. That her Eirik is the father of my child. No.”

“You’re sure about that?”

“That’s what I believe.”

“Who do you think is guilty of this murder?”

“I think that someone who is very clever and scheming is behind this. Someone nobody suspects.”

“I will remember that possibility,” Gardar said.

\* \* \*

The town was bigger than Gardar had thought. There were at least two hundred houses. He passed a weaving-shop, a bronze foundry, a tannery with skin dressing and a bone- and horn workshop.

He went into a small tavern filled with people around two small tables. They asked him about his part of the world and he told them about the small village where he lived. He stood mead *lagom* as they called all round. Vikings and merchants treated him back and once it was all on the house.

The mead flowed and when he left the house he knew that the people were convinced that the Christians were behind the murders and that if the king did not do anything soon, they would themselves see to it that justice was done.

Assisted by a merchant of his own age, Gardar went to the waterfront outside the rows of houses. He now realized that it was not by accident that the island was called Birchisland and the town Birka. Everywhere there were birch trees with white stems. And there, in a small cabin he found that old man Asvidr. Sitting on a stone, seemingly looking towards the king's house on Adelsisland, the old man was combing his enormous white beard.

"Who is it?" he asked. "I can't see you."

Gardar's expectations fell apart when he understood that the old man was nearly blind. But he nevertheless asked about the three bodies.

"Yes, I was there," the old man said. "They used to ask me to come when things happen that they don't know how to handle. But what can I do? People don't understand that when you get older you also lose touch with reality. In my case, I can hardly see. It's true that I was good at things in the past, but in my case the past is very long ago."

"What do you want to know and why do you want to know what you want to know, stranger? For I can hear that you're not from this part of the country."

"I've been asked by Frideborg Rolf's daughter to find out who killed her husband," Gardar said bluntly.

"That hag," the old man puffed. "Eirik Arngrimsson can be happy that he was killed. Otherwise he would have probably never got rid of her. She was always crazy about him and from what you say I can understand that she still is. But isn't she baptized or at least prime-signed?"

"What's that?"

"They make the sign of the cross as a kind of preparation for baptizing them."

"Yes, she is a Christian now. But please tell me of the three bodies. Do you know anything?"

"Since I'm almost blind I must use my other senses. The smell was not the best, I can tell you. So I covered my nose and felt the bodies with my hands. I can tell you that all three were killed with some kind of thin metal needle."

"How could you possibly feel that?"

"I could not feel that," the old man admitted. "But they showed me the little wounds on their backs and I touched them. I asked what it looked like. When they told me about the small size I asked them to find something to put into the holes. We used spearheads."

"Sounds too big to me," Gardar said

"Not if you use the very slim pointed part that you put into the socket of the longer wooden part of the spear."

"Of course not," Gardar admitted and the fact sank into his mind as an important observation made by a blind man. "And what about the crosses on their chests?"

"Made with the same very slim pointed instrument. Whatever it was."

Gardar thought for a while. The he asked. "Were they murdered where they were buried?"

"I think so. At least Eirik was."

"How do you know?"

"Good question. Let me think."

The man was silent for a while. Then he said. "Because one of the king's men told me that."

"Who?"

“I don’t know. Remember, I can’t see.”

“You must’ve recognized his voice?”

“No,” the old man said. “I did not recognize his voice. I don’t know any of the king’s men. But he was the one who told me that Eirik had been killed with a long needle of some kind and that the same needle had been used to cut the cross on his chest.”

“Do you think the Christians did it?”

“I may have done it. Are you a Christian?”

“No.”

“Then you may have done it.”

“I understand that you’ve heard that the Christians are not permitted to kill other human beings?”

“Yes, they have some rule to that effect. It doesn’t mean that they necessarily follow that rule. No, my friend, there are other things that in my opinion points to one of us and none of them.”

“I think I know what you are talking about,” Gardar said. “Is there anything else you can tell me?”

“I’m not sure,” the old man said, “but I’ve a slight feeling that the two last murders were committed in order to cover up the first one and misdirect suspicions in one or two different directions.”

“I’ve thought of that too,” Gardar said.

“Then good luck,” the old man said. “And now, what will you do for me?”

“I know your habit of gifts and countergifts here in Birka and I brought this for you.” He took the man’s right arm and put a few coins in his hand.

“Of what metal?” the man asked.

“Gold.”

“That’s too much for this,” the old man said.

“I would say it’s not enough. Your information has been of the highest value to me. By the way. I have a feeling that something more may happen.”

“I would not be surprised,” the old man said and smiled.

\* \* \*

Gardar went back to Frideborg Rolfsdaughter’s house. He arrived there at the same time as a bell began to toll. At that moment she came out of the door, locked it and hastened along the road. Gardar sped up but before he caught up with her, she disappeared into a house. He looked at the door and when he saw the cross on it he understood that this was the place where the Christians worshipped White Christ. He hesitated for a second and then he entered.

A big wooden cross was at the one short side of the house. Some fifteen people had gathered. In front of the cross, turning his back to the audience, brother Godfred stood. The air was filled with an unpleasant smell. It came in the form of smoke from something, which looked like two female brooches put together into one oblong thing formed like an egg. It hung in a metal chain that a small boy was swinging to and fro. What Gardar saw was a censer, but that he did not know.

He sat down by the door and followed the strange rituals. Peculiar songs and incantations said in a foreign tongue filled the house. At the end of the service a small bell rang and the people drank from a big cup.

Afterwards most people left but Frideborg Rolfsdaughter stayed on and talked with brother Godfred. Gardar stepped out of the shadows.

“This is my friend from the journey,” brother Godfred said.

“I know him,” Frideborg said. “Have you found something?”

“Something I’ve found,” Gardar said. “If the king doesn’t intervene, the people here are prepared to take care of you Christians. I think you should be very careful. However, I may be able to carry this case to a peaceful solution. But now I want to talk to you alone, Frideborg Rolfsdaughter. There are a few things I want you to explain.”

“I’ve no secrets from brother Godfred, who is my father confessor while he is here.”

“Your what?” Gardar asked.

Frideborg shook her head in disbelief and resignation. “It doesn’t matter. But you can ask me anything in front of brother Godfred.”

“To begin with. Do you know whether your husband was faithful to you or not.”

“He certainly was.”

“What about Olga?”

“As a thrall she belonged to the family, so he had every right to sleep with her.”

Brother Godfred looked very unhappy when she said that. But he didn’t say anything.

“So you were not opposed to his liaison with her?”

“Why should I be?”

“To the point. Are you sure you weren’t jealous of her?”

Frideborg laughed heartily. “You think that I killed him because he did what all men here do. If I had been jealous, I would perhaps have killed her, not him.”

“Did you realize that she didn’t like your husband’s advances?”

She did not smile any more. “I sometimes had such a feeling, yes.”

“She told me that he raped her. Took her against her will.”

“What could I do? We owned her. He was permitted to do anything with her.”

At that brother Godfred cleared his throat and said, “Now, remember that you and Olga are both Christians and that...”

“What is all this about,” Frideborg Rolfsdaughter screamed. “I sent for both of you and now you both turn against me!”

“As far as I’m concerned I’m turning against no one,” Gardar said. “I’m just trying to solve the problem you want me to solve.”

“Then do that and don’t pester me.”

Brother Godfred started talking, but the door slammed open and Olga came rushing in. “Sigurd Halfdansson has been found unconscious with a cross cut in his chest,” she exclaimed.

“Where?”

“Outside the town rampart, where the others were found.”

“I had a feeling that something like this would happen,” Gardar said. “I think that we soon will know the truth behind all this.” And Gardar thought of the clever old man. How blind he was and how clever.

\* \* \*

While the other people rushed to the side of Sigurd Halfdansson, Gardar got some young men to row him over to the king’s island. It took no time at all. He asked for his namesake Gardar Torkilsson, the man closer to the king than anyone else. And Gardar Torkilsson bade him welcome.

“Your fame as a wise and skilful sorcerer arrived here last year,” Gardar Torkilsson said, “and now that you’re here to find out who the killer in Birka is, I hope that you will be successful. There have been so many rumors and the king is annoyed.”

“Tell me if you think that anyone of the king’s men wants your job and kills your colleagues in order to get closer in order of preference to the king?”

Gardar Torkilsson leaned towards Gardar Varinsson and said, “That may always be a possibility, but no. I don’t think so. The hird here is a closely knit group of men, depending on each other.”

“So you don’t think that anyone of the king’s hird is the perpetrator?”

“Not for such a reason as you suggest. For other reasons, maybe, but not in order to get closer to the king.”

“Can you think of any other motive?”

“No.”

\* \* \*

The next day Gardar Varinsson went back to Birka. Sigurd Halfdansson was back on his feet. He could not tell, who it was that overpowered him from the behind, but he said it was more than one person. There was a lot of excitement in the town and people gathered in the open near the town wall in order to discuss what to do.

Many had brought their broadswords and the atmosphere surrounding the meeting was like the final preparations for a riot. When Gardar arrived, a verbal rowdy named Sverker Alesson stood on a hill and stirred up hundreds of women and men, who surrounded the place. His big hands rested on the hilt of his sword, which was put into the soil.

“The Christians hate our gods and they permit worshipping only their own god,” said a woman in a white dress. “Now they’ve killed three of our men and tried to kill one more yesterday. Every time they’ve put their mark on the victims. It’s about time we take care of the Christians.”

A murmur of consent met him. Frideborg Rolfdaughter run up to his side and screamed. “Don’t listen to Sverker. He has no evidence. Anyone could cut a bloody cross on the bodies of my husband and the other victims.”

“Don’t do this, Frideborg. It’s dangerous.” It was Sigurd Halfdansson, who entered the hill and interfered. “They may kill you.”

“They will kill all Christians if this man is permitted to spread his unfounded lies against us,” Frideborg said.



Gardar rushed up to the hill and raised his arms, thus bidding silence. “Listen to me. It’s about time that we put an end to the crimes committed here. You think that the Christians are responsible, don’t you?”

“Yes,” the crowd screamed.

“But Frideborg Rolfdaughter is right. There is no proof at all.”

“How about the bloody crosses on the bodies?” a voice screamed.

“If you killed a person and wanted to throw suspicion on someone else, what would you do? Well, I think you would plant some evidence that would lead people astray and throw them off the track. Anyone could, as Frideborg said, have cut such a cross in order to get us on the wrong track.”

Total silence met his words. Gardar almost heard how his argument penetrated the crowd.

“Frideborg is a Christian. So why should we listen to her?” a voice protested.

“I’m not a Christian,” Gardar replied, “so why not listen to me?”

“Because you defend the Christians!”

“My dear friend. That is not the kind of justice that Odin taught you in his song.”

“Tell us then. Who killed those men?” another voice insisted.

Gardar smiled. “Now we are talking business,” he said. “For that is exactly what I’m going to do. To begin with, the Christians have the peculiar rule that they shall not kill. They may not always stick to that rule, but I would say that it’s a little bit over the top that they would deliberately kill three of the king’s men here, especially since they are in a minority and their situation here is very frail, to say the least.”

Gardar paused and looked over the crowd. He found that they now listened to him. “In other words. Even though it’s possible that a Christian could have perpetrated these crimes, it’s not really probable. Not here. Not now.”

“Since all the people who have fallen victim to this murderer have been the king’s men, some people have thought that a power struggle has taken place among the men in the king’s hird. But there is no sign of such a struggle for power. On the contrary, I’ve been told that they’re a closely connected group of men. But who knows what thoughts that lurk in the minds of the king’s men? Nevertheless, the evidence is not there and most facts points in a different direction.”

“Who is the murderer?”

“Don’t be impatient now,” Gardar responded. “I, Gardar, the son of Varin, will soon reveal the truth to you. To begin with, I was confident at a very early phase of my investigation that the murderer is NOT a Christian. How do I know that? Because, when handling the bodies the murderer displayed all signs of being a follower of the Aesir cult.”

“In what way?” Sigurd Halfdansson asked.

“The perpetrator cut the hair from the skulls of his victims and removed the nails from their hands and feet. A Christian would never do anything like that, because a Christian does not believe that the ship Naglfar, which will cause the twilight of the gods at Ragnarök, is built in Hel using the hair and the nails of the deceased. If you don’t believe that, there is no reason to remove the hair and the nails in order to postpone Ragnarök. It proves that the perpetrator is not a Christian but — one of us.”

A strong murmur rose from the crowd.

“The person who killed Eirik Arngrimsson had a very special reason for the wicked deed. But in order to cover up the motive, the killer killed two more men. And last night the person or persons in question hit again, but this time the murderer only partly did his job.”

“They must have been disturbed before they were able to kill me,” said Sigurd Halfdansson.

“No. You’re alive because it wasn’t the intention that you should be killed. What happened to you was another try to mislead us.”

“What bullshit is this? I don’t understand what you’re talking about,” the brute Sverker Alesson bawled, raising his sword.

“I must admit that I don’t get this either,” Frideborg Rolfdaughter said.

“There are only two people here who understand what I say,” Gardar Varinsson replied and at the same time he turned to Sigurd Halfdansson, stuck a hand under his armpit and tore the golden brooch from him. “The murderer and I.” Sigurd’s cloak fell to the ground and Gardar held up the penannular brooch in the air.

“This is the murder weapon,” he exclaimed, pointing the brooch at Sigurd Halfdansson. “And he is the murderer.”

Sigurd stepped back and said, “You’re out of your mind. Why should I kill my best friend?”

“Because you, the only unmarried member of the king’s men, fell in love with your best friend’s woman. In order to get her, you killed him from behind using the long pin of your golden brooch. Then you cut the cross on his chest in order to throw suspicion on the Christians. After that you made a big mistake by cutting his hair and removing his nails before you buried him, which proved to me that the murderer was not a Christian at all.”

“Preposterous!”

“You told me and you told that old man Asvidr that Eirik had been killed on the same spot where he was later buried. If that’s true, the only one who could have known that was the murderer.”

“What’s this? I just took for granted that he was killed where he was found,” said Sigurd Halfdansson.

At this stage Frideborg interrupted. “Sigurd is right. We all thought that Eirik was killed at the spot where he was found.”

“And if I did all that, why should I kill the other two?” Sigurd challenged Gardar.

“That’s easily explained,” Gardar riposted. “When you found that the Christians were not suspected enough, you killed another of your friends and then one more. And you repeated the same procedure as when you killed Eirik Arngrimsson. Everything in order to make sure that the Christians would be blamed.”

The silence was total now.

“Yesterday, when I arrived and began asking people about the murders, you panicked and went out to the town wall and scratched that cross on your own chest with the penannular pin.”

“I was not even in Birka, when Eirik was killed,” Sigurd protested. “I was on Adelsisland.”

“It takes no time at all to row from Adelsisland to the outskirts of Birchisland. Yesterday, I went there. You could easily have slipped back here without being seen. I know you were here.”

“Do you have any witness to that I was here. No, you don’t. You can’t prove it,” Sigurd Halfdansson shouted.

“Yes, I can prove that you murdered all three,” Gardar shouted back triumphantly. “For what did I see that first time when I met you in Frideborg’s house? Your cloak fastened by a golden brooch with a strange brown color — similar to old blood — on this pin.”

Gardar held up the brooch with the long, dirty pin. “See for yourself. Dried blood on this deadly pin. Would you deny that this belongs to you? All the people here have seen that this is the thing that kept your cloak in place.”

Sigurd Halfdansson took a step backwards. His mouth was open with surprise. Guilt was written all over him.

“You bastard,” Frideborg Rolfdaughter screamed and snatched the broad sword from the surprised troublemaker Sverker Alesson, who stood there completely taken aback. “So, that’s why you were so kind to me after Eirik’s death. Now, draw your sword and fight this out with me like a man. Or do you want to do everything in a cowardly way, as you put it? Sneaking from behind. Not a good man to man struggle face to face.”

Gardar turned around and looked straight into her eyes. “He has no sword,” he reminded her.

At that moment, someone rushed up to the top of the hill and stuck a sword in the hand of Sigurd Halfdansson. More or less instinctively Sigurd raised it in defense and there was the clang of blades when their heavy broad swords crossed. And next... Her sword hit his throat. With a surprised facial expression his head trundled down the hill.

Gardar Varinsson turned to brother Godfred who had come up the hill. “I think we have a substantial case of accidental Christian relapse into heathen behavior here,” he said calmly. The friar did not appreciate the comment. But the strong-minded lady lowered her sword and without a word she let the monk lead her down the hill.

\* \* \*

A few days before midsummer... Skilled craftsmen in the harbor of Birka had repaired the mast. When it was time for sailing they were all gathered on the landing-bridge to say farewell to Gardar.

Brother Godfred, who would stay in Birka over the winter, was there. Olga was there, the slave-girl, who thanks to brother Godfred’s preaching no longer was an owned thrall but an employed maid, of whatever difference it made. The old man Asvidr was there led by no less a man than the berserk Sverker Alesson. Even the king’s number one housecarl Gardar Torkilsson had come. As had all the many new friends from taverns and mead-houses.

Before the ship put off, another merchantman glided into the harbor. On board that ship Gardar saw Randver Seggrson sitting on his cage. Gardar realized that a new sensation in the shape of a living baby-dragon named Crocodile was to hit Birka.

In his knapsack, Gardar had a most precious golden neck-ring from Kiev. It was payment for solving the murder case. But there was also another piece of gold, which now was his.

A penannular brooch with a blood-stained, deadly pin.

“Thou shalt not kill,” he murmured. And the more he thought of it, the more he found that there was something that appealed to him in that strange rule.

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## **A Mental Feedback**

by Bertil Falk

*Inspired by and dedicated to RD Larson*

The lilac safety pin penetrated her left cheek. She was all in saffron. Her hair was yellow as were her eyes, eyebrows, lips. Saffron things hanging from her ear lobes. She sat on the big cushion that ran out in all directions on the floor.

From invisible loudspeakers, the sound of the Kronos Quartet performing Jimi Hendrix' *Purple Haze*. Her eyes were closed and she had covered her tear glands by putting the thumb and the forefinger of her left hand over the root of her nose.

Then the doorbell rang. Once, twice, thrice...

Lars Parker thought of pressing the doorbell a fourth time, when he heard someone coming from behind. He turned around and faced a woman, all dressed in saffron and with a safety pin puncturing her left cheek.

“I'm coming,” she said. “You're early, Mr. Parker.”

“Ah, you're Billie Occasion,” said Lars Parker.

She looked exactly as he had visualized her. Relatively young, perhaps of his own age, somewhat punkish in a yellowish way as well as attractive; and he knew that she was divorced, very much so. Her former husband had told him that they were not even on speaking terms.

“Hmm, so that son of a bitch recommended me?”

“Your former husband did, if that's what you're hinting at.”

“More than hinting,” she said, while opening the door. “Please, step in!” She kept the door open.

“Thank you,” he said, walked in, stopped and stared unbelievably at the woman on the cushion, who took away her thumb and her forefinger from her tear glands and opened her eyes.

Paralyzed for a moment, Lars Parker swiftly turned around, only to find that Bille Occasion was not there. She was on the cushion, or rather had been on the cushion, for when he once again turned around, he found that she was on her feet. How could she possibly have passed by him into the room?

“How come you know that son of a bitch?” she inquired.

Confused, he replied: “He speaks kindly of you.”

She smiled a warped smile.

“I’m a programmer too,” Lars Parker recovered his composure. “I’ve known him a couple of months.” He paused. “We’ve been working together.”

“I see. Well, please sit down. And tell me what your problem is?”

“My problem?”

“Why are you here if you don’t have a problem?”

“Oh that. Well, it’s not exactly a problem. It’s just curiosity, something I don’t understand. No doubt I can live without understanding it, but the question gives me no peace. It’s gnawing. It’s a li’l bit irritating.”

“I see. To the point. What’s gnawing?”

“A dream.”

She nodded. “Dreams can be very annoying, yes,” Billie Occasion observed. “Tell me about it.”

“Well...”

Lars Parker was at loss for words.

“Yes?”

“I don’t know how to begin.”

“Try.”

He cleared his throat. “I dream that my mother, who has been dead for many years, scrambles eggs, sometimes in the kitchen, sometimes on a solar heated slab of stone. Then she serves them together with bacon and chocolate, all of it put together into a sandwich.”

“Bacon and chocolate?”

“It’s a kind of culinary fashion today, but when my mother was alive, she was the only one who mixed chocolate and bacon.” He paused and added: “With eggs.”

“You mean she actually did? Not only in your dreams?”

He hesitated. “I don’t remember.”

“And that’s all?”

“No, no, not at all.”

“What’s more?”

“I don’t know.”

Lars Parker looked at her with a helpless gaze. She smiled and closed her eyes, covering her tear glands by putting the thumb and the forefinger of her left hand over the root of her nose.

She trod lightly on vague ground. It was like being in a quagmire. All around her, there were changing realities, melting colors, sudden appearances, absolute quakes, and changing gestalts, a cacophony of shifting shades, sometimes recognizable human beings.

The unreliable ground she walked on wavered and she knew that she strode and stalked and strolled on a roller conveyor psychoanalysts call a stream of consciousness. She was in the midst of her guest’s inner monologue. She could feel

the helplessness she had seen in his eyes before she set out on her mental excursion into his mind.

Unexpectedly, her road turned slippery and she went into a skid and fell, her hands and feet stuck in a sticky mess of associative thoughts that hardened and then softened again. She got to her feet and walked towards a silver screen, where something that looked like a newsreel was shown, but she soon realized that it was the screening of old memories, where the lad Lars went downhill in a snowclad landscape on a toboggan branded "Rosebud," a piece of information that immediately was replaced by Superman for the two thousand five hundred and seventy-twelfth time saving Lois Lane in distress from a catastrophe beyond inhuman inexperience.

She knew there had to be a downstairs to the subconscious, but she could not find it. Then she found the elevator and realized that stairs were probably a thing of the past in this ever-changing environment.

The elevator cage was a subreal thing, not like a box but a formless entity with perpetually changing walls, ceiling and floor that had a dizzying influence.

She reached the bottom and walked out on the billowing platform of a subway station. The doors of a dilapidated train, tattooed with colorful 3-dimensional ZipZap letters, closed before her eyes.

"Welcome." A female voice.

"You're late!"

She turned round and faced a beautiful woman.

"This is how Lars remembers me," she said. "It's very flattering. But I'll show you my real face."

The beautiful woman turned into an old hag.

"You expected me?"

"Yes."

"Interesting. How did you know that I have the faculty for mental bilocation?"

"I've no idea. Let's take this train."

The arriving train was empty and before she could say or even think supercalifragilisticexpialidocious, the doors opened at the next station while a male voice said "Don't mind the lack of platform."

"Let's jump!"

The woman jumped and disappeared into a totally black abyss. She followed in the woman's "footsteps" and fell and fell and fell until she found herself in a garden of exotic flowers and with a pavilion.

"This is his unconscious. It's down here that I am forced to make sandwiches mixed with bacon dipped in chocolate. And scrambled eggs."

"Forced??"

"This is a giant obsession related to a magnificent post-traumatic stress disorder."

“Considering that you’re only a figment of your son’s imagination, you have very strong opinions.”

The woman said, “I have my kitchen in the summer house.”

They walked towards the garden pavilion. And for the first time, Billie Occasion was really surprised. Who came walking on the other side of the garden? It was she herself, but it was not a result of bilocation.

“That’s you as a figment of my son’s imagination,” the woman explained. “Unconsciously, Lars is thinking of you right now.”

At that moment the gestalt of Billie Occasion turned into President Barack Hussein Obama.

“As you can see, Lars’ stream of unconsciousness is shifting like Molly Bloom’s inner monologue.”

Obama disappeared into a rain of colorful display of July 4 fireworks, while the sound of *Purple Haze* was heard from above.

“Why is Lars repetitively dreaming about you preparing chocolate on bacon and scrambled eggs?”

“I don’t know.”

“Can’t you stop doing that?”

The woman laughed. “Impossible. I’m just the realization of his dreams. His dreams in a different incarnation from what you think. But I think that we can solve the problem you’ve come to solve.”

“How?” Billie Occasion asked.

“Take this Walther and kill me!” The figment showed a pistol.

“No, I can’t do that. I’m not a murderer, not even of figments like you.”

“Then I’ll do it myself.”

Lars Parker’s mother turned the pistol to her left temple.

There was a click of a trigger and a report. Billie Occasion looked at the spot where the image of Lars Parker’s mother had gone up in smoke and then she turned around. The summer house was gone, the garden was gone.

She had to find her way out of this mental mess. She roved about and found an escalator running up to the subconscious level. She entered the moving staircase, closed her eyes and covered her tear glands by putting the thumb and the forefinger of her left hand over the root of her nose.

Lars Parker saw her taking away her thumb and her forefinger from her tear glands.

Billie Occasion opened her eyes. The last sound of *Purple Haze* died away. She smiled at him.

“I think that your problem is solved,” she said. “Your mother committed suicide.”

“Yes, I know,” he said.

But Billie Occasion was not sure and she was not really surprised when the following day she got a frantic telephone call from her former husband’s colleague.

“Is she still pestering you with her chocolate embedded bacon and egg sandwiches?” she asked.

“No, she’s gone.”

“No more chocolate and bacon then?”

“It’s still there.”

“It is? But if your mother is gone, who is...?”

A sudden suspicion surfaced. “Do you mean that...”

“Yes, now you’re playing the part. You’ve replaced my mother. And damn you! I don’t know where you find them in my mind, but you’re using rotten eggs!”

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### Mr. Eisenstein's Holiday

by Gary Inbinder

A weekend at a luxury seaside resort did not fit Eisenstein's budget. Fortune had thrown him some knuckle balls; one more strike and he was out. Nevertheless, on his sixtieth birthday, he booked a room in a place he had visited in greener days.

The hotel had seen better times, too, yet upon his arrival, Eisenstein failed to notice any decline. The owners had put up a proud front in the economic downturn, and everything about the place — the well-tended lawns, neatly pruned trees and hedges, the polished marble and walnut paneled lobby, the friendly and efficient staff — remained, as in the good old days, *comme il faut*. But in harder times they had lowered rates, and that tended to make the place less exclusive. To the discriminating, such as Eisenstein, that change appeared noticeable in the tone of the clientele, like a telltale smudge on the wainscoting.

"They are always so loud," he thought. Eisenstein made that observation while standing in a short line at the registration desk. The stylishly dressed, thirty-something couple ahead of him chattered incessantly while their children, a boy of about eight and his somewhat younger sister, scampered up and down the lobby. "I would've been slapped, if I had behaved like that in public," our friend thought. He categorized the family: "Trailer trash with money."

The couple took their turn at the desk where they complained about the wait in line, which had not been long; the parking accommodations, which were in fact quite good; the service, which was impeccable; and so forth. "Trying to get a lower rate on a better room," our friend speculated to himself, adding as an afterthought, "How typical of *them*."

At that moment, the boy skidded on the slick marble floor and slammed into Eisenstein. Our friend winced, exhaled loudly and glared at the brat.

"Sorry mister." The presence of his parents prompted a grudging apology. The father turned at the sound of Eisenstein's "Ooof," followed by the boy's perfunctory expression of regret. The mother continued haggling with the desk clerk as though nothing had happened.

"I hope you're all right, sir? The kid didn't mean it. He's just antsy after a long drive." The father smiled like a used-car salesman peddling junk. Then, he turned to his boy. "Stop it, d'you hear? We'll be done soon."

The boy looked down and whined, "All right, Dad, but what about Meredith?" At that moment, the little girl whizzed by, wailing her Hollywood-inspired impression of the evil dead.

"Well, at least she hasn't run into anyone — yet." The father shared a knowing smirk with his male offspring, as though they both anticipated disaster and were amused at the prospect.

Eisenstein forced a rictus-like smile. “That’s all right — kids will be kids.” He continued to eye the man while thinking, “Have you considered the benefits of sterilization?”

Just then, there was a loud crash of broken glassware followed by howling. Little Meredith had made the intimate acquaintance of a fully encumbered cocktail waitress.

The mother stopped yammering at the desk clerk and turned her attention to the accident. “Oh, my baby!” she cried. “If she’s hurt, I’ll sue.” Then she tottered off on her platform shoes in the direction of the collision.

Amid all the commotion, Eisenstein noticed that the line behind him was lengthening, and a routine check-in had evolved into a tiresome melodrama. Fortunately, another desk clerk came on duty to get things moving. Our friend registered, eager to escape the family he had dubbed a prime example of *Painintheassus Modernus Americanus*.

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Eisenstein relaxed in a large leather armchair situated conveniently close to the bar. Late afternoon sunshine filtered through open French doors and bay windows. The light sparkled on polished oak and walnut in most areas of the mezzanine lounge, while some nooks remained dim. Our friend preferred the shadows, where he could remain obscure and detached from the other guests.

Not much had changed in ten years, at least not in the decor: the same leather armchairs and round, glass-topped tables strategically dispersed for the guests’ comfort; the same ebony grand piano with top down and keyboard cover closed, awaiting the evening’s entertainment; the same brick and copper fireplace, its embers banked in mild weather.

The ambience had something familiar and restful about it that welcomed Eisenstein. He relaxed until Mr. and Mrs. Painintheass entered with another couple. Their simian guffaws and f-bomb laden jabbering subverted his temporary illusion of well-being.

Where were their children? He wondered. The question crossed his mind and vanished as quickly as it came; the matter of the Painintheass brats’ welfare did not concern him. But they were like migraine headaches; even when they were absent, he feared their recurrence.

Eisenstein nursed his scotch; it was not his favorite twenty-year old single malt. Rather, he drank an inferior ten-year-old blended product. The difference in price — eight dollars per glass — had decided the issue. A decade earlier, he drank for pleasure; now, he drank for escape.

Mrs. P. emitted a blood-curdling whoop that reverberated throughout the lounge just as Eisenstein was sipping scotch. The woman’s hyena imitation jarred him so that his hand jerked and he spilled a drop on his best shirt. “If only that had been her death cry from the stake driven through her heart” he muttered as he mopped the spot with his water-dampened napkin.

While our friend was thus preoccupied, a refreshing ocean breeze blew through the lounge bar. Eisenstein glanced toward the terrace. The twilight sky seemed a rococo composition in blue, pink and gold — a glimpse of sublime beauty in contrast to Painintheass ugliness.

Eisenstein gestured to his server. She came promptly. “I’m taking my drink outside. Please bring me another and you may keep running a tab.” Eisenstein took himself and the remainder of his scotch outdoors. The place seemed empty, which suited our friend’s mood.

He took a seat at a small table next to the white balustrade that bordered the mezzanine terrace. His server brought him a fresh drink and removed his empty glass. She returned to the bar, and our friend began a conversation with an imaginary woman he called “my friendly ghost.”

“She’s pretty, don’t you think?” The ghost sitting across from him smiled while admiring the waitress’s firm little behind.

“I wouldn’t know.” He held his glass a moment before sipping. Then he put down his scotch and rinsed his mouth with ice water.

“How is it?”

“How’s what?”

“Your favorite scotch, of course.”

He winced. “This is hardly my favorite. I’m drinking failure.”

“What does failure taste like?” The ghost knew, but she still wanted his opinion.

“It tastes like the dirt on your grave.” He searched the ghost’s face for some reaction to his remark. She seemed mildly amused, which was irksome. He turned his face seaward, and stared at the dark Pacific. White waves rolled over the surface, breaking on the rocks and washing the sandy shore. The breeze rustled palms lining the road that ran along the coast between a private beach and the hotel. His face wrinkled, and he shivered. “It’s cold out here.”

“Not *too* cold, Mr. Eisenstein.” He glanced up and saw a real woman smiling at him. The ghost had disappeared but the woman standing beside his table resembled the apparition — so much so that she startled him speechless. “I’m sorry,” she continued, “I suppose you don’t remember me, but then you didn’t recognize me the last time we met either, and I’m afraid I’ve embarrassed you. What an amazing coincidence, our meeting here after all this time.” She spoke in a familiar but pleasant sort of chatter.

Her reference to their last meeting jogged his memory. It had been at this hotel, ten years earlier, at a healthcare law seminar. In addition, he remembered that he knew her from some time before that encounter, but he could not recall from where or when. The coincidence was certainly amazing; in fact, it was uncanny and disturbing. He smiled nervously, got up from his chair and greeted her. “I... I do remember you, but I’m afraid I’ve forgotten your name. I’m so sorry; it’s a sign of old age, I guess.”

The woman laughed softly, but there was nothing outwardly reproachful in her demeanor — at least not that Eisenstein could detect. She went on as though their meeting was the most natural thing in the world. “That’s all right, I’m not so old and I’ll admit I’ve forgotten your first name.”

Had he told her his first name? He had never forgiven his parents for naming him Victor Hugo after his father’s favorite author. In his youth, family and friends called him Vick, and that name, Vick Eisenstein, reminded him of someone who wore silk suits, spent too much time in Las Vegas, and had a collection of Sinatra records. He blushed and stuttered, “Uh... my name’s Victor, so you can understand why I prefer Eisenstein.”

“Why I think Victor’s a lovely name. I have a Great-Uncle Vick; he’s a wonderful old guy.”

“I’ll bet he is,” our friend grumbled to himself. Remembering his manners, he asked, “Will you join me Ms.... uh...?”

“Thank you, I will, and it’s Laura Brown. Please call me Laura.” She sat opposite Eisenstein and continued smiling. She appeared to be about forty, petite, with bright green eyes, pale, flawless skin and sensual mouth. Her long, silky chestnut hair glistened, and she wore a simple black cocktail dress that showed her figure to advantage.

Very attractive, our friend thought. So why flirt with a washed-up old man? Then, maybe she believed that his circumstances had not changed in ten years. Perhaps she was a bimbo frequenting this once exclusive hotel in search of a sugar daddy. Eisenstein knew the type — at any rate, he thought that he did.

He glanced at her hand in search of a telltale diamond, and saw none. And it was a pretty hand, with long, slender fingers and carefully manicured and polished nails. His eye scanned the terrace; they were the only guests seated outside. He politely asked if she wanted a drink and she answered in the affirmative, while presuming to call him “Vick.”

Eisenstein signaled the waitress and then had an awkward moment worrying that Ms. Brown might expect him to pick up her tab. He recalled that she had been a hospital administrator and wondered if she had lost her job in the recession. “Are you still working for the same hospital?” He reckoned that if she answered, “Yes” or she was similarly situated financially, it would get him off the hook.

“Oh I’ve moved up a bit. I’m Executive Vice President and CFO for the hospital group now.” She said this matter-of-factly but softly, almost apologetically, as if wanting to be truthful without bragging.

“If that’s the case,” Eisenstein thought, “*you* can buy the drinks.” He eyed his companion. She was certainly good-looking and, if truthful, unmarried — no ring — and not lacking for money. Of course, it could all be a sham. He smiled and with just a hint of sarcasm in his voice, which she did not seem to detect, said, “I’m glad you’re doing so well.”

“Thanks; it sounds better than it really is,” she replied with the sort of modest self-deprecation that proud people affect. “Are you still a regional counsel?” She inquired with a hint that his status might no longer equal hers.

“No, I’m retired.” That sounded better than saying that his employer had eliminated his job in a downsizing. He had received a retirement package that was more silver than gold, and it had tarnished considerably in the recent market crash.

She smiled sympathetically. “Oh you’re much too young to be retired, but we’ve had our layoffs too. I suppose no one is safe in times like these.”

He thought of replying, “Thanks for your empathy,” but why be sarcastic? He remembered something about Laura Brown that had impressed him at the time of their last meeting — her ingenuousness. He fumbled around for a more appropriate response.

He started by repeating himself, adding a “truly” for emphasis and an assurance of his sincerity. “Thanks, and I’m *truly* glad to hear that you’re doing so well.” He paused a moment, then continued, “You know, the last time we met...” He stopped again; he was about to say something awkward, and her wide-eyed gaze and warm, red-lipped smile unnerved him. “I recall you gave me your card, and I promised I’d call you about... something. I’m sorry I didn’t.”

“Why be sorry? I’m sure you had more important things on your mind.”

The waitress came for their order. Eisenstein requested his favorite scotch — Why not? No one lives forever — and Laura ordered Bombay Sapphire and tonic.

They carried on a safe shoptalk conversation. At one point, she questioned why he did not get back into their relatively recession-proof business. Someone with his experience could do quite well, even on a part-time consulting basis. She would talk to people, if he were interested.

He nodded indifferently. *Why be sorry?* It all came back to him now. She had given him her business card and asked if he would attend the next scheduled seminar. He said that he would, but he did not attend.

Following the seminar, a woman lawyer colleague, married with children, had teased him. During the introductions, the most attractive woman in the room had blurted out, “Oh I know Mr. Eisenstein.” Several attendees had smiled or laughed. Eisenstein had flushed with embarrassment. He had only a vague recollection of Laura Brown from an evening course they had attended a few years earlier. His friend reproached him with a knowing smile. “She obviously likes you and you didn’t even remember her name.”

“Cat got your tongue?” Laura questioned. He had drifted while pondering the past. She continued smiling enigmatically as she sipped her drink.

“Sorry,” he muttered, “my mind wanders. Another sign of old age, I guess.” That was a lame excuse; her presence bewildered him and he had simply run out of things to say.

“You say that too often — about your age,” she scolded. “You don’t look a day over fifty.” She saw right through him. He pleaded age as an excuse for his dullness and indifference.

There was a sudden eruption of drunken laughter; the Painintheasses and friends had come out to the terrace. Their appearance reminded Eisenstein of the monkey house at a zoo, except here the monkeys were not caged. The noisy party settled at a nearby table, but not before Mrs. P. bent over the balustrade and puked her appetizers and cocktails into the bushes.

Eisenstein downed his drink and eyed his companion with a desperate look. “Would you like to go for a walk? The grounds here are *still* lovely.”

His “still,” said volumes as well as his disgusted frown that expressed a longing to escape from all life’s Painintheasses. She agreed, and they waited for their server who had gone to attend to the Painintheass party. True to form, that group monopolized the young woman an inordinately long time while changing their orders, complaining about the bar not serving drinks that existed only in their muddled brains, laughing hysterically at their own unfunny jokes, making suggestive comments about the waitress, complaining about the service, and so forth.

When Eisenstein and Laura settled their tabs, there was some polite back and forth about who would pay and they finally agreed to an even split. As they were leaving the terrace, Laura glanced at Mrs. Painintheass, turned toward Eisenstein and observed, “She’s a celebrity. She has her own reality show — Trailer Park Party.”

“No doubt,” our friend replied mordantly.

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They walked along a purple wisteria-sprinkled path that meandered through the neatly manicured lawn and well-tended flowerbeds. Soft light flickered from the black wrought-iron gas lamps; the full moon glimmered behind a lampshade of drifting clouds. They stopped at a quiet vantage point

with a stunning view of the Pacific and the palm-lined beachfront. The ocean breeze rattled the fronds. “This would have been a great meeting place for Errol Flynn and Olivia de Havilland,” Eisenstein thought nostalgically.

Laura crossed her bare arms over bare shoulders and rubbed them as if trying to keep warm. Eisenstein noticed and offered her his jacket, which she accepted with a grateful smile. He did not know what to make of all this, *this* being a rendezvous with a woman he barely remembered who had suddenly and unexpectedly appeared like a ghost from a shadowy past. It had the dubious quality of contrived fiction.

Speaking of ghosts, Eisenstein’s peculiar haunt reappeared, interposing her ectoplasm between our flesh and blood protagonists. He sensed her presence immediately, and began a silent dialogue. “I smell your perfume — musky and intoxicating as it was when you were young and alive. Why is that?” He asked the same question each time they met.

“You sense my presence as only you can remember it. When you’re gone, I’ll vanish.”

“Have you no other lovers — no one else to remember you?”

The ghost laughed. “I’ve had many lovers, as you seem to have forgotten. Most of them are dead, and of those still living, only you remember me.” She paused a moment, before adding, “I exist only in your memory.”

He shook his head. “Too bad — I’ll be dead soon.”

The ghost nodded her agreement. “Yes, it’s a shame. We’re both dead, but in different ways. I’m in my grave, and the world’s buried you alive.”

He grinned sardonically. “Yes, like a Poe character; and you’re my Annabel Lee.”

“Is this our kingdom by the sea?” She turned her gray eyes toward the surf.

He glanced alternately at the ghost and the living woman before replying, “No, I suppose not.”

The ghost sighed, “Vick darling, why don’t you come on to this woman? She obviously likes you.” That was the advice his former colleague had given him ten years ago.

He did not answer. Instead, he gazed wistfully at the moonlit clouds. “How beautiful!” he exclaimed aloud to no one in particular. He felt the soft caress of the ghost’s hand on his. Or was it Laura’s hand? He looked back at her, with dull old eyes. The ghost had vanished. Laura Brown held his hand. He wanted to say something, but what came out would have been better left unsaid. “That’s what killed me — too much beauty. Or perhaps it was too much imagination.”

Laura was taken aback, but she tried to be sympathetic. “Can we have too much beauty? And being imaginative is a good thing.” She smiled encouragingly while fixing her eyes on his.

He replied without thinking. “Beauty smoothes the rough edges, and we need that roughness to thrive, let alone to survive. And we can’t let our imagination run wild. We risk losing touch with reality.” He stared at her bright face, now half-hidden in evening shadows. He did not know where she ended and the ghost began. “And then of course, we don’t live beautifully or imaginatively now.”

“Did we ever?” she whispered and waited for an answer. He stared silently, and she continued, “Your life can’t be *that* bad. After all, you can still afford to come to a place like this.”

Why did she bring his finances into the conversation? Eisenstein glared at her, as though she had violated his trust. “I can’t afford it — not now,” he muttered. “That’s why I’ve come here to die.”

His morose comment frightened her; his reference to death had raised a red flag. “Are you ill?” she questioned, her voice trembling. She had started her professional life as a nurse and Eisenstein had, in her mind, transformed from a potential lover into a high-risk patient in need of professional help.

He looked down at his hands while realizing that he had revealed too much. “I... I meant that figuratively. My life is over, but I still breathe. Please don’t worry; I’m not worth it.” His voice faded; both Laura and the ghost were gone.

He heard the sound of a woman’s heels crunching gravel. He turned his head and saw Laura’s handsome figure scurrying away from him in the direction of the hotel. She had dropped his jacket on the ground while making her escape. Apparently, she did not want to spend the rest of her evening with a depressed old loony. “Smart girl,” he thought.

Eisenstein blinked his eyes as if by doing so he could restore her lost image. “Talking to yourself again, old man,” he mumbled. “It’s time to go.” He bent over to retrieve his jacket. Screams, laughter and the rattling of skateboards shattered the stillness. He sensed a rumbling, a rush of wind and the sting of a hard slap on his protruding buttocks. He jerked up, turned his head and saw the wheel-mounted Painintheass kids streaking down the pavement.

Little Meredith stared back at him and stuck out her tongue. Eisenstein gave her the finger; she cackled like a young hyena and skateboarded on into the darkness. Lurking behind a tall palm, Mrs. P. had recorded it all on her iPod for the next episode of *Trailer Park Party*.

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Abha Iyengar's prose and poetry have appeared in *Mannequin Envy*, *Insolent Rudder*, *Dead Drunk Dublin*, *Citizen 32*, *Arabesques Review*, *The Fabulist* and others. He is a Kota Press Poetry Anthology contest winner, and his story "The High Stool" was nominated for the Story South Million Writers Award. He is a member of The Poetry Society of India and Riyaz Writer's Group at The British Council. His flash fiction has won contests at *Tattoo Highway* and at *Door Knobs and Body Paint*.

## Drought Country

by Abha Iyengar

This year, after seven years, the fields are dry once again and there is no rain. Mother does not need to tell Baabul how it will affect them, he knows. After all, he is the one who does the stocktaking, the inventory control. He knows that this year, if there is no rain, they will not have much money to go around to buy anything besides the basic food, maybe some rice gruel, maybe some onions and potatoes.

They are awaiting the monsoon. The heat is unbearable, the sun a red ball of fire that promises nothing but dry fields and baked earth, a wanting and a yearning. Baabul can feel the cracked hardness of the earth slicing through his heels. Anything will harden and stiffen when deprived, he thinks. Nature makes it so.

Mother is stiff, austere; she does not speak much and her eyes soften only sometimes, when a stray thought enters her mind or she hears an old song on the radio. But these are moments so rare that he can hardly vouch for their being true.

Maybe if father had been around, she would have been different. He remembers his father only through the photograph in the main room. That photo is of his father as a young man, at the time of marriage. Baabul has been told he was a baby when his father left home.

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Seven years ago, when the rains did come, after everything had dried up and there was no promise of it, he was very young. He has a faint memory of lying in fever, and his mother, very calm, next to him. She kept chanting something. He remembers nothing else.

People tell him, especially Mishima, the old lady who sells jhalmuri and little orange sweets wrapped in transparent paper, that it was a miracle that night.

On this day, as he stands there, buying a small paper bag of jhalmuri, she begins her tale again.

"Baabul," she says, "the clouds just opened up and poured like never before. The air spun with water, and the peacocks, you should have seen them dance."

"Baabul," she says, getting soaked in her narrative, "with the coming of the rains, the earth cooled, and so did your fever. We had a bounty harvest like never before."

"Yes, Mishima, I know," he tells her. He has heard this story so often, and since the wonder did not happen before his eyes, he is not impressed. She gives that extra twist of lemon on his jhalmuri. That twist is just what is obvious. There is something in her white blue eyes which holds him.

Her voice rasps like sandpaper against glass. "They were waiting for you."



He stiffens. "Stick to your business," he tells her.

"The hyenas," she shivers, "they were pacing that night, to pick you and take you. It seems they turn humans into hyenas. They are adding to their stock. They take the dead ones. They revive the dead body by licking it, and then they nip it slowly, and then the dead body comes alive, only now it is a hyena, with marks over its body, and no longer a male or a female..."

"Stop it, stop it, what nonsense!" Baabul tries to walk away.

Her voice follows him, as shaky as his legs, "Your mother saved you."

