

# EXTINCT



**Doesn't Mean  
Forever**

Edited by Phoenix Sullivan

# Extinct

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**Dare To Dream Press**

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## **TODAY**

*Echoes of yesterday touch the lives of ordinary people in extraordinary ways in these provocative mainstream stories*

*Jase was her ghost in the machine — a shaded memory captured in synthesized pixels. The ghost of her past — near enough to see, too distant to touch. But could they still, somehow, connect?*

## **LAST SEEN**

by Amanda le Bas de Plumetot

The last thylacine was seen on YouTube. You find her between film clips of ghosts and a movie you uploaded a couple of years ago. You and Jase that summer. He turns toward the camera and grins at you. The sun is on him and he is ripe fruit. Peach. Mango. Perfectly preserved.

Half dog, half kangaroo, the last thylacine paws at the bars of her enclosure: playful, happy. Ears forward, she rushes along the side of her cage, chasing something the zookeeper is holding; she sits back on her haunches, her long hind feet flat on the ground.

The camera bites pieces of light from the thylacine. Your computer processes it, your screen converts it. Pixels shade her through variations beyond black or white, on or off, there or not there; she's been trapped by silver, caught in greyscale limbo.

You read that the IBM computer, Roadrunner, can sustain a petaFLOP of calculations in a second. The words are meaningless, made up. Does FLOP stand for something special? It sounds to you like the way you feel most days.

The nights are too long and empty. You google Jase and discover 387 hits. You're not sure if that's many for someone who wasn't really anyone. You follow each link and find him tagged on Facebook, mentioned in blogs, standing on that beach with you. You and him, there on the screen for everyone in the world to see. You wish they would. You are wearing a bikini and smiling at the camera. He's beside you, tall and golden, his hand reaching round behind you, resting,

where you loved to feel it, on the back of your neck. He is smiling at you. You will always remember the way you could see forever in his face, in that gaze.

When you look at those pictures now, you know the eternity of that moment is simply a construct of light and shadow.

The last thylacine died in the Hobart Zoo. Locked in a cage, she stared out through the lattice of wire to the distant warmth of the keeper's house. Alone all the long nights, she paced, fretful, the unfamiliar sound of her nails clicking on cement. She was surrounded by the stink of bears, the roar of lions, the shit-hurling culture of monkeys, the press and flow of humans. The last thylacine was imprisoned between concrete floor and iron bars without even a kennel's shelter.

There was thunder the night she died, and rain. A springtime cold snap that followed days of merciless heat. Above the thylacine's cage was a deciduous tree, still bare of leaves. She called through the night, her high-pitched *yip yip yip* torn away by the wind. You've heard that hypothermia causes the victim to feel paradoxically warm and you wonder if that's what the thylacine felt as she died. You hope so. You hope she had a dying dream of forest and treefern, of other thylacines. Because the last thylacine's final vision was strobe-lit by lightning: black and white. Vertical bars. Alone.

At least you were there with Jase at the end. You held his hand and tried not to cry. It was wrong, the way you could feel his bones. He'd faded to shadows, black, grey, silver. He had no density, no weight. Even as you gripped his hand and tried to keep him with you, you could feel him fading. Black, grey, silver, gone.

Ghosts stare out from mirrors all over the Internet.

You read about thylacines on a cryptozoology website. A link leads you on to a website about the magical properties of silver. It takes a silver bullet to kill a werewolf; a silver crucifix will burn a vampire. Mirrors capture souls, trap them between glass and silver. You've heard there are cultures where they believe the camera steals their souls. Light carries the image, focuses it through glass and lens to be captured on a plate of silver nitrates. A moment of soul. You wonder if digital cameras have the same power, and then you learn that the circuits in them are made from silver.

Every website is a combination of picture, opinion and fact. The trouble is, you can't figure out which is which.

Ghosts are the spirits of the deceased.

Ghosts are an expression of psychic energy created by intense emotions.

Ghosts are beings from another plane of existence.

Ghosts are the symptom of a mental disorder.



Ghosts are old myths designed to scare children.

Ghosts are a means by which unethical predators can extract a living from gullible individuals.

Calculation speeds increase exponentially. ExaFLOP computers arrive: reconstruct the human genome; broker peace in Africa, the Middle East, between India and Pakistan; solve the energy crisis. You make tea in your kitchen and wonder about the use of this. Wouldn't it have been better if those wars had never started in the first place? Your personal set of genes remains unconsidered.

You believe that the theories and explanations for the causes of cancer are as authentic as ghost pictures. Somewhere in the world there's a doctor whose theory of cancer is the right one, but nobody knows whose. This means that somewhere on the Internet there's a ghost video that's real; you just can't tell which one it is. Maybe it's the photo where the faces of dead sailors are caught in the wake of their ship; perhaps it's orbs that can only be seen by cameras, caught as they float beside children and dogs and gravestones; or it could be those mysterious images staring from the windows of empty houses.

Cancer is caused by poor diet.

It's the result of living in a polluted environment, an accumulation of toxins.

It's a lack of antioxidants, too much sun, the body's inability to cope with stress.

It all comes down to an unwise choice of genes before birth.

Cancer is a condition of age; everyone who lives long enough is going to get it.

In a second and a half of blurred, unsteady camerawork, an animal moves across a tiny YouTube insert. The caption is *Mystery Creature — Thylacine??* and you wonder if this could be the one. If this could be the one image of a ghost — a real film of a live thylacine in colour -- or if it's yet another theory of cancer. Meditation, a high-fibre diet, sun-screen before leaving the house.

Comments on the YouTube page claim the animal is a lioness, a zebra dog, a wolf — a fake.

Comments on the YouTube page say of course it's a thylacine: they were cloned years ago so the animal wouldn't go totally extinct.

The Internet is a maze but you follow the clues, turning left at every junction. In 1866, a thylacine joey was preserved in a bottle. There's a close-up photo of it, and it makes you think of a newborn puppy, so innocent. Paws tucked under its chin, soft fur around its muzzle and its nose just millimetres from air. Preserved in alcohol instead of formaldehyde, the joey still contains intact DNA and, for a little

while, back just before the turn of the century, it did seem possible that it might be cloned. That every home could have its own newly un-extinct pet running around the backyard.

There are all sorts of theories about thylacines. Four thousand sightings since that last one died in the Hobart Zoo in 1936. *They were brought to the mainland, you read. A colony of them established in Gippsland. There are parts of the mainland where they never became extinct. A pocket of them in South Australia, still surviving.*

You wonder how people can believe such a thing in this day and age. There is no physical evidence of thylacines. No footprints or scat mark their passing; there are no middens of wallaby bones decorated in the scrimshaw of thylacine toothmarks. Nobody has found the remains of a thylacine deceased in the wild, or taken a potshot at one raiding the chookhouse. When every bushwalker, hiker, tourist and adventurer has a digital camera with a zoom lens and a mobile phone with at least a 2-mega-pixel camera, bluetooth and 3G roaming, and a personal page on Twitter and YouTube and Facebook, the thylacine's existence remains a grey area.

ZettaFLOP computers construct themselves, reveal the secrets of the human brain, solve global warming. Their processors are cool and silent. Keyboards have been replaced by a thought-activated interface, the screen has been superseded by the self-actualising unit: 3D visuals, surround sound, haptic response. One of these days you'll upgrade. Your enthusiasm for technology faded when it failed Jase.

You photographed him all the time after the diagnosis. Moments of hope as he endured the treatment. The transience of normality: eating breakfast, resting on the sofa, playing with the dog. You took care to frame each shot, avoiding the bruises on his arms, hiding his new bald patches from view, adjusting light against the pale of his face. You were not stealing his soul, you were preserving it on a 4GB flashcard. It's still inside the camera. You never uploaded those last images.

Videos of ghosts collect in odd corners of the Internet. Orbs drift on unfelt winds, tiny white lights buzz in spirals like the sparkle in his eyes on that summer day. A door opens, a chair moves, a dog watches as curtains are slowly drawn. There is no apparent reason for the behaviour of ghosts. Cold spots and compass deviations have no connection. Ectoplasm has gone out of fashion; there is no residue of ghosts. You sometimes think there is a sensible, natural explanation for hauntings: odd sounds that are really rats in the walls, the ringing doorbell that just needs its battery replaced, faces that are random patterns resolved into lost

loved ones by the yearning mind of the survivor. Haunted houses retain memories of past inhabitants only because the present inhabitants hold them there.

You wish Jase would haunt you. You just want the evidence, to know that something has lasted beyond those final days of morphine nightmare. You know that he would come if he could. You wonder how much of his soul fills the nodes and connections of Internet computers. Thoughts of him pass between you and your new computer and he gazes at you from that summer. You wonder how many ghosts drift in and out of the self-actualising fields in empty rooms. It isn't fair and you know it's stupid, but you are angry at Jase for getting sick. You feel betrayed by his death. Why didn't he stay? You wanted him to stay.

Do thylacines run like dogs or leap with their kangaroo legs? Does the *yip yip yip* of their call echo through quiet cities uncommented on, not because it isn't heard, but because no one actually remembers what a thylacine sounds like?

Awkward, hand-held ghosts inhabit the dark corners of offices, trap themselves in spider webs, knock against the walls. Ambiguous images in light and shade fade from the windows of empty buildings, "Like" stuff on Facebook, place themselves in news updates.

YottaFLOP computers appear spontaneously on every desktop in the world. You look up to find the new machine staring back at you.

Constructed of light and silver, supported by a platform of belief in the fantastic, the thylacine turns from her cellulose railway and steps through the self-actualising field into your room, ears forward and *yip yip yipping* in excitement.

There's a collection of stationery that hasn't been touched for months. The thylacine's foot brushes it as she steps over and out the window. You watch in open-mouthed amazement as her black and taupe stripes blend with the light and shadow of life. There's a stationery avalanche. Unopened letters and bills slide away to reveal your camera, battery now flat, memory card of Jase still there inside it.

Your fingernail digs out the flashcard and flicks it onto the flat of your palm. You offer it to the computer.

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*AMANDA LE BAS DE PLUMETOT is an award-winning writer of poetry and short stories, and also a performance poet. She has been published in books, trains, websites, zines, school readers, collections, magazines and TV commercials. She is a graduate/survivor of Clarion South 2009 and is awestruck by the wonderful*

*people she met there. She lives in Melbourne, Australia. Her kids have moved out, so she and her beloved hubby share the place with lots of pets. She likes cats, robots, movies, camembert and frankie magazine. She gets paid to sell movie tickets. She would like to be more organised when she grows up.*

Website: <http://amandale.net>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/featherfour>

*Michael didn't understand her loss. Even she didn't realize how deep it ran, until a saber-tooth cat helped to heal the past and point her toward a future she didn't know she needed most.*

## **PAST SURVIVORS**

by Sarah Adams

It's odd to think LA might be one of the sacred places of the world. But here, in the dreaming hills that hem in the vast puddle of concrete that is the city, there is no clear past or future, only an eternal present. Pockets of time — past, present and future — overlap and spill into one another in the breathing silence that fills the canyons and valleys.

It was the silence that drew me into the hills. I had hiked miles up a deer run, letting the rhythm of my feet wipe away everything else. Now, I sat in the shade of a sage bush, on a sunset-facing slope, asking the silence to hold me together. I held myself still — still enough almost to stop the blood in my veins. I trained my eyes on the sun, holding down the thought of my own blood trickling into the dusty earth, becoming part of the hills. The mountains breathed all around me. A lizard flashed across my foot. Knees drawn up to my chest, I tried to breathe with the hills, to be still like them.

But a mule deer, flanks lathered in sweat, crashed across the ridge behind me. It landed on the trail, stumbled, and went to its knees. Its eyes rolled white in its head. Froth bubbled at its mouth. As the deer flailed to its feet, a massive cat, too big for a mountain lion, sailed straight over my head. It landed on the deer's back, mouth already clamped on the animal's neck, even as its weight sent them both crashing to the ground. They landed in a heap of flailing hooves and a sickening thump. The deer jerked, blood bubbling from its nostrils, but the cat's impossibly long canines were buried in the deer's jugular. The cat squeezed, holding shut the windpipe until the deer's head hung limp.

Our eyes met across the carcass.

I, still as a sage bush, crouched on the ground with my knees up with my chin, arms wrapped around my shins. The cat, bloody-muzzled, panting, stood with one paw still on the deer's windpipe. Later I would wonder why I felt no fear, not even a dim, intellectual awareness that I should have been afraid. But I felt only the quiet of the hills pressing down around the sharp beat of my own heart.

Massive, angular shoulders tapered back to narrow hips. Dusty brown ripples ran over deeper golden shades, almost a broken tabby pattern, darker over the head and shoulders, shading into the pale beige of fallen leaves on its hindquarters. Fangs like ivory daggers curved back toward its body.

My hand crept over my heart, not to still the pounding, but to feel it, to know that my heart could still beat aloud. At the motion, the saber-tooth stretched its jaw wide, wove its head back and forth as if brandishing its weapons. Blood drops flew from the fangs, splattered the dusty ground. Its absurd stump of bobtail lashed at me.

I blinked and the cat was still there.

Eyes still fixed on mine, it lowered its head and seized the deer's limp neck, dragging the carcass with it as it backed away from me below the lip of the hill. I waited, immobile until the little sounds in the brush resumed: the *terrrrrrr-whit!* of a quail, the rustle of lizards at the roots of the scrub. Vultures dipped over the canyon, stooping toward the carcass. I got to my feet, quietly, as though I were in a cathedral, and hiked back to my car.

~~~

"You're awfully quiet. Something wrong?" Michael, my boyfriend, said over dinner that night.

"No. Sorry." I twirled my fork in the spinach fettuccine. It made spirals in the golden-green olive oil on the plate. "Thinking about my hike."

He tore another slice off the garlic loaf I had made. "You shouldn't go up there by yourself," he said for the thousandth time.

"I know. You could come with me."

"You could fall and break your leg," he went on. "Gangs use those hills to dump bodies and do drug deals. Not to mention the kids that go up there to drag race and drink." He was mopping up olive oil with the bread.

"I know," I said again. "But it helps me. I need to—" My voice caught and I clenched my hand around my napkin. Forcing my voice to be even, I said, "It helps me. I promise I'll be careful."

"That's good." He gave me a smile as I started to clear the table, piling my half-full plate on top of the other dishes. I yanked the breadbasket away from him, blinking hard and forcing a smile until I could get into the kitchen.

As I ran water over the china plates, I thought about the ivory and scarlet of the cat's fangs, the way its shoulders heaved under its pelt. Even in its stillness it had been all motion.

"You're still going golfing next weekend at Palm Springs, aren't you?" I called over the running water.

"What?" he shouted from the living room. "Honey, I'm trying to watch the Masters."

"Sorry."

---

I made camp by an abandoned firefighting helipad three miles up the trail from where I had seen the saber-tooth. My car was pulled as far off the road as possible into a little dry gulch where a tangle of Christmas berry would shield it from casual roadside view. Hiking is legal up here, but overnight camping is not. Fires are anathema. One spark can set the entire range ablaze, even in the spring.

Before, I had felt nothing, too immersed in the calm under the sky to fear. But this time fear had me. My fingers ached with stress as I laid out my ground cloth and slid the tension rods into the tent's loops. Fear-sweat soaked my armpits and ran trickles down my spine, but I hurried down the trail with only a can of hiker's mace and a cell phone in my pockets.

It has rained a few days before. At a low point in the trail, preserved in dried mud, were three perfect cat's paw prints and my heart leaped. But they were only the size of my palm. Mountain lion prints, too small to be left by the saber-tooth I had seen. I hurried on.

Long black shadows, sharp edged in the brilliant sun, slashed across the trail. Down in the valleys it was already dark, but here on the hilltops the sun still shone. I found the same point on the trail as before, the same sage bush and tucked myself down beside it. As I crouched, the muscles over my stomach tugged, the vertical scar across my belly resisting the spasm of eager fear that ran through my body. I drew my knees up, shielding myself, and waited.

After the sun went down, the air cooled around me. The winds blew up from the valley. The stars came out. Mule deer tiptoed by, following their own path over the ridgelines. A lizard skittered onto my hiking boot to lick the dew off the metal grommets. I waited.

Finally, when the moon had risen and set, I gave up and walked back to my campsite by the light of my cellphone. There I lay the rest of the night, my hand covering the scar across my belly, listening to the rustles and yips in the dark.