He begins to run. The hot, dry air licks him. He sits on the porch of his home, his head hanging between his knees, his tongue lolling out.

There are no hyenas in the village. Mishima needs to get her head examined. He is shaking, however, as he goes in.

\* \* \*

His mother never talks about his fever or the rains that came after that. Now, when he thinks of it, he finds it strange that his mother was so possessed and calm at the time of his illness. He lay dehydrated and almost dead, but she did not sit close to him, holding her pallu to her eyes. She did not rock from side to side, crying copious tears and bewailing her fate.

When his childhood friend Rana was dying in the grips of a fever and no medicine to help him, Rana's mother had done just that; she cried and cried, but the flood of tears did not bring her son back. He had wondered then why his mother did not give her the mantra, the same one that had brought Baabul back from the dead.

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That night Baabul is unable to sleep. He tosses and turns in bed, drenched with sweat. Any sound he hears in the night makes him jump. At the break of dawn, he is out in the fields, welcoming the light as never before.

He comes back inside, and his mother calls out to him. Baabul looks at his mother as she talks to him and finds her different. His mother's eyes are always quiet, concentrating only on the work at hand. They are usually like clear pools, steady and unwavering. He sees now that her eyes have a glazed look, she looks at him but does not really see him.

She is also standing differently; it is as if her body has become suddenly pliable, as if her back has decided it has had enough of stiffness. Her cheek looks flushed in the morning glow.

The house has almost a festive air that day. It is not big; it has one bedroom, which is really his mother's. He sleeps in the drawing room or central space, where the kitchen is too; the bathroom is at the back and separate. It is an old-fashioned house left to them by his maternal grandparents, the home Baabul's mother came back to when his father left.

It has been cleaned, swept, washed, and has the sparkle and luminescence of a place prepared for love or worship. Baabul has a sense of this, though he may not be able to define it. It is a sense of a place, what it begins to mean on different days. Each day the same place will have a different smell, a different feel, and this is what seeps into a person and makes him feel bright, cheerful, sad and melancholy or just spent on different days.

He knows his mother feels spent on most days; the cares and responsibilities heaped on her would make anyone so. He tries to do his bit, but he cannot do enough.

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His mother tells him now, “Go, Baabul, and find some peacock feathers for me, I want them.”

“Peacock feathers? What for?” He has to know.

“For my prayers tonight,” she says. She often uses strange things for prayers; not the usual coconut and flowers for her, so he is not too surprised. But this is the first time she has asked him to fetch peacock feathers.

Baabul steps out of his home and looks around, perhaps he will be lucky and won't have to go far to find some feathers. Finding peacock feathers is not easy, but he must try to make his mother happy.

Dusk takes its time gathering, but it comes. Baabul is returning empty-handed, and a certain sadness fills him. He wonders why his mother makes such demands on him and expects them to be fulfilled. Other ladies also offer prayers to the various gods, but he has never seen them use peacock feathers. What kind of deity is this that has to be appeased this way?

He looks down and kicks a stone, a snake slithers away. He sees two peacock feathers lying in his path. He picks them up, amazed at their blue-green and gold splendor.

His mother is calling out to him. He can sense her restlessness. His sadness and confusion is replaced with sudden anger.

He walks into the room and flings the feathers at her feet. “Here you are,” he says. He walks up to the photo of his father and dashes it to the ground. Then he stomps out of the house.

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The night is hot, the windows have been opened to let the air in. Baabul is lying on his bed, he knows he cannot spend the night outside.

Thirsty, he gets up in the middle of the night. His mother's bedroom door is shut. The smell of incense is in the air. He cannot help himself; he must know what is going on. He looks through the keyhole.

There is a peacock on her window ledge. He comes down and begins to dance. His mother is on her bed, she is looking beautiful, her eyes soft and expectant. The peacock now spreads his feathers out, revealing his splendour, which winks in the night light like gold in the sun.

Baabul's mother gets off the bed. She has the two feathers in her hand. She waves them in the air, says something and closes her eyes. Suddenly, the peacock changes into a man, dark-skinned, with gold and blue dress of muslin. His hair falls down his back in a mass of blue and gold. He takes the two feathers from her fingers and places them on the bedside table. He walks up to Baabul's mother. He is majestic, regal, and as he moves, a strange music springs up in the air.

They are dancing together. It is some kind of a dream sequence he is watching. He sees them together: there are no walls, no keyhole, no windows, just the sight of them dancing a slow and languorous dance.

Baabul is on his haunches, watching. He holds his head in his hands and turns away.

Outside, there is a crack of thunder. He is shaken, moved out of his reverie.

Rain? Rain!

The front door is open, the wind has unlatched it. Clouds have gathered. Big fat drops fall on the ground and disappear, for the earth is hungry and parched with longing.

He looks at the distance. He sees peacocks, dancing under the moonlight. The rain falls harder, gusts of wind blow him off his feet.

“Mother?” he calls out. “Mother?”

There is no response. He looks out of the door, gusts of wind blow the cool air in. In the distance he sees shapes.

He sees the silhouette of a woman in a sari walking away with a man who has a splendid mane of peacock feathers cascading down his back. He begins to run, fast, but the vision he sees vanishes. There is nothing but the dark night, the moon, and the cry of the peacocks in the distance. The rain is falling hard.

“Mother,” he calls out, “don’t go.” He lies down in the wet mud and cries.

The wind whispers in the trees, lifts his hair and lets it fall.

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## Yellow Pickle

by Blaise Marcoux

The sky burned pink as the sun bid farewell. Palm trees whispered back and forth to each other as the ocean breeze flowed around them. The tide eased into the sand, scattering the seagulls that had congregated on the shore a few hours earlier. The islet was full of noise, but exuded tranquility.

The house resting on the center ridge, the only one on the island, stood out like a beacon, the windows beaming light into the sea. It was a picture-perfect scene from the deck patio. But the boys ignored it.

“Check,” Milo droned, moving his white queen into place.

Pongo eyed the piece apathetically. Bishop blocked queen. “Why are we here, Milo?”

“Not this again.” A white pawn moved up two spaces. “Please, not this again.”

A black pawn responded. “I’ve developed a new theory. This one’s foolproof.”

“Oh, like the last twenty?” White bishop crisscrossed over from behind the trenches.

Pongo frowned. “Don’t be difficult, Milo. Just listen.” Black made another move, capturing the white queen. “Poor father was strapped for cash in his young twenties and desperately needed assistance.”

Milo groaned and unleashed his knight.

Another black pawn stepped forward. “So father sees an advertisement in the paper or a poster on a lamppost or some such. A pharmaceutical company needs a test subject and is putting out feelers for any volunteers.”

The white king performed a castle move. “Pongo, the only subjects admissible for that type of thing need an illness that can be treated by the medication.”

“Yes, well, father lies...” A third pawn moved forward, joining the others in the advance.

The white bishop finally struck. “Oh, so now father is a liar. Yes, father seems the lying type. But let me guess. This medication ‘impairs’ father. Resulting in his eccentricities. So the pharmaceutical company recompenses him handsomely, resulting in the purchase of our home.”

Black was playing sloppy now; a pawn flayed back, capturing the bishop and failing to properly strategize the board. “You have to admit, Milo, it makes a certain amount of sense.” The sun was beginning to set on the ocean.

“And what of mother? Where does she fit in your timeline? And can any lawsuit win really cover an entire island? There are so many holes in this; it just doesn’t make sense. Naturally, of course, because you got this from a book. I can always tell when you’ve been sniffing in the thriller section again.” From its hiding place, the white knight snagged the offending black pawn, moving into prime position of taking the leftmost rook.

Pongo threw up his arms in frustration. “Well, then how do you explain how he... how he... *just is?*”

The front door flew open, and Mello Mango, in a white apron covered with tomato sauce, yodeled, “Oh, Milo! Oh, Pongo!” He cocked his head quizzically at his sons’ patio activities. “Oh! You’re playing chess! I never played that, I didn’t know how to, I always played horseshoes, but it was always with myself, and I didn’t have any horses or shoes so I’d throw a can into the trash pail, but I always missed, so I’d go drink another soda, and then I’d throw the can into the trash pail and miss, so I’d drink another soda and...”

“Coming, father!” interrupted Milo, jumping up. He shot Pongo a look and walked inside, his brother following behind him.

\* \* \*

Milla listlessly chopped the carrots. At age twelve, she had become accustomed to being the real cook in the family, while father dawdled about with some attempt at chimichangas, or at least what father thought was a chimichanga recipe. Father and mother probably had an interesting relationship before mother’s... untimely death.

*Because of us*, thought Milla, and she nearly cut off her index finger. *Because of Pongo, Milo, and me. Because we were born.*

Father galloped in, giddy over his perceived dinner success. Her brothers trailed in, and she could see they had been fighting again. She had always thought that if Milo read less Voltaire and Pongo read less LeCarré then both would be better off.

“Storm’s coming,” Milla let the others know, sprinkling the salads with Thousand Isle. “The radio said so. Father, we really should board up tonight.”

Mello stirred a soupy substance around in a pot; thankfully, Milla could count on her father forgetting to serve the dish. He beamed at his only daughter. “Oh, a storm! We had a storm once back in Arizona and the lights went off and I couldn’t find Mr. Mungo and then I accidentally stepped on him, I think it was him, but we had a lot of cats and I don’t remember all their names—”

“We’ll do it, Milla,” cut in Milo.

“So I’d name them by the alphabet, but sometimes I would get confused because some of them looked the same, and sometimes I’d use numbers, but some of them looked the same so I’d get confused—”

“Thank you, Milo,” Milla responded, seating Mango quickly.

“So I called them all Bob, but sometimes I called them Mr. Mungo, so I probably stepped on Mr. Mungo, but maybe it was Bob—”

“Say grace, father.”

“And oh! Grace! Thank you God for the rain and the clouds and the butterflies and Saint Patrick’s Day and butterflies and night crawlers and for the television and for our home and for the salad and for lollipops and for clouds—”

“*Amen!*” chorused the children.

“Oh! Food!” And Mello began to devour the salad.

\* \* \*

Lightning dashed across the sky.

The man in the dark trench coat crammed himself through the window inch by slow inch. Ragged gasps escaped from his throat, his bloodshot eyes twitching wildly around the room. A piece of broken board tore into his coat and he winced but he kept crawling. With a crash he landed on the linoleum, pain jolting through his shoulders.

He could hear steps coming, running, racing. He tried to raise himself up, but sheer willpower wasn't enough; he needed energy, he needed sleep, he needed less pain. They were here now, four of them that the man couldn't make out in the lack of lighting. But a flash dispelled the darkness, revealing three confused children and... ah. Mango.

"Mango," groaned the man in the dark trench coat.

"Oh!" shouted out Mello joyously, launching himself into the man and nearly squeezing the life from him. Then Mello stepped back from the hug. "Oh, wait! Who are you?"

"Mango. Mello Mango," the man managed to say, struggling to stay upright. "It's me. Don't you remember? Dillon Hammond? From back in the day?"

"Oh! Which day? Tuesday or Wednesday?"

"You'll have to forgive our father," Milla explained, "he's—"

"Milla," Milo sharply interjected, "we don't know who this man is. He could be a thief. Or—"

"Not a thief," wheezed the man, and then he fell to the floor.

Mello stared at the man unthinkingly.

"Father, he needs a med kit," Pongo quietly noted.

"Oh! Med kit!" Mello raced out, leaving the three children with an apparently comatose stranger.

"Why," Milo wondered aloud, "am I the only one not throwing caution to the wind? A man breaks in. That's generally assumed to be a crime. Just because he can confuse father doesn't mean he can confound us. Seriously, people, think!"

"I am thinking!" Pongo retorted. "Whoever he is, he clearly needs help. I don't very much think a thief is going to go rob a house in this man's condition. Have you no charity, Milo?"

"Oh, have we been reading Dickens now, Pongo? What's next, a passionate defense of the poor?"

"While you two fight," Milla muttered, "I'll be dragging this man to the sofa. Feel free to help anytime." She pulled the man onto the couch, propping him up to keep him from slipping onto the floor.

The three offspring pulled up chairs and circled the man like an eager audience at a freak show. Only the rising and falling of the man's chest gave any indication of life.

"Now," Milla began, keeping her eyes on the man, "one detail you two haven't considered is how this man got here. Maybe he's from the delivery people."

A plane dropped supplies off at the island every Friday; gnarly men with blue uniforms would unload food, lecture tapes, toilet paper, and the like.

“Of course, he doesn’t exactly look the part. He’s wearing black, not blue. And he knew father. And the deliverymen barely do more than grunt, much less address father. So I think the driving question is not whether this man is crook or victim, but rather how he knew we lived here.”

The man violently coughed, jolting the children in their chairs. Then with his eyes still closed, the man groaned, “What are you kids, a bunch of mini-professors? Who talks like that?” The man bowed over, ragged breaths escaping from his chest.

Pongo shrugged and muttered something about geniuses, but Milo talked over his brother with vehement questions. “You were awake that entire time? Why were you pretending to be knocked out? Who are you? Why are you here?”

The man finally opened his eyes, his crimson-veined, hysterical eyes. He peered at Milo with intensity, then growled, “Where. Is. *Mango*?”

Milo crossed his arms. “He’s not here. So that means you’re going to have to deal with—”

Mello bounded into the room, clumsily juggling a med kit and triumphantly cawing, “*I found it! I found it!*”

The man chuckled at Mello. It was a harsh sound, lacking mirth. Then he moaned; Mello had slammed the med kit into the man’s chest. “Oh! Oh! Sorry! I started by looking in the basement, then I checked the attic, then I checked the basement again because I had forgotten I had already checked there, but then I found it in the basement—”

“*Mello, it’s so great to see you again!*” the man cried out with forced cheer.

“Oh! It’s you! From the marches!” Mello pulled up the man, embracing him, and made the man cry out in pain. “Yet! It’s Dillon Hammond and Mello Mango again! Oh! I should make you a sandwich!” Mello dropped Dillon to the ground and raced out of the room.

The triplets regarded Dillon on the room. “Marches? What marches?” wondered Pongo.

Dillon glared up and struggled to stand again, flinging the unneeded med kit to the side. “You’ll have to continue your inquisition later, tykes.” He paused. “Because, you know, an inquisition is—”

Cold disdain crossed Milla’s face. “We *know* what an inquisition is. We have a library, you know.”

Dillon began to limp out of the room. “We know what an in-key-sishun is. We so smart, we can say big words, look at us,” he mocked before exiting the room and slamming the door.

Milo harrumphed. “What was that you said about charity, Pongo?”

“That maybe we could donate him to charity. Because I doubt he could fetch anything at an auction.”

\* \* \*

Mello hummed to himself as he spread mayonnaise over the rye. He wasn’t humming a specific tune or really any tune at all, but he thought whatever it was, it sounded pretty, and oh! What’s this? He should put that on there too!

“Nice brats, there, Mello,” commented Dillon as he stumbled in. “But then, you were never the father type. Come on. What happened to your sense of adventure?”

“Oh! We’re going on an adventure?” Mello whipped around.

“*Careful with the knife!*”

“Huh? Oh! Knife!” Mello tossed the utensil inside the sink.

Dillon sunk into a stool stashed in one of the kitchen corners. “A butcher knife... to spread mayonnaise,” he said with a shake of his head. “Mello, do you ever feel trapped here?”

“Oh! One time I trapped a cricket in a bottle and then I—”

“Of course you do. You feel imprisoned. You’ve just been waiting for a breakout. Counting the days for someone to come in and rescue you from your private hell.”

“Kept it in my room, but *madre* screamed whenever she came in and saw it, so I kept it in the garage—”

“I’ve got a motorboat around the back. In this storm I can’t be sure it’ll stay anchored forever. We don’t have long. I know how you’re going to decide, Mello. I’ll be waiting for you, entertaining the brats. Pack light. We’ll be running through some woods.”

“But one day he escaped, or maybe it was a she, and then I was sad, but then I found a golf ball and I drew eyes on it with a marker and then I called it Cricket—”

“I know you’ll make the right decision. I’ll be waiting.” Dillon got up and gazed off into the distance before walking out of the kitchen.

“And we had all sorts of adventures, and we fished but we never caught anything, and I took him to the fair, but we needed tickets, so we left, and then we went fishing at night, but we saw scary men throwing another man who had ropes wrapped around him into the lake, and then we left, and oh! You’re gone!”

This confused Mello.

He chewed on the slice covered with mayonnaise and horseradish. Dillon had said something, he always was saying something, and Mello could never understand what Dillon was saying. He was like Molly that way, because Molly talked too slow, and Dillon talked too slow, and Milla, Pongo, and Milo talked too slow, and they never really said anything, except stuff about motorboats and shutters and responsibility. They never talked about dragonflies, and that made Mello sad.

*Madre* always said that Mello had his head in the clouds, and Mello liked clouds. They were nice and fluffy and you could imagine all sorts of things were in them, like horses or reindeers or dragonflies, and they were always changing.

He liked the island, it was nice and it was always sunny. He liked Pongo and Milo and Milla even if they were too slow. He liked that one lady who had come in and taught him to change the triplets’ diapers and dress them, she was a nice lady, like Molly.

But Molly was dead. And that made Mello sad. That made Mello very sad. And then the kitchen wall blew up and Mello had to run away.

\* \* \*

Dillon walked into the living room and realized the hell spawn were gone. Good. He tumbled into a couch and wished he could sleep. He’d taken too many caffeine pills. At the time he swallowed them down, he had wished he could take something harder than that, just as wished he could remember how to cuss, just as he wished he could remember how to do a lot of things. “All... I want... is... a cigarette,” he mumbled to himself.

“Smoking is bad,” the triplets chorused from behind him.



Dillon's muscles tightened in agitation. "You three are as bad as the Censors."

"What censors?" the shorter boy said, and Dillon could have sworn he'd heard the kid called Milo at some point. Probably while he was still half-conscious from the storm.

"You kids really don't know anything, do you?"

"We know lots of things." The girl, what was her name, Milla, yes, she was the one who had said that. And the third one was Pongo. Now he was getting the hang of it.

"Yeah? Why are you here, then?"

"Oh, you are the last one on earth to lecture us on metaphysics," Milo snapped. Dillon wasn't sure to like or loathe that one.

"No, idiot. Not here on Earth. On this island. Ever wonder about that?"

"No, he *never* does," Pongo bitterly explained. Huh. Trouble among the natives. Dillon would have to make note of that for later.

"Do you even know who your father is?"

"His name is Mello," one of them said. Dillon was having difficulty keeping track of who said what. Whatever. All the same to him.

"Yeah. Well, before you tykes were born, he was Mello Mango."

"Still is."

"Not getting the hint, are you, kids? He was free. He could make his own decisions. He didn't have you ball-and-chains strapping him down."

"Was he... well... different back then?" Pretty sure it was Pongo who'd put in that query. Huh. Well... was Mello different back then?

FLASHBACK: And Dillon yelled some more uncomplimentary things at the police line, but he saw some of the protestors were backing off, backing away, no! They had to stay united, they had to stay a crowd, they had to stay a mob!

"Hey," shouted Dillon at Mello, who was licking a mango ice cream cone on the corner, "you there! This is history! Hold this sign!"

"Oh! I'm not good at history, I don't know what Waterpool is, or why it is important, or what you're doing or..."

"Hold... the... sign!"

"Yay!" cheered Mello, waving the sign back and forth like a cheerleader. And that's when the pepper spray mists fell upon them. END FLASHBACK

Dillon blinked. "Yeah. Yeah, he was really different. Before they broke him."

Pongo looked triumphant. Milo looked confused. "'They'? 'Free'? What are you even talking about?"

"There were these protests. The government had bought up all the news agencies. All of them. They were forcing people to buy televisions. They were taking over everything. You see, they were going to make everything like *1984*." Pause. "Because, you know, *1984* is this book about—"

"*We know what 1984 is about!*"

Dillon cringed at the triplets speaking in unison. “Yeah, well, you kids have too much time on your hands. Anyway, they were actually putting cameras in houses, without the occupants knowing or agreeing to it or anything. And they would put these tapes on television. People were becoming addicted to other people’s lives. Privacy was no longer existent. And it was like the end of the Roman Empire. All breads and circuses and nobody knowing what the government was doing.”

“You’re very conspiratorial aren’t you?”

“Listen, you want to know how you got here or not? Me and Mello, we challenged the Man, we protested the Man, we stood up against him. But they captured us, wanted to make us an example. Thought it would be funny to imprison the protestors in reality TV shows. So you know what they did to me? Electric shock therapy. Electrocuted obscenities right out of me. You know, to keep their little programs clean. Hate to know what they did to Mello.” Probably nothing. Best not to let the kids know that.

“Imprisoned in a reality television show?”

“There are cameras everywhere in here. Videotaping your every move. They videotaped me for years. For fifteen years, I’ve been grilling pancakes. For fifteen years, I’ve been making *crème brûlée*. All my needs are met, sure. They have to. Feed the prisoner. Healthcare for the prisoner. But I was a prisoner. With no privacy to boot. Slave to the public’s eye. But I escaped. Yes, I found a way to escape.”

“How?”

“Oh, yeah, tell you all my secrets. Like you’ll hold up under torture.”

“Oh for you, I’d keep any secret.” Dillon was pretty sure that had been a sarcastic Milo.

“Me and Mello, we’re going to escape. I hacked into the island’s dish network. The cameras are in blackout now. Think. For the first time in your life, a million eyes aren’t staring down your back.”

“Well, it’s nice knowing that we weren’t alone.”

“And now, you kids, you’re going to escape. You’re going to finally be free.”

Milla held her arms behind her back, striking a militant pose. “We’re quite fine here with our books and lecture tapes, thank you very much.”

“But you don’t know what you’ve been missing. You don’t know the wonders of the outside.”

“Apparently tyrannical governments and crazy protestors. No thank you.”

Dillon violently began fishing around in his trench coat. The triplets tensed, expecting the man to pull out a magnum. But instead, Dillon drew out a simple cubic object with a screen in the middle of its plastic surface.

“What’s that?” asked Pongo.

“*Splatterfest IV*.”

“Sounds very banal,” Milla critiqued.

“I’ll leave that for you to decide.” He handed it to Milo. “Go on. Play it. It won’t kill you.”

“Said the snake to mankind,” muttered Milo. But he unpaused the game and began to push buttons.

“Oh,” gawked Pongo.

“Wow,” gawked Milla.

They stood over Milo’s shoulders and watched him play.

Mesmerizing minutes passed. They didn’t even realize that Dillon had left the room.

And then the explosions started.

\* \* \*

The charges went off slightly later than Censor Ten would’ve liked, and worst yet, the fireball had not been as impressive as it could have been. He checked the camera on the side of his rifle, looking through the viewfinder. No, this was completely unusable footage. They would never be able to put it on primetime.

“All right, spread out, keep your eyes wide open. The fugitive may be armed and dangerous!”

Censor Five glared at Censor Ten. “No he won’t.”

Censor Ten glared back, then stepped through the burning timbers. “Hey, Five, did you forget about audio or something?”

“Audio’s mucked up,” called out one of the censors from the back of the squad.

Ten grimaced. “Don’t tell me we’re having technical difficulties already.”

“We can’t just stop the mission to fix our equipment!” argued Censor Seven.

“Hey, you want this on mute?” Ten began to dial up Tech support, wincing as a piece of burning ceiling plaster plopped on his helmet. “Without good footage, the mission might as well be a failure. Period.”

“Not like we’re in a crossfire or anything,” muttered Five.

Seven gritted his teeth. “Uh, excuse me, Five? Are we not in the spirit of things here? Are we out of character here? Just flinging appearances out the window?”

“Listen!” snapped Five. “I remember a time when soldiers actually fought instead of this play-acting we do now! I mean, this is ridiculous!”

“Audio’s back on,” grunted Ten, “so shut up!” He aimed his rifle at the door, waiting. Their orders were to wait for resistance, brief firefight, then standstill. But there was no resistance. No crazy guy barreling out and firing at the troops. The minutes were passing. First the charges, now this. Was everything going to be out of synch from here on out?

“There’s not going to be resistance,” droned Five. “They’re gone, gone, gone.”

“Great!” yelled Seven. “So now what!”

Ten paused before speaking. Then, “We shoot up the couches. We shoot up the counters. Make it look good. Then we go searching. See if they’re not just hiding somewhere.” He cocked his gun, started the camera rolling, and blew a dozen rounds into the surrounding furniture.

Perfect visuals. Things were finally starting to turn out well.

\* \* \*

Mello wasn’t entirely sure where he was running. The floor seemed to be swimming below his feet, his soles not really touching ground as he pranced through his house. When he was finally tackled, he almost forgot to try and yelp, but it didn’t matter anyway because a finger was jammed into his mouth, silencing him.

Dillon recovered his breath, trying to wrestle Mello still. Oh no, the idiot had gone slack. “Mello!” hissed Dillon. “Mello, wake up! Now’s not the time to play possum!”

“Mmm a-mmm-mmm!” Oh right, the finger. Better remove that. “Oh, Dillon, there was fire, and then I saw men through the fire with big guns and then I started running.”

“Didn’t think they’d get here this quick.” Dillon shook his head. “We’ve got to get to the boat.”

“Oh!” Mello’s eyes widened. “But I’ve got to go get something!”

“Mello, we don’t have the time for this!”

“Oh! But I forgot my rubber ducky!”

Dillon yanked Mello into a wood-paneled room and started to tear off the boards from the window.

“And I forgot my special cherry-scented shampoo! And my secret recipe book! And my baseball bat! And I’m forgetting something else...”

“The baseball, maybe?” grunted Dillon, plying away the final board. He got out a bundle of cable, broke the window, and threw a line into the outside.

“Oh, no, never had one of those. Oh, and I forgot my fishy! But I think fishy is dead...”

“We’re going to have to rappel down. Good thing the boat is still there. I can see it from here.”

“Oh! I’m sure I forgot something else...” Mello muttered as he climbed down the side of his house. “There was the baseball bat and then there was the rubber ducky...” They raced across the beach, the rain pelting down on them.

“I just know I forgot something.” Mello scratched his head as the motorboat roared away. “I just know I forgot something else.”

\* \* \*

“Charge!” cried out Ten. The Censors barged through the door, turning it into splinters. The three children in the room stayed focused on their video game and didn’t even bother to turn around.

“Don’t believe this...” growled Five.

“Hey!” shouted Seven. “Kids, could you look a little more frightened, please? Just widen your eyes or something!”

Milo held up the video game. “Absolutely. If you can pull off something more exciting than this.”

Seven gasped. “Is that... *Splatterfest IV*?” Five looked at Ten hopelessly.

\* \* \*

“Just know I forgot something,” panted Mello, sprinting behind Dillon, jumping over the occasional log. They’d ditched the boat on the shore thirteen minutes ago. “Just know I forgot something.”

“Okay, break time.” Dillon halted, bowled over in exhaustion. “Don’t hear any rustling behind this. We got a good lead.” Mello trotted past Dillon, still scratching his head. “Oh, oh, oh! Know I forgot something!”

Dillon leaned against a tree trunk. “Apparently, a rubber ducky.”

Mello shook his head, looking genuinely contemplative. He looked into the clearing sky. The storm had moved on its way. “Just know I forgot... oh!”

Dillon jerked up. “What? Mello, what is it?”

“A camera! They can see us, Dillon!” He pointed at a light blinking from one of the branches. “They can see us like they could back on the island!”

Dillon relaxed. "Of course they can."

"But that's bad! They'll be following us! We won't be able to escape!"

"But we did escape!"

"Oh! But they'll find us! And then we won't be escaping! They'll ask me all those questions like they did before and they'll laugh at me and I won't know why they're laughing—"

"Heh. They'll never catch us. We'll always be one step ahead."

"Huh?"

"Mello... the domestic life... it's not for either of us. We were under house arrest. With no freedom, no choice. So I made a deal with the Man. Let me out, I said. You can still have your show. It just won't be another one of your dime-a-dozen *Brady Bunch* remakes. Two fugitives. Running away from the law. It's perfect television."

Mello felt confused, as if the world was finally going faster than him, was finally outracing his thoughts. "Bu... bu... but why?"

"Think about it, Mello! We're free! Yeah, we still have no privacy. Yeah, in a way, we're still prisoners. But prison is a state of mind. We're not closed in anymore. We're not trapped like we were!"

"Bu... bu... but I liked my house! I liked my island! I liked my butterflies! I liked my... oh! Milo! Milla! Pongo!" Mello began to whirl around, knowing that if he just looked in the right place, there the triplets would be, having their dull conversations. "Oh! Oh! Where are they?"

"Mello, they were just holding you down. You can't run from the Man with those brats wanting a bathroom break or a morning snack every five moments! Freedom, Mello! You're finally free!"

"No!" cried out Mello in horror. "You're a bad man, Dillon! A very, very bad man! You... you're nothing... but a... you're just like... the Man!"

Dillon's face turned to stone.

"You don't, Dillon, you don't care about anything! I don't even know what you're talking about! You... I... oh! You wear black! And I don't like black! And you talk about the Man! And if it weren't for you, those other bad men wouldn't have asked me all those questions! And that stinging stuff wouldn't have gotten in my eyes!"

"Without me," Dillon coolly began, "you wouldn't have those children you're currently missing. Or do you think any woman would reasonably fall for you... unless they were forced to? I made your life, Mello! I made you into what you are today! And I can remake you as I see fit! Without me, you're nothing, you understand? Nothing!"

"No!" Mello did the only thing he knew how to do. He ran. He ran through the brush, ran between the trees, just as he had run through the deserts of Arizona, just as he had run through the streets of New York City every morning. Before Dillon.

Oh, but Dillon was far behind him now, Dillon didn't matter. Bad men were blowing up his house now. Bad men had taken his children. Oh Milo! Pongo! Milla! They were gone! "No!" he yelled, pounding his fists on a pile of humus.

\* \* \*

Dillon sat down on the debris-covered forest floor. When the man in the nice business suit emerged from the bushes, Dillon wasn't even surprised. Dillon tipped his imaginary hat to the man. "Top of the evening to you, Director."

The Director smiled grimly back. He twisted his cane around in the dirt. "Is the star on his way?"

"Oh, I should hope so. I'm fairly sure I managed to run him off."

"It'll be a sure hit. A desperate fugitive... looking for his family. It'll be perfect for the Friday night slot."

"Awfully edgy. Considering you kept me from even cursing over the past fifteen years, I mean."

"Yes, well, we haven't had a war for the past fifteen years. The public has been living an idyllic existence vicariously through the TV. But the populace is getting restless. They always do. And as always, an anti-commercialism movement is rising. You understand how necessary it is for the United States to get on this rebel-rebel bandwagon, don't you? And not only get on it, but control it."

Dillon shook his head. "You sick—" and would've finished if a searing pain hadn't torn through his brain. Ah, the scars were still there. Better think of something else. "The cameras are off, aren't they?"

"Can't very well break character on-air now, can we?"

"Well, for the record, I really do think those kids are going to be messed up for the rest of their lives. You never told me that he had kids. They're going to miss their father, you know."

"No they won't. Let's face it, Hammond. Mango was a classic comical character. They always elicit sympathy but never emotional attachments. He was the comic relief in their lives, nothing more. Such a shame about his 'wife'. Such a strange pairing; I truly think she felt some love for him amidst all that pity."

The Director chuckled at Dillon. "You never really seemed to be one to care about the consequences of your actions. Perhaps you're having regrets over what your submission has done. Your shame is completely unnecessary. But very enjoyable to see, let me tell you."

Dillon was expressionless. "Well, I am your slave, Herr Director."

"Don't call me that." The Director strolled to his employee's side. "Oh, Dillon. We are all public servants... which is just another way of saying we're public slaves. We give the public what they want, we have to. Without that, we have insurrection and anarchy and nobody wants that. Not even the people who claim they want that rubbish actually do. You're just as good an example of that as any."

"Huh. Slaves to the public. Whatever the public wants." Dillon chuckled. "Funny you said that. I was talking about that with the Screenwriters Guild the other day."

The Director's face blanched. "You talked to the Guild?"

"Of course. During 'contract negotiations.' They liked your idea, but they agreed with me, it needed more pizzazz."

"Pizzazz."

“But of course, Herr Director. After all, your idea only had two real main characters: you, naturally, and poor Mello. But what if the Evil Bad Guy had an assistant?”

“I do,” the Director said. “It’s you.”

“Mmm. Right. Now let’s suppose the Evil Bad Guy assistant, let’s call him Igor, let’s say that Igor starts feeling sympathy for poor Mello. Starts helping the poor guy out occasionally.”

“That’s all part of my pitch!” protested the Director.

“So far it is. But me and the Guild, we both agreed there’s no dramatic tension between Igor and the Director with the current plot. No, Igor needs to do something heroic. Something bold, something dashing, something distinctly not yellow-bellied. Like, I don’t know, slit the Director’s throat when the Director least suspects it. And you know, the Guild really liked that idea. Really, really, really liked that idea.”

Horror overwhelmed the Director’s face.

Dillon grinned. “Smile, Herr Director. The cameras are back on.”

\* \* \*

No! Mello raised his head from the ground. He would find them! He didn’t know how to. But that had never stopped him from making chimichangas! He’d ask questions! He’d find out where the bad men were! And then he’d get Milo, Milla, and Pongo back! And then they’d find another island and they would live on it and they would eat pancakes and oh! A butterfly!

No! He couldn’t watch the butterfly! He had to find his children!

But the butterfly was so pretty...

Maybe the butterfly knew where his children were!

Mello’s eyes flashed with intensity. He bolted after the bug with purpose, with determination, with a goal. He was going to find his children. He was going to find Pongo, Milla, and Milo.

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Dan McNeil's fiction and reviews have been published online and in print by *Alien Contact* (German translation), *Antipodean SF*, *The Beat*, *Fantastic Metropolis*, *Fragment*, *Ink Magazine*, *Laura Hird*, *Monkey Bicycle*, *Mad Hatter's Review*, *Outsider Ink*, *The Quarterly Stape*, *Redsine*, *Word Riot*, and *Zygote In My Coffee*. Biographical details are scarce, but more information can be obtained at The McNeil Variations at [www.danmacneil.net](http://www.danmacneil.net).

## **Collecting Stones from a Beach**

by Dan McNeil

### BOOK OF THE WEEK

*Collecting Stones from a Beach*

by Professor Stafford McQueen

994 pp, Cambridge University Press \$94

Reviewed by Tim McLaughlin

Stafford McQueen is a poet, teacher and quantum physicist. Quantum physicist first, he worked with Stephen Hawking in the late 1960s on black hole theory. After co-developing this theory, he taught it to privileged, floppy-haired, upper-class students at Cambridge.

Later, he became one of the first modern physicists to appreciate the linkage between poetry, art and science. *Collecting Stones from a Beach* is proof-pudding of that linkage, containing as it does poetry, art and cutting-edge science.

Very early on in this delightful book, McQueen explains that collecting stones from a beach will, if carried out regularly, lighten that beach over a considerable period of time. However, as the stones cannot be 'unmade', that is to say, dispersed beyond the confines of this planet (unless loaded into a modified Saturn V and blasted towards Mars), he then beautifully points out that redistributing the stones elsewhere on this planet — for instance, to one's mantelpiece — achieves a kind of Malthusian balance. In other words, the mantelpiece accepts the weight that has been removed from the beach, resulting in a Gaian equilibrium of harmony.

McQueen rightly desists from delving into the obvious fact that the mantelpiece would inevitably collapse if too many stones were placed upon it. A surprising omission, one may think, but in my view the inclusion of tedious structural engineering principles and boring health and safety policy would have detracted from his beautifully vacuous and flowery prose. His truly wonderful mantelpiece metaphor is but one of many in this singularly unique book, a book of stones, dreams, faeces and blustery days on the English North Sea coastline.

Throughout the book, McQueen likens these billions of tonnes of stones to the billions of tonnes of faeces that mankind has shed from its body temple throughout the millennia. His defecation analogy occurs repeatedly throughout the book, a powerful leitmotif of mankind's entropic fragility. We can observe this theme in the preface, where McQueen indulges our fancies with just one of many marvellous poems:



Stones  
 Stones are everywhere, they are  
 On the beach  
 And within us  
 And elsewhere too  
 Yet these stones belong  
 To nobody but the Earth  
 Spewed out from the crust of  
 The planet like so much  
 Diarrhoea  
 Cooling after aeons  
 Then crumbling to form  
 Stones  
 On a beach  
 Like rabbit droppings  
 Basically

I myself visited Dungeness beach in Kent — the beach that inspired this poem — two years ago when researching the first volume of my latest book *Great British Nuclear Power Stations*, a personal travelogue of these leviathans of the atomic age.

Stumbling along the stony beach and nodding pleasantly at the day-trippers, with the massive bulk of Dungeness Nuclear Power Station looming impassively ahead, I was — like Thomas Pynchon — thankful to be famous and yet unrecognised.

Anonymity gives one such an advantage; for instance, when it comes to teasing information from a reluctant female employee of British Nuclear Fuels Limited. Assuming the demotic also helps — she was completely taken in by my impersonation of a drooling and imbecilic local. Had I been publicly recognisable, the employee in question would have gushed with unashamed embarrassment, and given me far more information — much of it useless — than I required for my research.

As it happens, it was only after I was released by the rather violent security guards (security guards too stupid to recognise me — don't they read *The Guardian*?) for attempting to climb the perimeter fence that I was confirmed as being on a mission of research, not terrorism.

Later, as I dragged my battered body back to my hotel, I squinted at the swollen orb of the setting sun through bruised and swollen eye sockets. Our solar furnace reminded me of the immense power contained within Dungeness's mass of concrete and steel; a power I would have been happy to see released in the form of an uncontrollable and catastrophic nuclear meltdown, obliterating not only myself and half of southern England, but (most importantly) the nearby house of Professor Stafford McQueen, preferably with him in it.

Digression aside, this fine book (McQueen's) proves beyond all doubt that years of academic contemplation can lead to a marvellous curate's egg.

Tim McLaughlin is a writer living in Romford. His *Great British Nuclear Power Stations* (Part 1, Essex to South Wales) will be published in October by Macmillan.

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Marina J. Neary is an award-winning historical essayist, multilingual arts & entertainment journalist, playwright, published poet, stage and film actress with principal PBS credits, as dancer, choreographer and model. An escapee from Communist Russia, she is fluent in English, Russian, Spanish and French. She is also author of an original tragicomedy, *Hugo in London*, highlighting the adventures of the French literary genius in England, which was produced in Greenwich, Connecticut in 2008. Marina is a member of the *Bewildering Stories* Review Board.

### **Where Else Can You Find Pies Like That?**

by Marina J. Neary

(Eastern Poland, 1985)

Joseph and Katherine lived under the same roof in chaste contentment. Joseph, a twenty-year old seminarian, looked at Katherine and felt nothing that would compromise the salvation of his soul. Father Athanasius wasn't always right after all. Not all women were brazen temptresses, at least not this one. The very sight of Katherine's round, stiff face set on top of a square body chased all unclean thoughts away. Holy serenity originated somewhere in the area of his stomach and then spread north and south.

And Katherine, every time she looked at Joseph, wanted to bring him a bowl of oatmeal with homemade butter and strawberry preserves, or a plate of blueberry pancakes, or a slice of cherry pie with a jar of whole milk. He would chew obediently, while she would lean her round head on her red fist and mutter, "Why, you're even scrawnier than my boy Stephan, God rest his soul."

Stephan had died in a motorcycle accident just a year earlier. His friends erected a cross in his honor on the side of the road. Traveling through Polish countryside, you see such a cross every kilometer, because nobody bothers to pave the roads or to teach sheep and cows traffic regulations. Still, it is vodka from across the border that causes most tragedies on the road as well as anywhere else.

"I don't drink," Joseph told Katherine the very first day. "Father Athanasius wouldn't approve."

"What a pity. I have some excellent cherry wine in the basement, like our Savior's blood."

And the cherry wine would appear on the table regularly. After just a few sips Joseph would remove his eyeglasses, take Katherine's hand and say, "You're sweet, Aunt Kitty."

She would pat him on the head, just the way she did that night when she found him unconscious, stuffed in an abandoned telephone booth, his hands tied with a telephone cord and the words "Pope's Concubine" written on his forehead in green ink.

"Who did this to you?" she would ask him from time to time. "Do you remember anything at all?"

"Not much. Father Athanasius sent me to town to buy textbooks for the library. Everything was going well, but then... I felt this pain around the bridge of my nose. And then... I opened my eyes, and there you were."

"Does Father Athanasius know where you are? Doesn't he expect you back?"

“Probably... But I like it much better here, with you. Sometimes I wonder if I died that night and went to heaven. Aunt Kitty... Your hands are never idle, and your clothes are made of wool. You’re the woman of noble character, straight from the Bible. I’ll leave if you don’t want me here.”

“Bah, your head is full of rubbish! Go to bed. You’ll find Stephan’s old shirts in the closet.”

She would light up the old oil lamp, escort Joseph to Stephan’s bed and cover him with three woolen blankets.

“Why don’t you have an image of the blessed Virgin over the bed?” Joseph asked once.

Katherine wagged her hand and looked aside.

“There used to be one, in a pearled frame, but then thieves broke in and took it, and I never got a new one. My Stephan had his own Madonna — with blue hair, lights everywhere. I took that filth down afterwards. Go to sleep, restless soul.”

The boy would fall asleep, oblivious to Katherine’s gaze lingering on him for hours afterwards. His usual waking time was between ten and eleven in the morning. He would kick the blankets off one by one, recite his prayers, and be out of bed by noon.

“Why don’t you put me to work, Aunt Kitty?” he asked one morning. “Why don’t you tell me to milk the cow or take her to the field?”

“Because, dear child, that’s the only cow I’ve got. If God forbid, something should happen to it...”

“But I feel so useless!”

“That doesn’t make you much different from my Stephan.”

“Perhaps I could go to town, get a job...”

“Doing what? Preaching on the streets? Don’t be stupid. Go inside, eat something. Where else can you get such pies?”

So the boy ate his pie obediently, which set a tradition for the next two months.

Then in early August, while Katherine and Joseph were drinking tea outside under an apple tree, a girl appeared at the gate. One could tell she was from Warsaw by her hair, mercilessly bleached and curled. Joseph had only seen such hair on Renaissance angels painted on the cupola of the cathedral. She was dragging a suitcase with one wheel missing.

“You don’t have a bomb in your suitcase, do you?” Katherine asked, being in an unusually cheerful mood that evening.

The girl dropped her baggage by the gate, kicked off her shoes and fluttered towards the house as if she had lived there her entire life. Katherine moved aside, making room on the bench for the mysterious guest, but the girl chose to sit down next to Joseph.

“My name is Isabelle. I’m sure you know it by now. Stephan must’ve told you.”

When Katherine heard another woman utter her son’s name, her square face turned rectangular. “You look hungry, sweetheart,” she said to the guest in an icy voice. “Don’t be shy. Help yourself.”

The last invitation was completely unnecessary. Isabelle tore a chunk of bread and dipped it into the saucer filled with strawberry preserves. “I had my reservations about coming here,” the girl continued. “I’m convinced that all of it is God’s punishment.”

Katherine pointed at Joseph. “Here’s your expert on God, sweetheart. Ask him.”

The boy revived instantly. “Speak, beloved sister. What leads you to believe that our merciful Lord is punishing you?”

“It’s my fault that Stephan is dead, even though the policeman insisted that it was just an accident.”

Katherine’s face became even longer and whiter, while Joseph’s eyes rapidly widened and blazed up.

“I summoned Stephan to Warsaw. At that time, I was five months pregnant with his baby and kept craving fresh strawberries, in the middle of winter. One evening Stephan got tired of my whining and hopped on his motorcycle, in wet snow...

“I waited for two hours, and then... Then the police showed up at the doorstep. I fainted before they finished telling me what had happened. Later that night I gave birth to a dead baby. That’s pretty much the reason why I came here. Will you ever forgive me? Should I leave now?”

The frozen curve of wrinkles on Katherine’s forehead stirred. “Don’t be ridiculous,” she mumbled in a ghostly voice. “It’s getting dark, and it’s a long way back to Warsaw. Spend the night here. Joseph took Stephan’s old bed. You can take mine. I’ll bring out fresh sheets.”

“And you?” Joseph asked. “Where will you sleep, Aunt Kitty?”

“In the barn. It wouldn’t be the first time. Stephan used to bring all sorts of cutthroats into the house, and they’d stay up all night drinking and listening to their satanic music.”

In the morning when Katherine went to wake up the guest, she discovered that the fresh pillowcases were all wet with perspiration. Isabelle had developed a fever overnight. Her bleached hair was like a yellow sponge.

Joseph was kneeling before the bed, holding the girl’s hand and praying. When Katherine came in, he lifted his head and glanced at her.

“Look, Aunt Kitty... What fragile fingers she has! Did you have such fingers when you were young?”

Katherine shoved her red hands in his face. “Look, you fool, and decide for yourself. Did I ever have lily fingers?”

“Should we call a doctor, Aunt Kitty?”

“I’ve never called a doctor before, not even when I found you in the phone booth. She’ll live, no worries.”

Katherine turned out to be right. Isabelle’s fever broke later that night. The girl sat up in her bed and turned her pale face, in the aura of bleached dry curls, towards her hostess.

“You’re a saint for letting me stay, Aunt Kitty. I just can’t imagine coming back to that apartment in Warsaw.”

“And what about my prayer?” Joseph inquired. “Don’t you think that the Holy Spirit had something to do with your recovery?”

Isabelle stretched her hand out, and he saw no other choice but to take it. And once he was holding that hand, he couldn’t resist kissing it.

“I confess I was worried,” he said. “And I’m not accustomed to worrying about anybody. Aunt Kitty is never sick. She’s so strong. You should’ve seen how much water she can carry in a bucket.”

“Enough about me,” Katherine interrupted him. “I’m only here to cook.”

She returned to her soups and jams. Joseph remained sitting on the bed, toying with Isabelle’s hand.

“Her son was one crazy savage,” the girl whispered with a mixture of nostalgia and terror. “He’d fly on his motorcycle all night like a demon. The police hated him. So did my parents. They cut my allowance off when they found out that I was carrying his baby. Would you believe it? His death made many people happy. Poor Katherine... For some reason I feel obligated to stay with her in this house. I have this feeling that she wants me here.”

“That’s grand!” Joseph exclaimed, beaming. “Perhaps you and I could go to church together.”

At that moment Katherine announced that dinner was ready. Isabelle attempted to persuade Joseph that she was well enough to sit at the table, but he insisted on delivering her dinner to her bed.

“Young lady, you’d better not stain the sheets with gravy,” Katherine warned her. “Have mercy on that linen!”

The girl shuddered and immediately planted a huge gravy spot on the sheet, right over the embroidery. Her eyes immediately filled with tears. “I’ll wash it, I promise!”

“Forget it,” Katherine growled with resignation. “You might as well wipe your hands and your mouth with that sheet. I’ll have to soak and scrub it anyhow. Go ahead, finish your dinner.”

\* \* \*

Isabelle never received an official invitation to stay, but Katherine never asked her to leave either. Every morning the table was set for three, so Isabelle knew she was still welcome in the house. More than once she offered Katherine help, and each time the stern woman told her to go and have a piece of pie instead.

One time when Katherine returned from the market she noticed that her old linen curtains were replaced by new ones of white French lace. It did not take a genius to determine whose initiative it was. With her hands clasped to her chest, Isabelle fluttered into the room.

“Well, Aunt Kitty, do you like it?”

“It really wasn’t necessary, my dove,” Katherine hissed through her teeth.

“But I wanted to! It’s a present, just to show how much I appreciate your hospitality. You must admit, those old curtains looked a bit... *provincial*.”

“Provincial, you say?”

“Y-yes...”

“And the problem with *provincial* is...?”

In two seconds Isabelle’s face became red and wet. “You’re still angry with me, aren’t you? You think I murdered your son, don’t you? You said you forgave me, but you still hold a grudge, don’t you? For once, tell me the truth. You want me to leave! Is that it?”

Joseph heard the noise and stormed into the room. His first instinctive movement was to put his arm around the sobbing girl.

“What’s the matter? Why is she crying, Aunt Kitty? What have you done to upset her?”

“She thinks I murdered her son,” Isabelle replied between sobs.

Joseph’s eyes blazed up with indignation. “Aunt Kitty! Did you really say such a thing?”

“She didn’t have to,” Isabelle continued. “It’s written all over her face! The hatred, the bitterness... How stupid I am! What am I doing in this house? I should’ve left the same day I came. No, I shouldn’t have ever come here in the first place! Whatever I say or do will only make her hate me more!”

While lamenting, the girl did not forget to hide her face on Joseph’s chest. He caressed her bleached hair and palpitated, for the first time beginning to understand the warnings of Father Athanasius — not that the old priest mattered any longer.

“Go outside, please,” Joseph whispered to Isabelle. “You need some fresh air. I’ll have a word with Aunt Kitty.”

The girl stopped sobbing and obediently went outside. As soon as the door behind her closed, Joseph attacked Katherine.

“How can you treat the poor girl with such cruelty? Hasn’t she suffered enough already?”

“Haven’t we all?”

“She mustered enough courage to bring you the truth! At last, you now know how your son died.”

“I didn’t need the bloody truth! This selfish bleached weasel sniffed her way into my house, just to ease her heart, to throw her burden on me. And you’ve lost your mind over that chunk of cotton-candy from Warsaw.”

“Don’t call her that!”

“Well, go outside and make sure she’s stopped sniffing. I’ve got cows to milk.”

Isabelle was no longer crying. She scooped some icy-cold water from the bucket and washed her face. Once again her eyes were bright and her cheeks rosy. In that condition Joseph found her.

“Thanks for not condemning me,” she said.

“Condemning you for what? Listen, you have to stop paying attention to Aunt Kitty. But why don’t you and I go to town for the rest of the day? I hear there’s that German band playing. I’m embarrassed to say, but I’ve never been to a rock concert before. Father Athanasius never allowed us to listen to that sort of music.”

Isabelle wrapped her arms around his neck. He thought he would faint, so he fiercely grasped at her hips for support.

At this moment Katherine was walking through the gate with a bucket full of fresh milk. When she saw Joseph and Isabelle, she dropped the bucket and covered her mouth with her hand.

“Aunt Kitty!” Isabelle exclaimed, still clutching Joseph. “Are you all right? Did you get dizzy all of a sudden?”

“I’m fine,” Katherine muttered, picking up the empty bucket. “You two go to town, do whatever you please....”

Isabelle expressed no further concern for Katherine and turned back to Joseph. “The old woman doesn’t like it when people fuss over her,” he said.

Meanwhile, the “old woman” was leaning against the wall in the kitchen, shuddering without tears. She could see her own reflection in the opaque mirror above the washbasin. She usually ignored the mirror, but now she could not take her eyes off it.

She stared at the thin graying hair tied in a bun, at the thick, sunburnt neck, the deeply set eyes without eyelashes and surrounded by wrinkles, the square chin. Suddenly she understood why exactly Stephan never had a father.

All these years she kept telling herself that it was the lot of all women to rear children on their own, that all men came and vanished, sometimes leaving souvenirs. Having only her own experience to draw conclusions from, she firmly believed that men's kisses and caresses were but natural consequences of having too much alcohol, nothing more. After all, no sober man tried to kiss or even embrace her.

One time, when she was seventeen, a truck driver who brought beer for the annual village fair dragged her into the hay barn. Having done what he wanted with her, he suddenly jumped up on his feet, cursing quietly, and ran outside. Katherine never saw him again and found comfort in thinking that devotion was simply not a manly virtue, that her deprivations weren't any worse than any other woman's.

After all, by the age of thirty most women she knew looked the same. They had the same yellow, wrinkled hands, black fingernails and gray hair. Just like her, they did not expect a sober man, be that a husband or a total stranger, to take interest in what was underneath their coarse woolen clothes.

Having seen Isabelle hanging on Joseph's neck, Katherine suddenly acknowledged the existence of another female species that had an unquestionable advantage over her own. Those creatures with fragile white fingers, lukewarm tears and empty, tinkling laughter could turn men into even greater fools than they already were.

Katherine knew that she could chop wood for three hours in front of a dozen men, and none of them would stop to help her. She also knew that it would take a woman like Isabelle nothing more than a pout and a sweet sigh to gather those very same men around her with their tongues rolled out. Even Joseph, who could not sleep without the image of Mary above his head, had fallen into the same pit.

Suddenly Katherine turned her shoulders out and looked through the window. The two young people were still in the yard, smiling to each other.

"Have a good time in the town, children!" she shouted. "Issy, here's my woolen sweater, in case it gets cold."

"No, thanks, Aunt Kitty," the girl replied. "Joseph already got my silk shawl. It goes better with my dress, don't you think?"

"You always look like a doll to me, Issy. Don't be too late, children. And don't waste much money on food. I'll be sure to leave you some dinner on the table."

Joseph was not listening anymore. He opened the gate before Isabelle, with surprising gallantry for a seminarian, and then offered his arm to her.

"It's so nice to be around a girl," he confessed. "Why does Father Athanasius condemn such things? I'm glad to be away from him. When Katherine took me in, I thought my life was good, but now I can't believe I spent seven years in the seminary."

Isabelle put her finger to his lips. "Can we please not talk about seminary, at least for tonight? We were going to town to have fun. Remember?"



Joseph apologized and promised not to mention God ever again, since he was about to dive into a series of ungodly activities. That night he had his first shot of vodka in the bar, and the instant onslaught of merriment that shook him made all the local alcoholics jealous. They started remembering their first drinking sessions, interrupting each other and almost weeping. They also gave Joseph tips on how to treat hangover, because every worthy man needs to know how to cure a headache before a twelve-hour shift.

Then some playful truck driver pinched Isabelle's breast, and Joseph naturally rushed to defend her honor. A few times he swung his fist at the offender, and every time he missed. A kind-hearted punch in the jaw flipped Joseph on his back. Isabelle squealed and rushed out of the bar.

"You're so brave," she told Joseph afterwards, blotting his bloody lip with an edge of her silk shawl. "Even the stuffy seminary couldn't smother the true man inside you. Oh, I just feel so *safe* with you!"

And again, she hung herself on his neck. Joseph, a quick learner, rubbed her sides. "Now I can tell Father Athanasius to go to hell!" he exclaimed, savoring the curse word he had uttered for the very first time. "We'll have some good times together, cause I'm a reformed man now. Don't worry, Issy."

Suddenly he released Isabelle and covered his mouth. A seven point earthquake ran through his body. His face, red and glowing a second ago, turned green. Blinking, he ran into hazelnut bushes and stayed there for the next fifteen minutes. Isabelle waited for him on the side of the road, wincing every now and then from the sounds he was making. When the sounds abated, she went to check on the boy.

"Don't look at me," he implored, on the verge of tears. "I don't know if I'll ever be able to look at myself. All those things I said... I can only imagine what Aunt Kitty will say when she sees me."

Slowly, Joseph pulled himself up to his feet, hoping that Isabelle would help him keep balance, but she recoiled, unwilling to risk staining her dress with vomit.

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They got home around three in the morning. All lights in the house were off, except for the small lamp in the kitchen. On the table there was a basket of fresh rolls with raisins, a pot of butter, a jar of pickles and a bottle of cherry wine.

"Look, Aunt Kitty left dinner for us," Isabelle sighed sweetly. "She must feel guilty about the things she said to me earlier."

"I can't look at food," Joseph muttered.

"Then have a pickle. Let's share one. You take one half, and I'll take another."

She opened the jar and took a sip of pickle juice.

"Oh, it's perfect. Lots of dill and not too much garlic. Here, try some."

"I've had that stuff before. I know what it tastes like... I just don't want any now, really."

"Come on, it'll make your stomach better."

Joseph shrugged, took a few sips and dropped his head on his hands. A minute passed in silence.

Suddenly Isabelle gasped and grabbed her chest. "Joe..." Her voice broke. "Joe, what's wrong with me? My heart's pounding... My neck's all sweaty... Joe? Can you hear me?"

Panting, she reached across the table to touch him. Her hands suddenly turned to lead. “Joe... I can’t stand up... My God, Joe...”

His head remained on the table. His hand contracted into a fist a few times and became limp. Then his entire body slouched to one side and crushed onto the floor. Through the burning fog in her eyes Isabelle saw the white froth on his lips and chin.

She also saw a dark square figure standing silently in the doorway. The door creaked, and the silhouette slowly floated towards the table and stopped just a few feet away from Isabelle.

“I’m sorry it had to be this way,” the shadow said, almost without malice. “But you wanted to be together, didn’t you?”

Isabelle, with her head slightly tilted to one side, dumbly stared into the blurry black square in front of her. Her eyes remained open even after her chest stopped rising and falling.

Katherine leaned back against the cold plaster wall and sat there motionless for a few hours, shifting her gaze from one corpse to another. A cock crowed on the opposite side of the village. Those sounds drove Katherine out of her forgetfulness. She stood up weakly, took one of the rolls from the basket and stuffed half of it behind her cheek. Then she picked up the pickle jar and drank the rest of the juice.

Before the poison had paralyzed her, she stretched on the floor next to Joseph, embraced him and rested her graying head on his chest. Despite the growing pain and nausea she smiled: she could almost hear his heartbeat.

One last time she glanced at Isabelle. With her face half-concealed by loose hair, the girl seemed asleep and perfectly harmless. Katherine let out a sigh of satisfaction and clutched Joseph’s corpse tighter. In this manner the three of them greeted the morning.

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Danielle L. Parker has been a fan of the speculative fiction and mystery genres since she was a teenager reading illicit Andre Norton, A. E. van Vogt, and C. L. Moore paperbacks by flashlight on do-your-homework school nights. College followed, with a dual major in computer science and accounting and a minor in German.

Her career in information technology and telecommunications had her working on everything from submarines to police systems to giant call center implementations, but it didn't stop her enjoyment of the worlds of sci-fi, fantasy, mystery, and classic horror.

After leaving Lucent Technologies, Danielle moved to eastern Washington State. When she has not been serving as a librarian has been hard at work writing short stories, novels, and book reviews for *Bewildering Stories*. Her novel *The Infinite Instant* was the 2009 Eppie Award winner. Its sequel, *The Nihilistic Mirror*, and a new novel, *Galen the Deathless*, are expected soon.

## **The Dream Miners**

by Danielle L. Parker

Jim Blunt, Captain of the starship *Pig's Eye*, earns a living the hard way at the raw edge of human space. Caught between Earth's long arm and the unwelcome attentions of humanity's alien rivals, the Asp, the captain sometimes finds himself in more trouble than even an outlaw trader can handle.

### Part 1

“Blub... blunb... Blunt...”

James Sherman Blunt, Captain of the ship *Pig's Eye*, paused in his stride. His bright blue eyes, startlingly cold beneath his space-bleached brows, picked through the shadows around him. *Had he actually heard his name?* It was as if water, unable to form a true mouth, struggled to form syllables out of burbling liquidity. Who, in the name of the beer he had christened his ship with, knew his name on this backwater excuse for a trading town?

Yet there it came again, gasping as if every sound were drawn painfully from the liquid of its veins. Letting his hand fall to the gun at his belt, Blunt turned.

He was in a narrow garbage-strewn alley, typical of Blessington's ramshackle, homespun construction. That faded gray door, leaning askew on its hinges, opened into the dim greenish glow of a fungi-globe. Blunt glimpsed a cloaked patron hunched over a long bar.

This was a drinking establishment of some kind, one of the poorest of this armpit of the Rim. No name or sign hung on that worn door. The bartender behind the counter was one of those despised hybrids of the multi-species Rim, his dreadfully recognizable human face deformed by flat triple nostrils and unevenly set reddish eyes.

Yet the voice had originated from that unwelcoming interior, and now it came clearer and stronger.

“B... Blunt!”

Captain Blunt placed his boot upon the uneven step. The wood creaked beneath his weight. The proprietor looked up with weary contempt, feeling — automatically it seemed — for a club beneath his counter. The creature hunched at the far end of the counter gathered its ragged cloak about its thin shoulders. It vanished swiftly through a curtained door in the back of the room. Blunt bent his head beneath the worn low lintel and entered.

“Who called my name?” he demanded brusquely.

No one answered. But a heap of rags at a filthy, food-encrusted table in the back lifted a trembling hand. This was the only customer now left in the shabby room. Blunt frowned. Out of the ragged oval of a hood, a bony human face, emaciated almost beyond recognition, grinned at him like a skull. A hank of brittle dry hair, bleached almost white, hung raggedly over its brow.

Blunt drew in his breath.

“*Sly Thomas!*” he burst out. “What happened to you, man? You’re nothing but a skeleton!”

“Aye,” Thomas said, in that same strange, bubbling voice. He raised his hand to his mouth and coughed into his knobby fist for a while, leaning over the stabbed wooden table. Blunt drew up the chair before him.

“I thought I recognized you,” Thomas gasped, when he could speak again — his lungs worked like bellows, sucking stale air noisily in and out. “I’m dying, Blunt. You can see that. But I’m glad...” And he grinned, showing the long yellow teeth of a death’s-head. “I’m glad to see you. I don’t want that fellow to turn my corpse into a fungus farm when I go. You’ll see to that, won’t you?”

“I’ll do that,” Blunt promised grimly. The proprietor sidled up, cringing like a mistreated dog, to inquire his wishes. Thomas raised a quivering fist in answer, and the proprietor withdrew sullenly, a feral glow in his reddish eyes.

“It’s all as foul as sewer swill here,” Thomas said to Blunt. “But I ran out of chips two days ago. That mangle-face lets me stay only because he’s thinking how I’ll help that fungus garden in his kitchen when I die.” Thomas laughed, hacked into his fist again, and wiped the bloody sputum with the edge of his hood. The hood had a blood-rusted edge.

“Rot-water,” he gasped. Blunt surveyed him silently, remembering the vigorous man he had met only three months before in the gambling saloons of Cameltown. “It’s rot-water. Ate my stomach out eight days ago. It’s in my lungs now. Won’t be long.” His putrid breath wafted across the table, causing Blunt to lean back.

“Remember that Denobian First Mate I had? The ape doped me with it six weeks ago.” Thomas spat on the table. The ejection was dark with blood. “He wanted to see me die slow. But I’ll have the last laugh now! He should have shot me instead.” And Thomas grinned evilly.

Beneath the concealment of half-closed lids, Blunt’s bright blue eyes examined his companion with renewed shrewdness. “Don’t see as how you’ve got much of a laugh left. Marooned you here, didn’t he? I didn’t see *Finnegan’s Bucket* in orbit. Nor any other ship, for that matter.”

Thomas Finnegan’s face darkened in instant rage. His tumultuous emotion almost overcame him; he burst into another fit of furious coughing, cupping his foul spittle in his hands.

Captain Blunt signaled the proprietor. “A bottle of Earth whiskey, if you have such in this cesspit,” he growled, dropping three of the tough plastic chips that passed for coinage in the Rim

upon the tabletop. “And the bottle better be unopened. Don’t try to pass off your home-brewed swill on us, or I’ll shoot another hole in your face. Make it fast!”

A hand deformed by a double-jointed thumb snaked forth in an eye-blink and scooped up the coins; the proprietor, bowing and backing in a parody of servility, vanished behind the curtain into his unseen kitchen. As Thomas wiped his palms upon his grimy sleeves, the barman returned with a squat glass bottle and a pair of stained plastic glasses. He placed them on the table.

Two bony, spit-slimed hands stretched forth. With unexpected strength, Thomas Finnegan seized the bottle and twisted its top. He raised the vessel to his lips. The golden liquid rushed past his nakedly thrusting Adam’s apple. It seemed the man would not cease drinking even to breathe.

Captain Blunt watched with growing concern. “Slower, man!” he cautioned at last. “That bottle would fell a healthy man, let alone a sick one!”

Finnegan lowered the bottle waveringly to the tabletop. He hugged it tenderly against his chest. Half the liquid was gone, and he panted like a racing engine. But his eye, regarding Blunt with sudden affection, was brighter and clearer than before.

“Whiskey!” he gasped. “No bot’l of... whiskey... ever killed an I... I’shman. I n... never liked you, B... Blun...” For an instant, the maudlin gleam dimmed, and something sly and malicious peeped forth from his blinking eyes instead. “But we’ll let... b’goned be b’goned for the sake of the... spir’t, eh?”

He raised the decanter again, but the bottle, wavering like a wandering worm, could not find his mouth. “You’d... like to know too, w... wouldn... *wouldn’t* you? Where... ’tis?” Once more he endeavored to put the bottle to his lips, this time with more success. He hiccupped as he lowered it. He glared at Blunt with the weak fury of a drunken man. “Kill me for it, too, you... you *would*,” he gasped, “if you k... *knew!*”

Blunt said dispassionately, “You’re dying, Finnegan. If you have anything to tell me, you’d better do it now.”

Thomas Finnegan slumped dejectedly over his bottle. In the pause filled by the dying man’s labored wheezes, Blunt felt an atavistic tingle on his nape. The bartender could no longer be seen, but... *yes*, that hanging curtain at the end of the bar counter *had* just twitched.

Blunt glimpsed, out of the corner of his downcast gaze, the tips of three fingers gripping the edge of the cloth-long, thin fingers with curving insectile claws. Above was the gleam of a single-faceted eye. The captain shifted in his seat, and eased his gun upward on his thigh.

“*Speak*, Thomas,” he urged. “It’s now or never, man!”

The dying man rallied at those words. Thomas raised his head, resting his chin atop the whiskey bottle as if it were his last true friend. Captain Blunt, muscles knotted in horrid anticipation, observed the tremble of the hanging curtain from the corner of his unblinking eye.

“Thoth took the charts,” his companion whispered in his hoarse, bubbling voice. “But I memor... mem’rized... the coordinates. Wrote ’em... Follow Thoth to... this star...” One hand separated from the neck of the bottle and groped within his garments. It seemed to take forever to find what it fumbled for. At last the trembling hand returned, gripping a folded scrap of paper. Then the hand fell limply, as if Thomas Finnegan had made his last effort in life and knew it.

“Kill the ape and see to it I have a... Chris... Christian burial,” he croaked. “I’ll have to do without... without... a pries’. I always knew... bound for *hell* anyway. That’s all I ask, Blunt, that you *kill* the—”

At that instant, the room exploded like a bomb. Captain Blunt fell sideways in his chair; a jagged bolt of red lightning dazzled his vision. Thomas Finnegan, expiring with a foul curse on his lips, fell face down on the table, snakes of vermilion flames streaming from his blackened head.

Blunt, twisting to his elbows beneath the protection of the table, returned fire. The deafening crack of Old Eliminator was met by a high-pitched scream from an inhuman throat, and a chitin-clad form, the same cloaked patron that had vanished before, fell with the flaming curtain entangled around the burning shards of its person.

Coming to his feet like a cat with his red-hot weapon in his fist, Blunt wasted no time. Thomas Finnegan’s lax figure slipped loosely off the chair. His scalp was furred with curls of smoking ash, and his blackened face warped like melted plastic. But his bony fingers still clutched his secret in a death-grip that delayed the man for precious milliseconds.

Blunt could afford no such delay; through the now briskly burning doorway rushed the raging proprietor, an ugly club borne aloft in his hands. Blunt lifted his weapon menacingly.

“Stand back, mule,” he warned, “or I’ll shoot!”

“Mule!” the host shrieked. “*Mule!*,” There was no time for Blunt to regret his imprudent choice of words. Others of the same mismatched ilk crowded behind the maddened proprietor. Of one accord, infuriated beyond reason at his inflammatory slur, the newly formed mob rushed toward him.

Captain Blunt turned and ran for his life. Out into Blessington’s dark night he rushed. His steel-shod boot, landing with all of the weight of his considerable centimeters behind it, crunched through the faulty step outside. He staggered free, hearing a hurled object whistle past his ear, and in a few giant strides gained the corner of the dark alley.

“You’ve no call for a Christian burial, Sly Thomas,” he panted as he sprinted with all the speed his long legs could muster, “but you’ll have a fine funeral pyre, all the same!” For behind him now were cries of alarm and the satanic silhouette of a rising inferno.

“Spacer scum!” a voice screamed.

“Earth dung!” another howled.

But the captain, moving with unwavering caution and purposeful speed through one nameless alley after another, paid those salutations no heed. Soon the clamor grew distant behind him.

At last the crudely framed wooden structures gave way to the ugly permacrete of the ramshackle port. Blunt, pausing to appraise his situation in the protection of a shuttered customs post, was relieved to see the silvery wedge of his own shuttle standing undisturbed. The scarred dirt field surrounding it seemed as deserted as he could wish for.

Lingering a moment, the captain raised the crumpled paper clutched in his fist to the wan light of the moon. Three penciled lines of multiple numbers — star coordinates in the system commonly used in the Rim — were visible in the gibbous glow. Captain Blunt’s eyes glittered like the stars overhead as he folded the scrap once more.

“The lost route through the Dark Inversion,” he whispered. “The Dream Mines! *The Dream Mines!*”

## Part 2

There is time for a man, that weakly pulsating envelope of soul and blood protected from the void and its infinite infernoes of light by mere plates and rivets of metal. There is time for that man to fear, and to *remember*...

He is an Ancient Mariner, and he seizes one of three. “Sit,” he says to that man. “I pass, like night, from world to world. I have a tale for you.” And such is the glitter of his blind white eye, burned to ash in the furnace of his soul, there is no gainsaying him.

The man, who does not know yet he is captive, laughs, and signals for another round of whiskey. “I’ll be with you in a minute,” he promises his two companions, and, “One more for the Old One!” he calls, easy still in his heart. For there seems nothing to fear in that gaunt, aged frame, or the skeletal visage scorched and dried by the radiation of stars, or even in the claw-like strength that holds his own muscular arm against the table as if it were a child’s.

“A tale,” the Old One says. “Listen to me... I steered my ship past the last rock and the last sun of the Rim. You know that place, too, wanderer! I see the void in your fierce blue eyes. There you know is a ribbon of *nothing*; stars lie prisoners in its sooty absolute—”

“The anti-matter drifts,” the captive inserts, tolerant and disbelieving, as he toys with his half-empty glass and looks toward the door. “You expect me to believe you passed through the Dark Inversion, you old loon? A *single* atom of anti-matter would—”

“*Listen* to me,” the Old One commands. “Seven days and seven nights I steered my ship through its deadly shoals; death whizzed by me like a wind and inquired at my doors. Stars I passed, and I saw the winds of nothing eating their spinning innards. The absolute consumed my steely fins; the needle of my prow vanished before my eyes; nothingness encroached upon my soul. Listen!”

“Very poetic, but it doesn’t scan,” the man says with a sneer, and begins to rise. But the skinny hand upon his wrist chains him like a manacle, and the man shrugs and hesitates, with a frown now drawing his pale brows.

“You are *strong*, young man; you are unafraid,” the Old One says. “Listen to me! So there passed a sleepless time. Yet at last I saw a star, a speck, a light of shining white...and there I stole my Albatross, this curse around my neck. Take up my dream, my Albatross, for which I sold my soul!”

And then upon the Old One’s scored palm the man sees a small glowing dream. And there is nothing the man ever imagined or conceived in his life more beautiful or desirable than that dream. For in it is every allure of treasure and power: uneasy crowns and purchased princesses; ships gravid with blood-freighted gold; there a loveless dwarf capering on the riverbank with his stolen treasure, and there, too, the sullen pirate king, burying an amber bottle of rum in the chill embrace of his murdered shipmates.

Captain Blunt whistled softly as he pulled his mind back to the present. “We’re both mad, Old One!” he admonished. His hands moved upon his boards; *Pig’s Eye* rolled and poised to dive with the premonitory shudder of a foundering ship. Far beyond wavered a thin ribbon of impenetrable, absolute *nothingness*...

Captain Blunt touched a final switch, still humming his aimless tune. “*When Anti met Matter, they both went a-splatter...*”

### Part 3

Inside a skin of steel, a hollow-cheeked man lounged in front of his red-lit and screaming boards. His mouth was taut with hours of unrelieved wakefulness; wiry gold hairs dusted his unshaven jaw. The singlet strained across his hard chest was streaked beneath the armpits; an unlit smoking-tube dangled from his lips. The litter of half-a-dozen hastily consumed and already forgotten meals surrounded his outstretched boots. The man held a match in his fingers, but that, too, was now forgotten.

For there in the infinity of space was a sight Captain Blunt had never seen before. A giant red orb burned like the mouth of hell. But a great gout of fiery matter gushed forth from the heart of the star like a hemorrhaging wound; something unseen and dark sucked its dying innards like an avid leech. Where the dark and the light collided, a rainbow coruscation of mutual annihilation blazed with more potency than a million nuclear explosions.

*Pig’s Eye* rocked violently; a white-hot flare briefly overcame the overstretched optical shielding. Blunt squinted at his board with watering, half-blinded eyes. “There goes the other thruster,” he remarked over the shrill, toneless warning of his computer and flicked his match to life with his thumb. As he cupped the minute flare to his mouth with one hand, he leaned forward and touched the red button before him with the other.

With a shudder, *Pig’s Eye* made its last leap. The man waited wakeful, listening to the soundless howl of the void, for hours he no longer counted.

But at last came the moment when his bleary eyes saw it. A pure white star blazed like Circe in an alluring shroud; attendant planets whirled around her like leaping ticks. One world glowed green as poisonous absinthe beneath an equatorial belting of white mist. Around that world flickered yet a tinier dot, an insignificant speck with a badly pockmarked and dented hull.

Blunt rose stiffly to his feet and scratched his newly luxuriant beard.

“Well, Jim boy,” he murmured. “Time to pass on Thomas Finnegan’s last respects. First we’d better have a *long* shower and a shave.”

### Part 4

*Finnegan’s Bucket* might as well have been the *Marie Celeste*. Managing the mating of his tiny shuttle to Finnegan’s old-fashioned access port with difficulty, Blunt prowled the eerily half-lit and empty corridors with a sizable gun in his fist. But he found no occupant. The ship’s lone shuttle was gone. Examining the board, he saw no sign the Denobian had returned once in those dozen



elapsed days. Nor did *Bucket's* computer record any communication from its missing shuttle and self-promoted captain.

Radiation levels were dangerous inside the damaged ship. Nevertheless, Blunt lingered long enough to accomplish certain sabotages before he returned, hollow-eyed and staggering with fatigue, to his own ship. Silencing *Pig's Eye's* clamorous and complaining computer with a ruthless stab of his finger, he cast a wearied eye at the daunting list of repairs his board urged upon him, programmed several alerts, and went below.

But the oblivion he so desperately required was strangely elusive. He tossed restlessly upon his bed. His head thrashed upon the pillow; his huge fists clenched and unclenched at his sides.

*Surely* this was nightmare. But it seemed to Blunt two giants bent over him even as he sought to evade them in his troubled sleep. He saw a skeleton Death, rattling a single die in a cage of five bony digits. The die fell, spinning in the air with the slow beauty of a time delay, until it struck some unseen surface and rested there, quiescent. Blunt began to count the dots. *Three... four... five...*

Then another hand with long red nails reached for the die, and the second giant bent over him. Her face was as large as a moon. Her eyes were holes into the abyss.

The die fell. The little cube seemed to float forever, until it once more struck the invisible surface and bounced, just a little, before it rested. *Six* black dots...

The sleeping man groaned an incoherent plea. But he knew Death could not help him now. *She-Death-in-Life* had won him.

## Part 5

Thoth had wasted no time getting down to the surface. Captain Blunt determined to proceed with far more caution. He spent the next three ship-days repairing his damaged vessel, making repeated trips to Finnegan's hijacked vessel to scavenge material.

He was forced to make several perilous and harrowing space-walks to replace the damaged shielding. Attached to his ship by a thin umbilical cord, Blunt looked down on the green and misty world beneath his boots. If the whispers of a thousand spaceports were true, there hid the fabulous mother lode of the dreamstones. Tomorrow he would stand upon its lush surface and perhaps hold the ransom of kings, one glowing stone, in his own work-roughened palm.

But Thoth's continued silence hinted at unknown dangers. Blunt cast a jaundiced eye upon the serene beauty beneath him, humming his bitter tune, as he welded his last plate to the hull.

*Oh, the humming of the bees in the cottonwood trees, by the soda-water fountain, and the lemonade springs, where the bluebird sings, in the Big Rock Candy Mountain...*

## Part 6

Into the mists of an Edenic morning, Blunt dove. Streamers of cool steam rose from the strangely Earth-like trees and grasses spread like a green quilt beneath him. A brightly colored bird with long tail feathers of blue, green, and purple floated like a zephyr on its widespread wings. No intelligent

hand had, perhaps, guided the planting of the riotous flowers whose scents greeted Blunt as he grounded and opened his small hatch. But never had Blunt seen or scented a paradise as lovely. Already, the wavering tendrils of a delicate, blue-flowered vine attempted to colonize the alien incongruity of his shuttle's metal ramp.

Blunt surveyed the scene, his hand on his gun belt. Thoth's shuttle stood on gently sunken fins, decorated like a lei-bedecked Hawaiian tourist by pioneering flowers. Nearby was a metal shack enclosing an antiquated winching engine and an open hole. A rust-speckled metal fuel tank stood by. A mound of rubble, indicating both ancient and more recent mining operations, further scarred the otherwise breathtaking vista.

Blunt kicked the vine away with his boot as he walked down the ramp. "Got to be a snake here somewhere."

But he found no answers in Thoth's shuttle. The little ship was locked, of course, an obstacle Blunt overcame by the simple expedient of burning a man-sized hole in the hatch with his gun. The shuttle was now no longer spaceworthy, but Blunt, waiting for the red-hot metal to cool, was not perturbed. One way or another, this was the last corral for Finnegan's murderous First Mate. Some debts Blunt counted sacred. The grinning ape was as good as flower fertilizer, if, indeed, he were not already pushing daisies out of his hairy chest.

That last was an intriguing question. Blunt, squeezing past the still-steaming slag of the warped door, examined the shuttle's computer logs with a growing frown. Thoth had landed fifteen days earlier and followed normal procedures to secure his shuttle. He had not been back since.

What *had* happened to the missing First Mate, a muscular King Kong who, like all of his simian species, stood at least seven Earthly feet of ropy strength? Where was the horde of dreamstones that Thoth, surely, planned to leave with?

Blunt emerged soberly and, once more in the bright sunlight, pressed a fresh clip into Old Eliminator before he rehung the gun upon his hip.

One did not need to be Sherlock to figure out where Thoth had vanished. The Denobian's Sasquatch-sized bare feet had made deep indentations in the soft soil. They led straight to the mining shaft.

Blunt, for his part, was in no hurry to follow. First he examined the chain that tethered the mining cage. The chain's solid, recently oiled iron links appeared sturdy enough. The winching engine was a gasoline-fired internal-combustion oddity, but it, too, had been recently serviced, no doubt by Thoth. The contraption roared to healthy life when Blunt cranked its leathery cord.

The next step was to raise the cage (still below, another indication Thoth had never returned from the mine). This was accomplished without signs of trouble. Blunt, leaning over the hole with his gun in his hand, watched the empty cage emerge from the darkness. The contraption bobbed to the end of its iron chain with a theatrical clanking. Blunt shut off the engine and turned to the fuel tank. He had to be sure.

Blunt next tested the controls that operated the car, which allowed a man to return from the bottom of the shaft. He examined the panel inside the cage. The mechanism was crude but adequate; twisted wires on their own tiny spindle conveyed the occupant's commands to the larger winching engine above. They, too, appeared to work without flaw.

His remaining tests proved equally satisfactory. Whatever had delayed Thoth, it did not seem to be a malfunction in the winching equipment. Blunt rewound the cage to the surface one last time and returned to his shuttle.

A half-hour's work, sitting on the ramp in the pleasant sunshine, yielded a battery-powered, radio backup he hoped could call down the car. Blunt had no intention of being marooned below. The shaft's dirt sides were too soft to be climbed.

He kept a wary eye as he worked. But the feathered birds tinkled like the chimes of a gamelan orchestra, and the wind played through the fernlike trees. A herd of knee-high, barrel-bodied ruminants like capybaras grazed across the sweet grasses without once lifting their heads in more than mild astonishment at his presence. Perhaps there *was* a snake hidden in this paradise, but the tame animals did not expect a tiger, at least.

He clipped the last of his expeditionary tools to his belt and stood. It was time to hunt chimp. Then (and Blunt felt a feral grin stretch his lips across his teeth as he strode toward the mining cage), *then, yes, then* he would fill his own rough palms with the silken fire of the magic pebbles, and there was nothing, *nothing* that could be bought or bartered or gifted, denied to the man who could trade the mesmerizing flame of the dreamstone. Rich men would spill their wealth into his hands, and ivory-skinned women willingly spread their limbs in return for the whispering allure of the magic pebble.

The wind sighed gustily, like the breath of a woman in the throes of the passion he had just idly imagined. The little breeze stirred the loose rubble at his feet. Blunt, on the point of entering the cage, heard the small avalanche. His eye followed the slight sound without thought. Something gleamed there now, something dull but metallic, that did not belong in the newly slipped earth.

Blunt hesitated. A stride took him closer; he bent, and his fingers plucked up the mysterious object.

He held a small disc with a hole perforating its once-shining surface. The cord that had at one time threaded it had rotted to slivers. Blunt, turning the ovoid to the sun, made out the hint of letters beneath a crusting of earth. Blunt brushed away the dirt and squinted at the engraving.

The *Blue Kentucky!* A crewman of an Earth ship missing for more than forty years had once worn the dogtag he held. Blunt's fingers clenched on the disc.

He dug through the rubble for almost an hour. But if there were bones of those lost spacemen, they had long ago rotted. Blunt found nothing, except that one small item no spacer yielded up until death.

Somewhere in the sigh of the soft wind, he seemed to hear a woman's laugh. Her whisper rose out of the earth beneath his boots, and her voice was the basso deep of a giantess. *Death-in-Life! Why* had he not understood? What a fool he was!

Blunt straightened his weary back and brushed the dirt from his hands. "I've still got a debt to take care of," he said aloud, and touched the gun at his belt. "I'm not leaving until it's paid!" He put the dogtag in his pocket and returned to the cage.

The contraption, swinging slightly under Blunt's crouching form, descended into the abyss. The dank mustiness of the deep pervaded his lungs. He heard the slow drip of unseen water and the moan of wind rushing up the shaft.

He fingered the beam-light hung on his belt, but there was, perhaps, no need for its aid, for below the descending plate was already a faint, spectral gleam. It was the light of the dreamstones, and as the cage sank, the light grew brighter and brighter.

In their matrix of shining white quartz, the pebbles gleamed, thousands of jewel-bright eyes embedded in a glassy sea. Fingers of corrosive allure scored his brain.

*Take me*, whispered a woman whose pale hair was the only cover for her slender body; the tips of her breasts teased him from its silken cover, and her eyes, half-hidden by those white-blond strands, glowed.

*I wish you'd never left me, Jim, oh come back forever*, whispered another, and this girl was small and sweetly plump, and her hair black and curly as a caracal lamb's.

*I'm proud of you, son*, boomed another voice, and a man in an old-fashioned business suit, his seamed face grinning beneath his thatch of graying fair hair, shook the hand of a Jim Blunt strangely taller, younger, and handsomer than the captain knew himself to be.

*I didn't do it*, said another Jim Blunt, *I didn't shoot him*, and this time, the man who had not smiled before smiled gently now and extended his blue-sleeved hand. The silver star on his shirt front glittered. *Yes, we know. It was an accident, of course. You won't be charged, son.*

And then, at last, Jim Blunt saw the face that had been bloody and eyeless, what was left of it, and now it was the face of his brother. That face was whole again and young and full of the love it had never shown in life.

So the man crouched in the cage wept and howled and covered his eyes with his hands. But he could not keep out that light.

*Believe*, whispered a voice as deep as the bones of the mountains. *Only believe, and it will be true.*

James Blunt grasped the edge of his cage with a white-knuckled fist. He bit a finger savagely, and tasted iron and salt. He flung up his head, and with the red trickle of his own blood trailing from his lips, glared into the kaleidoscope of light like a tiger turning to face the hounds.

"Shove it," he growled, and lurched to his feet as the cage bobbed to a halt. "I've got a job to do. Where's that damned chimp?"

Somewhere in the fractured light, something moved. The something that moved giggled. The raspy giggle trailed off, after a few minutes, then began again. The sound raised the hairs on the back of Jim Blunt's neck.

"Sly?" the voice mumbled, when it stopped giggling. "Is that you? What took you so long? I've been waiting for you. Look what I've found!"

The large dark shape Jim Blunt was just beginning to make out hitched up and arranged itself in a reclining position. Blunt saw Thoth.

The Denobian lay upon a bed of dreamstones. The gleaming pebbles filled his long arms and overflowed his lap. As he shifted, the stones purred softly. Thoth gathered the glowing gems in his arms and carried them to his nostrils, inhaling them like a bouquet of flowers, and squeezed them in his fingers, as reverently as a man squeezes a breast.

"I'm *rich*," the Denobian crowed in a scraped-raw voice Blunt could scarcely understand. "Look at how *rich* I am!"

The blood receded from Jim Blunt's face. "Yes," he whispered. "*Look* at you!"

There was no flesh upon the once mighty form of the giant. The Denobian's hairy skin hung on his bones like the pleats of an accordion. His lips were swollen and blackened. The eyes in his simian skull face were dried and blind. From where he stood, the captain could smell the foul reek, for the great creature had lain oblivious in his own waste for fifteen long days with the opalescent glow of the stones to comfort him. And even as Blunt watched, a worm poked a misshapen white head out of the ape's swollen ear.

"We've been friends, Sly," the dry voice croaked. "We've been friends for six long years now. I'm glad you came. We'll see good times together again, won't we? Look how rich we are! Doesn't it feel wonderful to be so *rich*, old friend?"

Jim Blunt drew his gun. "Maybe I'm a merciful fool," he said, "or maybe you just shouldn't die happy, after what you did to Sly... but this is the end, you great bloody ape!"

And he blew him to pieces and left the dreamstones crying behind in the fire and steaming meat as he rose to the surface and the fair sun above.

#### Part 7

The pub was quiet and dim. On Sunday, here in this more civilized realm of humanity, even spacers were required to keep a more respectful mien. Jim Blunt found the bartender alone behind his counter, wiping the wooden surface with a cloth.

"What'll you have?"

"Bourbon. Straight."

The drink was delivered and paid for, and the bartender, a small man with a few wisps of hair combed carefully over his round bald pate, lingered near his sole customer as he wiped the countertop. Perhaps he was lonely.

"Been here before?"

"Long time ago."

The bartender nodded. In the background, a sportscast turned down low mumbled cheers as a goal was made.

At last the captain set down his empty glass.

"Another?"

"No."

But the captain drew two more chips and held them between his fingers with the edges showing. The bartender nodded in understanding, and waited.

"There used to be a crazy old loon here," the captain said. "He liked to talk about the Dream Mines. Claimed to have been through the Dark Inversion and found them. Remember him?"

The bartender laughed. "He was nuttier than a cashew. Yeah, I remember him! He moved on. Haven't seen him for months now."

"Don't happen to know his name?"

The bartender hesitated and looked at the chips wistfully.

"Called himself Randle, I think. Yes, it was Randle. That's all I know. Don't take him serious about those dreamstones, though. He was just a crazy old coot!" And the bartender grinned widely and showed the pink plastic edge of his false teeth below his lips.

The captain laid the two chips down on the table. “That’s all I want to know,” he said. “Thanks.”

The bartender scooped up the coins. He wandered to the far end of his counter, still wiping, humming an aimless, wistful tune under his breath.

Jim Blunt took a small sheet out of his vest. He unfolded it. One line in the brief list he scrutinized caught his attention, and he put his finger on it. Joe Randle, late of Louisville, Kentucky, was indeed listed as the chief engineer of the lost *Blue Kentucky*. Blunt scrunched up his paper.

Somewhere upon a lovely green world circling a far, fair star, Joe Randle’s murdered crewmates and captain rested with flowers decorating their unmarked graves. And in another nameless spaceport, an Ancient Mariner who could never, ever rest pressed his story upon another stranger, carrying his curse in his hand, his shining white Albatross, the beautiful dream he had sold his soul for.

On the step outside, in the early evening, the captain turned up the collar of his vest. A soft, cool rain had begun. He looked up at the damp sky.

Somewhere up there, his stubborn, patched vessel was one of those myriad sparks in the lilac sky. His star called him, and that was as it should be. After all, a man had a more or less honest living to make.

\*  
\* \*

### **The Embrace of the Four-Armed Houri**

by Danielle L. Parker

Yellow rain slashed like driven nails. Jim Blunt, his six-foot-plus frame bowed beneath the buffet of the relentless wind, flinched at a massive discharge of lightning. The cracking carillon in its wake pained his eardrums.

But at least the gaudy display served a purpose. Now he glimpsed the hulking stone mass of the terminal ahead. Shielding his face from the foul-smelling torrent with an uplifted arm, he bolted for its shelter.

His outstretched hand fetched up against a cold, slime-encrusted stone surface. He fumbled blindly at an old-fashioned iron handle and pushed the door open. A welcome glow lay inside.

“Shut it, mate,” a nasal Australian twang commanded. “It’s bloody hell outside. As usual!”

Blunt did not need to obey. The wind sucked the door shut with a crack like a gunshot. Wiping his burning eyes with his streaming sleeve, he gasped, “That’s acid!”

“Sulphur,” the twanging voice agreed. A long-limbed man unfolded from a chair set by the fireplace. Blunt, blinking, saw the lanky form was encased in incongruous garb-tights and a stiff

tabard over a long-sleeved tunic. The tabard was decorated with an ornate shield. A flaming mountain was worked into the center. The angular face above was a spaceman's seamed visage, but its tan had faded to an unhealthy yellow.

"Lucky you've got solid tripartic plating on that shuttle of yours, mate," the man continued. "Step up to the fire. You look like a wet cat."

Blunt stretched out his hands to the flames. The glance he turned on the other man held wariness. "How'd you know what kind of skin I have on my shuttle? And who are *you*?"

"Rod Blair, customs agent," the Australian replied crisply, thrusting out his hand in welcome. "Who'd you expect to meet, *Himself* in the flesh? As for how I knew..." Courtesies complete, Blair re-settled in his chair. "They do things a little differently around here, mate. Your shuttle has been thoroughly conned. *He* doesn't like sloppy work." The Aussie's face grew long and mournful.

"You're working for the natives?"

A flicker of emotion fled across the Australian's bony face. "Aye," he answered. "Me, an Earthman — *that's* what you mean, isn't it? A *spaceman*, grounded? Well, it's none of your damn business! And if you take my advice, you'll stick strictly to business while you're here. Safest world you can visit on the Rim if you do. There's no crime *here*!" Blair's wide, thin lips twisted on a bitter taste.

"And if you don't stay clean," he continued, "you'll wish you were blowing your guts into hard vacuum. Don't say I didn't warn you! *Now!* You're not our usual pilot for the annual shipment. What happened to old Detmos?"

A gleam came into Blunt's eye. "He played a bad hand of cards."

Blair raised a skeptical brow. "Suppose it's none of my bloody business at that. Your authorization checks out as legit. Good enough." He got to his feet and, after rifling through the neat stack of papers on the table, handed Blunt a small parcel. "Chit in there, signed by the mayor, no less. It should cover all your local expenditures. You've got three days to conclude your affairs and depart. Don't linger, don't ask questions, and keep your nose bugger-free. *Otherwise...*" Another grimace twisted the man's face. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

"Of what?"

But Blair avoided his stare. "The Argos is where old Detmos used to stay," the customs agent said. "It's as good a place as any. Mayor likes to eat there, so should make it easy for your business. Look for a sign with a white spaceship painted on it." He crossed the room. "Through this door. You'll find it easy enough if you keep your hand on the fence. Good luck, Captain Blunt."