~~~

After that, every time Michael went away on a golf weekend I raced my car up into the hills and hiked until Sunday evening. Then I would speed back down the winding, two-lane road to make it back in time. Except it felt more like rushing back in time. Somewhere on that road lay the invisible line between the timeless, stable hills where everything existed and the relentless forward rush of LA. In the lowlands, my past was gone, irrecoverable. My empty future blended with the unrelenting present into a featureless haze, as deadly as the Tule fog that blankets the city on cold mornings.

One Friday night, I curled up on the couch, leaning my cheek on Michael's arm while he watched women's golf highlights. "Are you going golfing tomorrow?" I asked during a commercial.

"Nope. I've got a half day in-service at work tomorrow, remember?"

"Right."

We watched stocky women in short skirts paste the ball across brilliant green lawns. I slid my hand into Michael's. "Want to hear about what I did last weekend?"

"I thought you went hiking." He didn't take his eyes off the screen.

"Yeah." More minutes passed. "I was careful," I said. "I took mace. And I didn't leave the trails."

"That's good, honey."

The match ended and Michael's least favorite commentators came on. He started scrolling through the channels. I tightened my grip on his hand. "Can you look at me for a minute?"

"Sure, babe. What is it?" He didn't turn the TV off, but at least he hit the mute button.

My palm sweated in his and tremors ran through my bones. "Will you go to mass with me tomorrow? Please."

He gave me a little smile and a laugh, as if I'd asked him to put on a clown's nose. "Why tomorrow?"

"Because it's—" I stopped myself before I said *his birthday*. That wouldn't work. "It's been one year tomorrow," I said. "I want to go pray for him."

He let go of my hand, half turning in his seat to face me, a patient frown on his face. "I don't think you should keep doing this, hon. It's not helping you let go."



Why don't you go back to the therapist? She did you a lot of good. You can tell her how you feel, get it all out so you can cope better." He patted me on the knee.

I dug my nails into my palms. My voice still calm, still reasonable, I said, "The two aren't mutually exclusive, you know."

He patted me on the knee again, more a rewarding gesture than a reassuring one. "You're right. You go to church if that helps you."

"But I want you to go with me." I *need* you to go with me.

"Honey," he said, always patient, explaining it again. "I'm not the one who needs help getting over this." He turned back to the TV, thumbing the sound back on in time for *Iron Chef*.

---

I slipped out of the house at dawn, my hands full of camping gear. Before the clouds had lifted off the peaks, I was on the trails, tramping across deer paths, descending into canyons, looking for signs. By dusk I was weak-kneed and shaking. I trudged back toward my campsite, one foot in front of the other, too tired to stop.

Until I reached the helipad. A man in a Forest Service uniform waited for me there, feet dangling as he sat on the concrete circle. I gave him a nervous smile and stayed on the far side of the camp space.

"This your tent?"

"Yes, sir."

"You can't camp up here, ma'am."

"I'm sorry."

"It's not just illegal. It's not safe, especially alone. You want to camp, you should go to one of the designated campgrounds." His voice was more conversational than lecturing.

"I'm sorry. I'll pack up right now." He still perched on the helipad, a foot from my tent. I dug my fingers under the straps of my pack and didn't move toward him.

He shrugged. "I'm supposed to fine you, but you didn't light a fire, so I'll let it go. Have a nice hike?"

I gave him a non-committal nod. "Saw some cougar tracks earlier."

"You sure they were cougar?" he said.

Something in his tone made me look more closely at his face, the eager forward hunch of his shoulders. "Yeah," I said. "They were only about this big." I

traced my palm and he nodded, the excitement going out of his eyes and shoulders. I took a step closer to him. "Have you seen bigger?"

Now he studied me, his eyes wary under the brim of his Forest Service cap. We watched each other a minute, our eyes locked, each gauging the danger from the other.

Finally, "There are a lot strange things in these hills," he said. "You never quite know what you'll find."

I gave him a slow nod. Let my heart beat twice before saying, "Like a saber-tooth cat."

Now his grin spread out from his eyes to light his whole face. He patted the helipad beside him. "When did you see it?"

"'Bout a month ago." I let my pack slide to the ground and took a seat next to him. The concrete ground into my cold muscles and I braced myself with my hands, sitting half turned so I could see him.

"I saw mine six years ago," he said. "I've been looking for it on and off ever since. I told a few of the guys in the service, once. Won't do that again."

I pointed at his gun. "Are you going to shoot it?"

"Not sure I could, even if I had to. It never did me any harm." He ducked his head, eyes hidden again under the cap brim. "You could say it did me a lot of good. All the time I've spent up here, trying to find it again. I could have spent it in bars."

I drew my knees up and rested my chin on them. The breath of the hills blew over us. "What did you lose?" I asked.

The question sent a jolt through him, brought his face back up into the light to meet mine. His eyes were pale hazel, the color of young sage leaves. Boyish freckles dusted his cheekbones despite the crow's feet around his eyes.

"My wife. She left me for a buddy of mine."

"I'm sorry." This time I meant it.

"What about you?"

The scar across my belly tightened, the muscles shrinking back, flinching from the touch of memory. Tears pricked my eyes in the breeze and I blinked hard. I couldn't inflict my tears on this guy. I cried too much as it was.

But he'd asked, so I told him. "A baby. And my uterus. It was ectopic and they didn't catch it in time."

"I'm sorry." He reached into his breast pocket and offered me a handkerchief.

"It wasn't a real baby yet. That's what the doctor said. It couldn't have lived, so it didn't count, I guess."

"Funny how other people get to decide what's real and what's not. Bonny, my wife, she said I wasn't really in love with her." He picked a piece of loose quartz off the concrete, sending it across the campsite as I blew into the handkerchief. "Did you have a name picked out?"

"Michael Brandon. I was going to call him Mikey until he got old enough to be embarrassed by it." I dabbed at my face, smiling at the image. "Did you have kids?"

"Nah, it was just the two of us." He pursed his lips, thinking, or looking backwards, maybe. "For a long time I used to come up here, just for the silence. Like it could hold me in, keep me from having to feel anything anymore."

"Yeah," I said. Dusk had fallen as we talked. The sharp black shadows were gone, swallowed in the creeping darkness that grew up the hillsides. Soon I would have to get in my car and drive back down to the city, to my job, to Michael.

I shivered in the evening wind and curled my arms into my chest for warmth.

"Do you think we're both crazy?" I said.

"Sure." He laughed. "If we were sane we'd get the hell out of LA and come live up here in the hills where we can breathe."

---

I still drive down the narrow road into LA nearly every day, crossing the invisible line between the timeless, breathing hills and the city's rush. But every night I come back into the foothills, to the house where I can smell the chaparral and hear the mountain's heartbeat. And on weekends we tramp the hills, finding those pockets where time doesn't exist, where the past and present and future overlap and blend into one another. We haven't seen our saber-tooth again, but we're hopeful, Jim and I.

---

*SARAH ADAMS writes urban fantasy and science fiction when she's not teaching college English. She was a 2009 Writer's of the Future semi-finalist and has sold work to Flash Fiction Online. She's shopping around a co-written novel about a human changeling in Winter Court London and finishing her solo novel about berserkers in Buffalo, New York. She also writes about books and life on the blog A Hundred Thousand Worlds at <http://ahundredthousandworlds.blogspot.com/>. When she has a free moment she hikes the hills above LA. She has yet to see a saber-tooth cat — but she's hopeful.*

*For millions of years, across countless species, three emotions have always remained true: fear, loneliness and love. Vesna discovers from a quite unexpected source just how old the dance of love truly is.*

## **FOOTPRINTS ON THE BEACH**

by Aleksandar Žiljak

*Teeth.* Sharp and backwards-curving, serrated to better tear flesh. Tearing through the peaceful herd of iguanodonts grazing in the early-morning light.

The pack of roaring megalosaurs — grey carnivores mottled in camouflage green — charged through the forest clearing, throwing the iguanodonts into mindless panic.

Amid the horrified screams, running on Her hind legs through the scattering stampede, She was aware only of the teeth pursuing Her, of the megalosaur zeroed in on Her, faster than Her, salivating jaws ready to bite into Her.

Instinctively — there was no time to think — She swung Her powerful tail and swerved. The megalosaur deftly evaded the deadly blow that nearly slammed into its head, but lost the pace in the process. Its jaws snapped onto empty air. But the predator didn't give up.

Nothing else but those teeth on Her mind, She rushed noisily into tall cycads and gingkoes and magnolias, hoping to lose the bloodthirsty beast, using the dense growth to slow it and give Her a chance to escape. She leaped over a fallen, moss-covered log. Her massive body broke through shoots, heavy feet squashing horsetails and ferns beneath Her, frightened insects bursting left and right. Something tiny and hairy scurried into the thicket, barely escaping being trampled.

She heard a scream behind Her -- the sound of deep wounds and imminent death. A heavy body collapsed with a thud, its stiff tail thrashing helplessly against the ground. She glimpsed forelimbs waving through air as the hapless creature

tried to stab its attackers with pointed thumb spikes. The sounds of the kill faded as She ran. Hungry carnivores snarling and hissing as they squabbled over the best pieces of meat, torn from still-living iguanodon. Hot blood gushing and painting the world red.

Driven by panic, cries of ruthless slaughter echoing in Her mind, She didn't realize that Her pursuer wasn't chasing Her anymore — that it had turned back for its part of the carnage. Long after She was safe, She still rushed mindlessly through the forest. Until finally, some trace of reason broke through Her terror and told Her it was over. Exhausted, panting, She stopped and listened over the heartbeats thundering in Her ears.

Around Her, the ancient forest spoke softly. Quiet chattering of small feathered dinosaurs hidden under ferns, clawed feet rustling dry leaves as they searched for anything small enough to be snatched and swallowed. Whistling of pterosaurs hunting dragonflies above Her; their grayish, leathery wings flapping as they maneuvered skillfully between tall trees. Those were all usual sounds; the sounds She heard every day.

Relieved, She decided the danger was past, left far behind.

But where was She? She looked around.

The tall sequoias — thick pillars with reddish bark — seemed unfamiliar. After a short exploration, She realized She had never been in this part of the forest before. Lifting Her head, She took a deep breath and let out a long, sad, piercing call. Then She listened. Every living being in the forest around Her went still, their daily routines suddenly interrupted by the strange, loud call. She called again and listened. Silence. She called a third time — but there was no reply. That could mean only one thing: She was so far from the herd they couldn't hear Her anymore. And that filled Her with unease. Fear. Alarm.

Throughout the day, She called and listened, called and listened, called and listened. Finally, She only called, growing more and more desperate with every unanswered call. For the first time in Her life, She was separated from the comfort of the herd.

For the first time in Her life, She was all alone.

~ ~ ~

Vesna sits on the bench under the pines. Sunset blazes above the sea, setting the sky on fire. Behind her, in a laurel bush, a little dinosaur with watchful eyes warns that a cat is on the prowl. The dinosaur has wings, black feathers, and a yellow bill. Next to Vesna, sketched on sheets of paper in the portfolio, rest some other

dinosaurs: distant relatives of the blackbird with the watchful eyes, the chirping sparrows and the titmouse above her, and gulls returning from the sea.

A lock of blonde hair falls across Vesna's eye. She swipes at it angrily. And then the day's pent emotions erupt like magma from somewhere deep inside her, and her lake-blue eyes fill with tears. Vesna covers her face with her hands and shakes as she sobs. The knot in her stomach – clenched there since morning — threatens to burst loose. Somehow she managed to hold back on the dig, to hide tears from her colleagues, to evade questions and sympathetic looks. But now ...

Sobs bring release, and after several minutes she calms down, sniffing, wiping tears from her cheeks, feeling somewhat better. *Tissues*. She reaches for a package of paper tissues in her bag.

Suddenly, she's aware of a hand holding a neatly folded, perfectly clean handkerchief.

The young woman lifts her tear-filled gaze. A gentleman in what looks to be his 60s stands before her, his gray hair parted at the center, his mustache neatly trimmed. He's dressed in an impeccable, sand-colored suit, appropriate for early autumn, with a scarf around his neck and a walking-stick in his other hand.

"Thanks." Vesna takes the handkerchief, wipes her tears and blows her nose. She returns the handkerchief with an embarrassed smile, as if apologizing for making a fool of herself. *How long has he been standing there?* she wonders. "I'm afraid —"

"It's perfectly all right, Miss," the man replies with a slight bow. Vesna smiles once more and sighs. It's getting late; it's time to go. She picks up her bag and portfolio. Laurels and oleanders and pines sink into the dark, night creeps into recessed corners of the shrubbery, and dinosaurs that are birds settle down and turn quiet. Lights come on along the promenade covered with gravel. Time to return to her cheap motel room, where she'll probably cry some more.

"Excuse me, Miss." Vesna feels a trace of urgency, almost a plea, in the man's voice. She pauses. "It looks to me — correct me, if I'm wrong — that you've had a strenuous day. If you'll allow me ... Perhaps I could take you out for dinner somewhere?"

His offer takes Vesna by surprise. She doesn't know what to answer: The man before her could easily be her grandfather. *A dinosaur*, she thinks wickedly, and is at once ashamed. Somehow, she feels that, like the dinosaurs, *he* doesn't belong to this world and time, and maybe that's exactly the reason why she suddenly finds herself attracted to him. *And why the hell not*, she asks herself after a brief consideration.

"Vesna." She smiles as she introduces herself, offering the man her hand. He takes it in his and kisses it lightly, like a true gentleman. Vesna raises an eyebrow, surprised and amused by the man's old-fashioned manners. She tries to remember if anybody else ever kissed her hand like that. No, nobody ever did.

"Šarić. Professor Šarić." The man introduces himself with a slight bow. Something in that bow fills Vesna with confidence, and she allows him to take her arm under his and lead her down the path, some ten minutes' walk to a restaurant with a cozy terrace. As soon as he'd suggested it, Vesna realized how hungry she was. Somewhere above them, in the dense pine crown, a small nocturnal dinosaur, brown-feathered, thickset, with large yellow eyes and a sharp beak — a little owl — calls at them from its roost before going out to hunt.

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She reached the seashore on the fifth morning, following the stream She discovered the day after the megalosaurs attacked Her herd. The stream murmured through the forest, merging with other streams, widening after two days into a slow river. Clear water quenched Her thirst; clear water guided Her through strange, unknown country.

The sea spread before Her. For the first time in Her life, She saw plesiosaurs, their distant, small heads on long grayish necks high above the waves, bodies and fins paddling beneath them. Silhouetted against the clouds, large pterosaurs soared in circles, carried by rising thermals, their long wings motionless. Several smaller pterosaurs — with folded wings and long tails, bare red heads and yellow jaws filled with needle-like teeth — feasted on a dead fish on the beach.