The howl of the wind as Blair opened the door terminated any chance for further questions. Blunt, shrugging his powerful shoulders, ventured into the furious torrent once more.

The aforementioned fence, although he could scarcely make it out through slitted and tearing eyes, proved a chest-high stone wall, pitted and etched by centuries of acidic rains. Blunt, shielding his face in the crook of his arm, pushed into the storm with its guidance.

After minutes of struggle, he reached a break in the wall, without a hint as to which direction he should turn. Where *was* the damned town? If he ventured forth without the slender protection of the wall, he might never find it.

Growling a curse that even he could not hear in the storm, he stretched his hand, searching for the continuation of his stony guide.

But his hand, groping forward, met something else, something fleshly and warm and soft. He thrilled to recognize it. A *woman*! What he had filled his cupped palm most satisfactorily. Perhaps he heard a cry, but it was torn on the storm. Tightening his grip on more manageable female anatomy, he drew his struggling prey inexorably toward him.

“I’m lost!” he bawled into the ebony hair tangled around him like a living cloak. “*Lost!*”

The heart-shaped face pressed to his chest turned up. The girl raised a slender arm clad in a wet blue cloth and pointed into the darkness. Her words, whatever they were, were torn from her lips.

Those lips were red and sweetly bee-stung. Focusing his stinging eyes on them with hunger, Blunt bent closer. Her breath was scented with clove.

“*Help* me,” he said.

The girl seized his hand and pulled in reply. Blunt offered no resistance. Wherever she was going, he wanted to follow. It has been — how long? — since he had seen any woman without the raddled face of a port whore. He knew women who, like himself, frequented the thinly-explored star lanes of the Rim, etching the same hard-won living on a dangerous frontier. But they were few. The bitter cost of their survival showed in their seamed brown faces and unfriendly eyes. She... *she* was young, and beautiful! That much he knew by the hot thrill of his veins.

The girl towed him without hesitation, as if the acidic rain and sulfurous wind bothered her not at all. Blunt gave up trying to discern their direction and merely shielded his face as best as he could. Suddenly his feet struck a threshold; warm light poured forth. The girl released his hand. Blunt groped forward. He glimpsed her, shutting the door behind them.

In the sweet peace that fell, he smelled the rich scent of stew simmering in the crockery pot upon the hearth and heard the comforting, gentle crackle of an open fire.

“Take this for your eyes.”

Her hand placed a cloth dampened with a fresh scented liquid in his fingers. Blunt wiped his eyes. Immediately, he felt relief.

The girl moved away from him and took off her wet blue cloak. Lifting his head, he met her defiant glance.

“You thought I was human!”

In all aspects but one, she could have passed for the beautiful young woman he had supposed her. Four slender arms were revealed as she hung her cloak upon a hook. Her face was more heart-shaped than the human norm. Her knee-length, shining black hair sprang thickly from an indentation in her forehead. Her large dark eyes, lustrous as velvet, were lidded with a second membrane he glimpsed as she blinked. Its tissue-thin cover protected her vision from the rain. She was maidenly slender. Her breasts were small, and her hips merely hinted at roundness.

Only the double sets of arms truly betrayed her mixed ancestry. These were thinner than any normal human limb, and there was something of the insect in their inhuman dexterity.

Blunt leaned against the door with his arms crossed upon his chest. His blue eyes glinted beneath his lids.

“Yes,” he replied simply. “I did.”



The girl moved toward the pot on the fire and took up a long spoon to stir its contents.

"I'm a mule," she hissed over her proudly straight shoulder. "That's what you Earthmen call us, isn't it? *Mules!* So you'd better go — wherever you were going. I suppose you were trying to find the inn. There's a rope outside. We string them to guide us when the storms come. If you keep your left hand on it all the way, it will take you directly to the inn."

Blunt said nothing for a moment. Then he straightened, took off his wet vest, and shook the rain out of it. He hung it on a hook next to her cloak.

"That stew smells good," he said. "I'll pay you for a meal, if you have enough for two. And I'll stock your firewood, if you like. You must burn a lot of it in this weather."

The girl looked up from where she knelt with the spoon still in her hand. Her eyes were wide and startled.

"Y... yes," she said. "I use a lot of wood. I could use someone to... to... that... that chair. You can sit there if you like."

Blunt hung his vest on the back of the indicated chair. Its wooden frame was small for his frame, but he settled his damp boots on the fireplace fender without complaint. His footwear steamed. He leaned forward to take the bowl the girl proffered.

"Do you have bread? Biscuits?"

"Yes," she whispered, and hung her head so the black hair hid her face. Her double hands suddenly trembled upon her knees.

Then she got up abruptly, with another defiant toss of her head, and went to the table to uncover a cloth-wrapped half loaf of bread.

Her home was just a room, built of white-chinked walls of permacrate scrap. It was open to the roof. A plank platform spanning several rafters stored food supplies in crocks and jars. A narrow bed with a colorful, hand-worked coverlet was separated from the main room by a lace curtain, now hooked back. Its bedside table held a blue-flowered china basin and pitcher of water. The two wooden chairs by the fire, the round table with wooden bowl filled with fruit, and a handmade shelf holding neatly folded clothing and sundries completed the simple furnishings. Yet everything was clean and polished.

The girl put a slice of dark bread in his hands. Blunt set bowl and bread aside to await his hostess. She served herself with a hand that shook slightly and retreated to her chair. The second pair of her thin fingers plucked restlessly at her skirts, but she did not seem to be aware.

"My name's Jim Blunt. You can call me Jim. I'm from Tennessee, if that means anything to you. That's on Earth."

"A... Anya," she whispered.

Jim Blunt nodded and took up his bowl and spoon. The stew was unfamiliar but delicious, the bread was rich and chewy, like the rye he remembered his grandmother baking. They ate in a long and somewhat tense silence.

"That was good," he said at last. "I haven't had home cooking for more years than I like to think of."

The girl dropped her spoon with a clatter and clasped one set of hands to her chest.

"You... you won't hurt me, will you?" she burst out.

Jim Blunt considered the question seriously. "I'm going to make love to you," he said. "So I can't promise that. Men hurt women a little, I suppose. We can't help it."

His eyes fell upon her with a considering gleam. "You knew what you wanted when you brought me here. Are you afraid to go through with it now?"

The girl wrung her upper set of hands, while the second pair pinched her skirt with anxious fingers.

"No. No, I don't think so."

"Good." Blunt put his empty bowl on the hearth. "But if you are, you can ask me to leave now, and I'll go. But later, I won't."

"You don't know *why*," she whispered. "You don't understand *why* I... tomorrow is my wedding day."

The captain raised one blonde brow. "I don't cuckold other men. But that's tomorrow, isn't it?"

The girl hung her head and put both sets of hands to her face as she nodded.

Blunt rose to his feet. "Don't cry," he said in a suddenly husky voice. "You're lonely. Just as I'm lonely. It won't be a happy marriage, will it? I know what you want: the same thing I want. There's no crime in comfort. If there's a sin, I've done worse already."

"I shouldn't do this," she said, weeping into her hands. "You don't know. You don't *know*. Yes. When I saw you, I *wanted*... before—"

The man pulled her upper hands away from her face as he knelt beside her. She looked up with tear-wet eyes. "You were beautiful," she whispered. "I thought you were beautiful."

"You are beautiful." His tanned face was taunt and intent. "But it wouldn't really matter if you weren't."

Her cold hands fluttered in his as silence stretched. At last they lay calm.

"That bed's too small for me."

She pulled her hands from his slowly. "Yes. I'll get the blankets now."

Jim Blunt reached out. His hand, groping blindly for the warm shape it expected, felt nothing. The blankets were cold and empty.

He opened his eyes with a grunt of surprise. A coal or two winked in a smothering blanket of ash. The room was dim with an illumination only slightly greater than night. Perhaps true daylight never came on this stormy, volcano-tormented world.

He sat up. The clothing and the chronograph so precipitously discarded last night — had it only been last night? — lay near his head. He groped for the green glow and held his chronograph up to unbelieving eyes. Already it was past the noon hour of a new day.

*She* was gone, and something in the room inexplicably chilled him. The silence echoed. It had the echo of abandonment, of loss, the flavor of last kisses already taken.

Shadows passed slowly by the window. Blunt heard a muffled, rhythmic padding, as of many feet marching in unison, the sound that had woken him out of his dead-to-the-world, satiated repose. He got to his feet and stole to the window.

Under the gray of a dim noonday, figures in enveloping sulfur-yellow robes passed. High peaked hoods with ovals cut for eyes swaddled their heads. They passed, four abreast, twenty or more, in dread and secretive hush. A few tolled, in ponderous slow pendulum, heavy iron bells.

Dirge-like rang the diminishing peals; the soft sound of many feet faded, leaving Blunt in bafflement. A *wedding*? Surely not!

Inexplicably, urgency pressed him. He dressed swiftly and washed his face and hands with cold water in the basin and pitcher. He donned his belt and shoved the weapon never far from his hand into its well-worn holster.

At the door, he hesitated; but the room was so cold, so lone, so *empty*, when last night it had been, for just those few hours, *home*... He turned back, blew on the dying coals, added sticks to it, and watched it glow again to life.

Then he let himself out. The air outside smelled of brimstone.

The prosperous settlement he had not seen in last night's storm was squeezed as tight as some medieval walled village. Sturdy huts of permacrate, jammed cheek-to-cheek, soon gave way to more elaborate but no less densely packed edifices of cut lava rock. The street beneath his boots was cobbled with chips of the same gleaming black. Painted shutters stood permanently closed against inclement weather. Even the glassy lava rock showed the pitted ravages of the acidic rains.

It was quiet and still, so still the captain could hear, drawing farther and farther away, the faint clang of those still lamenting bells.

The Argos was not hard to find. The inn was the only place with any stir of life. But not much: only the host and his wife — a dour, silent couple of indeterminate origin — and, at a table, surrounded by a few bored attendants, a portly man enjoying an impressive repast of meats, cheeses, fruits, and sugary treats.

Blunt cast a covetous eye upon the feast and spoke to the host, who approached, wiping his hands upon his clean white apron.

"I'd like breakfast."

A table was procured, and the host brought, with commendable promptitude, a steaming carafe of hot spicy beverage in a heavy stone mug.

Blunt lifted his mug in ironic salute to his fellow diner, for surely the portly man in the rich red robes had not once taken his eyes off him.

"Ah! Forgive me for staring, sir. We receive few visitors here on our poor planet. I was expecting another face; in fact you will forgive me if I ask what became of old Detmos?"

"I'm fulfilling his routes."

"Well," the fat man said after an inquiring pause, his eyes twinkling amidst the creases of his plump face, "I hope he is alive and well — *alive* and *well*. We can only hope, in this uncertain life. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Masel Venge, the humble mayor of this humble village, which is the only village on our most humble world. Will you join me? We may do business together; yes, indeed we may."

Blunt rose. A bright-eyed young boy pilfering fruit off the table pulled out a chair for him.

"I'm Blunt."

"Ah! Plain indeed. I adopt the same frankness, captain. No trading captain likes to leave without something tucked in for the outbound voyage, does he? Hmm? Are you interested in taking on cargo?"

The host brought a generously filled platter of bread and meats and fruits. Blunt, nodding his approval, picked up his knife and fork.

“Yes,” he said. “Gems. That’ll do nicely.”

The mayor laughed until his belly shook, and his eyes disappeared in the creases of his fat. “*Gems!* I was thinking fresh produce. Our volcanic soils produce the most wonderful fruits and vegetables you can imagine. Yes, it’s true, we use greenhouses because of the gases in the air, and artificial lighting because of the lack of sun. But *you* seem to find our food tasty enough. I have several wagons of fresh mirlitons and sugar apples for immediate shipment. You should have no trouble finding a market for such dainties, and I can offer fair terms, sir, fair terms—”

Blunt shook his head. “I don’t do fresh produce,” he said. “I made that mistake just once. Not unless the market’s already sewn up. Too much risk of spoilage. I’m interested in gems.”

Mayor Venge laughed louder than before and stuffed a sugar apple into his widespread mouth. “I wish you had been here to do business with sooner!” he gasped when he could speak again. “Alas, Captain Ital will be here in two weeks to take our annual supply of lumens. I’m told he gets quite a fair price for them at the gem market in Cameltown.”

“He pays you twelve Earth Monetary Units per kilo. I can offer you thirteen.”

“Thirteen!” The mayor smiled. “That hardly seems worth breaching faith with our old associate. There’s something to be said for old acquaintance, after all!”

Blunt considered. “Fourteen. That should give you increased revenue of at least nine thousand EMUs. I’ll take your gems directly to dealers on Astral instead of Cameltown. I’ll get a better price for them. But it’s twice the distance to market. I can’t go higher than that.”

“Nine thousand EMUs!” Mayor Venge’s black eyes glittered. But an elderly attendant leaned down and whispered in his ear, and Venge’s brow creased. “Yes, *yes*,” he muttered. “If there’s any chance *He* might not approve of it — of *course* not — but it all depends on the exact wording of our agreement with Captain Ital, doesn’t it? Show me the contract, Embin!”

His subordinate presented an electronic pad from a pocket of his long robe. Mayor Venge perused the tiny words passing across its glowing surface.

“Yes... yes,” he murmured. “We agreed to sell Captain Ital lumens... yes, *yes*... But there is no *exclusivity* clause in here. And it does not say what *quantity* of lumen we have to sell him. That can be little, or much. Embin!”

“Yes, Mr. Mayor?”

“Reserve two — exactly *two* — kilos of lumens for Captain Ital. Sell the rest to Captain Blunt.” He flourished the pad at Blunt. “And if you will imprint your DNA, sir, on this contract, in accordance with standard custom, and present a draft for the appropriate amount from a reputable and certified bank — see, sir, here is the number of kilos we can sell you — *then*, sir, I believe we can *indeed* do satisfactory business!”

Blunt laid down his fork and examined the contract presented to him. At last he tapped in his information, applied his thumb and extracted DNA to the appropriate spot, and drew a sheaf of paper from his breast pocket.

“Seems in order. Here’s a certified draft drawn on The First Commercial Bank of Astral. Take a look at it. You see it’s good for up to twenty thousand EMUs. Deliver the shipment to my shuttle

in an hour. I'll examine it there and fill out the final amount at the same time. If there are inferior stones in the shipment, I'll have to adjust."

"We follow the letter of our contracts, sir," Venge assured him, studying the draft with an expert eye before he returned it across the table. "The stones are first quality. We are *never* dishonest, though a man may make a better deal *honestly*, of course. If we were to cheat, the *consequences...*" He shuddered. "*He* has been known to punish transgressors severely. A word of warning, Captain! Strict honesty is strongly advised! Not even outlanders have escaped His correction. Surely you met the unfortunate Mr. Blair? He'll know never to trade spoiled goods again!"

"Who are you talking about?" Blunt queried. "I thought you were the top dog here."

Venge's eyes bulged like two round olives. He leaned across the table, his attendants fluttering like ruffled starlings around him. "Today is the *worst* of all possible days to ask me that question," he hissed. "Today *He* is more awake than usual, and *He* listens. For your own safety, captain, do not ask too many questions. Take your stones, and go!"

"The worst day?"

"Yes." Slowly, the fat man rose to his feet. He pointed an unsteady finger at the window, now so dark with cloud or smoke that nothing outside could be distinguished.

"Look!" he proclaimed, with a politician's innate showmanship. "The mountain is on fire. *He's* awake again! *He* waits all year for this, the one day of the year we especially honor *Him* with a precious gift. Didn't you see the procession this morning?"

"The procession?"

"*His* wedding," the fat man said. "It's *His* wedding day. He has one every year, I'm sorry to say. It really depletes the availability of our young women. Take your stones and go, Captain Blunt. The vulcan who lives in that mountain is not to be trifled with!"

The lumens were first quality. Blunt let his last handful of luminous blue stones slide from his palm with an impatient nod.

"They're good," he said curtly. "I'll write the draft for twelve thousand five hundred EMU. Agreed?"

And that was that. Moments later, with his small but precious cargo stowed, his ramp retracted, and the over-powered engines of his small shuttle shaking to life, Blunt sat frowning in front of his console. He tapped his long fingers on the arm of his captain's chair in a staccato rhythm. His business was done. He was free to go — *if* he wanted to.

Every spacer had this nightmare. Roger Dahlstrom, one of the oldest and most experienced traders on the Rim, had been summarily decapitated on some backwater world, all because he had shown the sole of his boot to the local ruler by thoughtlessly crossing his long legs. Too late, the captain learned the punishment for the dread insult he had unwittingly delivered.

Sten Kowalski, a hulking Pole who had once bested a seven-foot, gorilla-strong Denobian in a legendary bar fight, had come out the loser in another such incident. He had solicited what he took for a sweet-faced girl. The girl had been a priest and a eunuch. For his blasphemy, the mighty Pole died with his heart in the small hands of his would-be love object.

Then there was Red Irish, who sneered at the rat-like entrée of an Asp's dinner in Camelton, and died, seconds later, with a venomous claw dug deep into his throat.

The Rim was the edge of the universe. The shadows of both distant Earth and Asp, her rival, fell across it, but the rule of law was uncertain. Humans changed out of recognition, warped by the influence of foreign soils and eager merging of sperm and cultures with a thousand unnamed species.

So what business of *his* was it if the inhabitants of another two-bit Rim world appeased the local volcano every year by dropping a maiden down its throat?

No doubt he was already too late. For one night, he and she had done what men and women had done together through the centuries. He had made no promises. He scarcely knew her name. But, by heaven, it was enough...

Blunt flew for the mountain.

The great cone stood dominant, a living Everest shaped by fire and ash. Its febrile heart lit the smoke-blackened sky. It spewed forth incandescent guts in a ceaseless rain of molten cinders. Lightning stuttered through its endless cloud. It stank of poison and the brimstone heart of hell. It was a mighty pustule on the skin of the world, an inflamed boil that could never be appeased or salvaged, even by the death of a woman.

Blunt's fist knotted around his joystick. "Screw you," he whispered. "I'll leave all of you in ashes, if you've killed her."

She had cried, when he rested panting beside her, wordless in the aftermath of his first shuddering release. But it had not been for the pain of her lost maidenhead. He knew now why she had wept. *Tomorrow is my wedding day.*

The shuttle was not meant to hover. The engines that rocketed it out of a gas giant's heavy gravity were not easily throttled. The captain reined back his shuddering vessel like a bridled horse, letting the flat belly of the craft act as his airbrake. He made several dangerous passes, whistling at nearly sonic speed over the hellish landscape of mud pools and boiling geysers before he found the trail.

Upward it wound, for miles and miles. Perhaps he was not too late, for surely, human feet trudging hour after hour through that grim landscape could have but reached the foot of the monster by now. *Perhaps it's not too late.* Blunt's lips split in a savage grin. Perhaps the vulcan would get another tidbit, this time. He would feed it the first man who opposed him. Down the fiery throat he would throw them, one after another, those yellow-robed fiends, and to *hell* with them all.

He lost the trail then. He had to make three passes, holding the bucking, protesting shuttle with an iron grip, before he finally saw the dark entrance that swallowed the path. Merely a jutting ledge, a short lip that — if a man were fool enough, and lucky enough, and most of all, *nervy* enough — could serve as a landing spot for a shuttle that could later launch into the air, like an eagle falling closed-wing from a cloud...

If he missed by even a foot, either landing or taking off, it would be the end of the short and, so far, less than illustrious career of James Sherman Blunt. Blunt's lips thinned.

His fingers could have threaded the fine eye of a needle until the instant the brakes held his screaming craft. Afterwards, when he craned his neck to look over the nose of his shuttle into the

void that fell away far below, his hands could not have held the contents of a mug of coffee steady on his knee, they shook so much.

When he climbed out and saw the rim of his outside tire squeezed over the edge of the abyss, Blunt cursed furiously for some minutes, in defiance of the death that stared him yet eyeball to eyeball and until his legs, which quivered finely under him, allowed him to walk.

Wide, shallow steps, cut into glassy black obsidian, led him onward. A cable handrail was strung on each side.

He had no need for light, for he saw a glow far ahead of him, and the glow was red. He heard noise, like a giant watery pot set a-boil. As he descended, the hissing sound grew louder and louder, and the baleful light brighter and hotter.

He descended one hundred fifty-two steps before he saw the glaring sea of fire.

No ships sailed those sluggish waves. Some waves dropped back with a wet, kissing *plop*. Others expired with a brief fart of foul-smelling gas; others, more vigorous, burst like bombs and cast brimstone to illuminate the distant reaches of the mountain's heart. The molten sea sighed, and breathed, and hissed, and grumbled, and shrieked like ten thousand exploding firecrackers.

An impossible jetty thrust far out over the restless red. Blunt saw sulfur yellow robes clustered at its foot. And *someone*, one lone, small figure, walked the impossible bridge, walking steadily out over the molten sea, streaming flames from the black hair that blew in the brimstone wind, feathered with flickering light from her burning sleeves...

Jim Blunt shouted but could not hear his own cry. He ran and felt the furnace through the soles of his boots, and cinders smolder on his skin.

But now she stood at the end of the bridge, and *she was aflame*, head to foot. *And the sea changed.*

A whirlpool began. The circle of lava was barely noticed at first, and suddenly, it was vast. A tornado of hot air formed, and became a tornado of lava. Wind howled in a rising siren, until Blunt put up his hands to shield his ears and screamed protest; but still he could not hear himself.

The light of the molten tornado burned fiercer and fiercer, until he fell to his knees and tore off his hat to cover his eyes. Behind squeezed lids, actinic lightning dug into his brain. He could keep none of it out, none of it, not the sound, nor the light. He knew no more.

When he came to himself, a tired, gray-haired man in a yellow robe was washing his face with water.

Jim Blunt grabbed him instantly by the throat. "You *bastard*," he spat. "You killed her!"

"*Mmpf*," his victim gasped. He could say nothing more, for his face was already purple.

But other yellow-sleeved arms seized the captain's strong limb, and many more, until at last, with great struggle, they dragged his iron fist away, and the captain lay cursing in a seething prison of protesting men.

"Listen," his victim croaked, massaging his bruised throat with one trembling hand. "Just listen, please, captain, and do one thing — *one* thing we ask you — and if you still desire to shoot me after that..." He lifted Blunt's weapon in the other quivering hand. "Then we'll return your gun, and you can have at us!"

Jim Blunt looked up from his human chains with glittering eyes. "Say your prayers, then," he said. "If you think they'll do you good."

"She's alive." The man lifted a trembling arm. "She's *alive*, captain. She will live longer than you or I ever will. She'll live when this world is molten from pole to pole and there's nothing of humanity except our ashes. She's the bride of the Vulcan now, and *that* was the promise he made us, when the first man and woman stepped on the burning rock of this world!"

Jim Blunt smiled. The men who lay on him tightened their grips, and the man who leaned over him paled, put his hand to his throat again, and swallowed hard.

"Give me your word," he croaked. "Give me your word, you'll go back down one more time and look, Captain. That's *all* you have to do, and we'll give you your weapon as soon as you get back, if you only give me your solemn word to do as I ask."

"I've never broken my word yet," Jim Blunt said, and smiled the same kind of smile he had before.

And when they let him up, he shook his clothes in place, picked up his hat, and nodded to the man who held his gun in his still-shaking hand.

"My word is this," he said. "You're all mad dogs, and when I get back, I'll take care of you, as a man should take care of mad dogs. But I'll do what you ask me to, first, because I promised. Then you'd better know how to use that gun, if you think it will do you any good. What's your name, mister?"

"Emile Mandel." The man held the gun at an awkward angle in his uncertain hands. "I'm the town schoolteacher."

"You'll be the first," Jim Blunt replied politely, and tipped his hat, before he turned away.

When he had counted one hundred fifty-two steps, he looked on the sea once more. Then he stood still and stared, for a long time.

Upon the almost-calm surface, twenty-six women of fire danced and sported and sang in whistling voices of steam, and one of them, only one, had four crimson arms.

At last Jim Blunt touched his hat and lifted his hand in farewell. But she did not notice.

"I guess there's more in heaven and earth..." he said. "Or maybe even... in hell. Goodbye, my lovely! Maybe we'll meet again, some day."

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Diana Pollin is a New Yorker who loves and inhabits the wonderful, sunny, and mysteriously inspiring city of Marseilles. For her, nothing tops the traditional ghost and horror story where less is more. For a self-professed newcomer to writing, she has had remarkable success at *Bewildering Stories*. Her influences are Lovecraft, Poe, Black, Le Fanu and, of course, O. Henry.

## Good Writing

by Diana Pollin

“Pearls before swine!” Barton thinks. “All Alma’s fault, these yearly family parties. Just to give Debra a God-knows what notion about their Jewish roots! Well, I’m partly to blame, I gave in to this nonsense.

“Alma, bless her heart, lives in a dream world, when will she wake up!? Never? Stands to reason: spoiled only child, never had to worry, thanks to Papa Lensky paying for everything, including my doctoral studies at Columbia.”

Barton had suffered the taunts and jeers of his homeroom classmates. They follow him everywhere, even forty years after the Abramovitz name was changed to Sturges, back in 1926. He can still see those awful 10-year olds smirking in his bedroom, where he’s buffing his shoes. He puts up with it, all for the love of Alma.

Love of Alma? Well, yes, he might say it is or has become love. But damn it! (Barton pulls murderously on the shoe rag.) What does Alma see in that typically Jewish family of his? Jealous maybe? All her relatives are dead.

\* \* \*

“Com’ ovuh here, waddy bin doin’!”

Charlie attacks from behind, via her belt. Debra has 1.27 seconds to avoid the floor, and social disgrace. Besides, Father would kill her for staining the carpet. It is a very expensive Shiraz, she knows. She lap lands. A hot vicious mouth presses against her ear, Yaouw! It tickles, she wants to yell. Next, two kneading fingers tug at her cheek, and the inevitable, “I can’t get over how tall you got. Wad a’ you? Six feet or sumpin’?”

Aunt Bessie, the jerker’s wife, pipes up, “She’s got her father’s nose.”

“Aunt Bessie, you wanna drink?” Debra holds up the last vodka orange like Excalibur before the tray hits the floor, Thank Goodness empty.

“Hey gimme that!” Charlie whips it out of Debra’s hand.

“Charles you have had enough!”

“Go to Hell, woman!” Aunt Bessie turns away. Debra’s problem now.

“So what’ you been doing Red Head?”

“Been going to school. I’m almost a senior,” Debra ventures lamely to the ancient.

Uncle Charlie attacks the vodka, drinks like an anteater, but in stereo. “Ain’t tchou sumpin’?” He sets the vodka down on a coaster, starts to jiggle her on his knees, as though she were five instead of fifteen.

“So you’re like your Dad. Shmarrt!”

A burp like the Leviathan kicks Bessie onto the return track, “Charles, stop that at once!”

Water off a duck’s back. “Yeah, the smaarrt one, just like huh faaduh.” His hairy arm holds Debra, squirming, while Aunt Bessie works the other side, his wrist.

“An’ she’s a red head, like that shikseh Bart was crazy about when he was in collegsh. Yah know, yer a shikseh, lid’le one? Like the girl with the red hair.”

“Charles Cohn, just Let Her Be!” Bessie crescendos as the prisoner, finally free, slides from his lap to the floor and all 3A are there for the show. Tush landing, no problem. Gets up with a Charlie Brown smile. No need to drop a tray on the Shiraz, social sin already committed. *Red head Red head. Fire in the wood shed! Wake up Debra, get real!* What was that for?

And where were her parents during the ordeal? Barton was in the kitchen, like the police, never around when she needed him and Alma, well... But, who was this good-looking boy coming over with Alma? A knight in shining armor, a prince charming, a savior! “Danny Levine, your cousin Gil’s son.” Alma introduced him, and then: “You kids can sit here and be by yourselves, pay no attention to the older generation.” She found them a seat in a corner and served them orange juice.

“What fantastic hair you have!” Danny remarked, settling down to get acquainted. Okay, rub it in, she was a freak: red hair, freckles, sludge-color eyes! Tall and awkward, a big bird, her father’s nightmare. Catherine of *Washington Square*. Barton had wondered out loud where she came from. Alma was small and fine-boned with dark hair and blue eyes, Barton was mousy brown with a pinched face and dull gray skin. But, here she was, an aberration! Irish type redness combined with Jewish sensitivity! And this cute cousin was turning the knife in the wound!

“Yes!” Debra flared up, “I have always had red hair and don’t ask me how I got it!”

“I am sorry,” Danny apologized with a soothing and honest smile. “But I really like it.” He had a jutting-out nose, dark hair and tan skin, periwinkle blue eyes, and a neat, muscular body.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter! Where do you go to school?” Debra asked with a toss of her head.

“Well, I don’t know just right now. You know about my parents divorcing so change is in the air. If Mom moves back to the city, I might consider Stuyvesant or Bronx Science for my senior year. I took the test for both and got in. But, of course, a lot depends on Dad, where he is relocating.”

“I suppose it has been really rough on you. I mean, with your parents breaking up. I never did get to meet your Mom,” Debra said without thinking.

“I think I would like to talk about something else.”

“Of course, I understand. Gee, I am sorry. Always come out with the wrong thing.” Debra sighed, embarrassed by her *faux pas*. “I thought of trying out for Bronx Science, you know, but I’m no good in math and science. Play the piano a bit and the flute. I thought I would try out for Music and Art. Father taught there...”

“I know,” Danny broke in enthusiastically. “One of my buddies, Jerome Kagen, landed in his English class. Your old man was strict! Knew his stuff though. He was one of the few who really cared. The other teachers just came in, did their job and walked off. Not your Dad! You know, I even remember Jerome telling me that your Dad took an hour of his time to explain a difficult passage in a short story they had studied. I think it was by Hemingway. You ever read any of his?”

“Just the Nick stories. I prefer Saroyan. I love Willa Cather and...” She was about to say Harper Lee when Danny interrupted.

“You know, I couldn’t make up my mind to do math and science or English. I write poetry, do you? I heard that you jumped two years ahead in school so you must be a bit of a brain.”

She smoothed her skirt and sipped the orange juice. “I don’t go in for poetry. I have tried my hand at short stories, though. One is appearing in June in the senior year book.”

“What’s it about?”

“Oh, it’s about a Japanese girl who is hit by the A-bomb and is laid out to die. On the day she shuts her eyes, a dove comes onto her hospital window sill and inspires her to make airplane peace signs. I am not describing it correctly, but basically it is a plea for peace, now the conflict in Vietnam is getting *really* serious.”

Danny touched her hand. “I would like to see it, if you don’t mind. Talk it over with you. Do you have a copy?”

Flattered and feeling a little giddy, Debra said, “Sure, in my room. I have done more writing, mostly historical stuff. Let’s go.”

“Historical stuff?”

They started down the long corridor of the pre-War apartment with its Chagall prints on the walls and abstract drawings by unknown artists. Debra’s room was papered in green flowers, an overcrowded desk occupied a large wall space. Danny shut the door. They were alone and far from the planet of drunken adulthood. She handed him the story, he sat down on the bed, while she swiveled nervously, and elatedly, in the desk chair.

After a time, Danny raised his head, and ran his fingers through his hair, “Yeah, I like it very much. Can I give you a bit of advice?”

“Oh, please do!”

“You have got talent, voice, style and the right sentiments. But, you don’t need all those qualifiers. White can stand as white, you don’t have to say pearly white. Let the reader do some of the imagining. I know I sound pedantic, but that is what Mr. Lyons, a marvelous English teacher I had last year, told the class. He really *taught* his students, like your Dad. He said, ‘Make it pithy and pitiless.’

“Good writing is cutting all the lace work, getting down to the essentials. Good writing starts with *awareness of motives*, you know, what lies behind passionate love or unrelenting hatred, for example, why these passions exist, and for whom, and how they interact, and what *surprising* forms they take, even when your characters wear masks, or social tags.

“Good writing is the product of an unforgiving, even brutal, honesty that sweeps across social, sexual even family lines, honesty with yourself *first*, then in regard to others. It may be hard to call a spade a spade, it’s even harder to recognize that a spade *is* a spade.

“As I said, push aside all the moss, tell it like it is. I think writing is like a connect with *reality*, and the wonder of it is that it produces fiction, marvelous fiction. Didn’t your father tell you all that? Sorry, I am being simplistic and I’m probably boring you to death.”

What had Barton said about her writing? That it “needs vast effort.” Goodbye, the end, get out of my way. “No, you certainly are not boring! I don’t really discuss things like my writing with my

father. He was pleased when the yearbook staff asked me to write *Planes of Peace*. I just let it go at that.”

Danny asked to see her historical stuff which she kept hidden under the desk as her father had no conception of privacy. The box was a tightly folded carton containing paperback biographies of Cleopatra, Jezebel, Messalina and Lucretia Borgia. Each book held loose pages blackened with handwriting. “What is this all about?”

Debra rose from her chair. “I guess you would say it is my real self. My beautiful alabaster skin, my hair which runs in blue black silken waves, like ripples on the ocean at night, the feline grace in each of my movements. I show the cunning of a fox when I speak to my admirers and my plotting ministers.

“Stately and solemn, I walk to the foot of the eternal and mysterious sphinx and I worship Isis at sunrise. I raise my hand and Cesar and Anthony drop to their knees, I drop a pearl into a chalice and it dissolves in a hiss, I know that I am the object of court intrigues, but I am wily and shrewd and ruthless, I have spies everywhere, and counter-spies, and I know who is trying to poison me! I choose to die at the serpent’s sweet bite. I am Cleopatra the unvanquished!”

“Great! Just great!” Danny clapped and laughed. “You know, you could be a marvelous actress. Have you done any acting?”

Actress? Her? Actresses were pretty, petite, always on display. “No, I... er... I guess not.”

“Well, if you ever want to be an actress, I think you’d be a great one. Or a writer. Maybe they are not so different. Can I ask you what these stories deal with?” Danny had sat on the floor, leaning his back against the bed, taking a notebook.

Debra returned to her swiveling desk chair. “I take up where history and Shakespeare leave off. I pretend Cleopatra staged her own death and ran off in search of a kingdom where she could rule and be safe. She meets all sorts of historical and mythical figures on the way, like Aeneas and Romulus and Hannibal and they become lovers, and she influences their future conquests.”

“That sounds really great! And you do the same with Jezebel and..”

“Yes, although with the others it is harder because they were really wicked women. Cleopatra at least had some good points. But I find these evil women fascinating. Even Jezebel... Did you know...”

But before Debra could finish, Danny had risen to his feet, and a photo had fallen from his shirt pocket. “Isn’t she beautiful?” he said in a soft voice, showing it to Debra. Wavy ash blond hair in a loose chignon, finely chiseled nose, high prominent cheekbones, black eyes, pale skin.

“Yes. Is she your girlfriend?”

“She certainly is! Hannah Abelman. We’ve been dating for three years. She skipped a year, like you!” Danny looked intently at his cousin. “She’s got early admission to Barnard, but does not know if she’ll go there or the Fashion Institute. Perhaps will do both. Tremendous talent. Wants to be a designer.”

“How tall is she?”

“Huh? Five three, five four. Does it matter? Not everybody is fortunate to be tall like you!”

\* \* \*

The guests had left. Alma called Debra into the kitchen while Barton disappeared into his study. They had finished the dishes when Alma in a soft serious voice told Debra that “Father wants us in the office.”

Barton was at his desk with his back to the door. A finely chiseled tulip shaped brandy glass, filled to the brim, stood above an ocean of papers. A telephone and special lighting had been installed; Barton had weak eyes and was accustomed to working late on his scholarly books and articles.

Alma took a seat beside her husband, who had turned his chair around and motioned Debra to a stool. Debra said she preferred to stand, to which he replied, “As you please.” He turned to the brandy and sipped it parsimoniously, perhaps as a demonstration of how to drink a cordial. “You may stand, but please, do not give me the spectacle of your infernal slouching! Spare me that, if nothing else!” Debra took the stool.

“Bart, Debra’s tired. Why not tell her why you asked us in, dear?” Alma inquired, trying out an innocent tone of voice.

Barton pursed his lips and cocked an eyebrow, another slow sip of brandy. *He* had all the time in the world. “There are two reasons why I asked you *both* to come in tonight. The first, and I think Mother will agree fully with me on this, is that it is indecent and unfitting to receive a young man in your room behind closed doors.

“I know you and your cousin have done nothing blamable, but it is not suitable to distance yourself from a crowd with a boy your age. The consequences, you must realize, will fall on your family as gossip and wrongful supposition.”

“Don’t give a damn, *now*,” thought Debra, but Alma replied, “I think... dear, I think that it is all my fault. I wanted to get Debra away from Charles, and it was I who suggested that the young people go off and talk.”

“And that is exactly why you are here tonight, Alma!” He pointed a finger at his wife and spoke harshly. “I insist on putting an end to these family parties! I will no longer be the *victim* of *your* misplaced generosity and *our daughter’s* utter disregard for her and our reputation! No discussion, the end!” Alma muttered that she understood and that the parties would cease.

“May I go now, Father?” Debra said resignedly. “I’ve work to do.”

“You certainly may not. I have not finished.” He reached for the brandy, took a loud sip, followed by a loud gulp, followed by a tense minute of silence. “I trust you will not engage in that behavior anymore. But, if it were only that, I would not have called you in and have you interrupt my work. What I have to say to you will come as a surprise to your mother. I wonder how this disappointment will sit with her.”

Alma and Debra exchanged glances. Barton went on, “You know, Debra, that we as parents have been very generous with pocket money, supplemented, it is true, by your baby sitting, but you cannot say that we have refused you any *worthwhile* cultural or educational pastime. You agree with what I have just said?”

Oh no! There it was! Well, let it come! And, yes, she has the courage. Didn’t Danny say she was a good writer?

Barton cleared his throat, and lowered his chin. Another slow sip of the brandy. “Very well, then. If you agree that you have been privileged, and even *far more* privileged than most of your friends by everything your parents are doing for you, you can well understand *my very profound* disappointment at finding the rubbish you have been *hiding* under your desk!”

“You really had no right to explore the contents of my desk,” Debra said dispassionately, raising her eyebrows.

New development, this insidious placidity! What was his daughter up to? “Of course I had a right! It was *my* pocket money that was being spent in such a horrible and negligent way! What’s more, you are a *liar* and a *thief*, as that pocket money was very specifically set aside for museum trips, and books of fine literature! And when I asked you what you were reading, you answered Dickens! Well the Dickens you were! *Liar!*” Barton glared and growled and reached for the tulip.

Alma rose from her chair and pleaded, “Barton, I think the child is tired, and I don’t think it is so terrible, this adolescent liking for drugstore literature. Every child goes through it. I remember I...”

“No, Alma, not *every* child reads pornography...!”

“You hate me, Father, don’t you?” Debra said in a stony voice.

“Debra! How can you say that? Father and I only want the best for you!” Alma folded her daughter in her arms.

“No, Mother. Father hates me, and now, I know why he hates me,” Debra replied with a certain coldness.

“Debra dearest, we *know* you are not reading pornography. It just is... Well, how can I express it? It is as if someone gave you a beautiful Greek statue and you took a horrid crayon and began scribbling all over that beautiful statue and spoiling everything that was good and beautiful about it...”

“And oh yes, now that you mention Greek statues, Alma, our daughter *does* have a taste for classical literature. Do you know what *terrible* things she has been reading?”

“What *terrible* things has she been reading?” Debra mimicked, gently setting aside her mother’s arms.

“Quiet you! I am speaking to your mother! The so-called life of Cleopatra, four volumes of the most terrible rot.”

“Barton, enough of this!” Alma cried out loudly, removing a tissue from her pocket, “She is just curious!”

“Curious? Our daughter! No! She’s a liar and a thief!”

Another long slow sip of brandy. Silence for a moment. Was he selecting a form of punishment or had he finished the assault? “Do you, my dear Alma, really want to know what our daughter is like? Well, then, I will tell you.”

Barton set his voice into a mocking singsong. “Dearest Alma, our daughter is like Cleopatra... *Serpent* of the Nile, or she is like Jezebel...”

“Or,” said Debra, walking to the door and looking pointedly at her father, “she is like the girl with the red hair.”

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## Night Shift

by Diana Pollin

### I

“Hosanna! Praise to the Lord in the Highest! Go forth now Sisters and Brothers! Go forth and walk forever with the Lord for He is bountiful, for He comforts the Righteous, for He bestows his blessings on the Courageous and when I say COURAGEOUS I mean those who have SEEN — and when I say SEEN, I don’t mean those who take a peek around and shade their eyes, but I mean those who have the COURAGE to look, those who have the COURAGE to examine, those who have the COURAGE to SCRUTINIZE, those who have the COURAGE to come up from the cellar of darkness where the voices of Satan, the tongues of Beelzebub and Baal wag out their warnings of sham danger, where the enemies of the Lord speak in the smoothest honey tones to those who are only too glad to remain in the comfort zone of SIN, in the land of BLINDNESS, in the kingdom of IGNORANCE!

“Why go out into the wide world and SEE when the land of Nineveh overflows with milk and honey? Why do I ask you? Well, I’ll tell you! Because Beelzebub’s milk is sour and sickening and the honey is oozing out of bees that work the hives of Satan but make no mead for the Children of the Lord!

“Evil wants no Good looking over its shoulder! Evil seeks the thick rich dark fecund soil of Hell before it breaks ground and blossoms like a poison plant in the world above, evil loves the no man’s land of darkness, evil hates the rays of the Sun.

“It is EASY to turn your head away, it is EASY to make up all sorts of excuses — your eyes are playing tricks on you, it’s none of your business, it’s the way the world works — and a thousand other reasons to turn your eyes from what the Good Lord has put forth before you, but be aware that He is testing you because the TRUTH is no easy exercise!

“Remember Daniel in the lions’ den! Well, I want you all, I want us all, to carry that same ironclad invulnerable unassailable shield of courage and faith your whole lives through! I want you all to carry that razor-edged spear of TRUTH, to pierce the armor of self-deceit and cowardice forged in the smith’s shop of Satan, the war plate we all wear when we cannot, when we will not SEE.

“That is the hard metal standing between us and the light of the Lord, because the greatest, the vilest, the fiercest adversity to the Lord’s TRUTH springs not from the henchmen of the Princes of Darkness but from ourselves!

“Do you have eyes and yet fail to see! If the Apostle Mark, who walked with Jesus, said that, then I guess he said it for a reason! I’ll bet you my last dollar, he wasn’t preaching to cowards! Go forth now with the blessing of the Father! Go forth with the light of the Lord, look, watch and see! For it is the Truth that shall set you free! Let us pray. A minute of silence, if you please.”

The Baptist Church of New Abyssinia, on the heights of virtue, descends into prayer. Silence, before the assault on evil. The fluted pillars wait to resound. Bellicose rhapsodies snake through entrails, grip throats, dash against the ordained minute of silence. Another 30 seconds, then the Hosannas will shoot like cannonballs, loose and feral. Behind me Satan! What is the geography of evil? Does it grovel in the most inhospitable caverns of the soul or does it walk like a commoner behind royalty?

Still, the tempter moves quickly, a minute is an eternity and there is no telling what mischief he can do. Send old Scratch down to that fetid cellar to soak in the brine of infamy. God’s Truth is there, in this church, plain for all to see, riding on the mad sunlight ripping asunder the clouds of November, the eerie light of miracles is blazing, the Holy Cross above the mensa is crimson which means...

“Amen.”

“Hush up, the preacher told us...”

“Told me nothing. That’s a sign of God above the altar, don’t you see?”

Ah... men! Two notes lumbering about the bowed heads commence a strange festive mood. All eyes are turned on the preacher’s missus, sitting like an angel at the organ... an angel of Patience! Faith has moved mountains, but never overnight.

She is wearing a choir robe, only her head and hands emerge like black petals on a long white stem. A veiled parishioner adjusts her white lace gloves and whispers to her neighbor, “Mrs. Andrews, that’s her name, I think, is from Trinidad. They’re Christian over there, but a little weird. Look now, she’s smiling at Marion Peters, first pew, in the center.”

The black-suited gentleman and the white gloved matron nod. He is smart but smarmy and she feels ill at ease, but talk is a gift that glows brightly on her sense of usefulness.

“In the center?”

“Yes! You’re a newcomer? What’s your name?”

“Gabriel.”

“Well, bless my soul! Like the Archangel.”

“Yeah.”

Miss Electric Piety drawls out another bar, the missus’ hands fly over the keys like a spider caressing its newly spun web. Reverend Andrews, at the lectern, shifts papers around and says with a boyish smile, “Delia and I will be serving coffee in the study, as usual. Are there any announcements?”

Marion Peters shuts her eyes. The others may howl Hosannas and shake like tuning forks, she clams up and plunges to her knees in molten intensity. Dazzling is the church this Sunday and



pristine like the lilies of the field that dwarfed the heavy splendor of Solomon with their bell beauty, unadorned and undaunted at the king's passing by, while in the same long-stemmed vase, beside the virginal blooms, the matronly hollyhocks decked in mauve and exuding a captious perfume shade the altar.

Reveries of field lilies, the darlings of the winds, dancing in gracile waves on a green carpet... Marion Peters falls to her knees, joins in their delight, but a minute is short and cruel.

That Prayer interrupts her rapture, snares her soul in the trap of its iniquity. She sees a skull-headed mantis swinging a sickle and marching across the white fields. She cries in shame and blames the pure turpitude of her flesh, helpless before evil, even with prayers of love.

God, crafty Magician, can You not turn dung into diamonds? Where do you go when That Prayer speeds you past the flowers, past their roots squiggling in the dark fecund soil, past the worm leaving his segment-children who will eat your flesh as they have read your mind? The first triumph of evil, Marion Maybelle Peters, is not in the deed but in the thought!