She walked across the soft sand, pausing to sniff a large spiral ammonite shell washed ashore. The smell of decay from inside the shell was unfamiliar to Her. Curious, She nudged at the shell with Her nose, but nothing came from inside. Lifting Her gaze, She noticed a line of footprints going down the beach and then turning and disappearing among the cycads and araucarias. She looked more closely, only now seeing there were more footprints. Tiny ones, made by the swift-running feet of small dinosaurs. And large circular ones, impressed by a sauropod, a herd animal like herself She had once seen, with trunk-like legs supporting a massive body, long neck and a whip-like tail.

She looked back: She, too, impressed footprints. And then She saw another line of prints. Her nostrils flared as She inhaled their feeble, old scent, recognized the stench, and froze. A megalosaur had prowled here some time ago. Perhaps it was scavenging for carrion before it returned into the dark forest. Or maybe it was hunting. *Teeth*. Danger lurked here, too, She realized. She'd have to be

cautious. Still, She was relatively safe as long as She was on the beach itself. It would be difficult for a carnivore to stalk Her and jump Her while She was in the open.

Then, a deep hooting call resounded across the beach, and the pterosaurs feeding on the fish raised their bare heads in alarm.

~ ~ ~

Vesna presses the green button and looks at the illuminated screen of her cellular. No new messages. She knows her hopes are vain; Slaven will not call back. He doesn't have the guts for that. He doesn't even care. Vesna makes a solemn promise never again to enter a relationship with the kind of guy who breaks up by cell phone.

She leans back on the bench, letting the breeze from the sea cool her. White dinosaurs glide across the sky, jubilant in the freedom they enjoy high up. On a nearby rock, a brown juvenile gull quarrels with an adult over a morsel, a piece of bread. The adult wins, and the juvenile spreads his wings, takes off and flies low above the waves to look for his fortune elsewhere down the coast.

Vesna spreads her portfolio open. She leafs absently through the drawings of petrified footprint impressions. A grid of squares is drawn neatly across them. On the dig, the same grid is laid down in taut ropes. This morning, the crew has been busy clearing another thirty square meters, uprooting bushes, removing earth and stones. The newly exposed part is not pegged off yet for Vesna to scale down.

A sense of presence snaps Vesna from her reverie. Professor Šarić stands politely by the bench, trying not to show that he's interested in the contents of her portfolio. "Curiosity is a reflection of intelligence, Professor," Vesna teases, looking back at the drawings.

"Thank you." The professor blushes.

Vesna smiles and moves aside, an unspoken invitation that he accepts with relief. Today, the walk felt more strenuous than usual. Age ... "May I?"

"Sure." Vesna passes him the drawings. The professor realizes they're a series, continuing one after another.

"This is what people are talking about?"

Vesna nods. All of Istria has been buzzing about the new find: hundreds of footprints frozen in stone. At least five dinosaur species and countless individual animals: iguanodonts, a huge sauropod next to numerous small herbivores — some of them probably hypsilophodonts — and a meat-eater.

"They're from early Cretaceous." Vesna points to the main map. "This one is a sauropod. See here, it just strolled by. It was a big one — notice the diameter of



the prints! Twenty meters long, maybe more. And this is a large carnivore, possibly a megalosaur or something similar. We can't yet determine the exact species of carnosaur based on footprints alone ... And these are the iguanodons —" Vesna pauses when she notices the professor's confused stare.

"I'm in a different field, you know. English, German, Italian ... Dinosaurs ... I only know they existed."

"I'm sorry." Vesna smiles as she apologizes. "Sometimes I forget myself. Here." She pulls out several reconstructions drawn between her careful copying of the footprints in the grid. Professor Šarić nods, impressed by her skill for making long-extinct beasts come alive in detailed pencil drawings.

"So, these are the footprints of iguanodons?"

"Yes, we're quite certain of it. But we don't know what these ones mean. Nobody ever found anything like this before! Look how the soil was trampled." Vesna takes the drawing and points excitedly. The professor follows her finger as it skims across the paper. "This was one animal. It approached the second one, a smaller one. See — it's this trail. And look here—" Vesna leafs through several sheets. "They faced each other. Nothing in itself, right? But look more closely! As if they were turning around that way, but still facing each other..."

"Perhaps fighting?" Professor Šarić suggests.

"No, we don't think so." Vesna looks at the drawing. "It looks too neat for that. For a week now, the entire crew has been trying to figure it out. But we can't. Maybe we'll never know," she sighs.

The professor studies the drawing more closely, frowning in concentration. The layout of the footprints seems somehow familiar to him. Until—

*Damn, it can only be ... But it's impossible!*

Still, if they were human feet, there would be no trace of doubt, not for a moment. He starts humming a melody, barely audible, as Vesna looks at him, perplexed.

*Yes, that's it! It can be nothing else, say what they may. And the poor child doesn't see it. Of course, she doesn't, this modern youth ...*

Finally, the professor returns the drawing to Vesna, thoughtful, saying nothing, merely smiling enigmatically.

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Her heart shivered! Immediately She recognized the call of a male of Her own species. She replied, paused to listen, was answered at once. Splashing through waves washing the shore, She rushed across the wet sand, scattering several

pterosaurs into a flurry of flapping wings and protesting cries. Where was He? Why couldn't She see Him? Frantic, She stopped and called once again.

He stepped out from beneath the tree ferns. While He was motionless, the play of sunlight and shadows cast by leaves on His strong brown body with its narrow white stripes made Him almost invisible. He was watching Her intently.

She stopped in Her tracks. As much as She wanted to greet Him, as much as She rejoiced in seeing Him, She paused, cautious, not approaching any closer. She knew She was unfamiliar to Him, a stranger. He might consider Her an intruder. Maybe He was guarding His herd; if that were the case, He could attack Her to drive Her away from His territory.

Standing almost motionless, they studied each other for a long, long time. No other iguanodon stepped out of the shadows. She heard no other herd members. The male was alone, just as She was. Both alone, both diffident. Any sudden move could be understood as an act of aggression. Therefore, diffidence. Suspicion. Solitude.

And then She decided She couldn't be lonely anymore.

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Vesna descends the stony stairs. The professor sits on a rock beneath the wall rising above a small cove. Sea washes the sandy shore gently. It's late afternoon and several strollers on the promenade above talk loudly and laugh at a joke one of them has just made. Above them, a small dinosaur calls in a ringing voice, methodically searching the crown of a downy oak for an insect or two. It has a greenish back, a yellow breast and belly with a central black stripe, black crown and throat, and white cheeks: a great tit.

When he sees Vesna coming down the stairs, Professor Šarić loses his breath. He freezes, petrified, speechless.

"Something wrong?" Vesna asks, worried at the sight of him. She wears a simple cream dress with a white cardigan thrown across her shoulders and a white shawl wound about her neck. Nothing special, nothing calculated; autumn afternoons and evenings have begun turning cool.

"Did it ever—" The professor pauses, not taking his eyes off Vesna. "Did it ever happen to you that you saw something — someone — so beautiful it's painful? So painful it squeezes your heart and..."

For an awkward moment or two, Vesna doesn't know what to reply. If it weren't for the pain in the professor's eyes, she'd take his words for simple flattery or teasing. But now ... Somehow, she's not sure things are going the way she expected them to go. How and why did something that was to be just a

harmless, pleasant company — meant merely to wash away the bitterness left after weeks of fights and tears — catch her completely unawares? And does she have the right to play with an old man like that? Should she excuse herself and turn and leave?

No, that would make things even worse, hurt even more. Should she—

“Forgive me.” Professor Šarić takes Vesna by her hand and leads her from the stairs to the shore. Her feet sink, shallowly, into the soft moist sand. “I didn’t mean to worry you or anything. I do sometimes prattle. *This* is why I invited you here.”

Only now does Vesna notice the CD player that the professor has placed beneath the wall, safely away from the waves. “Maybe it will be somewhat of a disappointment to you, but a phonograph with a horn was really a bit too heavy to carry.” Vesna laughs at the professor’s joke while he presses the play key. Music spills from under the wall. A waltz. Vesna doesn’t recall ever having heard it before; certainly, it’s nothing she’s heard played in clubs or on the radio.

“Tchaikovsky. Some find it saccharine, but honestly, Strauss became boring to me ages ago. May I?” The professor offers Vesna his hand. She hesitates, not really knowing what to do next.

“I’m afraid I’ve never danced to this,” she admits, blushing.

“It’s easy — just let go.” The professor smiles as Vesna takes his hand. Warmth of times past streams through her palms. Times not as past as the ones in her portfolio, but nevertheless, gone forever. Times neither better nor worse than present, but lost, never to return. The professor takes Vesna around her waist and leads her across the shore. After several clumsy steps, Vesna’s feet catch their own rhythm and she and he begin flying across the sand, in harmony to the melody of the waltz, enthralled in the whirlwind of dance. The world around the professor and Vesna is no more. Gone are the warm afternoon and the chuckling white dinosaurs in the sky, the sea and the whispering trees. Only the two of them remain, dancers cocooned in a time of their own that will never pass...

But then the waltz *does* come to an end and the merry-go-round winds down and stops. Vesna staggers, flushed, breathless, but remaining on her feet, steadied by the professor’s hands. She bursts into joyous laughter; it’s been ages since she’s had such a good time.

“Now, take a look at the footprints, Vesna.” The professor smiles knowingly, like a teacher happy at the sight of his pupil about to grasp new knowledge, reach new levels of understanding.

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They spent that entire day together, She and He, touring the coast and the forest, feeding on plentiful juicy shoots, drinking in the cool river. Occasionally, between morsels, shy at first and then becoming bolder and bolder, He'd touch Her neck with His beak. Then He tried to lick Her cheek — just one fleeting, flickering touch of His long tongue. At first, She wiggled away, waving Her powerful tail in mock warning, as if driving a boring insect away. But He was persistent. She kept evading Him, feigning annoyance. She even tried to bite Him with Her beak once, and spur Him with Her thumb spike, but She didn't really mean it. He jumped aside and then approached Her again, licking Her and rubbing His strong body against Her side.

She moved away from Him and eyed Him from a distance, measuring Him. Then She turned away from Him, acting disinterested. She took a step deeper into the fresh forest, looking for something juicy to nibble on. And He followed close on Her heels; wherever She bit, He bit, too. As the day grew warmer, they grew closer, body next to body, feasting together.

Then He took Her even deeper into the green shade of the old forest. She let Him lead Her. She followed Him up the river, until they reached a sunny clearing among the tall sequoias: a remote and secret place only He knew about. She stopped at the edge of the clearing, as if waiting for Him to invite Her in.

The place was well-hidden from prying eyes; away from hungry jaws filled with sharp, serrated teeth. It was quiet, too. Buzzing of insects and flapping of pterosaurs' wings were all the sounds She heard. It felt like just the spot to scrape a nest in the soft ground and fill it with dry leaves. It looked like just the perfect place to lay eggs and guard them closely until they hatched. He watched Her as She decided it was indeed an ideal place to raise offspring, to watch over them as they grew to a size when it would be safe to lead them into the hostile outside world.

That whole day, He introduced Her to His domain, in the forest by the sea, until the shadows grew long and the forest started sinking into dark.

And then She stopped and turned, following the river back to the seashore. When She heard the breaking waves, She ran through the shadows. And He ran after Her, the ground shaking as they went.

On the beach, on the very edge of the sea, She stopped and waited for Him to come to Her. Then She reared on Her hind legs. She looked at Him, a male in his prime, and He looked at Her, a young female ready to start a herd with Him. He reared, too, and they touched their forelimbs and started turning,

instinctively, in slow circles. They turned and turned, in an ancient ritual whose meaning they didn't understand, but that would forever seal the bond between them. They kept turning around each other, led by something primeval within them, their powerful legs leaving footprints in the sand.

They kept on turning as the large pterosaurs glided through the dusk, tracing circles above the dancing lovers, before returning to their night roosts far out on the cliffs. She and He danced, and the sea was all the music they needed. The waves sung to them, the wind fluted, the pterosaurs clapped their leathery wings. They danced the way they would dance for decades to come, the way their parents had danced, the way their children would dance as well.

The hungry roar of a meat-eater broke through the forest, but they didn't heed it, not stopping for a moment. They were together, inseparable, strong. No predator could touch them. They danced for new generations, in harmony, as if they'd been dancing together their whole lives, as if they hadn't met only that morning. They danced in slow, heavy-legged rhythm, two dark shapes against the sunset sky burning bright in reds and oranges and fiery gold.

And then, as night fell, under the twinkling stars, they stopped dancing, She and He, and surrendered to each other. Under his panting weight, She forgot Her old herd, and teeth and death and horror. Instinct led Her into the future, towards a large nest, with eggs and little ones that would one day grow and dance themselves to the rhythm of life.

~~~

Vesna snuggles against the professor's chest. His gentle hand rests on her breast. The autumn nights are chilly, but the professor's warmth spills comfortably across Vesna's back, and she enjoys his quiet breath on her hair.

That afternoon, it had taken her time to understand. Time to take the proportions of the animals into account, their anatomy and how they moved. Time to accept the obvious, no matter how impossible it seemed. But as much as her mind resisted, as much as the scientist inside whispered it could not be, in the end, there could be no doubt. Her and Šarić's footprints on the beach, in the sand, the impressions left by their shoes ... Vesna substituted them for the prints of the iguanodons' feet in her drawings.

Many, many millions of years ago, two iguanodons danced. They didn't just perform ancient rituals of wooing, calling and displaying, and ritualized fights that occasionally erupted into something more serious — that would be nothing more than paleontologists had assumed for decades they'd done. No, these two

danced! Facing each other; holding each other by their forelimbs; turning, circling, twirling just like humans do. They danced!

Why? That, too, was demonstrated by the afternoon's experiment. When, exalted by their discovery, Vesna embraced the professor and, not fully realizing what she was doing, kissed him. And then when they looked into each other's eyes, fully realizing what they were doing, they kissed once again. Only to end finally, after the best dinner Vesna had ever had, in the professor's apartment, in his bed, in a hot, sweaty, panting embrace that made Vesna forever change her opinion of elderly gentlemen.

"You don't sleep?" The professor's question is a whisper in her ear. He starts rubbing himself gently against her hip, and the young woman realizes with joy that the night is by no means over yet.

"Something's troubling me." Somewhere in the corner of her mind, Vesna wonders why she must stubbornly — usually with the same disastrous results — analyse every relationship she's in? Why can't she simply let go, all the way, without holding back? Why can't she listen to her heart when it whispers to her she's finally found what she was looking for?

"What?" The professor kisses Vesna's cheek, his hand caressing her breast, teasing her, making her entire body tremble with desire. Their breathing growing faster, Vesna turns to face him and look him in the eyes. They kiss and kiss and kiss some more, until she opens to him, spreads her legs, breathless, surrendering to the passion, moaning as his lips close over her nipple and his moustache tickles the soft skin. And, as the professor penetrates her in slow thrusts, Vesna thanks two ancient behemoths that helped her — eons after they died, millions of years after their species went extinct — to find a new love.

And later, much later, feeling cozy and fulfilled, as she ruffles the professor's sweaty hair and places a gentle kiss on his forehead, she asks, "The iguanodons. Who played them their waltz?"

~ ~ ~

*ALEKSANDAR ŽILJAK was born in Zagreb, Croatia, in 1963. He graduated from Electrotechnical Faculty in Zagreb and earned his Master of Computer Sciences degree in 1990. He's a freelance illustrating artist, specializing in wildlife, but also doing science fiction.*

*He also writes science fiction/fantasy/horror stories. He has published two story collections, Slijepe ptice (Blind Birds — 2003) and Božja vučica (The Divine She-wolf — 2010), and a book on cryptozoology. He has published his stories and texts all over the world. He's also an editor.*

*Aleksandar Žiljak has won six SFERA Awards for his science fiction writing, art and editorial work.*

*John doted on the elite French touring car he'd devoted much of his time to restoring. Can his dead wife teach him there are other things worthy of his attention too?*

## **THE RESTORATION MAN**

by Simon John Cox

John doesn't stay long at the wake.

It's held upstairs at the Dun Tap, round the corner from the crematorium; just trestle tables and sandwiches and a hundred quid behind the bar for the mourners, who flock in after the service and croak their grief like ravens. He arrives last, circulates amongst them beneath heavy beams that smell of dust: lovely service, very respectful, it's what she would have wanted. Someone gives him a beer. It feels heavy, and he drinks it too quickly. He leaves as soon as he feels that etiquette will allow.

"Still in shock, I expect," says a steel-haired aunt, and she smiles briefly after him before returning to the carcass of the buffet.

At home, in the house where they lived, he is overcome by a feeling that she is nearby. Every time he walks into a room he feels as though she has just left it, senses that she is in the very next room, tells himself that if he can only get in there before she leaves ...

When he reaches the bedroom he pauses, stands and looks at the urn in his hands for a long time before finally placing it amongst the black-framed pictures on the narrow mantel, sliding them left and right to make room. Past selves smile out at him in grainy colour and black-and-white, and he suddenly realises that he can't remember the last time he looked at any of these photographs. He picks up one of them and tilts it so the light from the lamp can help him to pick out the detail. His eyes aren't what they were.



They are on a beach that yawns away beneath a dark strip of sea. The sun is low in the sky and she is smiling broadly. She looks so young. His hair is thick and his forehead is smooth. It's years ago.

Brittany. He remembers it. He'd picked up a lead on an exhaust in Rennes, and she'd suggested that they make it a long weekend away, so they'd taken the car over on the ferry from Portsmouth. After they'd picked up the exhaust and politely admired the man's mausolitic fleet, they'd driven back through low countryside bruised with heather and found a sweltering room at the tiny *Hôtel Petit Bretagne*, then they'd eaten, slept and walked together until the sun was long dead. They were young then, not long married. He remembers enjoying the weekend.

He picks up another photo, but in this one she isn't smiling. Not properly. She's trying, but the sun is in her eyes and her hair is being whipped across her forehead by one of the winds that scour in off the Channel. The smile's there, if you look, but she's wearing it like a uniform. Where was it taken? Brighton? Hastings? He doesn't remember.

Was he even there, behind the camera? Or was he in a van, being bullied by Parisians on the *Périphérique*, on his way to beg and barter a headlamp or a carburettor out of some pinched, mean-spirited collector?

Something begins to nag at him, a vague feeling that refuses to solidify and remains perceptible only on the fringe of his awareness.

Before he goes to bed he lays out a skirt and blouse on the back of the chair, like she used to before the chemotherapy dredged the strength from her limbs, and he wonders why he'd never done it for her before. Outside, a dog barks. He lies down, then he turns to the side and says goodnight to the space in the bed where she used to be.

He hunches his shoulders on the way to work, braces himself against the world. The wind has shifted, northerly, and it sends thick fleets of clouds scudding across the sky in its path. He arrives at the workshop after what seems no time at all, and he has to check his watch to convince himself that any time has passed since he left the house. He realises he has no memory of the journey.

The workshop reeks of a disappearing age, the heavy scent of grease sharpened by an overnote of thinners and a bass drone of cigarette smoke. Chipped workbenches hug the walls, covered in bolts and bulbs and fossilised spark plugs, while dark gargoyles of metal hide in corners and peer out from beneath heavy tarpaulins. Two fragmented cars occupy the centre of the workshop like ruined castles, one elevated on a lift to allow access to its

underside. A third vehicle shelters beneath a soft cloth cover closer to the back. Terry crouches beneath the elevated car, working a wrench at its filthy belly. When he notices John, he lays down the wrench and wipes his hands with a rag.

"How are you doing?" he asks. His face is already streaked with grime, and when he frowns dark lines fire across his forehead.

"Oh, you know," says John.

"Are you sure you're OK?" says Terry, "We can manage without you if — you know, if you need some time. Craig says he can do Saturdays if we need him to."

"No, no, I'm fine. Probably best if I keep busy."

Terry's an old friend. The oldest. He was the one who suggested they go into business together all those years ago.

*You and me, buying old cars, fixing them up and selling them on! We'll make a pile! We'll get a workshop! It'll be great! What do you say?*

It's a hobby for John, really. He put most of the money in up front, and he tinkers at the machinery, but Terry's the one who really knows what he's doing.

He climbs into heavy overalls and turns the kettle on.

"Craig in yet?" he says.

"Not yet."

Craig is Terry's son-in-law. They took him on last year, and they tell each other it was just to give him a chance, just to get him started on a career, never admitting to one other that the heavy lifting is starting to hurt the old back, that the close-in work is starting to strain the old eyes.

John brews two cups of strong tea and hands one to Terry, then he walks over and slides the tarpaulin off the car near the back of the workshop. Terry walks up and stands beside him, sipping his tea noisily.

"Got some good news for you," says Terry, nudging him with his elbow.

"Oh?"

"Bill told me some Arab drove his Facel into the back of a lorry at about sixty over the weekend. Completely wrote it off. So I've got him to buy what's left of it for us and ship it over. From what he says it'll give you pretty much the rest of the bits you need."

"Doesn't he want to get it repaired?"

"Nah, he's some oil sheikh; he'll just buy something else. Bill says the guy told him he was getting bored with it anyway. Bored! Can you believe that?"

John looks at the car. Sleek and muscular, heavier than its size suggests, the chassis a wrestler's torso, the headlamps a pair of wide, surprised eyes. The Facel II. *His* Facel II. He's built it with his own hands, piece by piece, from the scavenged

corpses of the few of its brothers that have succumbed to accident, disrepair or time, born out of weekends spent on roads to Monaco and Reims and Geneva, hunting down doors, fascias, seat covers, gear sticks. Damaged pieces, refurbishments, replica parts. Hundreds of hours. Thousands.

He'd bought the skeleton of it years ago, back when they'd just got the business started. There'd been no money for it, so he'd had to buy it out of his own pocket. He'd tried to convince Terry that they could make a profit out of it, but Terry hadn't wanted it.

"Too rare," he'd said, "Not enough parts out there to rebuild it."

Terry was right; it was astonishingly, legendarily rare, but John was convinced that it could be restored, certain that sufficient fragments might be unearthed and procured and pieced together.

"It's like an endangered species," he'd said, "When they're gone, they're gone. It's our duty."

"It's hardly a bloody polar bear," said Terry.

But the Facel II was never really about making money, and he suspects that Terry has known this all along. It's a fable. A mythical car.

Craig asks him about it from time to time. "I can't explain it," John will say, "It's just something you either get or you don't. It's not the fastest car, it's not the best to drive, it's not the most comfortable. But it's *something*. It's beautiful. Probably the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Beautiful?" says Craig, "It looks like a fuckin' tank. Probably drives like one an' all."

Craig would never understand. All they teach you in college is wires and fluids and tolerances. Hardware. Nothing about the soul.

*The most beautiful thing I've ever seen.*

John doesn't really hear what Terry is saying; his attention is taken by the car. It seems different today, somehow; the silver paintwork seems lifeless, the chromework will-o'-the-wisp not present. He feels none of its usual magic, none of the stomach-tightening thrill of imagining himself behind the wheel, cruising down through southern France to the Ligurian coast, the sun scorching down, just him and—

Just him and—

And who?

"With these parts from Bill you'll have that beast up and running in a few months, I reckon," Terry says.

"What?" says John.

"The parts. From Bill. Should be enough for you to finish it."

"Yes, I suppose."

Outside, rain begins to smack down, streaking like quartz along dim windows, hissing from the pavement and the roof like white noise.

"Are you sure you're all right?" asks Terry.

"Do the lights seem funny in here?"

Terry looks up, frowning.

"No, they're fine. Why?"

John doesn't answer. The car seems dead. No, not dead; more as though it could never live.

"I think I just need to get some fresh air." He starts to strip out of his overalls.

"Sure, no problem," says Terry, "Take as long as you need."

He walks home, but instead of going inside he gets into the car and pulls out of the driveway. Before long he's on the road, but he has no idea of where he's going. The windscreen wipers squeak and thud; brake and traffic lights bleed red and green before him. He drives through suburban estates, high streets, arterial roads, until he reaches a motorway, and then, then he realises where he is going. He joins the traffic, hissing along, until the blue exit sign appears through the spray like an epiphany, and he turns off down the slip road.

He reaches the car park at the bottom of the hill and parks up. He's the only one there. He leaves the car, picks his way through the puddles and mud, and climbs the tree-lined path to the top of the hill. At the top he sits on the bench and looks down through the rain at the countryside that stretches away before him: the ruined abbey, the coiling river, the patchwork of fields flecked with sheep and cows. The motorway is barely audible. Nothing changes. Apart from the weather, it's the same as when they came here before.

They sit on the bench, looking out at southern England. He's packed a picnic, and they spread cloths on their laps and eat cold quiche and salad. He pulls a bottle of champagne out from the bottom of the hamper. She asks him what the occasion is. You'll see, he says. He pops the cork so that it flies off down the hill, which makes her smile, then he pours champagne into two tumblers. To us, he says, and they raise the glasses and sip champagne and gaze at one another. There is one other thing, he says, and she asks him what it is. Hold on, I need to be on one knee, he says, and her expression is an unforgettable blend of surprise and joy. He holds up a ring, and she offers him her hand. She almost forgets to say yes.

He doesn't know how long he's been sat on the bench. He looks at the empty space beside him. The rain is easing now, but it still colours the landscape in long shifts of grey. He wonders when that first supernova of passion faded, when exactly his obsession with the car began to corrode their marriage.

After the picnic they go for a walk, down the hill to the ruined abbey, then along the stream. They walk for miles, all the way to the weir. They hold hands, and he enjoys the feeling of the ring on her finger. They take some leftover pastry from the quiche and feed it to the ducks.

He doesn't feel like doing that today. He gets up from the bench and walks back down to the car park. Does he feel better for having come here? He feels less alone, certainly. He can feel her energy here. Some part of that other day still remains on the landscape here, underlaid faintly beneath it. A watermark of the past.

He sits in the car for a while before leaving. His breath turns the cold windows opaque, and the world outside seems to become a little less real. The bare trees grow faint, as though they are moving away from him, shifting into another dimension. He can barely make out the hill.

When he gets home he finds that the clothes of hers that he hung on the chair are gone. He looks on the floor, under the bed, but he can't find them. He wonders whether he put them away himself and simply forgot. He wonders whether he hung them there at all.

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The will is straightforward. Mr. Skinner, the solicitor, reads the document, but it's a formality. John remembers being here with her when she made it, a month after she'd been diagnosed. When the reading's finished, John stands and waits to shake Mr. Skinner's hand, but the solicitor remains seated.

"There's something else," he says, and he reaches into a brown envelope on his desk and pulls out a black notebook.

"What's this?"

"Her diary. She posted it to me with the instruction that I give it to you on the reading of the will."

"What does it say?"

"I haven't read it."

At home, John sits on the bed, under the gaze of their photographic pasts, and reads the diary. It tells him some things he knew, some things he didn't, and some things he knew but had never admitted to himself. He reads the diary from beginning to end, and when he has finished he goes back and reads it again. As he

reads the words they take on more substance, become more resonant, become livid or joyous or sorrowful, until eventually he is no longer reading ink on a page but hearing her words as she whispers them to him.

Terry's very understanding. John's working less and less, and when he does come into the workshop, he seems distant and unfocused. The parts that Bill scavenged from the oil sheikh's wreck arrive, and John begins the painstaking task of repairing, refurbishing and refitting, but his work on the car is autonomic. There's none of the joy that he once felt. He just uses it as a reason to get out of bed now.

"I thought you loved that car," Craig says to him, and he can't think how to answer. He did love that car. It was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

Terry takes him to one side, says that his heart's obviously not in it at the moment, it's quite understandable, it'll be all right in time, he should take some time for himself. John nods.

The next day he takes the photograph from the mantel and drives down to the coast. He's sure that the picture was taken in Brighton. He pushes through the Lanes and down to the seafront, and when he gets there he holds up the picture of her and tries to calculate where it was taken.

The wind has a sting to it, and it whips the sea into splintering peaks. He doesn't remember being here. He holds the picture in front of him and tries to match the two horizons, to picture her before him, to imagine how it might have been. He wonders why she didn't say anything about him spending time away, working on the car, chasing parts across Europe. Or maybe she did, and he just didn't hear it. Didn't want to hear it.

*The most beautiful thing I've ever seen.*

The seafront is busy. People flow around him, into him sometimes, *sorry, sorry*, then on, huddled against the wind and clinging to one another as if they were falling, tumbling down the street. Then, in the polished glass of a shop front, he sees her. Just for an instant, behind him, looking right at him. Wide brown eyes, dark hair moving in the wind. He turns, looks, but sees behind him only the promenade and the greying sea. He looks back at the window, but is confronted only by his own reflection, standing ghost-like behind the glass. He looks again, but there's nothing.

He buys fish and chips, wrapped in yesterday's newspaper, and returns to the car. When he gets there, on the driver's side window he sees a face. Not a real face; a cartoonish approximation of dots and curves, as traced in breath with a finger. She drew something like it on the bathroom mirror once, so that in the

mornings, when he got out of the shower, he'd have a smile to cheer him up. It's a sweet gesture, and he doesn't really mind that it's slightly distracting to have one on a car window. He doesn't remember it being there before.

He lays out clothes for her every night before he goes to bed now, and sometime the next day they are always gone. He finds them eventually, days later, in the washing basket, so he washes them for her and hangs them in the wardrobe. He replenishes the feminine toiletries as they dwindle in the bathroom. He has taken to cooking two meals in the evening.

He doesn't like looking at himself in the mirror any more. The reflection that stares back at him with those sagging eyes is a lie. The images in the old photographs are the real him, caught in an intangible past. The images are the real her.

He comes to the workshop after hours now, to rebuild the car. To be away from Terry and Craig, though he's not sure why.

It's finished now, the car. The parts all installed. He's got the engine working. He's polished the paintwork, and the mirrors and the windows. He's vacuumed the seats. Dusted the dashboard. He's filled the tanks with oil, brake fluid, petrol. It gleams, frozen and impenetrable.

Except it isn't finished. The leather at the side of the passenger seat is cracked and thin. The rear bumper is pitted with coppery blooms of rust. Already the perfection is crumbling.

It isn't finished. It'll never be finished.