He slips in beside her, the finely dressed gentleman, smelling like a spice garden. He is wearing a dark silk suit and the loose smile of a golden watch chain drips out of a vest pocket. A bowler hat sits on his head, which she suspects is bald, and gold rings circle his wide fingers. Now isn't he the picture of old Scratch called in by That Prayer? He must have heard it and slipped in, unwelcome, yet — alas — expected. A disgrace! Mrs. Andrews, leaving the organ, relieves her of the embarrassment of shaking his hand.

"How are you doing Marion? You okay?" The Reverend's missus is beautiful, she walks in a perfume of paradise, sweet but not intense, her voice is a soothing melody but there is firmness in her gaze.

"I guess I am okay," Marion answers, amazed that Delia Andrews came over to her while three hundred souls are snake-dancing before the Lord.

"You remember that hibiscus you gave me? Well, can't get it to be like yours. You have the touch. And the strips, they're doing fine. Took the graft well, as some plants will do when the soil is foreign. Let's leave this hothouse of Sunday screamers, I want to show you something. Follow me."

They go through a passage behind the altar, down a narrow flight of stairs to the basement, which shelters the large study where a wide and generous window ledge looks out on the street. Marion moves the African violets out of the strong, killing sunlight.

"I should have drawn the shades," Mrs. Andrews said, doing what she had neglected. "The last thing I want is to destroy them. But I do make sure the four o'clocks are in a shady spot. I feel a special love for those flowers; they go against the grain. Bloom not in the sun but in the coming darkness. Delicate but sturdy. And yet so simple and beautiful, flowers of the field, like the lilies of Solomon."

"Four o'clocks are what I do best," Marion stuttered, "they just... well, just grow wherever I place them."

"He hasn't knocked them over, has he?" Mrs. Andrews asked, adjusting the tiny pots and throwing her a sidelong glance. Marion's hand patted down the bang that hid the bang on her

forehead. "I am sorry," the pretty lady added, "it's just that I can't stand to see you suffer. Be honest, Marion, you have suffered too much. You can't leave him?"

Marion choking back the tears, answered, "Maybe I still love him. Maybe... maybe I am just afraid... afraid that he'll come after me. All he wants is the money, the money to go on with his drinking, his partying, his smoking.

"Sometimes I think it's the smoking that gets me more than the rest, he does the other stuff at bars, but the house stinks. He defiles everything, every temple, including the Lord's." She stroked the leaves of the sad dainty violets. "Mrs. Andrews, you are so lucky, your husband is perfect!"

"The name is Delia. No, Marion, my husband is not perfect!" the lovely lady said correctively. "It is just that there is more tolerance. Perhaps I can bear the pain. When I look at you, I see fear and a will to live, as well as the pain. When will the next hit come? And where? He is out of work again?"

"Yes!"

"And living on what you make as a cleaner?"

"Yes!"

"I have something for you, dear. Come here." Delia led Marion by the wrist to a dark corner of the ledge. "You know, I come from the Barbados. I am a minister's wife, but that does not mean I overlook the country gods, the ones who relieve pains, help women in childbirth.

"You know what I'm talking about. We have only one earthly life to live, so why live it in pain? The Good Lord never meant us to bear the burdens of the World, that's what He hired the saints to do! Some are more gifted for suffering than others.

"Be honest, Marion, you don't have that gift, you have the gift of ten green thumbs and that's a great gift, it's the gift of life! You never expected to hear that from a minister's wife, but there it is. And so this is my gift to you. A little plant I sneaked in from the Barbados looks like a dragon's tongue. It's supposed to bring sufferers good luck, reverse the suffering."

The plant's main stem was an ugly speckled maypole sprouting glassy spiked leaves, but it was a gift and thus a part of the giver, and she could not refuse it.

"You got to take care of it. My people call it the spider plant, because its spikes are pointed, like a spider's prickly legs. Sometimes, a spider will get into them. When that happens, you can wish away your sorrows. I saw a spider there this morning, it's gone now. One day it will be back! Think about it!

"Promise me you will not throw it away," Delia whispered, taking Marion's hands in hers. "Use it instead. The spiders, they carry messages, you know... to certain powers. Are you staying for coffee?"

The first parishioners had straggled in, their voices were hoarse, needing fluid comfort, coffee, but also the Reverend's good sherry and beer. They would be parading around as those with the light of grace, and Marion despised their salvation which was waiting to fall from their lips as so many miracles told over cups of coffee.

They would see the ugly plant and make an instant connection between it and her soul, and laugh as saints were sure to laugh in that smug way at the damning of the damned, as in paintings

she saw of old men with joined hands and tedious looks, springing to Heaven while skull-headed mantises did herdsmen's work around a pit.

She left with the plant wrapped in a shopping bag. Wasn't there a tall, stout black clad figure following her? She hastened home in fear.

## II

Tuesday arrived in a drizzle, it was five in the morning and she tiptoed from bed. The alarm clock was her enemy; it would wake her sleeping drunken husband, she had learned with the instinct of the farmer to wake with the day breaking timidly in winter, devoid of promise.

She had learned to be meek, and not to expect to inherit the Earth as her religion had told her, but to take pleasure in small pleasures, like watering the plants in the early hours of the morning when, left by herself, she could be verbal and overflowing with her admiration.

The posh opulent petals of the begonias, exuberant and showy, the piquant sensuality of the hibiscus, and its more sophisticated grace, the demure violets, surely the shy virgins of the lot, wearing golden dots and the row of four o'clocks, sublimely simple, honest and friendly, her favorites... They needed her care and her love, the spider plant was apart on a higher shelf, a special, eccentric, and ostracized guest.

She saw from her kitchen that Santos, of Santos Soda Beer Cigarettes Candy News, was cleaning his store window. He was a hateful little man, plying his trade in a dingy little hovel between two dilapidated buildings off Atlantic Avenue. But he kept his store window sparkling clean, rubbing its glass in round caressing strokes, as if it were his third eye.

He had demanded payment that Roman owed him for a pack of Marlboros, and she had quarreled with him over selling Roman cigarettes, but the snide mercantile rat insisted that he could not stop people from coming in. She yelled that he would never see her again, to which he answered in a sneer, "never say never," sounding like the voice of an oracle, strong despite its softness and able to mask other noises of the street, even the loud rumblings of the subway train in the grating below.

For some unknown reason, the memory of the subway train interrupting their rude conversation brought her thoughts back to the spider plant. She took it down from its shelf, tested its soil and saw a small black visitor exploring its speckled leaves. The plant needed no water; she put it back on its high shelf and wished the small beast a happy day. It was time to go.

A quick glance in the full-length hall mirror. Her face had a pretty upward swing to its features. She was pleased with how she looked that morning; a new mood had come over her, it tempered the forked tongues that would always come after That Prayer, it even covered her torment with the sort of merriness the damned might feel as Hell's fires licked their cheeks.

The train took her directly to 42nd Street, where she checked in at the office and got her "mission"— the night shift.

## III

Unbelievably lucky was she when she arrived in a stupor at the Dunkin' Donuts. Why was it empty on a weekday night?

"It's a trap, Marion Peters, leave at once!" Jiminy Cricket said looking over her shoulder. "This place is weird, empty as an old can. You think you're some kind of queen? Do you really think that you deserve special treatment after what has been going on in your poor little head all day long?"

But the hour was late, hunger is the best teacher, and reverie beckoned, she promised JC, no ill thoughts would or could stir up her weary mind. She would dream of her window-sill children, her flowers, the four o'clocks in tardy bloom, the naughty hibiscus and the sensuous begonias.

And even the spider plant would be checked to see if its visitor had stocked the larder. And she thought of Delia and Reverend Andrews, their three children, two girls and a boy, well dressed, always polite and smiling, and even this warm empty dining area, strangely hers tonight, a gift, no questions asked, a small favor of Chance to one who is not used to receiving.

She got her tray, picked up a free newspaper, sat where she never sat, facing a mirror, and began flipping through the pages of the tabloid until her eyes came upon an ad for a secretarial school with a photo.

No high school degree? No problem. We'll have you through business school in no time and on your way to earning big bucks. And feeling great about yourself. We'll teach you how to act, talk and dress like those Gal Fridays the Brass cannot do without. So stop by for more information and a free appraisal. You're headed for the top of the Class.

Stunning, that Beyoncé type with a telephone against her ear, and, in the other hand, a briefcase bursting with gazillion dollar deals, she is standing in an alley of royal palms on some financially graced shore where limousines cruise down wide boulevards and life is said to be easy.

"A real looker, I agree." The black bowler hat had taken the seat facing hers! He had entered with his foulness, called in by her dreaming of Beyoncé in paradise, she was sure. A plump bejeweled hand reached across the table! Never would she take it, but he did have the look of a rescuer approaching a drowning person.

"Now, why wouldn't you shake the hand of an elderly gentleman who followed you to church? I know, the old sin of pride, too good for someone like me? Well, sweetheart, you are facing a mirror, and dreaming of secretarial school, so doesn't that tell you something? Suppose you were wrong, very wrong. Be honest with yourself, and the rest will follow. The name is Gabriel."

"How did you know I was looking at the ad?" Her dark eyes narrowed mistrustfully.

"I know everything about you. You may not know it, but you are rather pretty. Push your bang aside and above all lose some weight." He smiled at her. She accepted his outstretched hand.

"I get it," she said, "you are the angel of the spider plant!"

The elegantly dressed gentleman burst out laughing. "Sweetheart, I've been called many things, but never that!"

"Then, who are you?" Marion choked with fright.

“Sweetheart, I am you. I am the big blazing truth that you are going to have to face up to one of these days, and the sooner the better!” Gabriel pulled out a fat cigar.

“There is no smoking in this restaurant!” Marion cried, astounded.

“Yeah, I know. You should try it one day, not the cigars — not for ladies — but silk-cut Turkish... Maybe somewhere deep down, you really want to give it a try. The only cigarette you ever had was when you were ten, in the parking lot behind a Safeway supermarket and, if I recall, the experience ended painfully. Only smug unadventurous souls give up a pleasure. And as for this place being a restaurant...”

“Get to the point! NO beating around the bush and this... this... name-calling, it’s just plain insulting! Okay, so I am not the glamour queen of the year, but at least I know what I want!” She hissed loudly while he laughed, but he ceased his laughter at her final words.

“Do you? Are you sure you know what you want?”

“Yes. Yes, I suppose I do.”

“He smokes like a chimney,” Gabriel said.

“Who?”

“Your husband, that crook, who else?”

“Yeah, Roman goes through a pack and a half a day.”

The gentleman took out a card and read, “Smoking constricts blood vessels and thus contributes to aneurysm ruptures.” He returned the card to his pocket and said squarely to Marion’s face, “A longstanding habit of smoking can end in sudden death.”

“Yeah, but I don’t smoke. Never have.”

“Sweetheart, not you — *him!* Now, when you step out of that subway an hour from now you’re going past Santos, and I recommend you go in and buy a pack of whatever he likes. You are all out of them and he’s going to bust you in the morning anyway. If he gets his hands on a cigarette... Let us just say that I will make sure that it’ll be his last.”

“Just what are you saying?” Marion Peters knit her brow.

Gabriel touched her wrist and whispered, “Listen. You are what? 27? You can go through life a battered cleaning woman, dead at an early age, or you can take steps to change it.”

“Are you telling me that I should bring on a death just because...”

“I’m not telling you anything. I am just giving you the truth! Up to you to do what you like with it.”

“Do you realize that it is a crime, a sin! An act against... against... God!”

“Hush!” he said and smiled. “Take a sip of coffee, it’s getting cold.” When she looked up, he was gone.

Tortuously slow was the ride to Atlantic Avenue, the stations appeared like bobbing shadows on a Chinese lantern, they lingered teasingly when she wanted them to move in a sort of relay race in which she was the baton. When they neared Atlantic Avenue, she felt like a diver sighting a brown line shimmering above the nebulous liquid.

And in the same impatient way, she wanted Tuesday to bolt to the end of the week, where her dreams were already resting, and praying in the pristine white church on the hill, embellished with the intoxicating sweetness of flowers and the prettiness of Delia, and her minister husband who

was so distracted by his wife that he had to shift around the sermon pages during the minute of prayer. That was her Sunday morning sorcery, conjuring sunshine and grace, even in the dead of winter.

Santos! She saw him in his doorway at midnight, pinning a look on her that felt like a bee sting and she responded to him with a righteous glare. God save her! The supplier to Satan would be glad to open just for her... NO! It was unthinkable! May he be damned! She walked past him with all the Christian virtues speeding her pace.

#### IV

Be thankful, Marion Maybelle, for the small joys that come your way; there's worse off than you, and you know it. Today is Tuesday and you get the night shift! At least you got a job! He has slugged you again over those Marlboros you won't buy? Well, you know how it is: "Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do!" Remember that line and keep silent, that's two lives you're saving, his and yours.

Your Christian duty is to save them in silence, something about the right hand not knowing what the left is doing. And keep telling yourself that some people must wait before they are led in triumph to the Lord! If you are a Christian beg for pardon when he comes at you, hush up when he calls you chubby. "Turn the other cheek" wasn't written for the birds. And hang in there, think about Sunday coming up and Delia at the organ.

But it was Saturday Marion Maybelle was thinking of. A few blithe minutes to finish the mug of coffee. She will miss the train. So what! The office at 42nd Street will wait.

A sunny and icy Saturday had swirled out of the week's grinding dullness, winter had put on its finery and its minion, a nippy mischievous wind, was exploring open necks and ears. She chanced to meet them — Delia and the Reverend, their two big girls and their little boy trudging after his sisters — on an afternoon walk. The girls wore white dresses with skirts opening out like lilies beneath their matching plaid coats and the son, in a dark suit and a woolen cap, trailed peevishly after his sisters.

She was returning home from the supermarket, bundled up and overloaded with packages; she had deliberately walked past Santos and there they were, Delia and the children and, to her great surprise, the Reverend, emerging from the hovel with a pack of cigarettes.

"Smoking! Reverend Andrews!" she exclaimed.

"That's right, Mrs. Peters, bad habit, shouldn't indulge." He answered with a smile that gave every indication that he had no intention of stopping the indulgence.

But she forgave him. He was really such a dear and a great guide, inspiring people to go the straight and narrow. And he was so boyishly good looking, despite his 50 years, graced with a halo of thick silvery hair that must be the color of the eyes of God.

His sermon on Sunday praised purity. "Draw the lines of good thought and righteous action and color them with your character. Your acts must reflect the truthfulness of your thoughts..."

His words of righteousness caused the congregation to rise and sway in harmony like the palm fronds that must have fanned the Savior's way into Jerusalem, and, during the coffee which, that week, she did not refuse, she saw him put his arm around his wife's shoulder.

The front door clicked open. She heard shuffling, then a curse, and the door slammed on its hinges. A hand pulled open a drawer, another curse. Roman had come in. Roman had seen the light in the kitchen, he knew where she was and Lord Jesus Christ!... She was going to pay for her dreaminess!

A mass of human rage entered the kitchen. Roman was not a tall man, but he was powerful, with a vicious whipping energy to his movements and a sneer disgracing his weak face. He stood for a long minute at the kitchen door with the havoc in the hall behind him.

"You got my cigarettes?"

"No, Roman! I told you...!"

"Told me what woman! Don't give me that religious crap, I told you to get the Marlboros or..."

The kitchen door snapped shut.

## V

I told you once, I told you a thousand times, Marion Maybelle, you had it coming! You and only you are responsible. The whole place is complete chaos! The begonia, the violets... Gone all gone! And the four o'clocks!... Your favorites! It takes only a minute to destroy the work of five years. The only living things left in this kitchen are you, that devil plant and its spider! It's like total bedlam and you are guilty, a thousand times guilty for not taking the train when you were supposed to!

She was breathing heavily, trying to shake off the panic gripping her chest, her eyes were all blue, she would have to cover them in heavy make up, wear sun glasses, and in the dead of winter! But what could she say about the swollen cracked and bleeding lip? And her arm that he twisted like an old rag, it hurt like the devil! Bad for the line of work she was in.

Work! It was 2:00 in the afternoon, Roman was sprawled on the couch, in a stupor. She crept quietly to the telephone and called the office. A person called Doreen at the other end of the line told her, "Normally an unexplained absence means an automatic firing, but you are in luck, honey, there's an urgent request tomorrow: Saint Nicholas Avenue and 156th Street. If you play ball, we will overlook the incident. It's a night shift. Will you go for it?"

Will she go for it? Did she have a choice?

Wednesday came spitting its sleet at her window, Satan or whoever was ruling the world had decided that day and night should wear the same clothes. Fat chance she would get to see dawn today or any day, now it was just a matter of surviving.

It was what? Four in the morning? Saint Nicholas and 156th Street? It would take hours to get there and back and before she would have to check in at the office on 42nd Street! She'd be home at midnight with a little bit of luck.

And talk about luck... Roman was still asleep and snoring on the couch. She set up the coffee machine in the kitchen and looked at the only other survivors, the plant and its spider, dissecting

with diabolical accuracy and not a small amount of grace, a very fat fly. She managed a smile at the spider, God intended it to eat like the rest of us. She had to get to work, this was her last chance. A last minute glance in the mirror. Where was her umbrella?

## VI

Eleven o'clock. Past eleven o'clock. Dunkin' Donuts had been a sea of noise once, long ago, the whole place smelled like molten sugar and cinnamon spice, but not now, sister, not now! Shift those glasses over your nose, hope it's not broken the way a lot of other things are; he went after me, well, that's sort of expected, but the plants, the four o'clocks, they did him no harm and...

No more food, can't stand this place and its noise and those prongs the servers use, look like crab claws just out to get you, like some other people. Yeah, I know, some of the well-meaning customers are starting to look over here, never seen a battered housewife before unless they do the battering; wouldn't put it past anyone, even the rich and the college boys.

One more minute of this and I'll be getting the can; I do something for you, dear, and the "Do you need help, lady?" and frankly, it just makes me sick, they put their well-rubbed noses into my business. Outta here. Fast.

The Times Square Station. Slimy flakes greased the stairs. The rush of crowds, the bug-eyed train cars, the people scurrying like little hatched nits onto the platforms, and fanning out over the stairs, the stations slipping in and out of view like in a crazy clock where phases of comfort or ill ease have replaced the hours.

She hung onto the pole feeling like a discarded strip of linen, bound for the rag bin. And the train chugged on and on and on, the crowds... the crowds... Never had crowds like this late at night. The next stop was Atlantic Avenue, and... no one there! The train was suddenly empty! Amazing! She was alone. Or almost.

He was on a seat. He was puffing on a cigar. He nodded to her, but, she spoke first, and she asked him, "You said it was... a new-her-ism?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Are we still on?"

"Yeah, but it's your last chance. You don't go into Santos' tonight and you blow it, sweetheart."

"I see. We're stopping now."

"I'll be walking behind you. Remember: your last chance."

Atlantic Avenue slid into view, the doors opened. Jiminy Cricket spoke. "You are seeing things and hearing things. The guy behind you isn't even there, and if he was, he is Satan."

She stepped out of the train, and into the penumbra of the station, a gloomy stairway lay ahead.

"Life and death are not for you to decide."

She moved slowly towards the first step. Her feet ached. Each step dripped with water, the rain had not stopped. Thank Goodness she had the umbrella.

"You married him for better or for worse."



She stopped halfway up the flight. There would be nobody in the toll booth and when she reached the mezzanine level, there would be nobody but Marion Maybelle Peters and Satan in unholy alliance. The outrageousness of it all even caused her to giggle. It was too extraordinary; she could always not go into Santos'. She started the climb to street level.

"All right, he has fouled up, but it's your Christian duty to forgive, and pray he'll see the light."

She was on street level. Gabriel was trailing, looking at his cigar that had gone dead. JC droned on: "And remember what you learned in church! The dark cellar where sin grows..."

She reached the street with the umbrella open. Gabriel was behind her. He had relit his cigar. A street lamp was puffing its lurid breath in Santos' direction. Her black umbrella made her one with the darkness, she tilted it down over her face, just below her eyes.

It was past midnight and cold. A taxi stopped at Santos'. A hooker got out. Tall, thin, grasshopper body. Loudly striped black and white fur jacket and short pants. She ran into Santos', ran back, stuck her scrawny neck in through the window to talk with someone in the back seat.

The light turned green, but the taxi stood still as a headstone. The hooker and her long white boots disappeared behind the screen of a cheesy yellow door and a tall, silver-haired middle-aged man stepped out. Reverend Andrews. He ran into Santos', returned with a carton of Marlboros. They sped off.

JC 's voice rushed in. "There must be an explanation for all this."

Trembling she turned to Gabriel.

"It is not the thought. It is not the deed. It is the flowers," he said softly.

She nodded and understood what he meant. Then she went into Santos'.

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Some of Elyss's published works can be found in the anthologies *A Time for Dragons*, *Philippine Speculative Fiction*, *Matchmade*, *Philippine Genre Stories*, and *Story Philippines*. Her fiction has also been included online in *The Best of Philippine Speculative Fiction 2009*. "Pursuit of the Litaniera" was a finalist for prose in the 3rd Philippine Graphic/Fiction Awards.

## Pursuit of the Litaniera

by Elyss G. Punsalan

Apo Leticia liked to say that Death calls himself Leong. That they keep each other company right before the sun sets, when her tasks as a litaniera — leading the prayers to the Highest to help the dying, the living, the sick, and the desperate — have been folded and tucked away until the next morning. That they meet at the river, and that she knows that Leong is near when the hot humid day cools to a December chill. That there is also the heady, foul scent of *bangbangsit* punctuating the air; its smell so putrid that a whiff invokes a deep and ghostly grave.

Apo Leticia liked to say that it was never roses, never the fragrant *dama de noche* or *ilang-ilang*. And that it was a strange choice for perfume — a *bangbangsit* flower looked too colorful and gay for the somber Leong.

She had met him when she was sixteen at her mother's deathbed, and rightly so. Leong's duty at the time was to take the diminishing Apo Belang to the valley of the dead, but he was somehow distracted, even amused, by Leticia's staunch army of litanieras who prayed without ceasing for her mother's salvation. Later on Leong would tell her that he had never seen an assembly that cared to pray for a woman who had lived an unremarkable life.

Apo Belang reluctantly reared a dozen children, and when she was done she spent the days smoking as many fat tobacco rolls as her toothless gums would allow. The litanieras, composed of women, children, and men, filled the small room, the elevated *sala*, the kitchen, the wooden ladder leading into the garden, the backyard, the *silong* beneath, around the outhouse and pigpens, the length of dirt road to the parish, and the pews of St. Joseph the Worker Church, with the various names of the Holy Mother and the saints in heaven.

When evening fell, they lit their candles, and chanted the *Regina Coeli* (for it was Easter), followed by the Most Holy Rosary, in all its joyful, sorrowful, and glorious mysteries. They had come through the urging of Leticia herself, who delicately reminded them of the times she had prayed for their loved ones in need.

Leticia by herself was a powerful litaniera — her prayers had found a secret passageway straight into God's ears, where supplications from her lips were clearly heard and granted. She was aware of this gift and was wise to gauge a petitioner's request, whether it was just or not, before acquiescing.

Frequently she would turn down a crooked governor's plea for re-election victory, or the foolish request of an envious matron, but rarely would she deny the farmers who pleaded for rain or a young mother who wept for her feeble child. It would seem that by herself, she had no need of the host behind her, but as days passed, her mother's breath became thinner, broken to pieces by thickening rasps of cough. She had sought the help of everyone she had ever prayed for, because for the first time Leticia feared that her own prayers were about to fail.

In between "Have mercy on us" and "Hail, Holy Queen," Leong emerged unnoticed from the walls of the small room. Unnoticed, that is, to the rest of the faithful except Leticia, who momentarily raised her head to recollect the next lines of prayer, and saw instead a pale man standing at her mother's bedside. The man had a curious expression, something so displaced from the mood and tone of the occasion that Leticia quickly shut her mouth and stopped reciting. It seemed to her that the pale man was oddly entertained by the litanieras, and that no one else was disturbed by his behavior.

Leticia looked around the room and out the window, and saw that the others were continuing where she had left off — murmuring with their eyes closed, their palms in the air as if in surrender. The words "Hail, our life, our sweetness, and our hope" floated from their mouths and hovered above them like the susurrations of birds. *No one else has noticed him*, she thought. *I must be mad.*

As she alone had this vision, she regarded this man with brazen curiosity, noticing how his skin, though ashen, shone faintly in the dark and how a raised vein wrapped around the lean bulge of his arm. He wore the simplest of clothes — a white shirt, brown trousers and shoes — and looked like an overgrown student who had found his way to her home by mistake.

There were circles around his eyes, dark and deep, and a kind of formal and melancholy sheen that only someone who had lost anyone for good would ever know. But apart from that, that sadness, there was on the man's face a bewildered look that edged closely to fascination. Leticia tilted her head.

The pale man noticed and said, "You shouldn't be seeing me."

Leticia froze, not knowing what to do. The pale man bent to her mother's ear and spoke ancient words, sounding unlike anything Leticia had ever heard. Apo Belang's head turned towards the man and asked what it was like.

A cold wave of blood surged through Leticia's body. Realizing suddenly who the man was, she sprang up and lunged toward her mother. She yelled and shouted and kicked the man whom no one else could see. "Go away!" she said. "You have no business being here!"

\* \* \*

The man had every business to be there — Apo Belang was over ninety years old, a miracle in itself really, because the hundreds of tobaccos that had pillaged her lungs were supposed to have killed her decades ago. But the man stepped back, away from parent and daughter.

He gazed at the ardent woman who shielded her mother from him, and sensed in her the familiar feeling of loss? Desolation? Emptiness? He could not tell which. But it was the very same air that had inhabited him since grasping his own reality. She was, clearly, not like him, not like death itself, but he felt as if he was looking at his own reflection.

\* \* \*

Perhaps the man was unnerved by what he saw; he turned around towards the wall. Leticia held on to her mother, but at the same time her mind wrestled with the finality of that moment, having to contend with the possibility of never knowing anyone as mysterious, or as desirable. The man took a step. Leticia blurted out, "Wait."

He glanced back at Leticia, looking as baffled as she was. They caught each other's gaze and held it, trying not to let go, up to the time the man strode away, resignedly, into nothingness.

\* \* \*

Many years had passed, and Apo Belang was still alive. She had long given up on tobacco since her near-death, but at age one hundred was discovering the aromatic charms of the cigarette. The town continued to talk of that day, the one they called The Great Vigil, where their fervent prayers reached the Holy Virgin, and brought back the soul of this old woman.

Some even said that Leticia, who was seen lashing out on the devil, had been possessed by the Holy Virgin Herself. Leticia was quick to dismiss the rumor, quicker still the parish priest at St. Joseph the Worker, who later on lost a significant number of parishioners at his mass.

When pressed to tell what it was she saw, Leticia would change the subject, usually by asking about the person's family and their well-being. She rarely spoke about the so-called Great Vigil, and kept to tending their little *sari-sari* store and washing other people's laundry, ways to augment the family's growing expenses though she had no children of her own.

To entertain herself she looked after her nieces and nephews, the children of her siblings. She immersed herself at church, organizing the retreats for the Legion of Mary, catechism classes for the youth, and the occasional fundraisers. On Wednesdays, she regularly sang the Marian hymns in the choir section, accompanied only by the vociferous playing of the pipe organist.

Leticia continued to be a litaniera, as it was what she did best — praying for newborns and newly deceased, souls in purgatory, the reconciliation of families, safety of travelers, the promise of harvest.

There were many litanieras in her town, but it was she who would still be called on by the richest and poorest of her folk, at any time of day, and usually at one's hour of death. In return the rich would offer her some thousand pesos, and the poor their best poultry. To both she would refuse, as a matter of principle. "My wage is in heaven. This is my mission," she would say matter-of-factly. There was no trace of hubris. No exaggeration of modesty. She said it as plainly as she would say the color of her dress.

Around this time Leticia's youngest sister gave birth to a boy, who would later be christened Florante after the folk singer, the mother's favorite. However, the mother would not live to see the christening, and would lie motionless at the last minutes of labour, her breath unable to escape. The charity doctor would later on explain that the patient's heart had stopped after a rapid rise in blood pressure.

Leticia was out of town with her church mates on a field trip she had helped organize. She had returned too late, her sister already in a wooden coffin, adorned with white and purple flowers arranged in rattan baskets. The husband of the departed was nowhere to be found, although folks

who lived near the Darapidap beach claimed to have seen him going further north, deranged and unkempt. Nobody has seen him since.

The next Saturday, the mourning crowd had gathered around the open tomb in a forlorn spot in Candon Cemetery, on the side of a hill. A gust of wind from the trees blew, ruffling hair, clothes, and the newborn's sleep. The orphan began to cry in Leticia's arms. The litaniera gazed at the child's face as she rocked him gently. He was unevenly brown-skinned and had lustrous hair, so much like his mother. *I should never have left*, she said to herself. The coffin scraped against small rocks as it was pushed into a white cement box.

Apo Belang leaned against the arm of her oldest son. She had fallen unnaturally silent since her daughter died, but when the undertaker sealed the tomb, her surface ruptured open and poured out her grief — dark, menacing, angry, violent. In the flood of unabashed heartache, her children wept with the knowledge that their mother had loved only one child.

Leticia held little Florante tighter, as if to protect him from Apo Belang's deluge of sorrow. She looked at the babe — how peaceful he'd become. He seemed to have been lulled to sleep by the old woman's wailing, which had gradually dissolved into the thick prayers of the crowd. But something stirred in the trees, and this made the baby's eyelids flutter.

Leticia felt the urge to slip away from the crowd and uncover the mystery in the wood, however she was halted by her eldest brother's sudden pronouncement — Apo Belang was dead. She quickly handed over the infant to a cousin, and instead of going to her mother, ran towards the trees. She sprang past the moss-covered crosses and unhappy cement angels, past the apartment-type niches and grand mausoleums.

In her pursuit the prickly underbrush between the named plots grazed her bare legs. She wasn't sure what she was after, but her heart paced and pushed her onward, urging her to catch someone, yes, someone, before it was too late.

The grove of trees grew denser at the edge of the cemetery. Leticia squeezed herself in between the trunks and paused to listen. A bird screeched overhead, jumping from branch to branch. Sunlight splintered into bright rods through the natural eaves, then spattered unto the leaf-covered floor.

Leticia heard her own breath flaring through her nostrils, and felt the front of her blouse, wet with sweat, clinging to her breasts. Instinctively she moved her hand towards her neck. In the cluster of trees before her, shadows clung between thick shafts and seemed to form a dark mass that stared back at her.

"Where is she?" Leticia cried out to the shadows.

The dark mass slowly crept out of the trees. As it separated itself from its hiding place, threads of black gauzy smoke stretched between itself and the branches, like spun sugar, breaking off as the mass moved toward Leticia. The shadows dropped to the ground like dispensed pieces of clothing, and revealed a man whom Leticia thought she had seen many years before.

"Your mother is where she wants to be," the man answered. He reached out to touch Leticia's face, the white skin of his hand shimmering in the light.

Leticia held still and looked into the man's brooding eyes. She felt his cool fingers trace her ear and the line of her jaw, then loosen strands of her hair away from her neck. Her heart became a beating drum beneath her chest.

"Where does she want to be?" she asked. Her breath tightened.

"My dear Leti," the man whispered, leaning closer to her, his face fading away, "she is with the one she loves."

The air quivered with the cries of Florante, carried from some distance away. The man had vanished, leaving nothing to prove his existence, except perhaps the lingering chill. Leticia broke free from the trance and remembered her obligations. She walked back toward the mourners who were weeping for both daughter and mother. No one asked where she had gone. Leticia put her hand in her pocket and pulled out her rosary. With a steady voice, she invoked them all to prayer.

\* \* \*

Leticia worried about Florante while she washed the metal cups in the outdoor kitchen. He had not returned from the children's mass today. *He must be at the river again*, she thought. She hoped that her nephew, now a full-grown child, would be playing with his cousins. She also hoped that he was swapping stories, or even talking nonsense with them, as long as he was talking. As a babe Florante did not cry or babble like infants, and when he had grown he expressed only through nods and shrugs, and an invented language of hand signals and facial expressions.

She hung the last metal cup upside down on the bamboo spike and wiped her hands dry with her skirt. When she looked up, the clear sky was taken over by ship-like clouds sailing from the east.

She decided to go to the river to fetch her nephew before the rains came. They would have to be back before noon, when Leticia had to visit a dying maestro's home and lead the litanies. She grabbed the old umbrella by the side of the door, and as she stepped out of the house, a series of thunderclaps shook the *ipil-ipil* trees lining the dirt road.

Leticia went as fast as she could to Oaig Daya, the western river. It usually took fifteen minutes to get to the Oaig on foot; but it took less time for the heavy rains to change it from an innocuous stream to a raging, living body. Many had drowned in it before, and these images filled Leticia's mind while the rain pelted all around.

Past the muddy farmlands, the Oaig laced through one side of the mountain and a rocky bank. During the summer, families came there in droves to enjoy the serenity that its clear waters promised.

When Leticia arrived however, white water swelled and frothed, and the trees bent under the force of the rain. She called out her nephew's name, but it seemed she could not shout loud enough — the river was drowning out her voice.

Leticia traversed the bank, still crying out for Florante. Her umbrella had already slipped from her hands and tumbled downstream. Rain slapped against her eyes and made it difficult for her to walk. She made a visor out of her hands to shield herself, and she searched the Oaig for signs of the boy. Suddenly, a child's wet hand shot up from the water, as if waving to something.

"Florante!" Leticia cried.

She raced towards the hand and ran downstream, going around boulders and tripping on

deadwood. The raised hand bobbed up and down in the gushing river, and continued to do so along a great length of the course. After some distance the hand drifted toward the banks, and the boy emerged, dragging himself out of the water.

In the last stretch as Leticia neared the child, she thought about slapping Florante hard enough so that he would not cause trouble like that again. But as the boy saw her, he smiled. His face lit up, and dimples dented both cheeks. His cheeks, she thought. The color had drained out of his face.

“Auntie!” the boy exclaimed.

Leticia dropped to her knees and held the boy. She didn’t know whether she should be happy that Florante was alive, or that he could speak. “You should have gone home after mass, you know that,” she told him.

“I know, Auntie. I’m sorry. But I wasn’t alone. Manong Leong was with me, I met him today, and he rescued me.”

“Who is this Leong?”

“You know him too, Auntie. He says you’ve met him. First at the Great Vigil, then second after Mama died.”

“I don’t know anyone named Leong,” Leticia stammered.

“He held me up while I was in the water. I slipped, see? I was really going home because the rain came. The rocks were full of moss, and when I stepped on them, I slipped and fell into the water. He dove straight in. The water was strong, Auntie! I almost drowned! But he held me up and led me to the side of the... Wait. Where is he?”

“Who, child?”

“Manong Leong. Don’t worry. We will see him again. Tonight, he said.”

Leticia helped the child stand up. As they walked the rutted path toward home, her fury for the man who took her mother and sister away rose up and screamed defiantly in her head.

\* \* \*

There was a small group of women in the maestro’s home that night. Leticia had been praying the Santo Rosario with them for hours, and was starting on the novena for the souls in purgatory when Florante knelt beside her. The yellow candles flickered on the wooden stand, and changed the shapes of the *santos*’ faces.

The room, which adjoined the maestro’s sleeping quarters, smelled of medicine and burning mosquito coils, and the overpowering scent of incense brought in by the priest and Knights of Columbus. The maestro’s daughters shuffled in and out of the kitchen, bringing food and coffee to the visitors.

In the lull between prayers, the maestro could be heard wheezing by himself in the other room. He muttered the names of his dead relatives from time to time, in the form of greeting, and this made the wife worry.

“We shall see him tonight, Auntie,” Florante whispered. Leticia sensed that the child was eager and restless.

“Use your voice to say your prayers. Thank the Lord God that you are alive. Thank Jesus that you can speak,” she whispered back.

The child nodded. He closed his eyes and sought God. Leticia closed her eyes and sought the Prayer to St. Joseph, their patron saint.

“O St. Joseph, whose protection is so great, so strong, so prompt before the throne of God...” The women behind her answered back, completing a prayer of old, the one sent by popes to emperors before going into battle. It was said that no one shall die a sudden death with this prayer, shall not be drowned or poisoned, shall not be burned in any fire or fall into the hands of the enemy. “I dare not approach while He reposes near your heart... St. Joseph, patron of departing souls, pray for us.”

Leticia felt fortified by this prayer — it was the novena she had used the most. It had never failed her since the time she learned it from the maestro himself. It would have been the prayer used to save her sister.

A draft slid into the room, which raised the hair on Leticia’s arms. She rubbed her arms to warm herself. A man dressed in black walked in from the front door and into the maestro’s room. No one had bothered to stop him.

“It’s Manong Leong!” Florante said to her, and at once stood up.

Leticia rushed into the other room and saw the man, this Leong, talking to the maestro. The maestro gazed intently at the stranger, and seemed to be comforted by his presence.

“The maestro had prayed to St. Joseph way ahead of you, Leti,” Leong said. His hand rested on top of the weary man’s head. “He misses his family. He is... very tired.”

“His family is here,” Leticia replied. Her voice carried a new boldness, but only for a while. Leong turned to look at her, and she felt her knees weaken.

“It is his time to go,” Leong said.

“I prayed to God,” Leticia choked. “I prayed to see and defeat you, that you may not inflict pain on us again.” Leticia inched closer, her fists clenched tight. She was meaning to do all she had said, but at that point did not know how.

“You don’t know what you’re asking, Leti,” Leong said.

At that moment, Florante appeared at the doorway. “Auntie, what’s wrong?” he asked.

Leticia looked back at Florante, and noticed how much more animated he appeared, even with his frail body. She sensed her nephew had changed into something she was a stranger to, since she saw him at the Oaig Daya. A kind of wrongness shadowed that boy. Panic went off like a bell in her head, and her eyes fought an oncoming wave of anger. She turned to Leong, “What have you done to Florante?”

“Listen, Leti,” he said gently.

His voice drifted to Leticia, and solidified as the sound touched her ears. Her heart stopped moving, and her tears, those that were about to fall, stilled at the rim of her eyes. He came nearer, and she felt his hands go around her back, cradling her, subduing her. She was as still as stone, yet she felt everything.

“Forgive me,” Leong said, “It was the only way to make Florante stay with you.”

Leticia did not understand. *How could Florante want to leave me?*



Leong moved so that Leticia could see his face. “This morning, at the river, before he fell into the water, his head hit against a rock. He was already dying, and you were still far away. I didn’t want you to feel any more grief. I changed him, Leti. I changed Florante to be one of us.” He touched her forehead with his own. “Forgive me. I thought it was the only way.”

Leong released Leticia, and walked quietly out the room. Florante ran towards his aunt and held her up as best as he could. The icy hold on Leticia thawed slowly, and as the room warmed to the heat of lamps and candles, a tear melted from her eye and fell unnoticed to the wooden floor.

\* \* \*

Apo Leticia sat precariously on a flat rock by the riverbank. The Oaig Daya was indeed beautiful in the summer — the sky, accompanying the water’s merry journey from the mountains to the ocean, stretched itself endlessly above the river. Her grandnephews and grandnieces played nearby while their parents tried their best to keep them in line.

A charming little girl, who seemed to be her favorite nowadays, waved to her while riding a rubber inner tube. Apo Leticia waved back and laughed. “Be careful of rocks!” she yelled. She did not expect to be heard above the radio with the volume turned up, and the laughter of her family which took over the river.

While gazing at the view, a young man stood in front of her. He had on a cotton shirt and beach shorts — an attire fit for the season. He reached for Leticia’s hand and touched it with his forehead.

“Auntie,” Florante said. He wore the same grin of some years ago.

*This look suits him. But he could use some more time in the sun,* Leticia thought.

“I didn’t think it was you who was going to pick me up,” Apo Leticia said.

“Do you want me to call Manong Leong instead?” Florante asked as he helped his aunt get up. He looked worried, and a bit hurt.

“No, that’s all right. I’m afraid I’m going to see much more of that man,” Apo Leticia answered. She curled her shaking arm around her nephew’s, and saw the Oaig Daya fade slowly from her sight.

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Mimi Rosen graduated from college with a degree in Special Education. She works as an early intervention teacher of the handicapped. Her love of writing re-emerged with a passion about five years ago, after her daughter left home for university. To date, she has had four short stories published in on-line magazines and is also working on her first novel. She lives on a quiet mountain lake in upstate New York with her husband and two dogs. She is a member of Backspace Writer's Forum. Mimi's mother is a Holocaust survivor, and her story has influenced Mimi's writing as well as her life.

## **Extraordinary Man**

by Mimi Rosen

A butterfly lies dead near the wood steps of the barracks. Its velvet wings, orange and black with three rows of white spots, tilted against the ashy earth. I consider embodying the creature, stealing its place on the frigid ground. All this death is frost to the spirit, but it is better not to think such things. Besides, I have protection, a small parchment tucked under my tongue on which I have inscribed the true name of God.

“Who is speaking?” the SS officer snaps. He halts crisply, enlarging his chest and scanning the faces in each row. His eyes are amber like a jackal's.

I'm not frightened. I shiver because I'm naked and it's cold. I'm standing within a column of camp Jews, between the prisoners' barracks and the east watchtower. Men and women, frozen with obedience, watch the ground as if doing so could blanket them.

Only God can save them. I pray to him constantly. Barely audible chants, not intended to offend, but which manage to disturb the jackal-eyed officer nevertheless. He scans the rows of prisoners as if on the hunt. His black boots wear a path behind the white-coated physicians, who unfold their tables before each human column.

“Open,” one physician says. He reminds me of a goat. A gray and black beard elongates his chin. He adjusts his spectacles then pulls on Yossele's lips, revealing the carcasses of his remaining teeth. “You're sick,” he says.

“No sir, I'm strong like a horse.” Yossele coughs.

“This one's useless,” the physician says.

A young soldier goosesteps towards them. He shoves Yossele into the group of ailing prisoners. Yossele's ashen color deepens under the blue-eyed soldier's stare.

The doctor leans over the table and scribbles. He looks up as the next prisoner steps forward. “Open,” he says. His methodical touch reminds me of father, who once examined a speckled horse with similar efficiency.

Father had been a respected teacher and gifted storyteller. His stories filled me with the power of God and the greatness of those who believe. Before the war, Yossele and I would spend Shabbos afternoons seated at our father's feet. Father's grainy voice still vibrates through me. Long ago, it had spirited me from our shtetle to places where extraordinary men experienced wondrous miracles.

Now, only one story reverberates through my head, the tale of Rabbi Judah Loew and the Golem. Rabbi Loew once molded a giant man from clay and placed the name of God in its mouth. And so, the Golem lived and served as protector.

These camp Jews deserve protection too. I can protect them, because I myself am extraordinary. I whisper over and over the prayer that Rabbi Loew used to breathe life into the Golem, believing it will transform me. And so I will become a superman and deliver these Jews from this barbed-wire camp.

“Who is mumbling?” the officer snaps. He scans the crowd of down-turned faces.

“*Solomon sha!*” Yossele whispers, his icicle fingers draping his testicles.

He’s close enough, within his ashy group, for me to shield when the time comes. The parchment jabs the inside of my cheek. I shift it to the other side of my mouth and continue to chant softly, bracing for the miracle.

I *am* extraordinary. I see what others can’t, like smoldering faces within piles of embers. I know that the ashes of each camp Jew will eventually form such a pile, but it is better not to think such things.

“Is it you I hear?” the jackal-eyed officer asks.

“No sir,” Yossele says.

“Then who is mumbling?”

I am the jackal’s accomplice. Each day, corpses are piled before me and I shovel them into flame-licked ovens. It is blistering work, but if not me someone else would be assigned to it. This work would engulf lesser men in madness. I’ve learned how to insulate from insanity. I avoid looking at faces, but then my eyes sometimes betray me. The sight of father once singed my mind that way.

If my eyelids had remained together, if my eyes had looked at only what was necessary, his vision would not have afflicted me. Now, father’s face relentlessly smolders before me. I try not to think of him, but my mind won’t pardon me. His slender mouth has become one with the pale lips of each man I’ve set aflame. His limbs have become tangled within each mound of floppy arms and legs. My mind persistently relives that moment. It won’t acquit me from my sins.

Other camp Jews know what I have done. I can tell by their shifting glances. I can hear it in their thoughts. They meekly await their fates, while loathing the jackal’s accomplice.

“Silence!” the officer barks. “I think you know which Jew is buzzing.”

“I d...d...don’t, sir,” Yossele says.

The young soldiers in the background laugh as the officer brandishes his pistol at Yossele. Fresh blond faces with wicked smiles. Their cold rifles loose in hand.

Yossele fears guns, but I’m not afraid. I could seize a rifle and shoot one smiling soldier after another. I am extraordinary that way.

“Shall I shoot *this* Jew?” the officer says, pointing his pistol at Yossele.

“The time has come,” God whispers and my voice rises in prayer. The officer turns, but I lunge before he realizes who I am, sinking my fangs into his gruff face. Blood fills my mouth. I yank the pistol from his hand and fire. The officer grunts and falls. Blood spreads across his black shirt.

Something strikes the side of my head. A metallic taste fills my mouth. I tumble, then lie motionless on the ash-colored earth. Yossele's eyes are on me. They remind me of father's. The jackal-eyed officer twists on the ground. His screams vibrate through me.

I am transforming. Steamy blood oozes between my cheek and the earth. It spreads like a glistening pool. I move the parchment to the back of my tongue and swallow. It curls within my throat. I resist the urge to cough.

I see father and surrender to his vision. He appears in a warm aura, caressing my face. "Forgive me," I whisper. I reach for him. He grasps my hand. Then I realize it is Yoselle's hand holding mine.

"You're not guilty of anything, Solomon," he says, bringing his lips to my ear. He softly chants the Sh'ma.

I am shrinking. My soul flutters and my body willingly releases it. It emerges as a butterfly with crystal wings that lift me above the barbed wire.