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It's a Saturday, and he's in the High Street, on his way to the supermarket. He sees Craig coming the other way, with his wife. She's pushing a pushchair with a young child in it. He smiles at them, but they don't respond. He waves, but still they don't react. He's certain they haven't missed him, certain they aren't deliberately snubbing him. It's more that they looked right through him, as though he were transparent. As though there were only blank space where he was standing.

It's a Wednesday, and he's at the crematorium. It's the anniversary of her death. He's come here alone, but there are other mourners here, and they collect in drifts, like black snow. None of them is here for her. He places the bunch of fresh dahlias in the vase by the plaque and steps back to admire them. He knows they're what she would have wanted, because her diary told him so. She told him so.

Scattered people fill the streets on the way back from the crematorium, walking in ones and twos and threes. Some of them look at him as he passes in his ash-coloured suit and black tie, a man dressed to meet the dead, and he suspects them of talking about him, quietly plotting condolences and excuses.

He hears someone fall into step with him. High-heeled shoes, clapping along the pavement, a rhythm and timbre that he recognises. Familiar, comforting. The moment feels fragile, so he keeps walking and looks straight ahead, fearful of shattering it.

Just then a silvery car sweeps past, and for a second, just for a second, he wonders if it's the Facel II. Perhaps Terry's taken it out for a spin, to get the engine warm, blow out the cobwebs.

He's aware of these thoughts, but it's as though he's outside his body, eavesdropping on himself. He's dreamed of this moment for years, of releasing the Facel II into the wild, yet this passing confection of metal and glass stirs no emotion in him. It feels as though ... he doesn't know what. Something feels different now.

"Was that the car? The Facel II?"

"I don't think so," he says. He keeps looking straight ahead.

"Is it finished now?"

"I thought it was, but it's not."

"What do you mean?"

He closes his eyes for a second, shakes his head.

"It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't matter? I thought you said it was the most beautiful thing you'd ever seen."

He walks on for a few steps before replying, just to listen to her footsteps.

"I know," he says. "I'm sorry."

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*SIMON JOHN COX was born in Tunbridge Wells, and has a degree in chemistry, a job in marketing and a black belt in Taekwon-Do. He has been writing fiction for as long as he can remember. He has had short stories published in various places, and is editing his second novel whilst trying to interest agents in his first. Simon is a founder member of the Tunbridge Wells Writers group, and is currently starring as the protagonist in his autobiography.*



Website: [www.simonjohncox.com](http://www.simonjohncox.com)

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/SimonJohnCox>

*When a single mum returns to her island home of Tasmania with her young son Jack in tow, things don't turn out quite the way she expects. In fact, her efforts to settle back in take a strange twist...*

## **A DARK FOREST**

by Jen White

On the way over, a man, who had been muttering and pacing for a good half hour, climbed onto the rail of the ferry and dived into the black water.

"What's he doing?" Jack asked.

"Jumping in," I lied. "But don't you do it. It's dangerous."

All around us people shouted and ran to the place where the man had been standing only a moment before. I didn't move, just stared at the empty rail, at his after-image.

I led Jack inside to the snack bar. I knew he would not forget what he had just seen. It would emerge days, or even weeks, later, rising up from somewhere deep and dark. "Remember that man, Mum?" he would say. "The one who jumped into the water? Remember? I had a dream about him last night."

I had not set foot in Tasmania for a decade or more, that deep, dark island, as vivid as a fairytale. Ten years ago I moved to the mainland to seek my fortune. I had blamed the total mess my life had become, the damage that I had inflicted on myself and others, on the place rather than on myself. I know now that nothing is that simple. Oh, I was right to leave. I still believe that. The island and I had been a poisonous mixture, producing something airless and angry and desperate. But, with time, the damage in me had healed as much as it ever would, and distance had enabled me to see that there was something pure about the island, as if all that was extraneous had been filtered out and what remained was heady and overpowering, the distilled essence of Australia. Now here I was, returning with a child, and on my way to a new job as an historian with the museum. I no longer

had family on the island, but I had memories of family. And I wanted Jack to see the place. It was as much his heritage as mine.

That man jumping, I told myself, it wasn't a warning. It was merely the kind of thing that was likely to happen when one undertakes a perilous journey.

Soon after we arrived, Jack and I found a cottage on the edge of a forest and we made efforts to settle into our new lives. Several times a week Jack would ring his dad and tell him about everything.

"I saw snow, but it's hard," I heard him complain softly into the phone. "It's cold and grey. In real life it's dirty."

I had never really talked to my wild, untethered son about the island. I hadn't known how to. "Once upon a time," I should have begun, the story unreeling from there, ending finally in, "And everyone lived happily ever after." But I had never been able to find the words. I decided to show him instead.

I took Jack to see the house I had grown up in, a sprawling white weatherboard with a stone verandah. We searched and searched for it. Eventually, we found its location, but the house was no longer there. It had burned down, a neighbour told me, one moonless night, and all that remained now was a blackened hole, as if a rotten tooth had recently been removed.

"Maybe this isn't the place," Jack kept saying. "Maybe it's the next street up," as if I had misremembered the map of my entire childhood. I know memory is malleable, but surely not to that degree.

Jack did not do well at school. His teachers said he always seemed distracted, as if he had dog-hearing and he was listening to sounds no one else could hear. On weekends, we drove through the mountains and camped beside crystal lakes. Jack hated it. He froze. Sun child, he despised shoes and socks and the big, fat, larval jackets we wore against the wind.

It was months before I made any friends. I felt down and dark, like a wrong decision. No one would talk to me, barely even smile. And I, mirror-like, lost the knack of smiling myself. People moved slowly here, as if the air itself weighed upon them. I had forgotten that. Here, nothing was superficial, nothing light.

And then Robin, a scientist who had been employed by the museum for decades, showed me the foetus.

"Come with me," he whispered.

I had finally passed some test I hadn't known I was sitting.

He ushered me through silent corridors and locked doors. It felt as if I were being admitted to some exclusive private club. After many long minutes of

walking, we reached a temperature-controlled room somewhere in the centre of a maze of offices and labs.

Robin brought the object out carefully. He put me in mind of medieval monks handling holy relics. He told me of how they had taken many samples from the creature in an effort to reconstruct the architecture of its existence.

The thylacine itself resembled a baby rabbit more than anything. Its blind eyes, as opaque as peeled grapes, reminded me of my mother's preserves. This animal was so young when it was taken that it had still been in its mother's pouch. And now, long dead, it could yet become a mother itself. Imagine that, I thought, a mother who has never lived. It's the kind of thing you read about in the bible. It has to be a miracle, surely. The equal of the Immaculate Conception, almost.

It wasn't the only thylacine that had been preserved, Robin told me. There were at least half a dozen others, some of them siblings to this one, raided from the same pouch. But this one, unlike many of the others, was in excellent condition. It had been kept all these decades on the back shelves of a cool, dark room, safely forgotten. Robin let me briefly hold the jar. I tilted it. The animal had fur and the first signs of stripes. The stripes were its camouflage. The animal belonged in the shadowy mosaic of a dry eucalypt forest, a jigsaw of wetlands and grasslands, not a laboratory jar. You could see, even in its infant state, that its jaw was heavy, reptilian, mythical. Its paws were stretched out as if begging, its eyes huge and open, as if it were staring at something unbearably sad, like life.

I had read somewhere that dogs always showed great fear in their presence. On the surface, they were such similar creatures, but underneath there were vast, unseen differences. That dissonance between expectation and reality had thrown everyone.

Robin replaced the jar and led me back through the long hallways. I memorised the way.

One afternoon, as he stared out the kitchen door at the forest, Jack told me he wished we'd never come. "I miss my friends so much," he said. "Whatever I do here, it ends up bad."

"Life's like that sometimes," I replied. "But it's not like that forever."

Since arriving, I was forever feeling as though I were standing at a great height, looking downwards. Too much past flooding into the present, I had discovered, produces vertigo. I'd had to come, but I wished it were easier. Perhaps, leaving it all too late, this place could never be anything more for Jack than someone else's story.

"We can do something special tomorrow," I told him. "How about that?"  
So I took Jack to see the thylacine. Hell, I thought, it's something for him to tell the grandkids.

"Ohhh," Jack exhaled when he saw it.

He went to caress the jar. I pulled it back.

"It is very precious," I told him.

"Its paw is cut," he said.

The right paw was almost gone.

"That's to make more of them," I explained.

His eyes filled. "Can't we bury it? It looks so sad."

"It's not ours. Besides, it can't feel anything anymore. It doesn't know what is happening to its body. The real beast, its essence, is exactly in the place where it belongs. Some cool, green plain where it can run and laugh and be its true self."

Since the afternoon Robin had first shown me the beast, I had been reading everything I could find about it. *Dog-faced dasyurus*, it was called once, *dog-headed opossum*, *striped wolf*, *Van Diemen's Land tiger*. I knew all the names. *Thylacinus cynocephalus*, meaning pouched dog with wolf's head, named for the backward pouch in which it carried its young. But also, I liked to think, for the way it carried its testes, folded softly inside a partial pouch, protected by the lateral folds of the belly skin. And *slut*, too, it was called. Used, of course, only when speaking of the female of the species. Ironic really, for one who bred so rarely, and never in captivity.

Meanwhile, Jack had fights. He turned vicious. Telling me over dinner what he would do to his enemies. I couldn't believe it. Where was my gentle boy? The child who cried in sympathy when other children did? Had I brought him too far? Made him leave his own natural and true habitat? I was so worried, I talked to his father about his going back. I felt sick when I did that, actually physically sick. And even worse afterwards. I had to lean over, my hands touching my knees, my hair dangling over my head, draping the floor.

In the end I couldn't do it. I kept an eye on him, though; kept that radical plan behind glass in case of emergencies.

I had forgotten about the island, about it being a place of outrageous extremes, of fairy tale animals, of terrible, dark cautions. I wanted the middle ground again, just for a day. I did not want the dark forests, the imaginary creatures, the yowling beasts. But I was drawn to it too, of course. It was my own childhood, my territory, my nature. And sometimes our nature makes us sick to our stomachs.

I began to collect books on the beast. Many island people did, just as if they were collecting biographies of family members. I read the books over and over. Jack did too. We read that its tail was heavy and stiff, as inflexible as a kangaroo's. It was a dog that could not wag its tail. How disturbing it must have been to own a dog whose tail you could not encourage to wag. It could make a person resentful, a tail like that. The creature had had a surprisingly large brain capacity, much larger than expected. I wondered what that large brain had been used for? Dreaming?

Caged in zoos, thylacines were seen by most people as boring. The creature did not seem to know that what was required of it was a performance of some kind. Even a rebellious, zoo-crazed frenzy would have been something. But having no understanding of people, they showed no fear. We simply did not exist for them, and to be ignored is, for human beings, the worst thing in the world. Mostly, the beast sat in its cage looking pitiful, meekly accepting the situation it found itself in, without protest. Alive, it had been completely without entertainment value. Now that it is dead, it is a vacant space, able to be filled with anyone's fantasies. It is replete with potential. People can't get enough of it.

There were protests over the research, of course. Some mornings I had to cross a picket line. I know how you feel, I wanted to tell the protesters. I know all the issues. I think about them too. You're right. This is a publicity stunt, a way to attract funding. But it is also so much more than that. Think of it as a resurrection, the raising of the dead. Such a thing has only been done once or twice before, and then by gods. How marvelous it would be!

Or is that what worries them?

But I was being unfair. Miracles, by their nature, provoke fierce, uncontrollable response. That is their purpose, surely.

And lately the creature was being spotted everywhere. People saw it in paddocks and scrubland, on mountains, even in small, suburban backyards. Dream tigers leaping suddenly out of the island's subconscious and, just as suddenly, being sucked back in again, disappearing immediately, covering all tracks. Most sightings, I noted, occurred at night. That made sense, I thought. The beast, after all, had been a nocturnal hunter. But, also, night is the time of shadows and dreams, the time of yearning. It has been seen on the mainland too, though it has been extinct there for thirty centuries. Resurrection is an effort of the imagination as much as anything.

I hoped the effort and expense of the work would be worth it. Humans rarely change their habits, however. We might bring the beast back only to see it quickly become extinct once more.

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It happened slowly, at continent-forming pace, but Jack began to ease into the island. He found a group of friends, sometimes even staying over with one or the other of them. He smiled a bit every now and then. He relaxed enough to give me a hard time. That was a good sign, believe it or not. It meant he was getting his confidence back. I took him to a small zoo one day with six or seven Tasmanian devils. He couldn't believe them. "They're just like cartoons," he said. One of them opened its obscene mouth wide and growled, setting all the others off. Jack howled with laughter.

I loosened up enough to plan a veggie garden. We stopped being tourists. This crazy idea of mine was actually working. Sometimes we just stood there grinning at each other. It was probably the relief more than anything. After such a grim time, one or two good things made us giddy, hysterical, as if we were particularly lucky and fortunate people. I don't know how it happened, except maybe that we just persevered. After all, we couldn't go back, not really. It happened because we'd had no alternative.

One lunchtime, I saw old Dot Lutin in the street, a neighbour from my childhood. She screamed and hugged me, and made everything about the past seem instantly solid and graspable. We had a good old chinwag over a cuppa. It calmed me right down. For the first time since we'd arrived, I felt like I belonged.

That afternoon I stayed at work until the corridors were silent, and I made my way to the dark, chill room where the valuable specimens were kept. It was not the only specimen, I knew, but it was the best. I opened the jar, removed the thylacine, insured recently for two million dollars, wrapped it in a newly bought baby blanket, and took it to the forest, where I buried it under the canopy of a vast tree. Jack made a strange face at me that evening as we were watching the news, as if he knew exactly what I had done. I just smiled back at him.

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*JEN WHITE is an Australian author of speculative fiction who has had short stories published in various anthologies and journals. Her short story "An Ordinary Boy" appeared in the anthology The Tangled Bank: Love, Wonder and Evolution. She also has stories in the anthologies Bewere the Night and Dead Red Heart.*

*Keeping a baby dinosaur safe and secret from prying TV people and scientists is no easy task for a kid. But when your family have been keeping their sacred traditions secret from those same people for generations, it might make things just a little easier.*

## **MY OWN SECRET DINOSAUR**

by Jo Antareau

“The sore is from when Addy scratched me. He’s only a little dinosaur. Didn’t mean to hurt me. He’s just bored from hiding in my room all the time. He’s a plantivore, so he’s not gonna eat me.”

Em stares at me as if listening will make her brain explode. “Get a band-aid on it and shut up. I’m Skyping.” She turns back to the screen. “Yeah, I’m stuck home babysitting the Piglet.”

I get on with caring for my toe. The sore isn’t deep, but Addy — and his claws — are getting bigger. He doesn’t look like nothing I’ve ever seen, except in a picture. His legs don’t stick out to the side like a gecko’s. Got big back legs and short front legs, like a T-Rex. First, I thought he was one of those chicken-sized dinosaurs, but now I reckon he might grow taller than the house. Already bigger than the cat. I’ve tried to teach him to catch a Frisbee in his mouth, but he’s as keen about that as the cat was.

He still needs his breakfast. He’s woke up properly now that the day’s getting warm, but I hardly let him out in the backyard no more. Plants starting to look sick coz Addy’s been chewing them.



"Hide, boy," I tell him, stomping my feet. I chuck a dandelion under the bed, and he has to wriggle to get under. Soon be too big to fit. I hear him snap his mouth, then he sticks his head out again, looking hopeful. I'm still stomping. "No, boy, stay hidden till the footsteps have stopped." We do it again and again till I've run out of dandelions, and he sticks his snout in my hand for more.

I been getting his food from the park. Fallen twigs and bits of grass aren't a good feed no more. Now I gotta take a hacksaw and drag some branches home, and get rid of them once he's eaten the green bits. People give me funny looks.

I tell Addy he won't need to wait long, he'll get food soon — yummy leaves. When Em's on Skype, which is most of the time, she wouldn't hear a bomb. So she won't notice if I go out and come home with half a forest on my back. Addy tries to follow me, but I shut the door just in time. He's getting faster.

Em calls out, saying she's off to the beach soon. She's meeting her friends, and I'd better hurry and get my gear if I know what's good for me. I ignore her. She'd be dead meat if Dad finds out she's left me alone. Dad's paying her to stay home with me, which is a pain, coz I haven't had a seizure for ages. So I tell her I'll be ready in my own good time, and sprint to the park. It doesn't take long to get some thin, new branches. I sling them on each shoulder.

On the way back, Len calls out "Hi." He's an old guy with grizzled white hair and beard. He says something about Birnam Wood going to Dunsinane, which makes no sense, but I figure it's about the branches.

"To feed my dinosaur," I tell him, and he chuckles.

"Just like yer Grandfather, you are. 'E always liked a good laugh."

Len knows that Dad and me like hearing stories about Dad's dad, coz we never knew him. But I really gotta hurry; Em might hear Addy scratching. Len starts telling me about how the Blackfellas use these branches. The smoke's sweet and good to heat rocks and cook fish, but already I'm walking away.

"Ah," Len calls out after me, disappointed. "This one won't never make a Blackfella. Likes 'is food from a supermarket."

I tell him I wanna hear about how Blackfellas live, but later. When I get to my room, Addy gets all excited. I figure he's a type of Iguanadon, coz he's got a spiky sort of thumb that sticks up. Been googling when Em's not hogging the computer. Not sure what type of Iguanadon, coz there's heaps of them. He grips his branch with his spike when he sits on his back legs and tears the leaves and green bits. Leaves the tough bits behind. His huge mouth works hard, like a person with a heap of gum. Gets a dreamy look to him when he's eating.

But he shat when I was out, so I get to work quick on the mess. When Addy shits, he don't muck around. Lots of runny green stuff, sorta like a cow pat. Heaps for a little guy, but I'm used to it. So I scrub with an old towel. Once used Em's towel by mistake. So funny when she found it; wanted to know who spilt the spinach curry over it.

Em's stomping down the hall, asking if I want her to kill me. So I tell Addy to hide, and shove him in the wardrobe with his breakfast. Just in time, coz Em sticks her nose in. I'm leaning on the wardrobe door. If she saw what was in there, she'd upload pictures on Facebook and YouTube fast as you could blink, then tweet everyone about it.

"What's with the leaves?" she says, scowling at the bits left on the floor. "You making a pretty flower arrangement?"

"To feed my dinosaur."

"They've got a special ward for people like you."

"Your friends are so boring," I tell her. "Why bother with the beach? You know it's crap with tourists who think they can surf and hog the waves."

"Better than being stuck at home with you, even if we have to put up with bloody tourists."

Tourists are one thing that Em and I agree on, but that's no big deal. It's like the whole town's programmed to roll its eyes and say that tourists whine about how cold the water is. If they want bath water, they shoulda gone to Queensland. They have no idea.

We've made a deal. For a cut of her pay, I'll keep my mouth shut about her leaving me home alone. But she's gotta take me when she goes to the beach, coz you can see halfway down the coast from Dad's pub. It's on the beachfront with a huge veranda. People sit on their asses all day and Dad brings 'em drinks, and chats. He'd see in two seconds flat if Em was at the beach without me.

Over the cold months, we do heaps of surfing. Dad goes early in the morning before work and takes us along. Em's embarrassed to be seen with an oldie on a long-board, and whines about how dumb I look surfing in a life-jacket. But with the waves and wind so loud, it's easy to ignore her. We hardly go over summer, coz Dad works heaps of shifts — about twelve hours a day. That's why he hasn't found he's got a baby dinosaur in his house. Or noticed that our shrubs have lost half their leaves.

If we hadn't gone surfing few months ago, I wouldn't have found Addy. His egg, I mean. It was a cloudy, windy day, so Dad says go sit on the beach. It was OK by me, coz the swell looked so scary, I woulda been kissing the rocks. So I hung

out on the sand, kicking a ball around. Then I spotted it. It was just a small rock, colourful. Colder than the water, like it had been frozen and not properly thawed out. Took it to school, then home.

I kept it in my wardrobe. Took me a few weeks to figure it was a hatching egg, and a few more days to remember about a ship from Antarctica. It was on the news — sank off the coast. Fancy scientific equipment and ice samples, now fish food. I figured his egg had been frozen, so it was still good after millions of years. That made Addy the oldest living thing ever. Pretty cool, eh? My own secret dinosaur.

Addy's been hatched for three weeks. His scales are brown and green. Got busy eyes, always looking for food. Once he chewed some coloured pencils and spat the middle. Tried nibbling the curtains. He makes little chipping sounds when he wants to go out, which is most of the time. I take him out back, let him run round when nobody's home, but not near as often as he'd like. Dunno what'll happen in two weeks when I go back to school. I could sneak back home during the day. Or pretend I'm sick again. No, stupid plan; I'd be back in hospital. Then who'd care for Addy?

Em makes a big deal of saying "Hi" to Dad when we go past the pub. He's having a ciggy out back, so I stop. Em goes, hoping she won't see me for the rest of the day.

When Dad goes on about life's-too-short, I know that something's about to happen. Maybe he'll blow his cash on something really cool, like a motorbike. Or just take off in the Kombi with Em and me. A few years ago, he chucked in his job in the city to work here in the pub after whining about life's-too-short. I always thought 42 years was a pretty long life, but I don't tell him so. Just wonder what his next plan will be, and hope it means we get more time to surf.

Len shows up. He doesn't seem mad with me.

"Hey, Lance!" He waves at my Dad. "How's it goin', cuz?"

He's so skinny his pants are bunched up around his waist, tied with string. Dad asks him where he's sleeping tonight, and he says he don't know, so Dad says, "Our house, Len."

Then Len says to me, "Blackfellas are lucky buggers. We can just go to any town in Australia — any town at all — and if you know where Blackfellas meet, you know you'll find a cuz or a bro. You know you'll get a bed or a porch to sleep on, or maybe they'll share their place under the bridge with ya. That's why you always hear Blackfellas yapping on about who was yer mum or yer dad or aunty.

Whitefellas broke up families; tried to kill our culture. So just knowin' who your people are is like a big 'Up Yours' to the Whitefella."

"They reckon Blackfella culture's extinct," Dad adds, his accent changing like it does when he's with Blackfellas. "But it's not. Just not obvious, unless you know where to look."

Makes me think of Addy, coz he's not extinct either. Just not obvious. Like it's not obvious that me and Dad are Blackfellas by looking at us, coz our faces go bright red in five minutes flat without sunscreen. We didn't know we were Blackfellas till Dad's mum told before she died. She said it like it was something bad.

"Well, Len." Dad clears his throat. "I reckon I'd like to be a proper Blackfella soon, if yer'll still have me. You asked if I wanted to be initiated — well, yeah, Len. Yes I do."

Len shrugs and tells Dad he's known all along. That was his own dad's mob, why wouldn't he want to? So why not do it next weekend? Dad's rapt! That's his next life's-too-short move.

"How do you get initiated?" I ask, coz I'm thinking I'll have a go in a few years.

"Gotta show how brave you are, and how well you can do traditional things. Spiritual things. We'll go to Jamorjah Island, stay for a few nights. You and Emily can camp with the women and kids. Then when your Dad come back, he'll be a real Jamorjah man."

"A few nights?" I say, trying to look happy. But all I'm thinking of is how Addy'll cope if I'm not there. How'll he get fed?

Len grins and tells me I'll have a great time. I'll learn to spear fish and hunt goannas, like a proper Blackfella kid. "Them lizards are good eating — easy to catch if you sneak up behind them, before they've warmed up proper. Just grab their tail and *whack*, hit their head on a tree before they can do anything about it." I think of Addy and feel sick, but I just smile.

That night, I find Addy's been scratching the door with his thumb claw. If he keeps going, it'll be sawdust. And he makes a noise that means he's hungry, so I gotta get him more food. Getting sick of that park, but what can I do? Dad and Len have a laugh when I go past with a stack of branches. "Got plenty of them on Jamorjah," Len calls out. This time I don't say nothing about my dinosaur. I'm starting to worry they might believe in him for real.

If I leave a stack of branches in my room, he might have enough to last him when I'm on Jamorjah. I'll come back to a huge pile of shit, but that's ok. Then I hear Em telling Dad she don't wanna go to Jamorjah Island for his initiation.

Wants time to herself, no babysitting. Bugger! I can't leave Addy home with her; she'd find him.

Addy curls up on my pillow and drops off quick. I lie awake, thinking how I can keep him safe if I go. If I can't keep him secret *now*, what's gonna happen when he gets bigger? He don't deserve getting hassled by TV people and cut up by scientists.

Jamorjah Island's got no tourists. No houses or shops either, just bush and hills and beaches. No toilets — you gotta dig a hole. Not much water, just one bore left from the days someone tried to farm there, so no bath! Blackfellas come when they want to do traditional stuff, and go when they're sick of it. Sometimes heaps of families camp there, sometimes nobody at all. Some rich Whitefella gave it back to the traditional owners years ago. No Whitefellas allowed to stick their noses in no more.

We heard stories about Blackfellas telling Whitefellas about sacred rock art or burial sites, and the Whitefellas promising that, no, they wouldn't never disturb it. Next thing you know, a bunch of arche-whatevers come dig it up and reckon it belongs in a museum. Like it's not important to today's Blackfellas. So Blackfellas know to keep their mouths shut.

Len's taken Dad and me to the island a few times, to learn the dances and stories, the sorts of things Dad's dad woulda taught us. Plenty stories and secrets we don't know. Dad reckons we don't even know a tenth of them. He won't hear 'em all till he's a proper Jamorjah man either.

Jamorjah would be perfect for Addy. It's empty a lot of the time. It's rocky and hilly, so there's plenty shelter. I can keep training him till he knows to hide from footsteps. But the grownups would probably say no to a dinosaur living there, even if they know to keep him secret. So I gotta sneak him there. Best of all, I'll get to visit.

And then I get an idea about how to get him there without nobody knowing.

We set off real early Friday morning. Dad, me, Len and some others who are part of the initiation.

I nearly stop breathing when Dad takes my huge backpack to load it on the boat. Addy's hidden in there, sitting on loads of cold soft-drink cans to keep him cool. My clothes are packed all around to keep the cold in, and to keep his head up near the opening, so's he can breathe.

"You got rocks in there?" Dad groans.

"Nah, packed lots to drink, like you said." Then I had a thought: "Why do people bring water in summer; don't they try to live traditional?"

Len answers for him. "They was nomads, went to shore in the dry season when the water's dried out. We do some traditional things, just to keep the culture going. But some things we do modern like. Culture's gotta change so it don't go completely extinct."

We're in an ancient runabout, and the guy driving meets the waves to make the boat jump. *Smack* — water sprays everywhere. Funny the first time, but I soon reckon my breakfast won't stay in. The backpack's sitting on the floor, and I hug it. Lean my head on top. The others on the boat are talking and laughing. Too busy to notice that I undo the zip a crack to let air in. Can see his face, eyes shut. Haven't felt him wriggle, so I hope he's ok. I feel too yuk to do anything, and shut my eyes. This trip is the worst ever.

When we get to Jamorjah, my legs are shaky and I'm sticky. Addy woulda had a worse time than me, squashed in the backpack, so I stop feeling sorry for myself. I tell everyone I wanna have a walk by myself, and head into the bush with my huge pack on. Once nobody can see me, I check on him. Still breathing. All sleepy with cold, he looks worse than I feel. I take the cans out, have a drink. Dump my stuff and carry him against my chest.

I go along the dry riverbed. The bush is real thick, easy to get lost if you don't know where the track is. I just keep saying, "Don't stop, nearly there," till I get to the waterhole. It's a muddy puddle right now, but in a hidden valley. With all the training I done, he'll probably hide when somebody comes. I finally lie down on a flat rock with him next to me.

He lifts his head before I do and scrambles to the nearest plant. He stands up and nibbles the leaves that hang down. Yay, Addy! He knew what to do. He's gonna be alright.

So when he's busy munching, I sneak back to camp. He don't follow. Dad and the blokes had set off ages ago. The others at the camp say "Hi," the kids happy to have another kid around.

People look worried when I tell them all I want is to lie down, play later. I get worse, feeling hot and sweaty, and things start to look blurry. They put me in a bark hut with lots of blankets, give me something to drink. I can't stop thinking about goannas getting their heads banged.

It's hard to sleep, even knowing Addy will be safe. I tell myself over and over that he's much bigger than a goanna. The Blackfellas will leave him alone. Even if they find him, they don't want no nosy scientists on their island. Addy'll be safe, gonna keep on teaching him to hide when he hears footsteps. Nobody's gonna bang his head. I can sleep now. Sleep, please!

The night goes by in a kinda haze. The day too. I'm still in bed and the night's deep dark when Dad and the men come back. I hear them, whooping and shouting. "Yes, yes!" and "He done real great!"

Dad sticks his head into the hut, and shines the light in. Hurts my eyes.

"That initiation's the most incredible thing I've ever done. Incredible." His voice hurts my head. "I saw Yarondero."

"Huh? Who?"

"Yarondero. The spirit, the actual spirit our ancestor fought to drink from the waterhole. It was a huge lizard like I've never seen before."

The words *lizard* and *waterhole* echo round my brain. "Addy?" I can hardly get the words out. I feel worse than before I went to bed. I'm dizzy like I haven't been since I was sick years ago.

"Mate, you look really off. You OK?"

"What happened to Addy — the lizard?"

"Don't tell anybody I told you, but that's what the initiation's about. You gotta spear Yarondero. And I did! Fabulous."

And I get sick, am sick and sick up all over the hut, all over Dad, all over the air ambulance. So sick I get a seizure, when I haven't had one for so long. So sick I'm back in hospital with all its spiky smells and shiny floors.

But I want to go back to Jamorjah. Back to Addy. Gotta see he's OK. Please, don't let Addy be dead. Not my secret dinosaur. Don't let it be Addy.

"Dad!" I say, and the words are hard to get out. He wakes up, coz he's been sleeping in the chair next to me. "Yarondero?"

Dad blinks at me, doesn't understand.

"What's he look like? Please."

But now Dad's looking spooked. Tells me it's sacred. My tumour coming back is his punishment for telling me about Yarondero and the initiation. It's wrong for me to know about Yarondero before I've had my own initiation. Says he never believed in spirit things before, just thought he had to kill a goanna. But the legends are real, he says. Real!

I gotta forget what he's told me, so's my tumour will go away.

I tell him it was my dinosaur. My dinosaur what I brought up from an egg. But he just cries and says it's worse than he thought. Delusions, he says.

Over the next few weeks, I wonder about what Dad said, about Addy maybe being just a delusion. When I actually do any wondering, that is. Most times I feel too sick to think. Sick from the tumour, sick from the operation and the medicine.

Len visits one day. Asks me which of the nurses I'm gonna marry. Good looking like me could take my pick. I tell him to *shhhh*, what if they hear? Anyhow, I'm not good looking right now. Can't keep my food in or my hair on.

I ask Len if he's been to Jamorjah, hoping to hear about Addy. He looks at me strange. Tells me he seen tracks round the waterhole. Tracks like he's never seen before, except in our backyard.

"Lotsa secrets in Jamorjah Island," he winks. "Not saying anymore, except that somebody not used to chucking a spear don't usually throw them strong."

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*[Author's note: Jamorjah island, the Jamorjah people and Yarondero are fictitious. Other elements in the story, however, are consistent with aspects of traditional and contemporary Indigenous Australian culture.]*

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*JO ANTAREAU is a Melbourne-based psychologist. She hopes you enjoyed the story; her first publishing success. She is currently working on a non-fiction manual and several pieces of children's fiction.*

Blog: <http://procrastinate-writenow.blogspot.com/>



*Cassie felt alone in the big city and estranged from her coworkers. But when a female Neanderthal skeleton arrives at the museum where she works, Cassie learns that a woman who has been dead for thousands of years still has something to teach the living.*

## **THE LANGUAGE OF ICE**

by David North-Martino

She awakens while the rest of the tribe is sleeping. Yet she knows she's in a dream. *Lucid dreaming? Is that what they call it?* But the world she has entered is so real, 360 degrees of sight and sound, temperature and smell. She huddles with the group, their body heat providing most of the warmth, while a low-burning fire, sputtering at the lip of the entrance, provides the rest. There is muskiness to their presence, but it is not an unpleasant odor, and she feels comforted by the fact she is not alone.

Carefully, so as not to waken the others, she rises and stands above them. She has seen them before, but the symmetry of their faces and the angles of their bodies are so much more beautiful, so much more robust, than a modern human could ever imagine. In the dream, she realizes she, too, is one of them. She pads across the frigid rock, every muscle fiber speaking of the latent power coiled within her limbs.

When she reaches the fire, she feeds a few pieces of wood into the flames; they pop and crack as the fire sears off bark, searching for the pulp inside. She does not want to leave the warmth, but something compels her to move on.

Outside the cave, the winter stillness greets her. The bloated moon sits atop the hills. She has never seen the moon so large.

Another crack, another pop registers in her ears, but not from the fire this time. Something or someone moves in the darkness, watching her from somewhere out of sight.

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There is a moment between sleep and wakefulness when an alarm clock creates a vacuum, a ripple in time as the alarm prepares to sound.

Cassie opened her eyes at that moment, just before 6 AM, caught in the confusion between her dreams and waking thoughts. Then the alarm rang out, clearing the muddle as she scrambled to shut it off. She buried her face in her pillow, resentful at how exhausted she always felt after a lucid dream. It was like she lived a full day in her dream world and now, without rest, had to pull another shift in this one.

She forced herself to rise and face the morning chill. The old brownstone could be a brick oven in summer and a freezer during winter. During the two years she had lived in Boston, she had upgraded the appliances and even had the floors refinished, but for heat she still relied on cast iron radiators. Since the chinked walls and single-pane windows didn't retain heat, she was left with a symphony of banging and clunking every time the hot water flowed through the radiators.

Like every morning, she showered quickly and ate a soggy bowl of cereal. The TV droned in the background. The weather reporter made her usual prediction for cold, and what else could there be in January? Cassie was just happy the snow had held off.

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No one looks at you in the city. Eye contact has been banned by some unwritten rule. During the walk to the T-station, she kept her gaze to herself — watchful but not focusing on anything in particular. She had memorized this walk; it was the same repetitive journey she could have traversed in her sleep whether her dreams were lucid or not.

The trick to riding the subway, she'd found, was to pick a spot, any spot, somewhere between her fellow passengers' heads or somewhere above them and stare at that location for the remainder of the ride. Today, she chose a spot above and to the left of a guy who stood in the stairwell and just a little to the right of a sign advertising Harvard Extension School classes. She'd tried other tricks, like the business woman, diagonally to her left, absently paging through a newspaper, or the young guy with his eyes closed pretending to listen to an iPod.

But no matter what she did, she could never lose the uncomfortable feeling of sitting with strangers and pretending not to look at them.

In the small town in Vermont where she grew up, the winters were colder but the people warmer. Here, people advanced and receded silently, like glacial ice.

Once the subway train reached its destination, Cassie exited. The routine was so ingrained in her now she no longer saw the sign for Science Park, only moved like an automaton into the throng of morning travelers.

The nameless, faceless people of the street became the nameless, faceless patrons of the Boston Paleontology Museum. The only difference Cassie could see was that she had a special duty to serve the ones on the inside.

"I brought coffee," Jonathan Frost said by way of greeting. He was a twenty-one year-old graduate of Boston College whom she had accepted as an intern mostly because he was intelligent but also because he was cute. He handed her a large, clear cup with a straw.

"Iced?" She arched her eyebrows and swirled the cup to emphasize the clacking of the cubes.

"Everyone likes iced coffee," Jon said, deadpan serious. She could never tell when he was joking or if he ever got her sense of humor. Not unusual for an anthropology major. Depending on her mood, she thought it either annoying or charming.

Armed now with caffeine, she unhooked the rope that kept the general public from entering the exhibit area and ushered him in.

The rest of the day was filled with the final preparation for the grand opening of the Neanderthal exhibit. Through collaboration with the Boston Museum of Science, the pieces came on loan from the American Museum of Natural History, the Chicago Field Museum and the Natural History Museum of London. Two weeks ago, the *crème de le crème* had arrived: a complete skeleton of a woman from the Ice Age.

*That's when my dreams began,* Cassie thought as she touched the glass case that held the remains of a simpler time.

"Did I tell you I've been having strange dreams?" Cassie asked, staring into the brightly lit case that cast harsh shadows in the half-light of the exhibit area.