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A native of Argentina, Carmen Ruggero made America her home in 1959. She lived in California for most of this time, making the stage a big part of her life. Her work has been featured in sites like *Short Story Bytes*, *Scrivener's Pen*, and *BeWrite*. She took first place in the Veronica Tegler short story competition for her story "Eighty-Six Eggs." Carmen's website is Yarnspinner. A long-time member of the *Bewildering Stories* Review Board, Carmen is our special editor for poetry and Spanish language submissions.

## Trigal

by Carmen Ruggero

### A Tall Tale and the Flying Wheat Tail

It was long, long ago when I sat on my father's lap to hear a bedtime story; one I'd heard night after night after night. Father knew tales of a valiant lad who fought for his land's glory, or the mischievous doe, or the girl so fair — so long was her hair, she used it to sweep the story.

But the sweetest to my ear was the one about a little horse. And though I'd heard it many times before, the ending was different each time it was told. "And once upon the time..." my father said, with a rock and a pat, my head close to his heart, "there was a little white horse with..."

"No, Dad, the horse was yellow."

"So he was yellow and had a long... long... tail and his name was... Yellow Horse."

And as my father spoke, Yellow Horse, as real as a story horse could be, came to me gently gliding through the sky on a filmy cloud of smoke. He was a tiny little horse with long feathery lashes and eyes black as the night, blazing silver as the stars.

But his mane was not yellow at all. It was the color of wheat: creamy and pale. And so I gave him a new name: *Trigal*, which means "wheatfield" in Spanish.

I called to him aloud. He turned to look at me and shook his mane as if having understood, in as close to a horsie wave as he could. He stood on his vaporous cloud, and his eyes beckoned me to come for a closer look. He lowered his front legs inviting me to climb.

I held my legs fast around his body, bent forward, and clung tightly to his neck, my face next to his mane. "You smell like thyme," I said politely.

Trigal stepped off the little cloud and began to gallop with me on his back, holding fast, my eyes closed, laughing aloud!

He ran faster, faster, as I held on tighter and tighter, filling the silence with laughter. "Don't be afraid," he said, though I didn't hear his voice.

"Did you speak, Trigal?"

He didn't respond. My storybook horse sped across the meadow, splashing as he raced through the brook. His mane tangled with petals — purple, red and yellow. He was faster than lightning, and soon his long, long, tail spread like feathery wings of wheat, and he began to fly.

We were way above the clouds, gliding gently through the sky. "Do you like this?" he asked.

Again, I knew what he said, but never heard a sound. “How do you speak, horsie? Why can’t I hear your voice?”

He slowly turned to face me, and when he looked into my eyes, I saw my face reflected in his black, shiny gaze and knew his thoughts and my thoughts were one and the same. “Where are we going, Trigal?”

“Somewhere left of the moon, and south of the morning star.”

“Is that very far?”

“No! We’re here in fact.” And a riveting sight it was! Castles made of chocolate, trees laden with sugar puffs, bathtubs filled with cream, hair ribbons made of fluff, children dancing in the street, mothers singing soothing rhymes, lulling little ones to sleep. It was the land of imagination, my horsie said. “What do you fancy? How do you see yourself, lass?”

“I like to dance!” And no sooner said... just like magic, I was dancing, twirling, pirouetting through the sky! “Look at me. I can dance!”

But I stopped when I saw Trigal turning back. He smiled at me and, with his lashes, fanned a goodbye.

“Don’t leave me horsie, don’t... I want to go home!”

“You are home, silly girl, imagining your life.”

“No! I’m left of the moon, south of the morning star.”

“Well, that’s just where I found you, asleep on your father’s lap.”

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Brian Trent is a professional writer working in a diverse spectrum of genres. A novelist, journalist, poet, and screenwriter, his work has appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *The Humanist*, *Boston Literary Magazine*, *The Eclectic Muse*, *Illumen*, *The Copperfield Review*, *Blazing! Adventures Magazine*, *Astonishing Adventures*, and many others. He was a finalist in last year's L. Ron Hubbard's Writers of the Future Contest and is the author of the novels *Remembering Hypatia* and *Never Grow Old: The Novel of Gilgamesh*. Brian is a lover of travel, history, and possibilities. He lives in Connecticut, and has recently completed his first major science-fiction novel.

## Everywhere After All

by Brian Trent

Sometimes he ran into himself, and that was awkward. The whole point of the Diaspora was to eventually run into yourself, interface, and move on older and wiser. Like last week, he had been in a Lisbon bar with a bunch of college students, and he had talked his way into their circle, making them laugh, getting the right looks from some of the girls, and then he went over to the bar and ordered a round of Midori sours, and the bartender laughed.

“Can’t be too many codeworms who drink Midori in Portugal,” the bartender said. For a hellish second Leet panicked that the bartender was a codecop, and his heart squeezed a terrified spasm, legs coiled for a dash out of the bar. Then the bartender — tall, muscular, and blonde like some hybrid of Long Beach toolbox and Hitler youth — laughed again and said, “Squid change colors to show their mood.”

It was one of *the* phrases. Leet stared at the bartender, suspecting treachery. Leet had black hair and blue eyes, at least while in Portugal. Blue eyes made him stand out here. To the bartender he said, “Turn your dinner plates on the one with big tits.” And the bartender recognized this other phrase — a giant squid’s eyes are as big as dinner plates — and he gazed past Leet’s shoulder to the voluptuous girl at the table watching them.

“Can’t tell who she’s staring at,” the bartender remarked, and that was how they all ended up back at her place — three girls, and two different versions of Leet. He had to remind himself that technically, it’s a foursome. Just as if the girls had wanted him to get it on with the bartender, it would fundamentally be masturbation.

And by the end of that night, he and his bartender self have shaken hands to interface. Eight mysterious years of life as a Lisbon bartender came flooding into Leet, and he returned the courtesy by coughing up his own experiences as a modern-day party nomad who’d been making his way across Asia and Europe. They’re both older and wiser.

Of course, that was last week and he wouldn’t expect it to happen again so soon. The whole Lisbon episode made him want to change locations sooner rather than later, so he had gone to Athens. A bunch of codeworms were supposed to meet there in July anyway, to share security upgrades. Friggin’ Vector was cracking down hardcore.

More hardcore than usual, at least.

In the shell of a white-haired woman about fourteen years ago, he had given a speech to the U.N. Congress about the inherent challenge of codeworm life. Life's natural impulse was to spread out. That was simply what codeworms were doing. They lived in the nets, downloaded into shells. *Yes*, taking a shell without paying for it was theft, but they were forced into being thieves since Congress was too cowardly to rule on the legal status of codeworms. Without Constitutional protections, codeworms wouldn't dare download into a legally-purchased shell. The money transaction would send a huge blip to codeworm enemies — namely, most governments and corporate thug Vector Nanonics — and then your new shell would be tracked. Then they'd come for you.

Advertising one's multiple existences was suicide... or even genocide, depending on your perspective.

So in the shell of an old woman, Leet had driven home after his Congressional appearance through a forceful rain, intent on a bath, drink, and discarding the white-haired body for a new transfer. Instead, four armed dudes had been waiting for him inside his apartment. Tasered him. He woke up in their sedan. Tasered again. Woke up in a detention center, tied to a metal chair, his hands strapped flat to the desk in front of him.

A short, swarthy, sinister-looking fellow was sitting across from him. Kind of guy who looked born angry: too much red in his cheeks. Leet could practically see the high-blood-pressure diagnosis from where he sat.

"Welcome back," the guy snarled. "Had yourself a nice rest there. Didn't know codeworms needed so much rest."

Leet didn't say anything. He didn't tell the guy that the reason he was "resting" so much had little to do with being tasered. If you taser a codeworm, they black out the way your computer does when rebooting. But once rebooted, he pretended to be asleep so he could turn off a few programs, like muting his pain receptors.

"Gotta ask you about a hundred questions," the interrogator hissed. "We can get through all of them in a day, or we can drag this out for as long as it takes, understand?"

"You don't have to shout," Leet replied.

The angry guy snapped his fingers, and someone else wheeled over a metal box full of pliers, razors, a yellow blowtorch, and electro-torture devices.

"What kind of questions do you have for me?" Leet asked, still in the shell of an old woman.

"Who are the other codeworms? How many of you are there? How long it takes for you to download? That sort of thing."

"You could have saved us *both* a lot of trouble by just asking me back at my apartment."

He filtered his voice through one of the myriad audiofiles he kept. "I ain't telling you nothin', see? You coppers got nothin' on me! You dirty rats ain't gonna learn nothin'!"

The man lifted a pair of pliers. He fastened it around one of Leet's fingernails.

"Whoa, wait!" Leet cried. "I just told you I wasn't going to cooperate. You don't have to do that to my —"

He never felt the fingernail being ripped off. His hand was tugged hard, and then he saw the pale nail in the pliers' teeth. It looked like a piece of plastic, red at one end.



“Ouch!” Leet said. “Man! That almost hurt!”

Another nail.

“Almost!”

The pliers were put away in favor of slender metal stakes, which the guy proceeded to slip under Leet’s remaining fingernails.

Leet screamed... for a few seconds. Then he wiggled his fingers.

“I’m Freddy Krueger! Can you do the other hand now?”

This went on for four days, until Leet decided he’d recorded enough footage of this that he could die in peace. They’d already tried unsuccessfully to hack him, and so they wheeled his body into another part of the lab where, believing he was dead, they planned for a full body autopsy/download.

The thing is, most people don’t strap down a corpse, so as soon as Leet was left unguarded, he just walked out of the facility, grabbed a bus downtown, and got off at the nearest cybercafé. He downloaded himself into the web and left behind a mutilated grandmotherly body.

But he *did* take time to send the footage he recorded, along with some seamless editing, to every news station in the world. The global population shrieked and roared at images of an old woman being tortured for four days by an ugly little man. Within a week, Vector filed for bankruptcy due to the two-punch combo of devalued stocks and global boycott. Oh, and the death threats.

So fourteen years after the torture episode, and a week after Lisbon, Leet found himself lying low in a Greek college town. He blended in easily — one of his other selves had gotten obsessed by Greek history and culture, and a mutual handshake transferred this to him, language and all.

The first few days of his arrival, Leet had walked around town and found himself gravitating to the museums and old churches and still-extant ruins.

Another dark, rainy evening.

Leet emerged from a cliff-side restaurant, the sweet tang of local wine burning his lips. The rain drenched him as he splashed down the street toward his waterfront apartment, glancing at the harbor as he went.

A cruise ship was docked there. As he looked, it sounded its horn almost in greeting. Glistening, dark heads moved like wet beetles onto the boarding platform. Tourists, returning from this little stopover for another few days at sea.

Leet breathed deeply of the rain as he jogged. The smell had the same effect on him every time, no matter where in the world he went. Scientists said smell was linked to memory from those ancient days when scurrying rodents — champion life-form of the mammalian kingdom when the world was overrun by giant lizards — used their noses to sniff out their world.

For Leet, the smell of rain took him back to his childhood in Derry, when he had learned to project on his father’s old T-byte HVD sims. The headset had been too big for his skull, forcing him to clutch it with both hands. He made his first thinkflicks right there, in that moldy box-cluttered attic. Imagination projected directly onto the Capture Drive. Later, he would edit and shape the mass of colorful scenes.

Even with that illicit baptism in Dad’s house, it still took him ten years to grasp the real potential.

Much of the ignorant public persisted in thinking that Capture Drives snagged images straight from the synapses. While that was true, it was an anemic appreciation for what synaptic downloads could accomplish. With a strong enough Drive, you could project a perfect copy of yourself into the HVD. Images, memories, dreams, emotions, dislikes, sexual turn-ons. Yourself in digital.

Long ago a Cherokee brave had killed a white man for snapping his picture, because he believed his soul had been stolen. Adjusted for a few hundred years, the old Indian had been right.

The cruise ship blared its horn again. Leet almost jogged past it before he caught its name, emblazoned in black serif font: *MILLIONS OF YEARS*.

Ah-ha! His sneakers splashed to a halt in a greasy puddle.

Leet joined the crowd of returning tourists. Two cruise staff were standing by the vessel, smiling pleasantly at the men and women. The smiles faltered as Leet came into view.

“I was just wondering...” he started, knowing there was no point in trying to bluff. All passengers would be registered to the crew’s eye-lenses. Intruders probably showed up with huge red slashes through their faces.

“Registered passengers only,” one woman said. “I’m sorry, but I have to ask you to leave the boarding platform. If you like, we can email you a full brochure.”

Leet gazed past her shoulder to the ship’s name again. “Can you tell me if this ship is named after the Egyptian sun-god’s chariot? A good friend of mine used to be wild about stuff like that.”

“I’m sorry, sir. If you wouldn’t mind—”

“Her name was Rita Simoes.”

The woman stopped, cocked her head. “And who would you be?”

Leet felt his mouth run dry with nervous energy. “Um... she’d know me from her Vancouver college days.”

“Leet?” the woman said, and looked to the three other staff members.

A nearby man added, “Is that you?”

“Leet!” the other two men said excitedly.

The entire cruise ship, it turned out, was Rita Simoes. All the staff members were codeworms with her program. The vessel acted as a sort of motherboard to which all the Ritas would go, like bees returning to the hive, with morsels of experience to download into the superbrain Rita collective.

Later, Leet sat in the pilot’s cabin with an attractive Rita shell as company. “I like what you’ve done with yourself.”

Rita flashed him a lascivious smile. Back in college, she had been a middle-aged plump professor. This version was a highly idealized version of that — a snake-like poise to her slender, honey-skinned body. Very Mediterranean. “I wouldn’t have recognized you either! How have you been, Leet? Still on walkabout?”

“Staying low. But *you* ’ve set a new standard.”

“I keep in plain sight but stay mobile. Passengers deposit their money into the company, which my limbs access when they want shore leave. No one suspects me.”

“What if you spring a leak?”

She laughed. “Who says there’s not a fleet of me?”

Leet nodded and sipped his drink, trying to process this. He had never heard a codeworm refer to her extra selves as “limbs.” But then, Rita was one of the first codeworms ever. A handful of geniuses had realized the potential in Capture Drives in the early days, and those people became mentors to the burgeoning codeworm culture. Rita was basically a *bodhisattva*.

\* \* \*

“Leet, have you ever heard of All?”

It was the next morning, and the ocean was breezy and chill. Leet had his own table in the dining concourse, and Rita spoke to him through an earpiece one of her limbs had given him. This way he was in direct communication with the “main” Rita. Her other selves moved about as ship staff, tending to the many guests. When a waiter came by to refill Leet’s glass of water, the waiter gave a knowing wink.

Leet swallowed down a raw oyster breakfast and smacked his salty lips. “Sure. Some megalomaniac out of England or Scotland or something.”

“Is it megalomania?” Rita asked in his earpiece.

He shrugged, slurping another oyster. “The purpose of the Diaspora is to enhance ourselves. Not become one gestalt organism. I mean, what’s the point of improving yourself as an individual if you’re just going to lose yourself into one hyper-mind?”

A pleasant-looking trio of blonde women seated themselves at a nearby table. Leet flashed a smile at them.

Rita hesitated. A waiter came over to the blonde trio, and also hesitated. Leet wondered if all of Rita’s “limbs” were actually tuned in to his conversation with the mothership.

“Why do we learn anything at all?” Rita asked. “Isn’t it to improve not just ourselves, but the entire species?”

“Sure. But you’re not talking species. One Jupiter-brain gestalt is not a race of sentient beings. It’s an overlord into which everyone gets reduced as pockets of impulse and memory. Hell with that. I like having my own mind.”

He was speaking subvocally, his *sotto voce* vibrations carrying instantly through an implanted microphone in the roof of his mouth.

“Aren’t you being selfish?”

“Selfish?”

”How old are you, Leet?”

“Sixty-two.”

“And how many limbs do you have?”

“I kind of bristle at that description, Rita. I don’t think of my other selves as limbs. They’re like a circle of friends, living comfortably all over the world. When we meet, we share and move on.”

“That’s selfish,” she repeated. “It’s like having a coven of painters who carefully construct masterpieces on canvas, and then only show those masterpieces to each other.”

Leet was unused to the fervent undercurrent in her voice. Rita could be forthright, confident, even stubborn, but she had never exhibited the kind of proselytizing he was hearing now. She was trying to downplay it, disguise it, but it was there and Leet felt a cold prickle walking his spine.

“I *do* share some of my memories with *other* codeworms,” he said. “But that’s my choice, Rita. And I remain me.”

“Am I less an individual in my current state?”

Leet glanced around the concourse, spotting the ship staff and again wondering if they were all tuned in. Bartenders stirred drinks, greeters escorted couples to tables, cooks played with fire in the center of the room.

“Rita, if the cook there decided he wanted to disembark in Crete and become a pearl diver, would you let him?”

“I don’t like pearl-diving.”

“But maybe *that* version of you does. Maybe he read a book in his own cabin about the sea, and decided he wants to see it from below the horizon line. Maybe one of the passengers shared her story about how wonderful pearl diving is, and this story stimulated his imagination and got him thinking about doing something else with his life.”

Rita laughed coldly. “What would be the point of that, if everyone in the world were already part of All?”

Leet froze, the last oyster a centimeter from his lips.

The entire concourse was looking at him.

Cooks had stopped in mid-preparation, greeters leered in from the entrance, and every passenger — even the trio of blondes — stared at him.

He staggered to his feet, heart wild with terror. “Rita...”

“Just relax, Leet,” she said.

The silence of the concourse was devastating. Not a single murmur of someone’s voice or clink of a fork against a plate. No one blinked. Cold sweat broke out like wildfires all over his body.

“Leet,” Rita said, “You don’t understand. Frankly, you’re being very limited about all this. Evolution is the real issue here. It’s what’s at stake.”

That did it. It wasn’t just her words, but the unveiled mania in her voice, that drove Leet to bolt across the silent room for the deck rail.

He was passing an old man when he heard him shout, “Squid leave ink-clouds in their wake when they run away, Leet!”

Leet stopped, placing one shaky hand on the deck rail. The blue ocean looked like the safest place in the world right now. “Ex... excuse me?”

The old man held out his hands non-threateningly. The other cruise passengers slowly returned to their business, shooting him bemused expressions from time to time.

*There’s only one other person on this ship, Leet thought, and yet I’m vastly outnumbered.*

“Leet, it’s me,” the old man said. “Or more specifically, you. One of your other selves, you know?”

Leet glanced around to make sure no one was in striking distance. His hands twitched on the brass rail, which was cool and sticky to his touch. He glared at the old guy. “Prove it.”

“We shook hands in St. Petersburg about thirty-three years ago. I was working for an ad agency. I called myself Andre. At that time you were working as a part-time travel writer and full-time bohemian.”

Leet remembered. The guy he shook hands with wasn't this elderly shell, but a red-haired, green-eyed fellow. But circumstances often forced a shell-change.

"Am I talking to myself, or to Rita?" Leet asked.

"Both," the man said. "I first came on board about ten years ago, and met Rita and All. We had a six-day conversation about merging. I decided to try it."

"Try it?"

"Why not?"

"I can think of plenty of reasons."

The old man laughed softly and shook his head. The lines on his face wrinkled into a cheerful expression. "I'm still me in here! Your problem is that despite all your experiences, you continue to focus on the shell. What is the shell? Just a substrate for storage! In this body I'm you, Rita, and All. Right now."

Leet felt he was going to pass out. The world seemed to swing in a wild carousel behind his head. "All?"

"Yes. It's sort of like having three people at one microphone. All is speaking to you now. Your other self has stepped back from the mike, but is still there watching and listening. So is Rita."

"Stepped back voluntarily, or was dragged away by digital goons?"

"You keep thinking this is a prison, Leet. It isn't, no more than this ship or world is. We share such places together. We transfer out, have access to everyone within reach who has opened themselves up to this. All is right. It is evolution."

Who was speaking now? Rita, All, or himself?

As if reading his thoughts — a most unpleasant concept given the circumstances — the old man said, "Would it be more helpful if I changed voices to indicate who you were speaking to? It's such a superficial trick, but maybe it would be easier for you?"

Leet considered this. His hand was aching where it gripped the rail. "Sure. I'd like to hear All's true voice."

The old man shook his head, and when he spoke again it was in a honeyed baritone. "Here. This is the voice I was born with. But what difference does it make if I'm an Irish tenor or raspy lounge singer? Everyone on this ship is their own being. But we are also part of everyone else.

"You asked Rita about the cook deciding to be a pearl-diver. Yes, the cook could easily decide to do that. Any consciousnesses existing within the cook's body who *didn't* want to could just transfer to another willing body. The cook would then go ahead and become a pearl diver. Live his own life."

Leet felt his heart slowing. He was no less terrified, but felt confident enough now that he could jump overboard without interference if need be. Despite the pain, he gripped the rail tighter than before. "Okay..."

"Any time the cook and his wife want to travel, they need only upload into All. *All* of us. They could be anywhere on the planet. More to the point, they would never really be cut off from the planet. They would be anywhere, everywhere."

"What of the people who reject this? What of those who refuse to be part of this... this organic Internet?"

The old shell shrugged. “Their choice. This is *voluntary* evolution. People join for the benefits and immortality.”

“You don’t kill the ones who want to keep their individuality?”

“Not ordinarily.”

Leet felt a new surge of adrenaline rock him. That wasn’t the answer he had expected.

Before he could say anything, the old shell went on: “Do you go out of your way to kill a bee? Or do you only swat it if it’s trying to sting you? There are certain people who want to destroy all codeworms.”

“A few corporations,” Leet said.

“No. The U.N. Congress decided to seize control of all shell manufacturers yesterday.”

Leet’s mouth hung open. “They... no.”

“Read the news. It didn’t make top headlines yet, not with all the drama over that actress, and the senator’s scandal. But a law was rammed through yesterday allowing the U.N. to take ‘temporary control of shell facilities for the tracking of criminal activities’.”

The old man’s voice changed with these last words, enacting a sound-byte of someone else’s voice. Leet matched the vocal pattern to Senator Mezzo, a longtime opponent of codeworms and one of the people chiefly responsible for throwing a lifeline to Vector Nanonics in their time of trouble.

A gusting breeze blew against him with rough hands. Leet turned his head seaward. As a child, the sea had fascinated him. Divergent sea creatures sharing the same medium. He was reminded yet again that if not for his father’s attic, he would likely have pursued marine biology.

Or pearl diving. A giddy, desperate laugh welled up inside him and escaped his lips like the squeal of a condemned man.

Of course, land animals also shared the medium called air. But liquid was more intimate, somehow. Maybe it was an atavistic affection for where life had begun. He recalled his fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Ciotto, tapping her finger against a book and saying, “Think of it this way. The ocean was too crowded, so moving onto land provided new opportunities for early life.”

Leet looked back to the old man. The breeze came again, definitely storm winds.

“I’ll think it over,” he said and then jumped overboard.

It was a messy jump. His ankle slid against the brass rail and he plummeted dangerously close to the side of the ship. As a result, he impacted the water at a jarring angle that might have caused a normal body to sprain its neck.

The natural buoyancy of his shell was the only reason he survived the swim to the nearest shore, which was fifty hours of swimming. He emerged, exhausted and starving, from the sea onto a densely populated Moroccan beach.

Some people looked at him oddly; he realized that certain nosy beachgoers had spotted him far off. The curious came near, though Leet pretended not to understand them while briskly heading to the nearest hotel.

*Should have come ashore at night*, he thought, grimacing. But too hungry, too tired, too frightened to think straight.

He headed for an ATM and withdrew a sizeable amount of cash. Better to lie low for a while. This world suddenly has far too many predators. There was a motel a few miles away and he went there to clean up and order some delivery pizza.

When the knock came at his door, Leet was salivating. He threw the door open without his usual caution.

A fist punched him in the face.

“Ding-dong!” a caustic voice said, and he was tackled by two huge men. Leet raised his head and met the gaze of his old interrogator.

“Looks like we caught a worm,” the angry guy said. “Oh, and don’t bother with your disappearing vanishing tricks, okay?” He held up a small handheld dampener about the size of a cigarette pack. “But feel free to try. I don’t often get to see your kind frustrated. Makes me happy.”

Leet kept quiet while they pulled him into a van and drove off. The angry guy kept talking, though. He was using an external phone, and seemed busy contacting everyone he had ever worked with to gloat over this arrest. Lots of secret phrases and acronyms passed from his lips. Leet sighed and set his audio nanonics recording.

The angry guy, he decided, was a total friggin’ moron.

But at least he was a *known* variable. World governments and corporations had been the only threat Leet needed to worry about. His initial years of being a codeworm were primarily a sloughing-off of millions of years of built-in anxiety and terror. It was like scratching off items on a checklist: fear of cancer, fear of car accidents, fear of choking, fear of aging, fear of disease. Gone! No more! Even fear of death had gradually diminished the way a frightening movie becomes pedestrian after too many viewings.

But now... now a *new* beast had wandered into the jungle. There was no telling what its capabilities weren’t. It threatened the order Leet knew. If his captors knew of *that* thing, they’d probably run shrieking off cliffs.

The van stopped abruptly. Leet was led out into a dank underground parking lot. They moved toward an elevator which looked so new and white that it jarred with the dungeon-like conditions of the surrounding masonry.

In the elevator, the angry guy punched Leet again and slapped a bag around his head.

“Why did you do that?” Leet asked, once he had disengaged his pain sensors.

“Cuz,” the angry guy said, “you people think you own the goddamn world. Just hope we don’t have to set you on fire or rip your nails out, like we’ve done to others.”

Leet bit his lip. So, the guy didn’t realize he had captured the same codeworm from all those years ago. And why should he? *That* had been an old woman he’d been torturing.

The guy began laughing. Without sharing the source of amusement, he was content to chuckle to himself until the doors opened. Leet felt himself escorted into a cool, heavily air-conditioned room. The bag was pulled off his head.

He glanced around. The room was not what he had expected. Maroon room, with black leather sofas and a wet bar. There was a billiards table in the center of everything, but it was covered with plastic. A slender window looked out on a night-lit cityscape.

“Take a seat,” ordered the angry man, and he headed to the bar to make a drink.

Leet put up no resistance, half-expecting metallic bands to snap out of the armrests.

“This room is electronically dampened and has a wireless magpie at the ready,” his captor said.

“A what?”

“Ah,” the man grinned at him from across the bar. “Got something you don’t know about, eh?” He finished pouring himself a scotch and then, screwing the cap back on, said, “How many codeworms do you know?”

“Seventeen and a half... divided by eight, subtracted by the square root of four.”

The man gave the briefest of nods to his associates as he sipped his drink.

What happened next was so unexpected that Leet didn’t even have time to process it. Streaks of agony shot through his head and spine. His teeth snapped down in a fierce clamp. His legs kicked.

The pain stopped.

“Shall we try again?” the man asked.

Leet turned grey. “You can hack my substrate?”

The man looked so satisfied that Leet suspected the guy had an erection. “It ain’t just the cool kids who got the cool toys now.”

“Why are we such a threat to you?”

“How many codeworms do you know?”

Bracing himself for another attack, Leet said, “If I told you I honestly don’t know, because codeworms can be one person or a thousand, would you believe that?”

“Oh, I would!” The man rounded the bar. “And this room’s sniffer says you’re telling a likely truth. We’ll find all of you in time. You’re to help. I want to know everything about being a codeworm. How it started, what you can do. Every little goddam piece of data. We have as long as it takes. If you get cute, our magpie can extract you from that shell and toss you into virtual prison. Torture... for... eternity. No chance of rescue or escape. No petitions. We could skin you alive in there, roll you in salt, set you on fire, kill you. And then start all over again. And again.”

Leet swallowed. “That’s inhuman.”

“*You’re* inhuman. We’ve got a few of your brothers and sisters in those prisons right now. They didn’t feel like cooperating. Now they spend forever begging for death, which never comes. Eventually they tell us everything we need to know.”

“And then you set them free?”

“It’s a funny thing about *habeas corpus*,” the man said, swirling the liquid in his glass. “It only refers to a physical body. You don’t got that.”

Leet made up his mind in an instant.

“Okay,” he said. “But do you really have the time to hear *everything* about being a codeworm?”

The man nodded, looking smug, unwashed, and very human.

“Well, it all started when I was about six. I was watching a cartoon in which a guy was able to pop his own head off his neck. And that made me realize there is no end to the world’s possibilities.”

Leet leaned his head towards the window, and then did exactly that.



He suspected the window was reinforced, and it was. But when a nanosteel skull-casing is fired into such glass at five hundred feet per second, the glass breaks. Leet's headless body collapsed behind him as he was shot out into the night air.

It was a last-ditch escape trick, installed in an underground clinic when he had purchased his third shell. He never imagined he'd have a real use for it, and had joked with the mod-tech that if occasion ever required its use, he would repay the tech with an all-expenses paid trip to Cuba in the company of a dozen professional Brazilian lovers who could also tap-dance.

Falling through the Moroccan dark, Leet realized he had some very odd calls to make now, if he was to remain a man of his word.

His nanosteel skull slammed into the pavement and bounced, rolled, tipped over. Then tiny wheels emerged, driving the braincase away as fast as it could. It was a race against time now. Without the energy reserves of a body, he was living on backup power only. Two, three hours at most. Then he'd be as useless as a metallic football.

*And condemned to an eternity of torture, Leet thought, if those people catch me again.*

A dog gave chase, barking insanely after him as he turned onto a side street. Leet transmitted a general distress signal in Cryptocom if there were any codeworms — preferably another of himself — nearby. The dog was almost on him when he ducked into a storm-drain and got lodged amid the sludge.

Above him, the dog thrust in its muzzle and barked savagely. But he was safe now. There was nothing to do but wait. Leet switched to minimal power, leaving just enough of a trickle to keep him from total shutdown. He went to sleep.

\* \* \*

His systems abruptly, involuntarily powered on to full capacity. It was exactly like being shaken awake from a deep, comfortable sleep. His chronometer informed him that four hours had passed.

The dog was gone.

Leet found himself in a chair, in a new body that still smelled rubbery, brand-new, freshly-cut from the biosera cube in some illicit codeworm supplier shop. He noticed his new hands the color of caramel. They were unrestrained.

Leet swept his gaze to the room's occupants. There were twelve people. They formed an improbable variety of mankind. Any fear that he had been caught by codecops melted away as he saw their smiling, diverse faces. There were elderly white men and young Hispanic women and an Asian police officer and a bespectacled black woman and a chubby goateed Indian. They were strangers, and yet Leet felt the warmth of fraternal community among them.

"Leet," a black-haired man said, drawing out from the gathering. He was pale with bright blue eyes. "You're lucky we found you first. A lot of people are looking for you right now."

"Vector."

"And the U.N." The man sighed, knelt in front of him in a fatherly gesture. "A local codeworm picked up your emergency broadcast and found you in a gutter. Nice move. And fortunate. You have no idea of the hell you escaped from."

Leet swallowed. "I can imagine."

The man's eyes flashed brighter. "No, you can't." For an instant Leet sensed a vengeful spirit in that sapphire gaze, but then the man's face softened and his lips twitched into a smile. "But no worries now. You are here. Among friends."

"Are we friends?"

The man grinned. "Maybe not yet, Leet. But the war I knew would come is on our doorstep. It's started. In such a battle you have to pick a side, wouldn't you agree?"

Leet looked at the floor.

"You haven't seen today's headlines," the man said, and the gathering murmured knowingly. "The U.N. Congress made a big decision. It's... let's just say that it makes what we have to do inevitable. It's war, but the kind *they* will never see coming. We have advantages they can't even comprehend."

"We?"

"*All* of us."

Leet breathed out painfully. "I know."

"It's still your choice."

"Will it be... afterward?"

"Afterward and forever."

Leet looked at the individual faces in the room. Twelve different people. Skin shades and body types and hair color and fashion preferences.

*Different fish in the same ocean.*

He nodded again.

Afterwards, he found that he ran into himself more than ever before, but that it was increasingly less awkward.

He was everywhere, after All.

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Ron Van Sweringen was born September 26, 1936 in Hampton Virginia. He is a self-taught painter, well listed and exhibited in the Corcoran Museum of Art and in the White House, in Washington, D.C. under the Reagan and Bush administrations. As a writer and poet, his short story "Time To Fly" was published in *Miranda Magazine* and his poem "Greyhound Memories," was published as an excellent example of haiku poetry in Wikipedia. He currently resides in Vero Beach, Florida with his best friend, Punkin, a Cairn terrier who hunts lizards and snakes.

## The French Chair

by Ron Van Sweringen

The moment Louise Andrews saw the chair, she had to have it. The delicate curving legs and the exquisitely carved ribbons and roses on the fruitwood frame spoke to her. It was a love affair of the heart.

The tinkling bell over the door of the small antique shop was like something out of Dickens, and the smell of polished wood was everywhere. Louise stood quietly in the center of the showroom, surrounded by almost anything imaginable. A stuffed owl stared down at her from its glass enclosure, sitting on a tall mahogany linen press with polished brass fittings. Red damask drapes covered one wall and a cream-colored four-poster in the Italian style with colorful parrots atop it stood before the drapes. There was even a monkey chandelier, with crystal drops in the shape of fruit that looked delicious enough to eat.

"May I help you?" an elderly woman asked, her accent thick and charming. Louise assumed it was French.

"Yes please," she answered. "The chair you have in the window, can you tell me about it?"

The woman hesitated a moment, as if trying to make up her mind about something, and then replied, "The chair has a great history, mademoiselle. Would you care to hear it?"

"Yes, very much," Louise answered, anticipation in her voice.

"I was just about to have a cup of tea." The woman smiled. "Will you join me?"

She was elegant, her silver grey hair worn up, entwined by a black velvet ribbon. "I am Madame Beauvais, and this is my shop. And you are...?"

"Louise Andrews," the young woman answered, taking a seat across from her. "I am a dancer with the New York City Ballet, and I was on my way from rehearsal when I saw the chair in your window. It is so beautiful that I could not stop looking at it."

"Yes, I am afraid the chair has that effect on people," Madame Beauvais said while pouring the tea. "You are not the first to have a love affair with it. I myself was once under its spell."

The tea was delicious and relaxed Louise as Madame Beauvais began to tell her the story of the French chair.

"The chair was created in the reign of Louis the 14th. No one is sure exactly who the maker was. No signature or mark can be found. It bears the finest workmanship of its period and is most certainly by a master cabinetmaker.

“The first record of the chair appears in September 1784, when it was let out for auction along with other furnishings from the Chateau Le Barron, belonging to the deceased Duke Le Barron. It was purchased by none other than Marie Antoinette, Queen of France. It was said to be her favorite reading chair in the palace garden room at Versailles. The fine needlework covering bears the entwined initials MA, said to have been stitched by the queen herself.

“Upon her arrest and imprisonment during the French Revolution, the queen was allowed to take only the chair for her comfort, and it is from this seat that Marie Antoinette went to the guillotine.”

There was a hush when Madame Beauvais finished the story. Louise sat transfixed. In her mind’s eye, she had just seen Marie Antoinette go to her death. The historical importance of the chair was brought home to her, and also its probable value, which would be far beyond her ability to pay. Still it fascinated her, and she longed to know more about it.

“Is there more to its history?” she asked, hoping there was, for some reason. Madame Beauvais put down her tea cup and, with a sigh, responded, “Yes there is more to tell, if you are sure you wish to hear it.”

“Yes, please Madame,” Louise entreated.

“The German army occupied Paris in June of 1944. They were systematically looting art treasures and articles of historical significance from the city. The chair had by now passed into the collection of the Baron de Rochefort and its history was well known among collectors.”

At this point Madame Beauvais hesitated, and Louise thought for a moment that she saw tears in her eyes.

“I was a young woman then,” Madame Beauvais continued, “just out of university, and because of my interest in antiques and fine art I found employment as a clerical assistant to the Baron de Rochefort. He was a fine and honorable gentleman, and I admired him greatly, much as my own father.

“I remember it well, the morning he called me into his study and closed the door behind us.”

\* \* \*

“Marie,” he said, “there isn’t much time and I must ask for your help, but only if you are willing to give it. It may be dangerous for you, do you understand?”

Without hesitation I gave my consent. I knew in my heart that whatever the Baron asked of me would be in the defense of my country.

It was then that I noticed the French chair sitting beside his desk. It was strange, for the chair was always kept safely in the treasure room.

“Listen carefully and do as I tell you,” he said. Then we heard pounding on the huge mahogany entrance doors downstairs. “Hurry, they are here. Take off your jacket and hang it over the back of the chair. Now sit in the chair with your pad as if you were taking dictation. Smile at the officer and try to keep calm.

“You must remember this: if they make me go with them, you must stay here and wait for a workman to come. Show him this chair; he will know what to do. I cannot tell you more, for your own safety, except that hundreds of lives may depend on you.”

A moment later, soldiers armed with machine guns burst into the room; they were commanded by a high-ranking SS Officer.

“As you have been informed, Baron de Rochefort,” the SS Officer said sharply, “your collection of art is now being confiscated for its safety and protection by order of the Third Reich. You will sign the order of release I have here.”

Baron De Rochefort signed the paper placed before him, without looking up.

“And now to another matter.” The SS Officer hesitated, lighting a cigarette. “Is it possible that you have overlooked something, Baron? I find no mention of your diamond collection in this inventory. Why is that?”

“You are mistaken,” Baron de Rochefort protested. “The diamond collection you are referring to was disposed of months ago at auction, when the war began. I have furnished you with the bills of sale for each item.”

“Indeed you have.” the SS Officer smiled. “And we have just executed the accountant who forged them. Now will you save yourself the horror of torture and turn the diamonds over to us?”

The Baron, his hands shaking, answered slowly, “You are mistaken. I have no diamonds.”

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At this point Madame Beauvais stood up and went to the display window looking out on the busy street. “You must forgive me, Mademoiselle,” she said. “Some memories are still painful after all of these years. The Baron de Rochefort was taken away and I never saw him again. I waited in his office until the soldiers had emptied all of his collection from the treasure room.

“I sat alone in the dark until a workman arrived and inquired after the Baron. I showed him the chair as I was instructed, and he immediately turned it upside down, cutting away a small section of the material dust covering. From this opening, he withdrew a black pouch and emptied the contents into his hand. Even in the semi-darkness, the diamonds sparkled like white fire. I suddenly felt cold, realizing the danger I had been in.”

““The Resistance is very grateful to you, Mademoiselle”, the workman said as he prepared to leave. ‘These diamonds will save many lives. It is a shame this beautiful chair will probably be destroyed by the war’.

“His words stayed with me, and I decided that I would save the chair at whatever risk was necessary. I managed to move it through the dark streets to my small apartment. I painted it an unattractive blue color, using an easily removed water-based paint. Then I covered the seat and back in a shabby cotton chintz. The effect was perfect, and it stood safely for the remainder of the war in my small apartment.”

Louise Andrews found it hard to break the silence that ensued. She was not prepared emotionally for what she had just heard. “I am very sorry, Madame Beauvais,” she apologized. “I realize now how foolish of me it was to want the chair.”

“Not at all, Mademoiselle,” the elderly woman replied, turning to face her. “The war has destroyed all records of the chair’s provenance and perhaps I have made up the whole story. In either case, I am an old woman and I should like to see it have another love affair before I am gone. Would you consider two hundred and fifty dollars a fair price?”

“More than fair, Madame.”

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## **Life Under an Orange Tree**

by Ron Van Sweringen

I was born under an orange tree. My father on his knees, hands between my mother's legs, ready to support me as I arrived on the tide of life. My father had big hands, hard and calloused, a working man's hands. I held them throughout my life, every chance I got, until in the end they were frail and soft like a woman's.

My mother was half Seminole Indian, dark and mysterious like the great Everglades Swamp she came from. We lived Indian fashion: no doors or windows in our house. It wasn't much of a house, two rooms and a small kitchen. Old Cypress wood siding covered the walls and a leaning brick chimney was propped up with wooden supports.

I was twelve years old and my younger brother, Bruin, named after the Florida black bear, was nine. I had been named Riley, in honor of Tim O'Riley, a stout, red-headed Irishman who ran the local farmers' market. He was easygoing and kind to working folks like us, extending credit until an odd job could pay the debt. He kept a baseball bat behind the cash register, for the occasional passing black snake or any redneck crackers with sticky fingers.

It was a close August morning, I woke up on my pallet in the middle of the living room floor. Bru was still sleeping beside me, naked. He often pulled his underwear off in his sleep. The air was oppressively humid, even for Florida in the summer.

My mother, her black hair pinned up on her head, was already at work, sitting in an old canvas lawn chair under the orange tree out back. She was hand-weaving the intricate designs that Seminole Indians were known for. Once a week my father made the five-mile trip to Fort Pierce, where he left pieces of her hand weaving to be sold in a small shop. Between her handiwork and my father's odd jobs and seasonal work picking oranges, we managed to get by.

It was 1943 and the war against the Germans and Japanese was still going strong. Bru and I sat on the floor at night listening to the radio, after my father settled in his chair and turned it on. No one in the house was allowed to touch the radio, except my father. Even my mother avoided it.

Bru woke up while I was folding my pallet and he quickly put his underwear on, embarrassed because he was beginning to stiffen up in the mornings. In the kitchen we each got a banana and a piece of toast my mother had fixed with strawberry jam. Enough coffee was left in the old pot for a half cup each with plenty of milk.

Before we left the yard, my mother warned, "Be home early, a bad one is coming." She swore she could tell by the color of the sky in the morning. However it was she knew, she was never wrong about a storm.

As we opened the gate to the old chain link fence, Buster came charging out from under the porch. He was a black and white mongrel who wandered into the yard one day and never left. He had the run of the house, but preferred to sleep under the porch, on the lookout for rats and snakes.

About halfway down the two-mile dirt road to O'Riley's Market, the sun began to burn our neck and shoulders. My brother and I wore short-legged overalls with no shirts and, of course, no shoes.

Old Mr. Willburn was coming out of his gate, well shaded under the biggest black umbrella I'd ever seen. My father worked for him on occasion, when he had odd jobs, including digging his wife's grave in the front yard. Her tombstone stood by the flower garden she worked in every day.

"You boys come by tomorrow morning to weed Alma's garden and I'll give you each twenty-five cents."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Willburn, we'll be here before nine," I replied with a wide smile. Bru clapped his hands in excitement. "A whole quarter, just for me! Golly!"

My mother had told me to be sure and tell Mr. O'Riley that a bad storm was coming that night.

"Tell your mother I said thanks," Mr. O'Riley replied, looking up at the sky. "You boys help me bring those crates of tomatoes inside and then unload those watermelons from Mr. Harley's truck and I'll take a dollar off your bill. Be sure and tell your mother."

When we were finished, Mr. O'Riley gave us each an orange soda and a nickel bag of Fritos. Bru and I were happy to work for Mr. O'Riley. At night, when my father found out, he would shake our hands and tell us how proud he was of us. Bru would get tears in his eyes, but I was too old for that stuff.

It was a little after noon when we left the market, plenty early enough to go fishing. We headed for the Marshall canal. It was the widest and deepest canal in the county. One side of it, the Marshall Cattle Ranch, ran for miles. The other side was a large orange grove, the distance between the two, about fifty feet of water.

Fishing in the canal was good, usually plenty of catfish, bluegill perch and crappie. There were also some pretty big gators in that water; hard to see, but there just the same. Brew and I picked a shady spot under a large oak and set about finding our bait. A few worms and beetles came from under turned over logs, enough to last a while.

We always carried our hand lines, wrapped on their wooden spools, just the way we bought them in the hardware store for ten cents. They were simple, twenty feet of line, a sinker and hook and a round red and white float.

I fastened a fat white grub on my hook, while Brew worked on a wiggling worm. My throw went out as far as my line would reach into the canal. I had taken the precaution of tying my line around my wrist. Bru, watching me, did the same with his line and then sat down beside me.

We watched the water birds wading in the marsh grass on the other side of the canal, sometimes spearing a frog or small fish. Suddenly Bru's arm flew out in front of him, the fishing line taunt, biting into the skin on his wrist.

“Aaahhhhhhh,” he screamed in pain, “help me,” as he was pulled headfirst off the bank into the canal. I slid in directly behind him and we both came up standing nearly chest deep in the brown water.

The line tied to Bru’s wrist had suddenly gone slack. I wrapped it three or four times around my hand, while Brew worked frantically to untie it from his wrist, which was now bleeding.

Slowly the slack disappeared on the line and the pull began again. I had never had a fish pull that hard before. I dug my heels in the mud, barely able to hold my own, then the line slackened again and I pulled in a few feet at a time. I was winning.

Bru had scrambled up the muddy bank, screaming at me to hold on. I began a slow backward retreat, each time the line went slack, gaining a few more feet. Finally I made it onto the grassy bank and for the first time saw the brown water swirl at the end of the line. Whatever it was, it was big.

When we finally caught sight of the monster, I could hardly believe the size of the thing pulling and twisting against the line. It was the biggest, ugliest catfish in the world! Bru and I could easily get all four of our hands in its mouth at once.

It took us quite a while to work the fish out of the water and onto the grass. While Bru held the line taut, I put a hand in each gill and slowly pulled it up the bank. Then we both fell in the grass, rolling and laughing at the capture of our ugly prize.

Getting home was something else. It was over three feet long and weighed near thirty pounds. I went looking for a tree limb to hang it from, while Bru sat in the grass pulling the whiskers and swatting off flies.

We were something to see. Two kids going down the road with a giant catfish hanging from a tree branch balanced on our shoulders. Cars and trucks honked their horns and waved at us as they drove by. We were halfway home, when an old red pick-up truck honked at us and pulled off the road. A tall man in overalls and a straw hat climbed out of the truck.

“Boys, that’s some fish you have there,” he laughed. “Where did you catch it?”

“Caught it in the Marshall Canal,” I boasted, proud of our treasure. Seeing the mud all over us, he chuckled. “Looks like you boys had to go in after it.”

“Yes, sir,” Bru volunteered, “I sure did.”

“Tell you what,” he replied, “I’ll give you boys five dollars for that fish.”

“No,” Bru answered, looking at me. “It’s my fish.”

“It’s our fish, Bru,” I corrected him. “Without me, you would have lost it.”

He looked down at the ground and mumbled, “Well maybe.”