"I don't think so, Ms. Caldwell," Jon said absently as he arranged plant fossils in another case.

She hated when he didn't call her by her first name; it made her feel old. Plus, at twenty-nine, she was only eight years older than him.

"Since the remains arrived, I've been dreaming that ... that I'm a Neanderthal woman." Cassie felt her cheeks redden. She tried to laugh it off. "Sounds kind of silly saying it out loud."

"Your mind's been on this for weeks," Jon said as he carefully arranged a delicate fossil. "Seems normal to me."

"These dreams are different. I don't know how to describe it. They feel real."

"The human mind can't differentiate between what's real and imagined." Jon unpacked another fossil. Cassie looked at him. The low light pulled at his flesh adding, in that moment, ten years to his face. Sometimes she wondered who was older, who was more experienced.

"Sometimes they feel like another reality."

"Your brain's just sifting through all your short-term memories, storing them, trying to make sense of them."

"Okay, professor." Cassie tried to smile. This was one of those times when Jon went from charming to annoying.

"I took an undergrad psychology class," Jon said as though that gave him all the authority he needed to render a diagnosis.

"Well, you're probably right," Cassie said not wanting to talk about it any longer. "I'm going to head out a little early today. You mind finishing up?"

"That's what you don't pay me for."

She thought she caught a hint of a smile.

"Hot date?"

"No. Unfortunately. I'm just tired." She was tired, and distracted, and maybe it was more Jon than her dreams. She knew he got together with some of the other interns for drinks after work. She hadn't been so lucky with her peers. It seemed when it came to working on a business level with colleagues things went pretty smoothly, but she had trouble bridging the gap between business and friendship. Her boss had told her she'd need to do that before she would ever be considered for a director position.

On the way home she stopped into a Portuguese convenience store. Under the florescent lighting, the fruit looked darker, less appetizing, but she picked some apples and a bunch of grapes anyway. Experience had taught her they had some of the best fruit in the area despite the presentation. A box of ostrich jerky also went into her cart along with a package of trail mix. When work was busy, they could stand in for lunch — or even dinner.

The Indian man behind the counter spoke to her as he rang her purchases. She smiled to feign understanding, even though his thick accent rendered his words unintelligible.

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Under leaden skies, she gnaws on meat from the bone of a freshly killed elk. The warm flesh tastes gamey but satisfies her hunger. Men, women and children squat with her, filling their bellies with life-giving nourishment. Some speak between mouthfuls or laugh in delight about the hunt. When she opens her mouth to speak only a shrill animal cry rings into the air. The others shuffle away from her, cocking their heads in confusion. Not knowing what else to do, she continues chewing and stares into the fire.

She doesn't remember beginning her meal but she does remember the hunt. The women who were not with child or had none to care for joined the men. They had trekked through the snow with spears at the ready, waiting for some creature to offer itself to them.

A man they called Jimal had the gift of calling animals. He contorted his face and pursed his lips and made the sounds of prey. It was another language she couldn't speak. She wished for the power of speech — not to call for food, only to call for a mate. She felt a terrible loneliness. Because she was not quite like them, her tribe kept her at a subtle distance, fearing what they did not understand.

Jimal hunkered down pulling his furs closer to his skin and gave another call to the wind. Like magic, an elk appeared and snorted steam from its nostrils. They rushed it, impaling the animal with their sharpened spears. And they praised it as it wailed in its death throes, soaking the ground beneath in blood.

Now, they treat the meat like the luxury it is and feel blessed that on this hunt no one has been injured. Many hunts ago, a man called Ugathar had been mortally wounded by a mammoth's flailing tusk. They had buried him with all the items he loved in life to comfort him into the great sleep.

Fresh meat is always welcome, but they have also mastered the art of smoking and salting so they can survive during times of least abundance. In milder temperatures, they pick berries and sometimes larger fruits, drying and curing them much like they do animal flesh so their skin does not turn yellow in the winter.

All her memories of the hunt flee when she hears the snapping of twigs and the rustle of something just beyond her vision. The others hear it too. The strong grab for their spears and prepare for whatever is about to come.

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Cassie opened her eyes. Not at the insistence of the jarring tone of the alarm clock, but to the sound of static buzzing over a talk radio personality, the white noise so overpowering it made his voice unintelligible.

Impatiently, she shut off the radio alarm, thinking she must have hit the wrong button when she set it the night before. Looking around, she saw that drab walls had replaced the wide expanse of Neanderthal territory. But she was still cold.

Jon was right, it seemed. While the realization saddened her, it also left her relieved. Shopping for food yesterday *had* informed her dreams. No matter how real they seemed, that's all they were — dreams. How long she would have them she didn't know, but she could rest assured that her memory wasn't regressing somewhere in time. She only had the real world and her real challenges and struggles to deal with. And wasn't that enough? Did she really need more than her day-to-day life?

Yet the emotional remnants of the dream, that feeling of icy loneliness, continued to haunt her.

During the familiar bout with cold cereal, she tried to watch the morning news. Static whispered through the speakers. She flipped through every station — all the same. She couldn't even listen; white noise captured all the sound. She worried about sunspots and mused to herself about Mercury going retrograde, but reasoned in the end that it was only the cable company messing up the signal again.

The subway train shook and rattled, hummed and screeched, vibration communicating from the track into the passengers. This time Cassie found a spot above and to the left of a rider facing her. In her peripheral vision, his eyes appeared to be looking right at her even though they were not, yet she couldn't seem to vanquish the feeling.

At the exhibit, throngs of patrons entered while she watched from a dark corner. She buttoned her sweater; even all the body heat that radiated from the crowd couldn't take the chill from her bones today.

The cacophony of voices echoed off the walls and the ceiling. She couldn't understand them; all she could do was watch. Children ran from mothers who scolded them, couples held hands and strolled through the bedlam trying to reach the brightly lit case, and all, no matter how bored some looked, marveled at the woman who had traveled from another age to be with them today.

Jon walked over to her and gave her a knowing smile.

"You were right," Cassie tried to say over the din.

Jon just motioned to his ears and shrugged his shoulders.

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A group of five men more refined in their looks than the males in her tribe approach them cautiously. Like them, the strangers are similarly dressed in skins and furs tanned from animals that had provided them food and now provide them warmth. Their faces hold a regal symmetry and are painted with what her waking self would recognize as manganese dioxide — brownish-black streaks beneath each eye to catch the glare of the sun. They hold spears as agile as their bodies must be, and whether they are friend or foe, no one in her tribe can tell.

They call out, but neither side can understand the other. That doesn't matter to her, though, and for perhaps the first time in her life she isn't afraid.

One man stands out to her and his eyes compel her to approach. The others in her tribe call out to her. She hears them only dimly and can't understand their words — but even if she could, she wouldn't care. Dropping her spear, she trusts that simple act of supplication to convey the understanding that she means no harm. In acknowledgement, the men lower theirs as well.

The man with the compelling eyes watches her as she walks toward him, and she can't tell if it is confusion or recognition that shows on his face. The same face with dark eyes; narrow nose; and thin, inviting lips that she, having now found, can't imagine being without. And she finds the ability to say these words that mean nothing and yet mean everything that she has ever wanted to say and has ever wanted to express:

"Unka sabo uv."

And all he can do is stare.

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She watches her life unfold from this moment as her tribe integrates with the early humans. Love blossoms in the spring and grows stronger in the summer. The birth of a new spring also brings the birth of her child — one, like so many others, that heralds the birth of the modern human race. For the first time, she is alive, so alive that the heartache intrinsic to a harsh existence is as fully realized as her new-found joy. She allows it all to wash over her; at least she isn't cold anymore.

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Cassie sat, enjoying an iced latte in an outdoor café. Spring had arrived and today the weather was as idyllic as it had been in her childhood. She wasn't cold or warm but in that perfect place between extremes. Looking out at the passers-by, she thought she caught a glimpse of someone familiar walking down the far

sidewalk. But his features were obscured by distance, telephone poles and other walkers.

Cassie left her cup on the grated metal table and walked past the partition that corralled the patrons who drank their drinks and continued their conversations. She hurried across the street, approaching the man at an angle.

He dressed similar to her in a navy suit and dark shoes. In his face, she saw familiar dark eyes, narrow nose, and thin lips, although this face was slightly fuller and the beard had given way to a clean shave. And she found the ability to say these words that meant nothing and yet meant everything she had ever wanted to say and had ever wanted to express:

“Unka sabo uv.”

And the man in the suit could do nothing but stare.

~ ~ ~

*DAVID NORTH-MARTINO's fiction has appeared in Dark Recesses Press, Afterburn SF and The Swamp. He is also hard at work on his first novel. When he's not writing, he's either chipping away at a long overdue college degree or studying martial arts. He lives with his very supportive wife in a small town in Massachusetts. Feel free to follow his blogs and befriend him on Facebook.*

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/dnorthmartino>

Blog: <http://davidnorthmartino.wordpress.com/>

Blog: <http://davidnorthmartino.blogspot.com/>



## **TWEEN TIMES**

*Mythic tales and near-future accounts that could have been and could easily still be*

*With human hunters decimating his sleuth, Kerg concocts a desperate plan for survival. Just one problem — he isn't the only one looking out for family.*

## **TWILIGHT OF THE CLAW**

by Adam Dunsby

I swing my paw at the man's head. His hair twists in my claws as he dies. A grunt alerts me when the remaining man throws his spear. It passes over my shoulder, cutting a small channel in my fur, drawing a line of blood. I reel, but instead of killing this small thing immediately, my frustration bursts from me, and I roar, my breath blowing the long, black hair from his face.

"Go," I bellow. "Go from our land!"

I wait to see if he will run. He doesn't. His face says defiance. I bite and shake — not fast, for I am no longer young, but firmly, as only an age-toughened body can — and the man dies with a weak groan. I'm surprised he gives me that small satisfaction.

Tur lies dead. He was a mighty bear. I swipe at the ravens that peck his wounds. I've left them plenty of men to feed on. A spear protrudes from Tur's throat. A lucky hit. The men are not even good throwers, but there are many of them. Their luck is adding up.

We are now the hunted.

My young cub Kip bounds past me and tugs at a man's stolen skin — camel, it smells like. This land has been my greatest ally and greatest enemy. Some days it has offered up both slow prey and heavy fruit; some days powerful storms, drought, or disease. But in the end, it has always relented — clinging to us as we cling to it. And for Kip and his cubs it will be the same. Or so I have always believed.

Near the horizon a line of smoke rises, disappearing into the thin clouds. A raven lands on Kip's back as he noses over a body.

I decide. Leave. We must leave.

~ ~ ~

The bears come from all directions. All who are left. I count 33. Two more lost to man, not counting Tur. And the bears of this year are not the bears of last, when men were but a curiosity — just one more meal offered up by the plain. Some of the bears limp. Ribs protrude.

I begin before the young males start fighting. Though tonight it will be a fight between the old males I fear.

I stand on my hind legs. "Man! They come in greater and greater numbers. We can no longer pretend. We have no choice. We must leave. Find new lands."

A roar of shock is their response.

Bek rises to his hind legs. The low sun makes the scars on his torso appear to bleed afresh. When his father took the Ancestor Walk, he and I were the two candidates for Dominance. I won. But Dominance is like a hillside of rocks: impressive to the eye, but not so hard to send tumbling.

"Kill them," he cries. "Kill them all!"

I respond before the shouts of approval can drown me out. "We have killed them, and still they come. We have found their cubs and killed *them*, and still more men come. Their numbers grow. Even if we kill ten of them for every one of us, this land will become theirs. We must cross the river."

Bears shout, but to my surprise, cries of "It's time!" blend with "Never!"

To my side, Kip rubs against his mother. I look out. Yes, Bek's cub is crouching in his shadow.

"Bek! Look at the cub at your side. What you say is fine for you. But what of her? You shall go down a hero, dragging thirty men with you. But there will be thirty more behind them. And thirty more after that! When you are gone, and when the rest of these warriors live only in stories, what will become of her?"

Bek does not respond immediately, and in that gap Grot stands. He is the oldest of us. "What do we do, Kerg?"

A bear snarls, and Grot silences him with a glare. As the saying goes, an old bear at least has luck.

"We must cross the river," I say. "Now. Soon the spring flood will be upon us, and we will be stranded here, on this side."

"Kerg," says Grot, "man is at the river. At the crossing spot. He will stand on the ledges and cast spears down."

Many bears now speak at once. It feels like I stand amid a flock of geese. But let them talk. It is better if they convince themselves.

"The mammoths." All talking ceases. Bek steps forward. "If mammoth and bear rush the river at once, there will be too many for the men to kill. Most of us will make it."

"What makes you think the Grey Tusks will leave the plain?" asks a warrior bear.

Bek looks at the cub huddled against him and says nothing.

~ ~ ~

This time of year, the Gray Tusks will be on the far side of the south hills. The grass always comes in there first. It's a warm day, and the warmth rouses the flies. They burrow under my fur and bite.

I rear up, snap pointlessly at a fly, and sort through the smells. Budding osage trees, camel dung, a bison carcass — my mouth moistens; I'll explore the carcass on the way back — and, yes, mammoths, just over this next run of hills.

The adult mammoths search for new grass. The young bulls, bursting with clumps of fresh brown hair, lock tusks and twist heads. But these normal activities deceive; this herd was once much greater. And there were two other herds. Dead or left? I don't know.

I recognize Old Mother from the gray streaks in her faded brown ears. I trot down the hill toward her, but make it no more than fifteen paces before two bulls rush up and block my path. I offer a guttural growl, but they don't give way. One scrapes the ground with the arched nails of his foot, signaling a charge.

A raspy bray rises over the herd. Old Mother.

The bulls check themselves then move aside. Soon they are once more smashing their faces into one another. Ah, youth.

I practice my lines as I approach her.

"It is an honor, Old Mother. You and your herd look fit."

She regards me with a watery eye, tugs stalks of grass from the ground, and stuffs them into her mouth.

"Fit to rot," she says, munching. "But I do love sweet talk. Your grandfather was a sweet talker. Just twenty years ago he stood right where you are, complimenting me on my calf's fine dark brown —"

"We're leaving."

Her trunk drops, and she lets it fall all the way to the ground, as if that had been her intention all along. She pulls up more grass.

"Leaving for good," I continue. "Across the river. Man hunts our food, steals carcasses, even hunts us. But we've waited too long and now we need your help."

"Really."

"And you need ours." I go over the flooding, men throwing down spears, and how if more of us make the journey, more of us are likely to survive.

She takes it all in, keeping her thoughts hidden.

"You'll be remembered on both sides of the river," I blurt.

She smiles. "Clever. That comes from your mother."

"So will you help us? Together we'll rush the gap."

"No."

My ears sag.

"We mammoths make for much easier targets than bears."

I look at the ground. I was foolish to think I could sneak that by her. "But—"

"*But* I have a better plan. A group of you short-faced bears will rush the men — if they are there. While you fight, the rest of us will cross the river."

Having just attempted to lay most of the sacrifice on the mammoths, I can't make an issue of how her plan lays disproportionate death on us — not without causing an argument that may ruin it all. Some of the bulls edge closer, and mothers nudge their calves away.

"Why not send some of those bulls?" There is meekness in my voice, and I grimace inwardly.

To my surprise she says, "Very well, we'll have a contest."

I try to look puzzled. I'm not sure that I succeed. "What kind?"

"A memory contest."

I laugh, unable to control myself, and I actually use a paw to wipe the smile from under my snout.

"Really now," I say. "The mammoths can remember when these hills were mountains."

Old Mother looks defeated. "Well, it was worth a try." She lets a smile seep in. "We'll do a rock drop."

I nod. I make arrangements and turn to leave.

"Oh, Kerg, just one more thing. A pride of lions is stalking us. They're making some of the younger mothers nervous. Be a dear and shoo them away."

My mouth hangs open.

She smiles sweetly at a young bull who has sauntered to within a few paces of me. "Of course, Kerg, we could always remain here one more year, perhaps two."

A fly enters my mouth, and I clamp down and swallow the filthy thing. Then I go searching for lions.

---

I wander the lowlands scanning the potholes, scanning the cattails, even scanning the sky. I draw a long breath through my nose. There are no lions. A patch of water grass trembles. I take an even longer breath, letting the humid air linger.

Clever, aren't they.

"Come out, lion. I know you're in there."

A young, mud-covered lion rises from a pothole. The prince Felos.

I laugh. "You look like a drowned prairie turkey."

He bounds from the mud and stops a few paces from me. Lionesses saunter up to his side, eyes on me. One licks the mud from his neck, her tongue making long strokes from his shoulder up to his mane. He purrs, somehow maintaining his ferocity. But lines of ribs push through his skin, and I fill in the gaps. His father is dead, either killed by man or by man-caused starvation. Felos is struggling to keep his pride fed.

I shouldn't smile, but I do. "Covering yourself in mud. Well that's a new one."

Felos licks the lioness. She purrs. "New situations require new tactics."

"Does this mean you're actually going to hunt for yourself?"

Felos roars, revealing he still has plenty of strength left in him. All of their eyes glow, like a den of snakes in twilight. If I take even a half step back they'll pounce. They pause, waiting to see what I'll do. I feel my windpipe contract under an imaginary lioness's jaws, but I don't move.

"Enough! We are busy here. Pass on, bear!"

I clear my throat and manage a half step forward. "Listen Felos, I won't be long. Old Mother just asked me to say that they're on to you, and you won't be getting anything from them."

Felos sinks back on his haunches and bats a mosquito. He lets dejection show for the blink of an eye.

"The camels should be on the move," I continue. "Why not try them?"

"Camels are so fast," he whines.

As I start to leave, a lioness whispers in Felos's ear. He leaps to my side.

"Why are you helping Old Mother? She can do nothing for you."

My eyes lock on his. They are sunken, and I still see his jutting ribs in my periphery. "Because we are leaving. We choose not to battle men any more."

This surprises him.

As I walk away, he speaks in a sly voice. "Old Bitch they should call her. I'd sooner swallow a tusk than trust her."