“Okay,” I said to the man, “I’ll sell you my share, we can cut it in half.”

“No!” Bru shouted, “don’t cut it in half!”

“Look, Bru,” I said calmly, “tonight we can give the five dollars to Dad. Think about how proud he will be.” Then I added for good measure, “We can’t eat all that fish anyway. It will spoil.”

“Okay,” Bru relented, after thinking about it, “just don’t cut it in half!”

We were sitting on the front porch in our underwear when Dad came down the dusty road. Mother had scrubbed our muddy overalls and they were drying on the line. He took one look at us and said, “What have you two been up to?”



Bru stretched his arm out and opened his palm, releasing five crumpled one dollar bills. "I sold my fish," he boasted proudly, offering the money to our father.

"And what about you?" my father said looking at me.

"I helped him," I replied, my face growing red at his attention.

"I thought so," he smiled. "This is a lot of money. Are you boys sure you want to give it away?"

"Yes sir," I replied quickly.

"I guess so," Bru mumbled.

"I'm proud of you," my father said, putting a strong hand on each of our shoulders and squeezing until it almost hurt.

Dinner was really good that night, all my favorites, fried chicken legs, mashed potatoes and gravy, fried okra and corn on the cob. Mother said all of her men had worked hard that day and deserved a good meal. Bru and I smiled at each other. She called us men!

After dinner my brother and I settled on the living room floor near Dad's rocker. We were sleepy from eating too much and as the Kraft Music Hall came on, Bru and I fell asleep. I don't know how much later it was, when I felt my mother's hand on my arm, shaking me hard.

"Wake up boys," she said sharply, "go get into the crawl space under the back porch, hurry up!" Bru looked at me, finding it hard to move.

Grabbing his arm, I pulled him as fast as I could. I knew from my mother's voice, we were in danger. The wind was racing through the house, lifting the kitchen table off of the floor and slamming it against the old iron cook stove. My father and mother were right behind us, carrying the only suitcase we owned and the radio.

Lightning flashes lit up the back yard as Bru and I went head first into the crawl space. My mother and father were right behind us. Sheets of pounding rain, driven sideways by the wind, began beating against the house.

"Move further back, boys," my father ordered, "to the center of the house." We were all huddled together, our heads down in the soft sand. Buster was between Bru and me, keeping up a steady whine. My mother stood a crucifix up in the sand to protect us. Suddenly there was a terrible roaring sound and my father yelled, "Hold on to each other, hold on tight!"

Wet sand stung our faces and it was hard to breath, the wind sucked all the air out of us. I felt Bru move away and I tried to hold on, but it was impossible. All I could do in the blackness was put my head down and hug the ground.

Then it grew strangely quiet. I heard my father calling our names, I answered and waited for Bru, but nothing came.

"Bru, answer me," my mother called, fear in her voice. Still there was no answer as we scrambled out from under the house. The rain had pretty much stopped. There was just a kind of mist on our faces. The roof of our house was gone and the brick chimney was in scattered pieces on the ground. My mother ran through the house calling for Bru.

When it became clear that my brother was not there, my father turned to me. "Go toward Mr. Wilson's house and look for your brother. Be strong."

I had never seen anything like it before. Trees were down everywhere, many with all of their leaves stripped off. Only foundations were left where some houses had been. Houses that I had looked at all my life.

I called Bru's name until my throat hurt. I could hear sirens in the distance and soon there were people everywhere. Mr. Wilson's house and some others along the road were fine. Mr. Wilson was on the front porch and came down the steps to meet me.

"Have you seen Bru?" I blurted out to the old man.

"No Riley, I haven't seen him," he replied, his hands out in the air and a confused look on his face.

When I got back to our house, my mother was sitting on the porch steps crying. I had never seen her cry before. "No one has found him yet," she said softly, tears running down her cheeks. I sank down on the wet grass, sick at my stomach. For the first time I realized that Bru might be dead.

My father came back into the yard sometime later that night, looking very tired. He sat down next to my mother and put his arm around her shoulder. "Don't give up, mother" he said. "He's a tough little boy."

It was just past midnight when a black Model T drove up in front of our house and blew the horn. Mr. Baker got out, standing on the front walk. "Mr. Jones," he said as my father appeared in the doorway, "how many times have I asked you to keep your boys away from my hogs?"

My father's face looked blank. Then Mr. Barker opened the door of the Model T and there was Bru, slumped down in the front seat. He had a whopper of a black eye, a bandage around his forehead and when he smiled, a missing front tooth.

"Oh, thank God!" my mother cried, embracing Mr. Barker.

"That boy is smart," Mr. Barker said, shaking my father's hand. "When I found him, he was wedged in between Bertha and Beatrice, my prize sows."

"I'm very grateful to you, sir," my father replied, tears in his eyes.

An hour later, Bru and I were snuggled up on a roll-away cot on Mrs. Smith's screened in front porch. We lay close together facing each other when Bru started giggling. "Guess what?" he said, whispering. "I got to feel old Bertha's tits."

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John Vieczorek writes speculative fiction and poetry. He enjoys studying the different philosophies and religions of the world and has been a Zen student for a long time. In addition to *Bewildering Stories*, his writing has appeared in *Twisted Tongue*, *Cherry Bleeds*, *Crime and Suspense*, *Sinister City*, *Dark Reveries*, *Contemporary Rhyme*, *Quantum Muse*, and *A Cruel World*.

## Chickasaw Ridge

by John Vieczorek

Did you ever hear the saying “He ain’t a bad feller after you get to know him”? Well, I’ll tell you that sure weren’t so with Jack Ketchum. The longer you knowed him, the worse he got. Meaner than a rabid dog Jack was. Smart aleky, cruel, uppity, and just plain nasty, pretty much nailed his finer points.

Me and Rufus Taylor watched him sandpaper a cat’s ass when we was younglings. He poured kerosene on the critter and set it to blazing. Course twern’t nothing we could do about it, his Pa, Lester Ketchum being the High Sheriff and all. Let’s just say you didn’t cross Jack lest you were full of moon, or just plain inbred.

Big good-looking feller Jack was. Tall, thin as a fence post, long black hair trailing on his shoulders. He always wore a leather vest that matched his dark eyes; and cleated lizard-skin cowboy boots with silver toes.

I reckon a lot of the lady-folk here in Wheelwright Junction thought the same, because there was a passel of little fellers running around that looked just like him. Course ain’t no telling where they’d come from. But some of them called him Poppy, and we seed him walking the marble treads to the courthouse on more than one occasion. I heard nothing much ever came of it though. Jack’s Uncle, Aza Ketchum was the Lee County circuit judge, and he thowed a lot of female “caterwauling” out of his courtroom for lack of evidence.

Seems like only yesterday Jack and Lester crossed the cobblestone bridge up in Krypton. Old Mira Leonard the barfly told me they went looking for shiners up on Chickasaw Ridge.

That no good sum-bitch Jessie Lee Crawford was with ’em. The big ugly bastard butchered his wife and unborn and got away with it. He fed them to his hogs. Lester fixed it so he’d claimed it was Negras that kilt em, and Aza sealed the deal. Crawford would do anything Jack told him to. They wasn’t a lick o’ good in the whole damn bunch of em.

My Pa’d been shining on Chickasaw Ridge with my Grandpa, Evelyn ever since he was old enough to tote a rifle. Pa was an honorary man. He spoke in tongues and understood the word. He took up serpents: rattlesnakes, copperheads, and cottonmouths. He got bit a dozen times, but he throwed it off and they never harmed him none.

I remember one time my Pa held his hand over a fire until the flesh cooked clean to the bone. Pa never flinched once, or even groaned. He told me it was the power of faith that lived in him, and made him to conquer his pain. Pa never ate meat, nor would he kill a living thing lest it was in self-defense. They wasn’t one in that group of murderers that amounted to the tracks he left on the mountain. I ain’t ever knowed one like Pa since, and I know I never will.

Seems they cornered my Pa in the barn. Pa had his shotgun in the cabin, and he never saw 'em coming. They opened fire, the three of them, and pumped a dozen rounds into Pa's chest. But he just kept coming at 'em until Crawford ran him through with a pitchfork. Pa fell to the ground, and they thought he was dead.

Jack and Lester somehow learnt where Pa hid the money, and they found the saddlebag buried in the hay. When they turned to leave, Pa sprung up from the floor and buried a long maul in Crawford's skull, killing him dead. Lester pumped a slug between Pa's eyes and finished him.

Afterward, they went down to the Dew Drop and got drunk. All the while bragging about what they'd done.

When I come home from school all's I found was Pa's charred bones. The cabin where my Ma bornt me was burnt to the ground. My Ma run off with the Reverend Wilcox two summers prior, and Pa was all I had.

It was powerful hard them days afterward. I quit my schooling, and went to working for Amos Whipple the blacksmith. He was a kindly man unless he was drinking, but then you'd better stay out of his way.

Rufus used to haul coal for the Ashwood Brothers. He'd come out to the shop with a load ever' week, and we was fast friends.

Ruf was kind of a peculiar feller until you got to know him. He liked to sniff that air glue. Course there weren't anything wrong with him really. He just acted a little claggy sometimes. But his word was as good as gold, and we were always finding work together.

I never paid Ruf's ways no mind, until the day he caught his family jewels in the cog wheel of the hay bailer at the Hawley farm down on Chimney Creek.

Doc Prichard sewed him up. But he said Ruf would always be what they call a u-neck. Rufus sure growed powerful big after that. His shoulders swolt as wide as an axe handle. I never could figure why his voice got girlish and squeaky. I reckon they's some things we ain't supposed to know.

One day we were fishing for blue-cat down on the banks of the Savannah, and Rufus ast me, he says, "Jarred, don't you reckon it's time we picked up the pieces of what them Ketchum's did to your Pa?"

"I'd admire a chance to make things right for sure, Ruf. But them Ketchum's ain't got a weak link in the chain. The best we'd do is get ourself kilt."

Rufus stood up and stared out at the muddy brown water. "Your Pa'd sure be proud of you, Jarred Estep," is all he said.

One thing I'd learnt about Rufus was; he might not be the brightest berry on the bush, but when he was right, he was right.

"They... Lord... what can we do?" I ast.

"I got it figured." Rufus said. "Jack's been humping that Collins gal up on Necker's Knob. They meet every day around suppertime. I been watching them through the bushes. I figure we could sneak up there and pump a pellet into Jack's butt. Then when he got off her to chase us, we'd lead him down to that pocket of quicksand we found in the gumbo swamp by the end of the rise."

“That’s an admirable idea, Rufus. But how are we going to cross the pit?”

“They’s a big tarpaulin in the warehouse at the coal yard. I figure we could stretch it across the hole and wedge it down. When Ketchum chases us we’ll run across it and then pull it up from the other side. All’s you got to do is taunt him a little, and he’ll charge across that hole like a bloodhound after a wounded rabbit.”

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Late afternoon the next day we hitched the tarp to stump roots and covered it with muck. Then we army-crawled up the bank of the knob.

Shure-nuff, Jack and that Collins gal were going at it on a blanket like a couple of hamsters. His behind was pumping faster than one of them whirligig log splitters they sell to the city folk down at the Agway in Raleigh.

Well, Ruf raised his air rifle and slapped a pellet smack dab on Jack’s ass. I swear that boy could shoot the pecker off a hummingbird at fifty yards.

Anyways, Jack hopped up from that Collins gal quicker than a flea off a hot brick. He howled like a wounded coy-dog and looked over towards us. “I’m gonna kill you, sons-a-bitches,” he bellowed.

Rufus stood up, and made a sound like a swamp peeper.

Jack flung open the door of his Cadillac, and came out with two pistols.

Well, Jack commenced to chase us along the rise, running buck naked through the briars, his pistols blazing. Me and Ruf hit the gumbo flying and shot across that sippy-hole like we were made of feathers. In no time we sunk the canvas and hid behind a big cypress stump.

Jack crashed through the brambles, and stood a-looking from the top of the ridge; his chest heaving, and his eyes on fire. Ruf stuck out his head from a gnarl of roots and hollered, “Hootey, Hootey Hoo.”

“I’m gonna kill you bastards,” Jack cried, and he charged down the bank. Both his pistol were a flaming, and his stones slapped side to side on his thighs like a couple of hockleberries in a tote sack.

Just like magic, he jumped right into the bog and sank directly up to his chest; all the while a waving his arms and floundering in the muck like a toad tossed on an anthill.

“Help me! I’m gonna kill you bastards,” he bellowed. Jack fired the last of his bullets until the triggers just kept clicking like the sound of a ratchet wrench.

We walked over to the bank and stared down on him. The gumbo had already swallowed him to the chin and they weren’t much time left.

“Please, please. Help me out of here. I’m gonna kill you sons-a-bitches.”

I looked over at Ruf, “What do you reckon we ought to do?” I ast.

He looked down at Jack and said, “The Lord gives ’em... and the Lord takes ’em back.”

I took off my hat and held it to my heart. “Blessed be the name of the Lord,” I replied.

“Amen, Jarred, Amen.”

They was a clump of cattails growing on the bank. I broke off a thick stalk and said, “I’m gonna give you more of a chance than you gave my Pa, Ketchum.”

I thowed him the shuck. He dropped his pistols and they splashed in the water. Jack clutched at the reed like it was a river log bobbing in a flood.

“I’m gonna kill you sons...” were the last words from his mouth, before the quicksand sucked him under. His shiny black mane floated on the surface, and then sunk beneath swamp water, and followed him to hell.

When we looked up, that Collins gal stood staring at us from the top of the rise. We gazed at each other for a spell; Ruff says my jaw was hanging open. They Lord... she sure was a looker; towhead, long curly hair, ivory skin. The nipples of her breasts stuck out like a couple of red raspberries.

In a while she ast, “What should I do?”

“Keep your mouth shut,” I said.

We kept eyeballing each other.

“What’s your name?” I ast her.

“Rinthy... Rinthy Lyn.” Then she looked down, and rubbed her toe in the red clay.

“We best be moving on, Jarred. It ain’t wise to tempt the devil,” Rufus said.

I’ll never know why, but Rinthy never told a soul what happened that day.

\* \* \*

Things changed considerable after that. They never found Jack’s body. Lester retired shortly after. He drank himself to death in six months.

Aza took a bullet in the skull. Seems he didn’t honor the bribes he’d made with the Klan. I always knowed they was good for something.

Beauregard Ashwood, the middle son of the Ashwood clan was elected High Sheriff of Lee County. Rufus and him get along real good.

Me and Ruf rebuilt the still up on Chickasaw. The following year we finished the cabin.

That Collins gal came calling so often she moved in with us. A while later her sister Tammy Beth followed. You give them two a little hooch and they go plum crazy. They sure love to dance. Great balls afire! We have us some fun, you bet. ’Course, Rufus just likes to watch. It seems you lose a lot of burn when you’re a u-neck.

I see lately Rinthy’s commencing to swell. I reckon I knocked her up. But it’s righteous; I always wanted a young-un of my own.

Ruf still takes a sniff now and again. When the spirit strikes him, he sings “Amazing Grace.” For a big feller he sings so pretty it brings tears to my eyes, and I have to take my hat off. He’s devoted, same as my Pa was.

Business is good and we got us a respectable enterprise. As long as we tithe a tenth of our earnings to the Ashwoods, Sheriff Beauregard don’t allow nobody to fuss with us.

We got a dozen shotguns stashed ever which-a-away on the farm, and Ruf has just bought himself a crossbow. We traded a trunk full of lightning to Moses the Indian down in Raleigh for three cases of buckshot and a grenade launcher.

They’s a whole heap of trouble back in these hills, and me and Rufus ain’t the least of it. Anybody that comes up on Chickasaw Ridge knows they best be a-looking for shine.

Ruf can fling an arrow through the eye of a scarecrow on the other side of the cornfield. He don't believe they's a world beyond these hills, and he don't cotton to strangers.

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Two-time *Best of the Net* anthology nominee Ajay Vishwanathan, published in over forty literary journals, including *elimae*, *Dogzplot*, *Toasted Cheese*, *Orange Room Review*, and *Centrifugal Eye*, lives in a world of words and viruses. He shows obsession for one, reverence for another.

## Bhima

by Ajay Vishwanathan

He was rare, desired, and blessed; he was white. Scores of revering eyes peered at him as he sat on Bhima's left shoulder; his own small beady eyes fixed on his paws as he gnawed at them furiously, his long grubby tail twitching and snapping around Bhima's neck. He was no ordinary rat but the auspicious one whose occasional sighting evoked celebrity attention, who wasn't overtly concerned by ogling humans moving in excited circles around him.

It was a relatively quiet day at the rat temple in North India, where hundreds of freely roaming sacred rats, in jumbled shades of gray and brown, scampered across marble squares, spied through tiny holes in the walls designed specifically to let them crisscross the temple grounds, and nibbled at sweets and grains placed in metal saucers.

Reposed against a wall in a shady corner of the temple, his run-down green cloth bag parked next to him, Bhima seemed oblivious to the activity around him as eager devotees tried to engage the white vermin on his shoulder, leaning forward to feed him and touch him. The uninterested animal chucked a quick memento of attention at them, took a few hasty nips at Bhima's long beard and scurried away behind one of the clay pillars.

Bhima opened his eyes nonchalantly and watched the small crowd drift away; the half a dozen gray rats frisking on his lap didn't appeal to them. A bright red turbaned man appeared from behind the group and smiled at Bhima.

"I see you still attract the white *kabas*," he said and sat cross-legged next to Bhima. Middle-aged and influential, Bulaki was the head of one of the many families that took care of the temple. He had resisted frequent attempts by other families to evict Bhima from the temple premises by pointing out Bhima's special power of enticing the white ones.

The others thought he was useless and claimed that his constant unkempt presence during the day was drawing negative attention. They also suspected that Bulaki's real sympathy for him stemmed from his feelings for Bhima's daughter, shreds of an age-old romance that was throttled when she fell one day from a moving cart and died.

Bhima, who had just lost his wife, wasted in mourning, and slowly gambled away all his assets. Bulaki had provided him with a windowless ramshackle cabin a mile away from the temple for Bhima to spend his nights. In the past year, he had started spending many hours during the day sprawled lazily among the scuttling rats, feeding on leftover proffering, much to the displeasure of some of the town elders.

"They want you out, Bhima," said Bulaki, spraying red saliva from his betel-leaf chewing mouth, "and you know how feisty they can get."



Bhima sat silently, head lowered and knees close to the chest. He looked immensely old, older than he actually was, tiny tufts of hair growing out of dry moles on his withered face, patches of color on his skin eaten away by years of turmoil. An untidily tied saffron bandana, jaded and crinkled, around a flat head accentuated his nonexistent eyebrows and the heavy white rings around the iris.

“You are a good man, Bhima, I know. Life hasn’t been the same since Leena... I just wanted to tell you that my resistance is slowly wearing down and might not last too long.”

Bhima looked at Bulaki and nodded. “I know.”

\* \* \*

It was a Sunday morning. Encircled by playful rats and curious spectators, two white ones lounging at his feet, Bhima’s torpor belied the intense scene of dash and bustle that unfolded around him: bare feet hustled in and out the door as little creatures frantically weaved around them in droves, sometimes running a wrong route on the black and white floor and tripping on someone’s feet, generating a ripple of excitement in the gathering; a modest group of three sat in a corner singing to the drone of a three-stringed instrument, their voices barely audible above the cacophony of constant chatter and prayers; an older lady filled a massive pan of milk to its brim, her smile widening as she watched a jostling ring of rats lapping up the liquid; a young foreigner, his pale skin accentuated by the brown *kurta* that he wore, walked around with his camera, enthralled by the incongruous symphony between man and beast.

A hint of a smile escaped Bhima’s lips as he wondered who was more excited: the youngster who had just sighted a white rat among a crowd of dusky companions or the locals who had sighted a white man among a sea of tanned skin.

Dara, a broad-shouldered man, whose chest was covered in brown beads that hung from his neck, interrupted Bhima’s reverie. His beads heaved conspicuously and clunked together as Dara smiled at his friend and sat next to him.

“Do you smell ghee?” he said, as he drew in a deliberately long breath. “Makes me hungry.” Dara, who had grown up with Bhima in the same village, was the only friend who had endured the gossip and ranting about Bhima and stuck with him. He admired Bhima as a person and empathized with his plight.

Bhima nodded yes.

They watched the excited foreigner, his camera flashing incessantly at the rats, pots, people, saucers, the holes in the walls, the colorful henna tattoos on the feet of ladies, the tobacco-stained smiles; one of the men seemed a little annoyed at his new bride being captured unabashedly by a stranger’s lens.

“Dara, have you felt,” said Bhima, puckering his depleted brows, “that the number of white ones has decreased?”

“Uh... no,” replied Dara. “Why?”

“I have a feeling that the black ones don’t like the whites.”

“Why? Have you seen something that I haven’t?”

“I think the white ones are being harassed.” Bhima pointed out to the little white *kabas* sitting next to his cloth bag. “Look at the mark on his forehead. That is an attack, not a birthmark.”

Dara peered at the animal and shook his head. “Bhima... you are imagining things.”

“I’m not, believe me. Am I not the guy who attracts the white ones? I’ve seen similar scars, up close, my friend, on many other whites,” Dara contended, “Not just this one. I’ve seen them being chased around by larger black rats.”

“So, you think they are dying?”

“I don’t know... maybe.”

“You are getting old,” said Dara as he rose; his exotic beads bounced noisily, startling the dozing rats. “The heat is getting to you. Go home and get some rest.”

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Bulaki looked pensive, his head deflated without his colorful turban, as he stroked his curled moustache with his finger. It had been a joyless day for him; his brother had notified him in the morning that the elders had finally decided to ban Bhima from idling on the temple grounds, and now, Dara had interrupted his dinner to inform him that Bhima had not been seen for three days.

“I am too frightened to knock on his door by myself,” said Dara, standing solemnly, his eyes unable to meet Bulaki’s. “I thought you might want to.”

“I’ll go with you.”

The night was staid, dark; heavy clouds eclipsed the stars. The fluorescent street lamp flickered randomly as Bulaki drove his car right up to Bhima’s shack. Their shadows cast on the wooden door seemed ominous as they stood in front of the house, waiting for Bhima to answer their knocks; he didn’t.

Dara pushed nervously at the door, which creaked open. The light from the street lamp beamed into the pitch-dark room, onto an unassuming string bed, where Bhima was lying with his back towards them. As they tiptoed into the small space, they heard muffled sounds of shuffling feet along the walls.

Bulaki couldn’t see anything beyond the column of dim light as he sat at the head of the bed and felt Bhima’s forehead; it was deathly cold. He shook Bhima’s shoulder timidly but the man didn’t move. An inexplicable feeling of grief surged through Bulaki as he sat there motionless, next to the body of a man he could not disconnect from his life.

He had not interacted much with Bhima but there was something about him that he felt strongly about. Maybe because he was the father of the woman he once loved. Maybe because Bhima never objected to a courtship that society frowned upon or cast blame on Bulaki when he was unable to reach out and save Leena as she lost her balance and fell off the cart.

As Dara walked in towards the bed, the wind nudged the door that swung further inward, bedimming an already dark room. His foot caught on the strap of Bhima’s green cloth bag that was lying on the floor. The bag changed position and something jumped out of it, setting off a series of agitated, scraping noises around the bed.

Dara pulled out a match from his pocket and struck it. In the light of the flickering flame, they saw eyes, an army of them, all nervously staring at the men, some on top of an iron trunk, some on a heap of crumpled clothes, some near Bhima’s legs, but most lined impatiently along the gray walls.

Dara and Bulaki stared dumbfounded at over a hundred fidgety rats.

All white.

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\* \*

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## Chimera Khanna

by Kaushik Viswanath

Dr Khanna's left arm has its third involuntary spasm today in the evening. The mug flies out of his hand, bounces off the wall, and flies back at him. Dr Khanna shields his face with his arms and ducks while leaning backwards to avoid getting soaked.

Such complex manoeuvres tend to fail in such confined spaces. Not only does the water from the mug soak him accurately from head to toe, his right foot slips off the rim into the bowl.

The inside of the bowl is smooth, and his feces provide little grip. Dr Khanna topples over, face forward, his entire right leg now soiled with his own filth.

At that moment Dr Khanna is not panicked or disgusted; he is merely making a steely resolve to never use eastern-style toilets again.

Dr Khanna's wife helps him get cleaned up, gives him a fresh set of clothes. She is a loyal, caring wife, but it is obvious that she is uncomfortable around him. Since the procedure, she hardly ever makes eye contact with him. Dr Khanna resents that. She was, after all, the person who made him go through with the procedure. He was not afraid to die, but his wife told him that he couldn't leave her and their unborn child.

Dr Khanna is clean. He is no longer worried about the spasms in his left arm.

"Sanjana!" he calls from the living room.

A five-year old girl with pigtails comes bounding into the room. She steps on the mosaic floor tiles in a way that the tiles between her feet at any point form an L. She has been playing chess by herself again.

When she is in front of Dr Khanna, she brings her feet together, and with an expression of satisfaction, lifts her gaze from her feet to her father.

"What, Papa?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to see where you were." Dr Khanna smiles.

"I'm just standing in front of you," she says matter-of-factly and chuckles.

Sanjana has always known her father to be like this. The procedure was completed before she was born. It was worth it, Dr Khanna always tells himself, it was worth it for this little girl.

His friends were supportive in the beginning, but one by one, in a matter of weeks, those friends he had known since childhood dropped out of touch. Patients who had been visiting him for decades left him to have their teeth extracted by other dentists. Sanjana is the only person who can look him in the eyes and see who he really is. She is the only thing that keeps him going. And then he slaps her, fast and hard, across her right cheek.

It takes Sanjana a full ten seconds to feel the sting and burst into tears. Until then she is numbed by the shock of what her father has just done. He has never hurt her before.

Dr Khanna stands up, trembling, and heads for the door. He opens it and pauses for a moment. Sanjana has gone to her mother, wailing. Dr Khanna steps out and slams the door behind him.

Downstairs, Dr Khanna ignores the “Rohan! Rohan!” that issues from his balcony. His wife is the last person he wants to see right now.

*That was not a slap, Dr Khanna tells himself as he storms down the street, that was my arm twitching again, but it was not a slap. I would never slap my daughter.*

As he turns the corner, he is finally out of earshot of Chandra’s continued yelling from the balcony. The last thing he hears her say is something about how she has made Mango Biriyani for dinner.

But Dr Khanna has no appetite. He has just involuntarily struck the one person he loves the most, and he is going to meet his doctor to find out why.

Dr Khanna reaches the main road, and standing to the side of the road, tries sticking out his left arm, but it refuses to move. He waves his right hand instead. A stray dog yelps and bolts out of the way as an autorickshaw sees Dr Khanna waving, and swerves towards him. The auto pulls up beside Dr Khanna, and the driver raises his eyebrows inquisitively.

“Hiranandani Hospital, Powai,” Dr Khanna says, and climbs into the auto.

The ride will take a while. Dr Khanna has time to simmer in his uneasiness and premonitions. He keeps telling himself that everything will be fine, that the doctors will give him a prescription that fixes his arm, that even if they can’t, he is right-handed, and a slightly disobedient left arm would not be the hardest thing to live with.

After all, Dr Khanna has lived with harder.

But he cannot put his fears aside. No matter what he tells himself, he is afraid that this has something to do with the procedure.

The noise and smoke of the Mumbai roads only make him squirm in his seat with greater unease. He looks down at his left arm. For now it is still and silent. Dr Khanna tries wiggling his fingers, and he is able to do that easily. This calms him down a little bit. Hopefully he won’t be bothered by it until he reaches the hospital; hopefully he won’t be bothered by it ever again.

No sooner has Dr Khanna thought this when his right leg jerks out as it would in a knee reflex test, his foot forcefully kicking the panel behind the auto driver’s seat. The driver jumps up in shock and looks over his shoulder to see what is going on. Dr Khanna’s right leg is now jumping about in what seems to be a horrific merry abandon.

The driver swerves to the side of the road and stops the auto.

“Get out,” he tells Dr Khanna, looking at his face in the rearview mirror. He is too scared to continue watching the antics of Dr Khanna’s emancipated leg.

Dr Khanna struggles to control his leg as he gets off the auto. Standing on the side of the road, Dr Khanna holds his leg with his hands and quickly surveys his surroundings.

“But this is not Hiranandani...” a very bewildered Dr Khanna tries to tell the auto driver, but the driver twists the throttle and the auto speeds away.

\* \* \*

Dr Muthu is awake. He is not a dentist like Dr Khanna, he just has a PhD in English Literature from Madras University. His thesis was titled, “Comparative Marxist Readings of Kumbhakarna and Rip Van Winkle.” He has been asleep for five years now, thanks to a freak academic accident that put him in a coma.

The doctors said he was mind-dead, which was something like brain-dead, but with some medical and philosophical differences. The point was, they said, that Dr Muthu was gone; only his body remained. Through a new experimental procedure, they transferred the mind of a 45-year-old dentist dying from multiple organ failure into Dr Muthu’s brain.

The doctors said Dr Muthu was gone forever. How wrong they were. Mind-death, unlike regular death, isn’t always permanent.

Now Dr Muthu is awake, mind-alive, and curiously unable to control his own body, except for — with considerable difficulty — one limb at a time. So far he has tried controlling the left arm, which unfortunately led to the slapping of a little girl, which he is truly very sorry about.

In order to prevent any more accidental slappings, he is instead trying to regain control of his right leg and has so far been successful, although the control of only a leg and not the rest of the body is admittedly not very useful.

Despite the hands’ trying to hold the right leg in place, Dr Muthu is now reasonably confident that he is in control of that leg. *Now focus*, Dr Muthu tells himself, *focus on the left leg without letting go of the right*.

It takes a lot of concentration, but Dr Muthu is used to concentrating. He has a PhD. Soon, the left leg is his. Control of two of his legs means he can decide where to go. Yes, movement will be awkward if the rest of the body is resisting it, but it shouldn’t be impossible, thinks Dr Muthu.

He tries to figure out where he is and where he wants to go. He has always been a loner and doesn’t have any friends to go to, and the poor man’s family was swallowed up by a tsunami years ago.

Dr Muthu decides that the first thing he needs is a drink. Something stiff: a glass of whiskey ought to do it. He also hopes a little liquor might make his body easier to control.

He can’t control the movement of his head yet, but right across the road from where he stands, he sees the word “DEBASEMENT” in large purple neon letters. It is a nightclub, and Dr Muthu praises his luck.

The road is packed with traffic, but like on all Mumbai roads during rush hour, the traffic is standing still. Dr Muthu moves his legs forward carefully, one at a time. At first the rest of his body resists, but as if realising that fighting his legs while crossing a road might not be a bright idea, they begin to cooperate. Dr Muthu reaches the other side of the road, and walks through a doorway, down a flight of stairs to the basement where the DEBASEMENT nightclub is.

“Whiskey. Large. Neat,” Dr Muthu says to the bartender, after having walked through the flashing strobe lights and *dik-chik* club music and having seated himself at the bar. He is suddenly surprised to realise he has control over his entire body now. It is not complete control; there is still some amount of resistance, but whatever was resisting him is exhausted, and no longer putting up much of a fight.

“Whiskey. Large. Neat,” the bartender echoes unenthusiastically, and pours him a glass of dark brown liquid.

Dr Muthu picks up the glass.

Dr Khanna is a teetotaler. He always has been, and he always will be. There is no way he is going to swallow that. He sharply yanks back control of his arms and sets the glass down, firmly. He has had enough of this. He is going home.

Dr Khanna gets off the bar stool and determinedly fights his body’s resistance to do so. He walks away from the bar, ignoring the bartender who wants to know if he is going to drink that or what, and heads for the door.

Dr Muthu wants that whiskey. He was so close to drinking it when he suddenly lost all control of his body again. He has not had a drink in over five years. He is going back to the bar.

Dr Khanna is not.

Dr Muthu starts in the right leg, where he feels he has the maximum control, and tries to quickly stand on the toes of that leg and spin his body around so he faces the bar again. He manages to do it.

Dr Khanna takes control of the left leg and slides it backwards, pulling the whole body back, away from the bar.

Dr Muthu pushes the right leg further forward, and before he knows it, he is on the floor doing a split.

Dr Khanna lets go of the left leg and takes control of the arms, places his palms on the floor, and spins himself around while pushing himself up, so he stands facing the door.

Angrily, Dr Muthu grabs both legs and spins himself around again, so he faces the bar. He then aggressively begins to run, and folds his legs at the knees, so he slides across the floor towards the bar.

Around Dr Khanna and Dr Muthu, a wide circle has formed. In the middle of the dance floor, amidst the flashing strobe lights and *dik-chik* music, is a wild man break-dancing as if his life depends on it. No one else is dancing. They just watch in silent amazement. This man’s arms and legs are flying all over the place, while he does splits, slides across the dance floor on his knees, spins, does backflips, and all sorts of other crazy things. Nobody’s seen moves like that before.

The DJ recognises this man. Could that... could that really be her neighbour, Khanna-uncle? Dancing at a nightclub? It can’t be. She steps over to the light controls and immerses the dancing man in bright white lights. There’s no doubt about it: Khanna-uncle has got moves. She reaches for her cell phone and dials home.

“Ma?” She presses the phone to her ear and covers the mouthpiece to block out the *dik-chik*. “Ma! Can you go over next door and tell Chandra-aunty that Khanna-uncle is here?... Yes. Rohan. Khanna-uncle... Here means what? Here, at DEBASEMENT. Ma... *Maaaa!*... Don’t start. I’m a DJ, learn to live with it, okay?... *NO-I-DON’T-WANT-TO-DO-AN-MBA!* Will you just ask Chandra-aunty if she knows that uncle is here?”

“What? Uh... you probably won’t believe this. He’s dancing... No, not with some woman, by himself... Ma, don’t ask questions, if you want to know so badly you can come see for yourself. Just tell Chandra-aunty. Okay? Bye.”

She hangs up, puts the strobe lights back on, and turns the volume up.

The circle around the dancing man is no longer staring silently. Now they're going wild, clapping and cheering him on.

When Chandra arrives, her husband is still dancing. She can't believe it's him. Sanjana, who insisted on coming along, also watches in awe.

Dr Khanna and Dr Muthu finally collapse on the floor, too exhausted to struggle any more. Chandra and Sanjana run towards him. Chandra picks him up.

"Rohan, I didn't know you could dance like this!" she says. Dr Khanna smiles weakly at her. For the first time in years, she is looking into his eyes and smiling at him.

"Papa! Papa! How did you do that... that... first you were moving like a bishop, then like a knight, then like a rook, then like..." Dr Khanna can see Sanjana has forgiven him and forgotten about the slap.

"Excuse me sir," a voice booms behind them. They turn to see a large, muscular man in a t-shirt. He points at Sanjana, and sternly says, "No minors allowed." Suddenly he softens his voice and adds, "But you were terrific, sir, what dancing!"

Dr Muthu clears his throat.

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Mike Voltz' page in our Biographies and Bibliographies says only "No information available." However, we do know he writes excellent fiction, and we'd love to have more from him.

## Summer Rain

by Mike Voltz

The fields should have been green, but they were beginning to turn a parched yellow. Given a few weeks, they would be filled with brittle, yellow-white cornstalks. The sigh of wind that bent the tops of the corn would shortly become a harsh, rattling whisper and the growing season would be over with nothing to show for it.

Mitch Telford stood on his porch, searching the horizon. His eyes, once the dark blue of cornflowers, were faded by years of looking out over the fields. Likewise, the hair on his forearms had been bleached light brown by the sun. It was going on a month without rain and the wells had nearly been drained. Come next week, if there was no rain, Mitch figured they might just die.

Even though it was early in the week, Mitch was dressed in his Sunday best, a single outfit that had seen many years of repeat service. It was too hot to warrant more than an open shirt and jeans, but his wife had seen to it that they were both dressed for the occasion.

The church was the only building in Durham City big enough to accommodate all the townspeople. The name was something of a joke, bestowed at a time when the town fathers thought Durham might become an important stop on the way between Topeka and Wichita. That notion had been a fine dream but one that never came to fruition. The city limits sign boasted "Pop. 850...The Only Thing Growing Faster Is The Corn." That sign had been erected during what passed for a boom time in Durham's inglorious and dusty history.

Most families left their youngest members at home. It was too hot to get up to much mischief, anyway. Reverend Boone, known to his flock as the Preacher and to a few working girls in neighboring Kansas towns as William, stood just inside the front door, greeting the faithful. It was oppressively hot in the church and the growing number of bodies did little to move the still air.

In Boone's accustomed place behind the pulpit stood John Anderton, mayor of a town that was dying of heat exhaustion. Boone thought that if it did rain, the buildings would swell like books left in the gutter and the creaking sound as they did so would be a sound of relief. The plants would grow too, crackling as they shot up toward the suddenly kind sky.

If John Anderton was a man accustomed to speaking in front of large crowds, he did not look it now. Anderton was middle-aged and experiencing a thinning and receding hairline. Under the strands that remained, carefully combed into the ghost of their former style, Anderton's scalp was red and peeling. Boone wondered at the man's vanity, that he would continue to drag a comb across that hurt landscape.

The doors of the church were pinned open with rocks, but it did little to stir the air. Anderton looked over the crowd, which had mostly filled the pews. When he spoke, his voice was too soft at first to fill the high arches of the church. Boone figured the mayor was probably more used to sit-

down meetings and one-on-one glad-handing, anyway. Anderton cleared his throat and started again.

“Thank you for coming today. I know that you all have business to attend to, so I’ll try to keep this as short as possible.” He paused for a moment. The only sound was made by the paper fans the farmers waved back and forth under their chins. Boone felt sweat trickling under his arms and down his back. Standing by the door, the sun had turned the back of his shirt into a blazing sheet.

Anderton swiped at his forehead and continued. “We’ve been through some hard times before, but I fear this is the worst of them. Ken Bowden tells me that the wells are nearly dry. Another week should do it, for sure.”

“I didn’t come here to hear something I already know! I want to hear what you’re gonna do about it!” shouted one of the farmers. Boone couldn’t remember the man’s name, but his wife was Grace.

The mayor held out one hand, palm down, fingers outstretched, trying to calm the man. “I understand how you feel, but I think...” He got no further. The crowd sensed weakness and was turning; if no solution was offered then, by God, the man in charge was going to pay. Most of the crowd was on its feet and those not angry enough to stand did so anyway, if only to see. Their voices, the voices of the faithful shouting to God in passionate tongues, rose in a single swell like a flock of birds taking flight.

“Sitting in your office—”

“Don’t care about us—”

“Get off the stage before—”

Anderton was holding both hands out now, but it was too late. The crowd had become feral, exploring another side of the ecstasies Boone sometimes whipped them into with a particularly good sermon. It wouldn’t be long before one of the farmers yelled something mildly catchy that would turn into a chant, which was all a crowd needed to turn into a mob.

“*QUIET!*”

The crowd was silent for a moment, struck dumb by the sight of their preacher stepping forward, pointing an accusing finger. Here was a man who knew what to do with his hands while he was speaking. Here was a man who did not falter on the first sentence, pitching it too low. Reverend Boone seized the moment and filled the silence with his words.

“It’s so hot at night, I can’t sleep more than two hours at a time. Bathing feels like heaven. It’s so hot Miss Dunnam, whom you all know, nearly died walking to the store. It’s hot and you’re scared for your lives.” Boone walked up the central aisle as he spoke and when he reached the pulpit, the mayor ceded it eagerly.

“I know you’re afraid and you have every right to be. I know you’re scared for your families and your farms and your lives. If I’m wrong, let me know.” Boone waited; there was nothing. “But if I’m right, gimme a *PREACH ON!*”

“*PREACH ON!*”

“If I’m right, gimme a *YES IT IS!*”

“*YES IT IS!*” The crowd roared Boone’s words enthusiastically and he could sense the danger leaving them. Anderton had started to sidle away and Boone grabbed his wrist, heedless of the

slippery feel of the man's hair plastered to his skin by sweat. "If I'm right," said Boone, speaking more quietly now, "Gimme your attention. I want you to listen to your mayor. We'll hear what he has to say." Then, almost as an afterthought, "Amen on that."

"*AMEN.*"

Boone took a step back and folded his arms over his chest. Anderton resumed the podium, but most eyes were still on the preacher. Some of the color was returning to his face now, but his cheeks and forehead were still pale. Boone had never seen it himself, but he had been told many times that when he preached the blood seemed to drain out of his face, leaving it white and fierce. This particular trait, supposedly possessed by Moses and Joseph Smith, made the farmers listen for the moment.

At first, Anderton spoke haltingly but began to pick up speed when no voices of opposition were raised. There were two options, it seemed. One involved tanks of water transported overland into Durham. It would be effective but costly. Of course, with no water the crops would not grow and with no crops they could afford no water. Even the least educated farmer among them could see the hopelessness in that.

The other option, one that Anderton himself was eager to try, was to call upon a rainmaker. He'd heard of one, and the fellow in question was only a few days away. All that remained was to send for him. It wouldn't cost much and certainly couldn't hurt. The crowd murmured assent. They took a voice vote, then stood and filed out of the church, into the street. The light had failed considerably but the heat remained, huge and oppressive.

Eventually, they were gone and only the preacher and the mayor remained. In this dry spell, no one dared light so much as a candle, but even in the country darkness, Anderton seemed to be making a point of looking the other way. The only sound was from the church; the boards spoke in the secret, creaking language of old floors, echoing the small movements both men made as they shifted uncomfortably. Boone broke the silence.

"A rainmaker?"

"I know, I know." Anderton's eyes sought the cracks in the floor. "It isn't witchcraft. From what I've heard, he's a Christian. He prays for rain, that's all."

Boone nodded, but the frown-lines on his forehead were still there. The truth was that he too had prayed, had in fact sent countless prayers up into the blue yonder, to no answer and certainly no avail. "Are you calling the rainmaker to keep everyone calm until the first tanks get here?"

"Well, if he works we won't need to call for water." Anderton sounded defensive.

The preacher shook his head. "Call the rainmaker if you want, but call for the water, too." Now it was Anderton's turn to shake his head. Boone pressed on, "John, rainmakers are charlatans by trade. I've never heard of a rainmaker who didn't ask for at least half his money up front. A rainmaker is either a cheat or a cheat with some kind of meteorological training.

"When Christopher Columbus arrived, the natives didn't know what to make of him until he used his charts to predict an eclipse. He could no more cause planets to change course than your rainmaker can call rain out of a clear sky. But when Columbus's eclipse happened, it didn't prove his power, it *made* his power."

“There is no money.” John Anderton looked on the verge of tears. “If this doesn’t work...” Anderton shook his head and looked away. Eventually he walked out of the church, and Boone said no more to stop him.

Four days later, the day of the rainmaker’s arrival, the sky was still free of clouds. Boone wondered if the mayor planned on substituting the rainmaker’s failure for his own and making a neat exit as things rose to a fever pitch. Boone supposed only time would tell, and shortly at that. Once again, the people of Durham gathered in the church.

The rainmaker was late and Boone thought that his entrance was a particularly nice piece of work. He drove a small wagon, what Boone’s father had always called a “two-hoss shay,” down the main street of a town that waited desperately for him. All eyes in the church watched him through the window, straining to see something. Children were lifted up. Wives reached for their husband’s shoulders as they stood unsteadily on tiptoe, peering out.

The rainmaker took his time. Only his back was visible, clad in a blue shirt and crossed with suspenders. Sweat stains made dark patches on his shirt and Boone did not doubt that when he removed the suspenders, there would be a matching X of sweat. The whole affair was topped off with a broad, flat-brimmed hat that hid his face.

The rainmaker descended from the wagon in one limber motion and, for the second he disappeared from the window until he reappeared in the doorway, there was soft muttering.

“Did you see—”

“Where did he come from—”

“He’s really here—”

The voices fell silent again when he appeared in the door and for a moment, Boone felt like shouting “Praise the Lord! It’s Huck Finn!”

The rainmaker was a boy, fifteen at the most.

The hat hid his eyes and brow, but not his youthful jaw line. Curls of hair, dark with sweat, lay against his neck. Boone supposed he was an average height, if a little on the thin side. He walked casually through the church, with his hands in his pockets.

When he reached the pulpit, he turned and lifted his chin and Boone finally got a look at the boy’s eyes. They were dark and sparkling, rimmed with sweaty skin; under the brim of the hat, they looked like the eyes of an animal in a picture, peering out of a cave. The boy’s skin was milky white under a layer of dirt, and the preacher noted with an unpleasant shock that there was a cold sore blooming at the corner of the rainmaker’s mouth and a cigarette tucked behind one filthy ear.

The rainmaker faced the crowd, pushed back his hat with one finger under the brim, and began to speak. His voice still held the timbre of youth, but none of its uncertainty. There was something compelling about the adolescent voice, full of fire. Boone could only look at the mayor and wonder what they had gotten into.

“My name is Aaron Hands. You all know who I am. You know what I can do and from the looks of things round here, you need it.” He paused dramatically and Boone thought of a girl he’d seen on the revival circuit years before. She was only five but preached something fierce, working the stage with her child’s curls bouncing.

“I got the power,” Aaron continued, “I got the power and I can help you, if you want. I don’t want no money, not till I’m done. Then you can pay me what you think I been worth.”

Applause greeted this and Aaron nodded, as if this was no more than he’d heard in a hundred towns before. And here was John Anderton clapping right along with the rest of them. Empty treasury or no, Anderton knew a good deal when he heard one. Boone raised his own hands and reluctantly joined in.

When the applause died down, the rainmaker stepped back and the mayor enthusiastically took his place. For a moment, Boone thought he was going to call for another round of applause. Instead, he said that he hoped everyone would do their best to make young Aaron feel welcome and that he, John, would be honored if Aaron would sleep under his roof tonight.

“If it’s all the same, I’d rather get started. It might could take a while. Your town’s powerful dry,” said Aaron, and Boone was again struck with the impulse to laugh and ask how Tom Sawyer was getting on. Aaron favored the crowd with a slight tip of his hat, then walked down the aisle and out of the church, through the too-bright rectangle of the doorway.

One thing Reverend Boone could say for the rainmaker, he was as good as his word, at least in one respect. A few hours later, as Boone made his way to visit Miss Dunnam, he observed a cloud of dust rising behind a cart. He waited and was greeted by the sight of Carl Engle’s half-bright farmhand, driving the horses. His name was Matthew or Michael Hawkins, Boone couldn’t remember which.

The horses plodded along, and the rainmaker knelt in the flat bed of the wagon, hands clasped in prayer. His face was turned to the sky and the peculiar flat-brimmed hat covered his eyes with a small wedge of shade. Engle’s man gave Boone a sweet, empty smile and touched a finger to his sweaty brow.

Boone nodded back. The rainmaker looked down from the sky and studied the figure on the side of the road. He tapped the driver’s shoulder and the cart rolled to a stop.

“Mind lettin’ us by?” said Aaron. His tone was casual, but there was nothing casual or friendly in his eyes.

“Why don’t you come down and talk for a minute?” Boone expected resistance, curses maybe or stone silence, but Aaron rocked back off his knees and climbed down. He stood nearly a foot shorter than the preacher. “Do you see what you’re doing?” asked Boone.

Aaron didn’t respond, just stared up at preacher with his firing squad eyes. “You’re giving the people false hope. You’re going to break their spirits. Do you understand that, son?”

“I ain’t your son and I ain’t giving them false hope.”

“I don’t know what your story is or where you’re from, but this town is in trouble. These are good people, but they’re desperate. If you offer them hope then take it away, you might as well kill them.”

Aaron smiled. It was a singularly unpleasant expression of puffy gums and rotted teeth. “Been praying a lot?”

Boone was taken aback by the boy’s question. His smile suggested a trap and Boone chose his words carefully. “I pray for our souls.”

The smile fell. There was no witty rejoinder, no blasphemy that would cause Boone's hand to lash out and send the boy to the ground with a ringing ear. Instead, Aaron held out one hand, facing up. The palm was grimy and sparkling with sweat. Boone expected that, at any moment, the boy was going to perform some sort of parlor magic. Maybe that sort of thing impressed folks in other places but in Durham, a spade was a spade and a cheat was a cheat.

Boone watched carefully, framing both of the boy's hands in his field of vision. Aaron's fingers trembled slightly, but otherwise he remained still. They stood like this for some time and Boone was on the verge of asking just what the point was when a single drop of water landed in the center of the rainmaker's palm.

Boone took an involuntary step back, lips moving in the Lord's Prayer. The rainmaker rubbed the drop with his finger, making a dark swirl in the dust.

If it was a trick, it was a good one. Boone had never lost track of the other hand and the drop had fallen from quite a height. He looked up, but the sky was still the same hateful blue. When he looked back down, the rainmaker was climbing back onto the platform of the cart.

"Nothing to say, preacher? You'll see pretty soon. You keep prayin'. I got the power. When I call for the rain, it comes down." Then, almost as an afterthought, "On the just and the unjust alike."

It was only after Aaron tapped the driver on the shoulder again and the cart rolled on, that Boone realized the boy had been mocking him.

His heart beat heavily in his chest, and his thoughts were jumbled, flashing images. The cadence of his pounding heart made him think of war drums and Boone realized that, for the first time this summer, gooseflesh dotted his arms.

He continued on his errand of mercy, convinced that it was a trick but shaken nonetheless. By the time he reached Miss Dunnam's house, his heart had settled back into its normal rhythm, but he couldn't stop thinking of the drop, falling almost faster than his eye could follow, smacking into the boy's hand.

In the end, he didn't have to wait long for the answer. Boone was kneeling by Miss Dunnam's bed. He knocked twice before coming in, and was greeted by a most unpleasant scene. Miss Dunnam lay in her bed and for a moment, Boone was sure that someone had torn out her eyes, leaving ragged black holes. Then he realized that she was dead and the holes were no more than clusters of flies, busy at her half-closed lids.

Her body was even smaller in death, and it barely registered a bump under the sheets. If not for her hair and her hands peeking out of the sleeves of her nightgown, she might not have been there at all.

Boone took one of her hands and hoped her passing had been painless. He was still in that position when he became aware of a plinking sound. It was small but, in the dry and dying town, as unmistakable as a herald's trumpet. Boone placed the hand on the sheet and went to see what was happening.

He opened the door onto another world. At least, it seemed so at first. The day, previously hot and dry, was now cool. The breeze that crept across the dead yellow grass of the lawn had a damp edge to it.

Boone looked at the thermometer mounted by the door. For days the mercury had sat at 100, straining to burst out of the tube. Now Boone could actually see a thin band of white where the mercury had fallen. Boone allowed himself a moment of relief; in spite of his fear, he thought there had never been a more beautiful sight.

All over Durham, on isolated farms and down the main street, doors opened and people came out to look at the darkening sky. Clouds moved in from the east like strange alien ships, turning the sun into a glowing coin, then a small patch of light, then nothing at all. Some people ran outside, others stood in their doorways looking out into the newly dark afternoon. There were even a few people running around with their tongues out and their faces tilted up at the sky. Their foolishness was caught in the shutter flash of lightning, followed closely by the rumble of thunder.

The first drops of rain fell lightly, no more than a suggestion on a few lucky brows. Cheers of joy rose and were lost in the roll of thunder that announced the arrival of the storm. The rain began to fall quickly and beat the dust back to the ground. All over town, it plinked and popped as it fell in pots and buckets. The skeptical few who had watched the rainmaker's proceedings with a disdainful eye now hurried to collect as much as they could.

In the fields, rain fell on the parched crops. It ran down dry leaves and soaked into the baked earth. Animals licked at the ground, desperate to soak up as much moisture as they could. Children ran through the streets, stomping in puddles and sending muddy sheets of water onto each other. Adults who would have disapproved in a season not devastated by drought, laughed and played too. And in front of the building that served as his office, John Anderton stood with his arms spread, looking up at the sky as the rain rushed down to meet the earth.

The heaviest part of the downpour lasted almost an hour. The rain slackened to a drizzle, pushing down the awful humidity that threatened to rise. The clouds remained, dark and heavy as ever, and the smell of rain lay on the earth.

People made their way back to the church and packed the pews, filling the air with the smell of drying clothes and hair. By the time Boone arrived, most of the pews were full. Wet footprints covered the floor, leading this way and that. Boone entered to find the rainmaker leaning against the pulpit and, for the first time in his tenure as the town's resident man of the cloth, Boone took a seat near the back.

The rainmaker's eyes were cast down and people were content to watch him, murmuring amongst themselves, looking at the boy with power in front of them. Then Aaron reached up and pulled off his hat. He flipped it expertly into the lap of a man in the first pew. "Now it's up to you to pay what you think I'm owed." As the hat began to pass from hand to hand, the boy reached for the cigarette behind his ear and tucked it into the corner of his mouth.

Eventually, Anderton received the hat and pressed a few bills on top of the pile. Then he carried it to the front of the room with both hands encircling the crown, like a goblet offered to a king. The rainmaker, no king but a boy with thin wrists and greasy hair, took the hat and set it on the ground.

"I appreciate that, I surely do," he began and Boone was suddenly sure of what was going to come next. His eyes had fixed on Mitch Telford in the front pew. "I appreciate it a lot, but I want something else, too." One finger pointed at Mitch's wife. "I want her."

Marianne Telford looked around, then at the rainmaker with the fingers of one hand lightly touching her chest. He nodded. Over and over, Boone saw the single drop of rain pulled out of a clear blue sky, smacking into the boy's palm. A being with such power was surely used to getting his way.

There was a moment of silence in which Mitch struggled to find the courage to speak. Outside, the clouds moved slowly, but it seemed they had darkened and moved closer. *Tightened*, thought Boone.

Mitch shook his head and in a voice that was not quite steady, said "No. This is my wife." He stood up, alone in the room full of people, and looked like he wanted to take a step toward the rainmaker. Maybe raise his hand and scare him back into being a boy, but Boone felt it too. The air, wet and suffocating, was charged and the fine hairs on his arm were standing up.

"I want her now!" said the rainmaker, and it was the high, petulant shout of a child making a demand. Except this one's demands would be obeyed and his wishes met.

Mitch pulled Marianne to her feet and began walking to the door. They sat in the front pew, wanting to get a good look at the rainmaker, thinking of the stories they would one day tell their children. Now they made the long walk to the door.

Mitch pushed the door open and ushered his wife out. He looked back at the rainmaker, an island among a sea of upturned faces, and Boone saw that the man was afraid. He took another step and, as his foot crossed the threshold, the rainmaker screamed.

He called down a bolt of lightning as easily as he called down the rain. It struck Mitch, spiking his head with an angry snap. For a moment, Boone could see the faint outline of Mitch's skull as the lightning filled his body with electricity and shone through his flesh. His eyes burst and splattered on his cheeks. The pews erupted with screams as Mitch collapsed, trailing smoke, and lay in the entryway of the church, empty sockets turned towards the sky.

The rain began to beat down again. It smacked against the windows of the church, like an invading force. Aaron stood with his hands clenched in front of him and his childish pout had become a scowl.

"When I ask for something I want it!" he screamed. His eyes searched the crowd, daring anyone to challenge him. Rain-cooled wind blew in through the open doors. The first few rows of pews had been overturned by those desperate to get away from the boy with his hideous power. His skin had turned pale and the cold sore at the corner of his mouth stood out in purple relief. "When I want something you better give it to me!" he screamed. "Anything I ask for!"

The door banged open and shut in the wind. The rainmaker's hat tipped over and bills blew across the floor. From his place near the aisle, Boone noticed Anderton gathering the courage to run. His eyes shifted from the rainmaker to the open door and back again.

Boone screamed at him mentally to stay put, but Anderton bounced on the balls of his feet, then sprang for the exit. It was a short-lived attempt that saw him nearly fall with his first steps. He regained his footing, but didn't make it past the door. Another bolt of lightning struck Anderton in the chest. The mayor was driven back through the air, landing in the aisle and sliding bonelessly towards the pulpit.



Before the mayor's body came to rest at the rainmaker's feet, Boone was running for the door. The rainmaker screamed again and Boone threw himself to the side as the bolt of lightning passed over him like a heavy, living thing. He scrambled up, feet slipping in the mud; he would have been struck if the door, seemingly under its own direction, had not slammed shut.

The lightning struck an overflowing barrel, blowing it to pieces with a hiss of vaporized water. Then Boone was on his feet, running through the storm. He sobbed as he ran and his tears mixed with the rain, as he disappeared into the growing storm.

Sometime later, Engle's half-bright farmhand Hawkins brought Marianne Telford back. He held her out like a doll, with one big hand clamped on either arm. The church's door was bolted shut now and he knocked with his foot for admittance. He was let in by a man whose hands shook badly.

Hawkins couldn't understand why. He was a little scared, sure, but mostly happy that God had finally come into their midst as Reverend Boone always said He would. Hawkins didn't know why everyone was so afraid. He didn't understand why some of the women had taken their clothes off, either, and felt a heady mixture of shame and lust at the sight of their uncovered bodies. Hawkins wanted to look away but couldn't, and so contented himself with sneaking glances and hoped that God didn't catch him peeping.

Far away from the church that was no longer his, Reverend Boone huddled in a pigsty. He had stuffed the holes in the roof with plugs of moss. They swelled and kept the water out, but did little for the cold. As night brought a final layer of blackness and the rain continued unabated, he nursed his faith.

Boone had always believed that for every demon, there was an angel; now he wasn't so sure. There were rainmakers, certainly, but he'd never heard of one to part the clouds and call down the sun to dry the earth and warm the skin. He wondered if even God's eye could pierce the clouds to find his creation gone awry.

As Boone sheltered in the sty with rain beating against the roof and the cold stiffening his body, he thought of what he'd seen. He no longer thought of the single drop of rain falling into Aaron's hand, but of lightning. Long, jagged fingers of lightning reaching down for Telford and Anderton, touching them and sending electricity surging through their bodies.

Boone thought of the boy who had claimed the town and everything under the storm clouds as his own. He wondered if the rainmaker would dare use his lightning with a conduit formed by Boone's hands around his throat; all the rain, hail, and thunder the clouds had to offer would only make him squeeze tighter.

As he stepped out and the rain began its ceaseless beat against his head, Boone thought of clouds breaking apart into wisps and tattered scraps, and the feel of the merciless summer sun on his skin.

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Don Webb is currently retired and lives in Guelph, Ontario. He has had a career as a professor of French language and literature, mostly at California State University, Sacramento. During that time he also worked for the U.S. government for ten years as a translator of French and Italian. Don is the translator of *Bewildering Stories'* flagship work, an annotated modern-English version of Cyrano de Bergerac's early science fiction novel *The Other World*.

Don's role as Managing Editor of *Bewildering Stories* keeps him very busy, and yet he sometimes manages to come up with little seasonal stories like the following. On the surface, "Taking Notice" tells of the perils and adventure of time travel as a method of historical research. Closer attention will show that it is mainly about something else, something that goes a long way toward explaining the purpose of *Bewildering Stories*.

### **Taking Notice**

by Don Webb

#### 1. Matthew's report

To: Department Evaluation Committee  
Subject: Methods of Historical Field Work, annual report

The students in the Methods of Historical Field Work seminar have performed exemplarily in the application of skills acquired... Oh, let's skip the jargon; nobody trusts prose that deliberately puts you to sleep. We're all too old for that.

Speaking of which, everybody is tired at the end of a semester, students and faculty alike. And any course can be dull. I'll be the first to say I'm not a natural showboat, and as you know I've never liked the idea of treating a class as an exercise in stage performance. If it's all about the instructor, where do the students fit in? But this semester has not been dull at all.

In lieu of a written report, I'll submit a recording I made of the last class. It was done with the students' unanimous consent, of course. And it took place at my home; the University doesn't allow wine-soaked celebrations in classrooms. I'll sum it up in a few words: the students know their stuff, and they're the most intellectually inquisitive group I've ever encountered. Let's let them speak for themselves.

\* \* \*

The recording opens to show a small but comfortable living room. Twelve students are sitting in a kind of circle on chairs or overstuffed pillows. The professor has reserved two chairs for himself and his wife. She hands him the first bottle of wine.

"Thanks, Hon. Corkscrew?" He takes it and proceeds to open the bottle. "I think we all deserve a treat. It's been a long haul, and your individual projects have been excellent so far. I've invited my

wife to sit in on these last three. Her specialty is ancient languages and literatures.” He turns to her. “I’m sure you’ll be interested. Right?”

“To quote a forgotten ancient saying,” she replies with an ironic smile, “bring ’em on.”

The professor chuckles and continues. “Tonight we won’t take the reports in chronological order. I think you’ll see why.

“Matthew, you went back to the Stone Age to view the construction of Stonehenge. You all know the drill: means, motive, and opportunity. Everybody feel free to ask questions as we go.”

Matthew leans forward in his chair, a move everyone knows by now shows his enthusiasm. “Okay; first, means. How do you time-travel to an ancient society without getting noticed? Without causing a serious divergence in the timeline and getting trapped in it? We wouldn’t be able to return and enjoy our professor’s hospitality.”

The students unanimously raise their glasses of wine and salute the professor and his wife.

Someone already has a question: “You seem to’ve gotten away with it, Matt. What’s your technique?”

“Mainly spy in the sky technology. I seeded video drones over the Salisbury Plain beginning in the mid-30th century B.C. at intervals of a hundred years till the mid-17th century.”

“That’s an efficient use of energy,” says John, “but wow, talk about an equipment blitz. Wasn’t it expensive?”

“I didn’t need many drones,” Matthew replies. “All of them were reused many times, and almost all of them were recovered. And you used some of them in your own projects.”

“Which Stonehenge did you concentrate on?” asks the professor. “It started small and finished big. And as you say, that was over a very long span of time.”

“Right. Everybody wants to know how the big stones — the Sarsen stones — were erected.”

“A masterpiece of Stone Age engineering. Any surprises?”

“None, really. The ancient Britons did not have the wheel, and the stones were too heavy to be carted around on soft ground anyway. The builders used logs as rollers, oxen as draft animals, and wooden cradles and braided-vine ropes to step the stones into place.

“I did have a minor surprise. The Stone Age people were a lot better dressed than most people imagine. No shaggy furs except maybe in winter. They were excellent tailors and seamstresses. Some other Stone Age peoples even had what amounted to a sophisticated textile industry.”

Bertholomew interrupts. “How did they raise the crosspieces? I’ve never been able to imagine how they could do that.”

“That was the hardest job,” says Matthew. He turns on a hologram projector, which displays the construction site and workers busy carving stones and building earthworks. “At first I thought the lintel stones might have been put in place first and raised along with the rest somehow, but that didn’t make any sense, because they overlap the uprights.

“No, as you see in the projection, the builders did it the hard way. They used earthen ramps and levered the lintels into place. That construction team would have fit right in with the work force that built the Egyptian pyramids.”

“Okay, why did you undertake this project?”

Matthew leans back in his chair. “I wanted to find out why Stonehenge was built.”

“And?”

Matthew fidgets uncomfortably. “The best bet is the old theory of an agricultural fertility religion incorporating the Sun and the Earth. And the site was chosen for a peculiar landform that tracks midsummer sunrise over a few hundred meters. It was more visible then than it is now.”

“Okay, opportunity. How did you fit in among the ancient Britons without getting noticed?”

“I didn’t,” Matthew confesses. “The Britons were like the Egyptians: they needed a large and skilled work force but not a huge one. Everybody knew everybody else, even if they weren’t all locals. And I still don’t know the language.”

That is the professor’s wife’s specialty. “I’ve listened to your recordings. It may be related to Basque, but we can’t be sure yet.”

Matthew smiles ruefully. “I skulked about at night, planting recorders. That was a scary job: I nearly got caught several times. And the recordings haven’t helped as much as I hoped. Someone will eventually have to go in as a foreigner and learn the language on the ground. I’ll consider that for a post-doc project.”

“What will you do with what you learn?” asks the professor’s wife.

“I’m not very interested in what the adults say to each other.”

Matthew’s assertion causes a stir of surprise among the students. One of them asks, “What about the social and political structures? People have to be well organized to build on such a scale, even if they do take a long time.”

Matthew nods. “True. But adults will omit what’s common knowledge for them. I want to know what the parents tell their children. If Stonehenge was a kind of Neolithic cathedral, the stories that were passed down from one generation to another will explain their motives, and the rest will fall into place.”

“You’re right about that,” the professor’s wife responds, “but you’ll still have to do a lot of interpreting. The ancients’ vocabulary was almost certainly small. They may not even have a word for ‘religion’; ours is derived from one that originally meant ‘to bind together.’”

“That’s a good thing to keep in mind, Matt,” the professor adds. “We translate from one language to another, and then we interpret within our own language. We’d love to know those stories from prehistory, but we’ll need to know what they meant, how they were understood. Did those people even have a concept of oral literature, let alone symbolism?”

Matthew knows his anthropology: “I expect they believed they were practicing magic, literally helping the Sun mate with the Earth to ensure a good harvest. But how can we know unless they tell us what they were thinking?”

The professor nods in agreement. He adds, “You might have been able to mingle with the population somehow without being marooned in their timeline. But you’d have been taking a big risk. As it is, you’ve provided a model of caution by knowing your limitations and working within them.”

“But I don’t feel we know much more now than we did before,” sighs Matthew.

“It takes a professional to admit that,” says the professor. “But you’ve pointed out exactly what we need to know and how we might learn it. Good job.”

The class applauds. “Glad you didn’t get caught out in the dark, Matt,” says one.

“Be careful when you go back, okay?” says another. “And bring back a Stone-Age wardrobe for us.”

Matthew smiles gratefully.

## 2. Mary’s report

“Now,” the professor continues, “tell us about your project, Mary.”

“I’ll take you from the monumental to the faintly ridiculous,” Mary says. “I wanted to solve a literary puzzle that has hung over medieval scholarship for centuries: the meaning of AOI.”

“The meaning of *what?!*” asks Andrew, incredulously.

“I’m so glad you ask.” Mary feigns a disingenuous smile. “AOI appears frequently in the earliest copy of the *Song of Roland*. We didn’t know what it meant. We didn’t even know if it was a word.”

“By ‘didn’t’ I suspect you mean you’ve found out,” says Andrew.

“I think so,” responds Mary confidently. “Look.” She starts her own hologram projection, and the class finds itself virtually surrounded by a large crowd in front of a wooden stage.

“This is the equivalent of a county fair. Summertime in the province of Champagne; twelfth century. The capital, Troyes, is a hub on north-south and east-west trade routes. I had no trouble blending in with the crowd; it was full of people from all over northern Europe.”

The hologram shows six performers on the stage. One of them steps to the front, takes a manuscript from a pouch, unfolds it, and begins to recite in a loud voice that reaches to the back of the crowd:

*Charles li reis, nostre emperedre magnes,  
Set anz toz pleins ad estét en Espagne...*

Mary translates: “‘King Charlemagne, our great emperor, has been in Spain for seven long years...’ That’s a *jongleur* reciting the poem. Notice what the others are doing.”

She continues to translate along with the recitation: “No wall or city remains to be breached, except Saragossa, which is on a hill. King Marsile holds it, and he does not love God. He serves Mohammed and swears by Apollo.”

On stage, a *jongleur* has put on a crown with a Christian cross and a fake beard; he has also taken up a scepter and sword. The crowd applauds Charlemagne. Another *jongleur* puts on a crown with a crescent moon and waves a sword of his own. The crowd jeers at Marsile.

“And now hear the last line of the stanza.”

*Ne s’poet garder que mals ne l’i ataignet!*

“‘He can’t escape the harm that will come to him there’. And the last line ends in ‘AOI’. But it’s not said. Watch what happens.”

The actors quickly change the rudimentary stage props to show King Marsile in council. The first reader hands off the script to another, who continues the recitation, scarcely missing a beat.

“There you have it. ‘AOI’ appears to have been an abbreviated stage direction meaning ‘change speakers’.”

“I can see why they’d do that,” Bart remarks. “The readers had to yell if everybody was going to hear them. They’d want to save their voices.”

“And the readers could specialize,” comments Mark, “each reciting for particular sets of characters.”

Thomas has learned always to read footnotes first. “The epic has a signature: *Ci falt la geste que Turolodus declinet*. Nobody has known what that line means. Was Turolodus the author or a copyist?”

“There’s no way I can find out without getting noticed,” answers Mary. “I’d have to ask too many questions and go poking around among the likely candidates in recorded history. For what it’s worth, my guess is he’s the author. But what would we gain if we did find out who he was?”

“And what about the literary tradition?” asks the professor.

“Roland and his companion Oliver were well-known names. We’ve been able to confirm that from manuscripts I’ve photocopied. Like Matt, I’ve done some skulking around of my own, but that’s another story. As for the oral tradition, well, we’ll just have to do as Matt says: go back and do a lot of listening.”

“What about the battles?” asked Andrew.

“The ninth-century Basque ambush of Charlemagne’s rear guard? I’ll pass that one up, thank you very much,” replies Mary, with a grin. “But this is a twelfth-century audience” — she gestures at the stilled hologram projection — “and they don’t know about it. All they care about is Roland and Charlemagne fighting Saracens. What we see here is Crusader propaganda in action.”

The professor looks surprised. “And you mingled in the crowd and recorded the entire week-long performance without getting noticed? That was very brave of you, Mary. I’m glad you made it home.”

“I wasn’t worried,” Mary answers. “The bigger the crowd and the more inconspicuous you are, the better your chances. I felt pretty safe.”

“Thank you, Mary,” the professor says. “You’ve done a lot more than clarify an obscure term in an old language. You’ve brought a national epic to life by recording a public performance. And it makes the audience’s response very clear. You and Matt have both illustrated a very important function of history: discovering the meaning of the stories that people live by. Good job.”

The class applauds.

### 3. Jed's report

“Our last report for the evening is Jed’s. I’ll say up front that I worked with him on it, because it’s in my specialty. Jed?”

Jed stands up from the cushion on which he’s been seated. “Glad it’s my turn; my legs were getting cramped. Been doing a lot of walking lately.” He grins at the professor.

“I went back to first-century Palestine — or Israel, whichever. I took my lead from the professor’s investigation of Jesus’ anointment at the home of Simon, in Bethany. It was the demonstration that began the semester.

“As you may recall, the professor diplomatically put a stop to a little squabble about it between Pete and myself.” Jed looks at Peter, who stares back at him stonily with his arms folded across his chest.

But Peter replies, “I’ve heard it said that anyone who specializes in first-century history has an axe to grind. No offense intended, professor, but how do you feel about it?”

The professor answers with a wry smile: “Maybe so. The fact is that anyone who *lived* in the first century had an axe to grind. The Near East especially was a seething cauldron — which it’s always been. Even claiming to be a Jew was just a conversation-starter. The Sadducees and Pharisees were trying to herd cats. And we all know the Romans were never in a mood to put up with local quarrels on their borders. Jed?”

Jed picks up the thread: “Right. Of course I went to investigate a problem of fact in the gospels. I’m going to start with a little guessing game for you. I want to know what *you* think would be a good topic. I’ll tell you why I did or didn’t choose it.”

Mary is the first to speak. “Let’s take it from the top. The Nativity?”

Jed shrugs. “Not a chance. One thing you have to hand to the gospel authors: for their time they were literary geniuses. The Nativity is an old-time Hollywood boffo technicolor extravaganza.”

“Boffo?” Philip queries. “I haven’t heard that word.”

“Big box office,” Jed explains. “It’s easy to dramatize and colorful to stage. And it’s guaranteed to grab an audience right at the start.”

Philip presses on: “Okay, it’s a powerful literary ‘hook’, but why go to the trouble?”

“The social context. Who are the secondary characters? Angels, the three kings, and who else? Shepherds. They’re either foreigners or the equivalent of garage mechanics and agricultural workers — the working man. The message is radical equality. It dramatizes in concrete terms what we’d say with a few dull abstractions.”

Peter takes more interest than before. “I think I see where you’re heading. I can think of another scenario you might have chosen: the rich man who has as much chance of getting into the Kingdom of God as a camel does in passing through a needle’s eye. What do you think of that?”

Jed senses a provocation but after a second’s hesitation lets it pass. “You’re right; I think it was an actual event with a real person. But the gospels are clear about one thing: place. Terms like ‘Simon of Bethany’ amount to name, street address and postal code for all practical purposes. But they’re hazy when it comes to time. How could anyone find this incident by anything but brute-force searching? The time and effort required would be prohibitive.

“The story of the rich man has no setting in time or place. It’s obviously archetypal. It applies to anyone of means who wonders ‘Is crass materialism what life is all about? Is that *it*? What’s the point?’

“And you know the meaning of the ‘needle’s eye’. It was a passageway solely for pedestrians. It was normally located next to the main city gate, which was intended for caravans. Today we might say it’s as easy for a rich man to get into the Kingdom of God as for a truck to go up an escalator. Possessions have their place, but only people can get into the Kingdom of God. Today we might say ‘You can’t take it with you’, but it doesn’t mean exactly the same thing.”

Bart throws out another option. “What about the Sermon on the Mount?”

Jed sighs. “Again, when and where? And what would be the point? I think it’s what old-time politicians called a ‘stump speech’, where a political candidate would stand on a tree stump and make his pitch. And he’d do it frequently in many localities. A tree stump becomes a mountain because the country is semi-arid and the speech is so important.”

John speaks up: “How about one of the miracles, such as the raising of Lazarus?”

“A question more of time than place,” Jed answers. “But it’s still hard to find. And I would not be interested anyway.”

That causes a stir in the class. “Why not?”

Jed explains: “Little or no distinction was made between religion and politics in Antiquity. Jesus trained his disciples as ‘advance men’ and gave them marching orders to put his program in action. Heal the sick, check; cleanse lepers, check; cast out devils, check; raise the dead, che... Say what? Raising the dead is an item on a checklist? It’s *routine*?”

Bart muses: “Now that you mention it, there are several occurrences...”

Jed: “Those men were telling people it was no sin if they were ill or if a relative had died. Take away superstition, scapegoating, and blaming victims: what remains? The essential. Rules are made for people, not the people for the rules.”

“How about the garden of Gesthemane?”

“Written by an eyewitness who’s absent even in his own account. I’m sure something of the sort happened at some time, somewhere. But I wouldn’t bother to look for it.”

The class is becoming more and more perplexed. “Why not?” And: “Yeah, why not?” a couple of students ask at almost the same time.

Jed is ready. “I’ll put it bluntly: it’s a dramatization. The setting implies that the disciples were complacent. But the most important thing is Jesus’ state of mind. The story heads off any charge that the Crucifixion was desired, that it was a form of suicide.

“Okay, I’ll cut this short. I wanted to see the Resurrection.”

“Any surprises?” Peter again.

“No. Or yes. Anything at all would be a surprise. The professor and I could not find a tomb. I’m inclined to agree with the conjecture that there was none. But we did locate the disciples’ safe house. And here’s what I found.”

A hologram opens. The students find themselves observing a room with one window. It is daylight. A man is standing beside the window, evidently as a



lookout. The men sitting in the room are obviously dejected. One of them says in effect, “You say he lives? I don’t believe it. He’s gone. It’s all over now.”

“That’s Thomas,” says someone in the class.

A woman is visibly angry. “You were there. You saw the nails in his wrists and the spear in his side. That could have been *you* up there. You knew what he was doing all along, and you helped do it. That ‘INRI’ headpiece was the Romans’ idea of a joke. And you’re going to swallow it and say it’s all over? The Romans have won? That’s what *I* can’t believe.”

The man slowly looks up at her. “You’re right,” he says. “We’ve not finished.” He stands up. “We’ve just begun.”

The hologram ends.

“Speaking for my namesake,” says Thomas, “those people are saying what they think, but it’s not the written record.”

“It’s the same thing in different words,” replies the professor’s wife. “The gospel authors had to interpret the events in language their audiences would understand, and at the same time they had to emphasize the importance of those events.

“Today we might say that mysticism and the supernatural are a form of rhetorical emphasis or a kind of abstraction marker. But ‘abstract’ originally meant ‘to pull out’ or ‘to pull away’. Those people didn’t stand away; they thought in concrete terms, not in abstractions. They’d say ‘This is very real to us, and this is how I show what it means’.”

The professor nods in agreement. “The *Gospel of Peter* is almost grotesque in its use of the supernatural. And it really doesn’t matter whether the ‘G-Pete’ fragments were an early draft or a later one that was abandoned; the early writers knew they needed what we call ‘special effects’. But they must have also realized that action carried the meaning. They’d weaken the story if they resorted to overemphasis and over-embellishment.”

Matthew sees a connection: “The Sarsen stones are big for that very reason. But they’re all regular in size and shape. They’re not big just to be big, they have both function and style.”

Bart is ready with a quip: “Now I *really* want a Stone Age suit of clothes!”

As the laughter subsides, the professor’s wife asks her husband, “How many students have you lost over the years?”

The professor knows she knows how many and who they were. She is reminding him it is time to end. He turns to the class: “Twelve. An average of one every year or two. Somewhere, somehow they got noticed and changed history. Now they live in alternate timelines. I miss them all.

“You have been lucky. You’ve found out for yourselves that time travel is as dangerous as any military or espionage mission. And now you’re going to be the ‘special-ops’ forces of historical research. Remember: ‘Don’t get noticed’.”

Jed adds, “And if you do get noticed, make it count.”

Peter goes over to Jed, claps him on the shoulder and shakes his hand.

The stories have all been told. Having drunk a final toast, the students go out: some, to the past they share; some eventually to futures of their own.

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[Ed. note: “Don’t Get Noticed” can be found in *Bewildering Stories* issue 76.]

After retiring from writing code for computers, Julie Wornan discovered with surprise that she could also write for more irrational and emotive beings. And what fun it is! She likes to write flash fiction because small is beautiful. A native New Yorker, She lives in France where she divides her time between wonderful Paris and windy Montmélimar, in the Drome *departement*. Julie also likes to photograph reflections and make photo compositions: you can see her work at [www.flickr.com/photos/julieeiluj/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/julieeiluj/). She is also a co-founder of a French association that tries to save the wild cheetah from extinction (a real, not fictitious, possibility, alas). She has a husband, two daughters and two grandchildren; and a sweet purry tortoise-shell cat has her.

## **The Dead Are Easy to Keep**

by Julie Wornan

I first noticed them at midday. They were three black specks far out on the white plain that descends slowly from the mountain. By evening they had come much closer and had human shapes. One was tall; the second, more rounded; the third, very small.

They approached slowly, struggling against the violent wind, stopping often to protect their faces or pull their ragged garments more closely about them. Then the deepening twilight hid them from view.

I left the field and returned to the house, took my usual supper of bread with boiled water and lay down for the night. The season was not yet so cold that it was impossible to sleep without a fire. Tired from work, I fell asleep soon. The star Fevral had already risen high above the horizon when I was awakened by their knocking.

I knew them each at once by touch: the tall one, the round one and the little one. Their hands and faces were cold. The tall one spoke, but the sound of his words was strange to me. I brought them to the bed and had them lie down. By good chance I had laid many dry sticks by in case the season should suddenly turn colder; I made a large fire.

By the firelight I saw their faces. The tall one looked rough and worn, either by work or hunger or years; his beard was ragged; his eyes wandered a little but their look was clear and like that of a child; his hands were large and strong.

The round one was a woman. She was dark and silent. The little one huddled close to her side: a girl child, dark also, thin-faced, with huge fearful eyes. They made no answer to the words I spoke. The old one, however, lowered his eyes and extended his arms toward me, palms upward; then I recovered my wits and hastened to fetch some bread.

They ate eagerly, and also drank the tea I brewed for them from a dried herb. They did not say the words one must address to Amaya before tasting bread.

After they had eaten and drunk, the old man again uttered some strange syllables. I did not know whether he intended these for me or for a god, so I said simply that he and his family were welcome to my house and all in it for as long as I would be granted the joy of their visit. Then I motioned them to sleep. There was no more room on the bed, so I lay down on the floor.

I thought about them for a long time before sleep overtook me again. They did not seem to know the goddess Amaya, nor did they speak the tongue that Hohar has given us; therefore, they

must have come from afar. What might have driven them from their land? Had they, perhaps through some oversight, lost favor in the eyes of their gods? Or was it possible — dared I hope — that Amaya had heard my prayer?

For the gods of my country are hard gods. Far into the season of awakening, Hohar sends cold blasts to wither the frail green shoots that Juva brings forth. He broods, ill-tempered, behind his mountain throughout the short growing season; and the eager grains are not yet ripe, nor the last snow gone from the plains, before he again begins to storm and rage.

And when Amaya has brought the meagre harvest, the most difficult season of all begins: the season of snow and waiting. At this time there is little work to take one's mind off the hunger. Yet, when violent white nights break upon days so luminous and still, the very hours seem turned to ice and hunger is not the sharpest pain. On such days as these I have fasted and sacrificed and prayed that the gods might send me a companion.

I dared to hope that Amaya, the Giver, the goddess of the harvest, had at last answered my prayer.

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In the next days I learned their names: Mar, Rayu and Izimar; and also something of their language. I soon abandoned all effort to teach them my own tongue, seeing that they found it difficult. But I tried to impress upon them the names of the gods of my land, and the words which must be spoken to each upon awakening, when lying down and before taking bread. I did not want the gods to be displeased with them and do them harm.

Yet I could never make them understand the importance of this. Only little Izimar cared to learn some of the words, and she would chant them after her own fashion as she went about her play, sometimes seeming to address the fireplace or sticks or the empty air, but never speaking the words at the proper time. Still, she was so pretty and so young that I believed the gods would look upon her kindly, and maybe even count her awkward prayers as the due respect offered by the family as a whole.

If only I had spent more time with them during those first days! We might have come to understand each other. But there was still so much work to do in the fields before the first heavy snows.

I showed the woman, Rayu, on which shelf the bread was kept and how much was to be counted as a day's portion; also the box containing dried herbs. I use these only in times of illness, since I must travel for five days in order to pick them; but I understood my guests' need for nourishment after their wandering, and did not begrudge them the food.

At first Rayu was shy and reluctant, but after I had made her understand that it was my wish, she cut the bread and distributed it as I showed her, and also prepared the drink. After this, I went out into the fields. I went out early each day and returned at twilight.

The first evening I returned to find them well rested, but so quiet that it pained me not to know any words of comfort in their own language. By the second evening they seemed more at ease. By the third evening, Mar and I were able to exchange words of greeting, and little Izimar no longer ran to hide behind Rayu's skirts at my approach.

The third evening, also, they had washed themselves, and their garments as well, drying them by the fire; I was glad to find my guests so clean and radiant, only a little sorry that they had used all of my water, so that I had to walk to the lake to break ice and fetch more water in the early night cold if I did not want to go without drink that night and the next morning.

From the second evening I had tried to ask Mar and Rayu how they had occupied themselves during the day, and whether time did not press heavily upon them. I had thought that I would bring Mar to the fields with me as soon as he was rested, and show him how to help me break the earth and plant the last seeds. There would be few days left now when this work was still possible.

Most years, the harvest was scarcely sufficient for myself alone. Yet I was reluctant to ask him to work until he should offer it of himself, for I did not know the state of his health and would not have him work beyond his strength.

Neither did I ask Rayu to help me. Knowing nothing of their customs, I thought perhaps it might shame them both if the woman worked while the man idled at home. I believed that they would offer help when they could. They were my guests and my companions.

In time, I learned enough of their language to speak with them easily of such things as food and drink, warmth and cold. But there were matters about which I never could make myself understood. They seemed to have no words for those things we cannot see: the universe, the gods. This was a space between us — to my sorrow.

On the fourth day I had to return at midday for extra padding for my boots, the season having suddenly turned colder. I found Mar and Rayu engaged in some kind of ceremony, moving small pieces of wood from part to part of a design they had traced upon the floor.

I was alarmed: the gods of my country are jealous gods. Once I had fashioned a new goddess and had made a ceremony for her; that winter the snows came so early and lasted so long that I very nearly succumbed to hunger. Such is the wrath of our gods.

Therefore I threw the wooden objects into the fire and effaced the design. Mar said nothing, but his eyes looked sad; the woman rose up with a cry. I would willingly have stayed home as many hours as necessary to find the words to explain the cause of my action, had I not feared the hunger to come. Therefore, I fetched what I needed and returned to the field. Late that night I prayed to Hohar, Amaya and Juva, assuring them that no strange god had been honored in my house.

On the sixth day, the snow came down heavily. A handwidth of snow covered the ground in the morning and it continued falling all day. In my zeal to work the last possible bit of ground, I had neglected to gather enough firewood for the winter; now I set out quickly for the woods, and before midday had brought home several heavy bundles.

But the snow was piling thickly and the wind rose, driving heavy flakes under the darkening sky. At last I saw that I must turn homeward with my last bundle. Yet I paused again and again to take a few more sticks. When I finally turned toward home, darkness was coming and the snowdrifts were high. I had overestimated my strength.

In instructing Rayu how to apportion the bread, I had counted two days' portions as one day's for the four of us, and now I felt the lack of nourishment. Nevertheless I succeeded in returning home with the wood.

I asked Rayu for bread and tea. She gave me bread and water; then she turned her back and stood looking at the fire. I went to the box: the herbs were gone. I ate my supper. Then, to show I was not angry, I began to sing a song. I sang, "Jinjab, the sower of bad dreams, got caught in a cloud and had no harvest." It was a song I made up a long time ago and it sounds very clever in my language, only of course they could not understand it. But I made funny faces as I sang, and soon little Izimar began to laugh; then Mar laughed and even Rayu smiled and we were all very merry.

Then Mar sang a song, and he took out a little pipe from his pocket and played a tune on it and Izimar danced shyly in a corner, more gracefully than a goddess. Then, as I knew there would be no more days of work that season, I fetched the Promise Berries and distributed them, tossing one out the door first for old Hohar to chew: moist, fat fruit, the first gift of Amaya the Giver, to be tasted once when fresh and then dried and kept carefully and tasted again on this day to remember the promise of spring. I gave the largest share to Izimar, and the look on her face was sweeter than the taste of the fruit.

After this, old Mar sang many songs. The first were merry, but as he went on, they became soft and sad. Rayu sat quietly looking into the fire. Little Izimar climbed onto her lap and was soon sound asleep.

Then Mar motioned me close to him and began to talk. I tried hard to make out the sense of his words. He drew images on the floor with a charred stick. He drew several tall beings with horns upon their heads, and I thought that perhaps he wanted to tell me a legend about his gods.

This made me think of the beautiful story of Hohar's descent from a wandering star, and I began to relate it; but he would not listen, he only talked more rapidly, his eyes grew moist, and at length Rayu prevailed upon him to cease talking and lie down to sleep.

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And now we were in the white days. At times the wind whipped and lashed about the house day and night, and the vengeful sky seemed to bend down to throttle the very earth. Then suddenly the winds would stop and the world would be clasped in an icy silence.

Mar wandered about the house, sometimes playing upon his pipe or singing his beautiful sad songs which, although referring to a distant land I never would know, still seemed to speak of my land also: of the work in the fields, of the snow, of the promise of spring growing even now under the snow.

Indeed, all the things I knew and loved or feared deepened in meaning as I heard Mar's song. Then again, he would grow silent. Often he would look at me as though he would speak, but found no words to bridge the space between us.

Rayu seldom spoke. Sometimes she seemed to reprimand Izimar, who seemed afraid of her and tried to appease her as best she could. As for myself, the edge of time was less sharp when I tended to the gods and their ceremonies. I tried for a while to instruct Mar and Rayu about these ceremonies so that they might ease their hearts and receive a blessing. But my attempts made Izimar laugh and Mar and Rayu smile — he kindly, she with a hard mouth. Therefore I did not insist. Oh, had I done so!

We might have continued to live together. Bread for one can be bread for four; the body learns to withstand hardship. I asked little. But why were their minds so closed?

The bread was soon gone. Now we had to subsist on brit, the bitter, coarse grain that can be boiled to make a porridge just fit for eating when the bread is gone. But first it must be well polished. The outer covering, which is sweet and fragrant but must not be eaten, must be entirely removed. So it is commanded. Rayu would not have it so, and insisted on preparing the whole grain. I was able to prevent her from doing this. But something ill had begun between us.

I do not know whom to blame for what happened next. I cannot believe that the gods refused to reveal themselves to Mar and Rayu. Although they can be angry, the gods see into our hearts and do not desire to cause us pain; their greatest wish is to be adored. Nor can I believe that Mar and Rayu lacked the capacity to understand.

Why did they refuse to understand?

The appointed time for the Sacrifice of Midfrost had now arrived. Joyfully I prepared the images of the gods for the ceremony, polishing them and decorating them under the gleeful eyes of little Izimar, who inspired me to new artistic efforts and even contributed some decorations of her own from twigs and scraps.

When the gods were ready, we began to make music for them. Izimar helped by clanging on the water kettle with a stick. Mar pretended that his ears hurt and hid his head under a blanket, whereby Izimar clanged all the louder, and then they both laughed. But Rayu avoided my eyes.

The great sacrifice to all the gods is made in the coldest season. When hunger is our constant companion, we offer a portion of food to the gods. Then we will survive the winter and Juva will come. It must be so with the gods of every country. Whoever knows the mysteries of the gods, knows this.

I placed the sacrificial dishes before the images of the gods and filled them with grain. Then I brought the fire. Izimar's eyes were round as she watched me. Mar's eyes were stone gray. Rayu's eyes were black.

Then suddenly Rayu was between me and the gods. She snatched the burning stick from my hand and flung it back into the fire. She spat in Hohar's face. Then she stood before me, taut and vibrant. Rarely do I act without thought, but I did now. I struck Rayu hard on her face.

Mar rushed to the woman's side. Izimar cringed. I fell on my knees and begged their forgiveness, but it was too late. Mar, stoney-eyed, seemed not to see me; they all seemed not to see me; slowly, Mar approached the gods, then flung them upon the floor with a blow. Amaya's head rolled. Rayu laughed wildly.

Then they gathered up the grain I had offered to the gods and began to prepare it for eating. They prepared it without first polishing the grains. They sat close together near the fire watching the porridge boil. I sat on the floor with my face in my hands.

I do not know how many hours or days I remained there. Nor do I recall my thoughts very clearly at that time. I thought of Izimar's sweet face, I thought of Mar's songs, I thought of Amaya's head rolling on the ground, I thought of the wind outside, I thought of the snow. Then Izimar's hair seemed to be porridge of unpolished brit and I, dazed by hunger, was eating it. Then I awoke and saw I was alone. I think it was the ceasing of the wind that woke me.

I do not know what made them leave the house. Perhaps they went to look for firewood. The firewood was low. They were not familiar with our winters. What made them take the child along?

Perhaps they were afraid to leave her with me — as though I would harm her! When I climbed to the roof I could see their three forms lying dark upon the snow.

They were heavy, but I brought them back to the house one by one. I began to loosen their clothes and rub their wrists with snow. I saw that they would revive if I rubbed them. Little Izimar's face was so beautiful. How she had cringed when I struck Rayu! Rayu, in her stillness, looked like a goddess. Mar's face was noble as the god Hohar. Rayu murmured a little as though she would wake.

I do not remember what I was thinking. I remember thinking that I must polish the grain. I do not remember what I thought when I set them out in the snow again.

I raised the wooden gods from the floor and put them back in their place. I made a new nose for Amaya's head. I shaped it carefully. Then I polished the grains of brit and made the sacrifice, and I continued polishing grains until dawn.

When it was dawn, I went out to see to my guests. They lay still upon the snow. I carried them one by one to the plain where it slopes away toward the mountain. I drove three poles into the ground and I fastened them upright to the poles.

I bring them their portion of food each day. I sing new songs which I have invented for them. They like the songs. I thank the gods for sending me dear Mar, quiet dark Rayu and pretty Izimar. Soon Juva's season will come, and my companions will rejoice with me. I am happy that I am no longer alone.

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