~~~

I tell Greta everything.

"Felos is right," she says, stroking our sleeping Kip. "Don't trust Old Mother."

"It's a bad situation. We'll all be in danger. We have to help each other."

"Oh, do you think that is what she is telling her calves? No, she is saying race across the river as fast as you can. Push the bears aside. They have short legs, they won't be able to keep up!"

I motion her to keep her voice down, so as to not wake Kip. She continues in a whisper.

"You've seen the men wearing bear claws around their necks. Is that what you want for Kip?"

She leaves out, "Our only surviving cub." But she pauses, so I can fill that part in.

"But—"

"We owe the mammoths nothing, Kerg."

"But—"

"The way of the plain is survival. That's what you've always said."

Before I can respond, she runs her tongue up my cheek. I grow warm and mount her. I try to make it last and I succeed. But probably only because I am old.

~~~

Bears and mammoths face each other. Between us stands Cape, a filthy condor. His body is as black as a tar pit, his featherless head the color of carrion left in the sun.

The flat stone lies in the dust between us, the image of a rising sun visible on the face-up side. Cape clutches the stone in a rough orange talon, spreads his dark wings, and ascends.

Old Mother speaks, "My mother always picked sun. My mother's mother always picked sun." Cape drops the rock. "So I pick sun as well!"

The young bears and mammoths race to the spot where the falling rock will hit.

"Sun! Old Mother, it's sun!" cries out a bull. "The bears will be the decoy attack!"

Forty brown trunks reach for the blue sky and bray. We bears glare at the ground and murmur. All but one young bear, who — as I instructed — scoops up the stone and runs off.

~~~

I watch the sun set over the hills. When I was a cub my father would watch and smile as I slid down the slopes of loose dirt. Once he even did it with me. After

five or six slides my dark fur would be covered in the tan dust and I would find my mother wherever she was and pretend I was a lion. "Roar," I'd say.

Cape slowly spirals down and lands at my side. His breath smells of rotten organs. It does not seem right that such a vile creature has been given the gift of flight. If we had it, the men would never catch us, and we would swoop down and kill them as we wished.

I dig a little and drag the bison carcass – the bird's reward — from the hole. Cape has his greedy little head in its gut before I let go. When his head returns to the world of the living it is draped in gore. He is so excited he bounces from one leg to the other. Disgusting.

"So tell me, Kerg, I understand scratching a sun on both sides of the rock, but how did you know that's what the old beast would pick?"

I smirk. "Does anyone ever pick the blank side?"

He shrugs, and guzzles the bit of intestine hanging from his beak. "Still, to lose on purpose — what are you up to?"

I give him a ferocious look, reminding him that silence is part of the deal, then leave to be with my own kind.

"Oh, just one more thing."

I slow down, but don't stop.

"When is the crossing? I wouldn't want to miss it."

~ ~ ~

Low, dark clouds rumble toward us, a herd of bison trampling the firmament. Fear colors every face — bear and mammoth — and each time the sky flashes Kip pushes his face deeper into his mother's fur.

Old Mother rocks side to side. "I don't remember a sky as fierce as this. It's almost as if it's chasing us."

I order the old bears, Bek and Grot, to come with me to attack the men. At Greta's insistence, I take five young bears as well. Fires burn up on the ledges; they're like bolts of lightning held in place by old wood and brush. Another gift I wish we had.

We begin our ascent. One of the young bears is transfixed by the flames. I nose him onward but say nothing. Familiarity with fear will serve him well when it is his turn to lead.

Halfway up the cliff I stop. "Wait here."

My fellow bears look puzzled. Grot begins to speak, but I cut him off with shake of my head. I proceed up the rocky path on my own.



Pointed sticks stab the ground, as numerous as the pigeons that winter chases across the sky. Dirty smelling men block my path. One steps forward. Backlit by fire, he looks like a burning, evil spirit—which is what he is. Bear claws hang around his neck.

“Kerg,” he says with a smile.

“Pu’nah,” I say. I hear the stamping of mammoth feet begin in the distance. “So we have a deal. Only the mammoths. And only a few of them.”

Rain falls, hissing as it strikes the fire.

“Of course Kerg, a deal’s a deal.”

Through the wet smoke I smell another, and my lips pull back from my teeth. Pu’nah’s grin widens at my realization. Felos steps forward. A group of lionesses follows him.

“Felos!” I shout, hoping the other bears will hear me.

He ignores me and says to Pu’nah in a bored voice, “Are there more?”

“I think maybe one or two down the path.”

“Let’s make this quick, shall we? I’m starving.” Felos motions with his head, and the lionesses trot off. To me he explains, “An alliance. We don’t kill men, they don’t kill us.” He grins, showing more teeth than I have ever seen in one place.

“Our victory feast is tonight.”

Felos’s belly bulges. The men have fed him. King of the plain, indeed. He rocks back slightly on his rear legs, preparing to spring. Men raise spears.

“You’re next,” I say. “The men will betray you.”

*Just as I betrayed the mammoths.*

Roars and snarls rise up from the slope as the lionesses find there are more bears than one or two. Felos shifts his eyes slightly and gives Pu’nah a look of concern. The sky groans with thunder.

Survival on the plain is mostly running and biting and screaming at storms. But there are a few things one needs to know. First among these is that you never take your eyes off your opponent.

I leap at Felos. He has a more powerful bite, but I am larger. I drive him over, managing to get my snout beneath his jaw, keeping his teeth away from my throat. I bite into his neck and give a sharp shake, and it is over. The men are smiling, spears down, not moving to help their ally. Perhaps it was their plan that we would kill each other.

I no longer hear the roars of lionesses and bears. They could be all dead. The men direct their smiles at me, some with raised spears. The puddle of blood I see

before me comes as a surprise. It's mine. Felos got a claw into my chest. Now I'm happy I killed him.

The ground shakes — not from the heavy thunder but from the footfalls of the mammoths. They are almost to the river. Men line up on the edge of the cliff and raise their spears. One man hurls his, and I hear the death whinny of a young mammoth who has gotten out ahead.

"Pu'nah wait!" I cry. "Let them go. Feast on the dead bears and lions tonight." I hold out my paws. "Have these, the paws of the Dominant, to wear around your neck."

He looks at me with mock pity. Loathing clenches my throat.

"I will have your claws, thank you." He sweeps his arm in the direction of the charge. "We will have it *all*."

I leap at Pu'nah, but men are not as stupid as lions. A spear pierces my leg and I fall. I hear the screams of bears and mammoths. Men with spears rush up to me for the easy kill.

Lightning streaks everywhere. My fur burns. Thunder pulverizes my ears, and I can't tell if I am lying down or tumbling through the air. When the world settles, I am flat on the ground with charred and smoldering men scattered about me.

A fissure that had not been there before now snakes across the ground, and what had been a flat ledge now slopes gently downward. Smoke rises from the very rocks. I strain to all fours, but my injured leg gives way. Three men with spears come toward me. I struggle up and lurch. But not toward them.

I dive into the fissure, and push with my good hind leg against one side and my shoulders against the other. Nothing happens. Men laugh at me. I push harder, my ribs popping, realizing I will probably die looking a fool. A few pebbles fall onto my belly. The crevice widens, and the ground lurches downward. A man on the rim of the ledge falls screaming into the river.

The men rush up the now steepening slope. Flashes of lightning illuminate the fear on their faces, and they lose interest in killing me. They stumble into the trench I hold. Some I push back. Some I kill. A few make it past me. Rocks roll toward the river. So do men.

Pu'nah strains to get over the fissure. Two arms and a leg make it across, but I bite into his lagging leg. As we struggle, other men use my back as a bridge.

"Let me go," Pu'nah yells. "You stupid beast! We can both live!"

But I don't need to let him go to live. I will live in stories. I will live in Kip's memory. And I will live as a part of this land. I crush Pu'nah's head in my jaws. The ground cleaves, and we fall.

~~~

I float. I am a spirit now. Perhaps I will see my father. Who else might I see? I keep my eyes closed, not wanting to know the answer, not wanting to think of those whom I've betrayed. Something lands on my nose. *Ach!* The spirit of a fly? I swipe it away and open my eyes.

I lie on a lumbering mammoth. Bears and mammoths trudge forward. The plain before me is just as never-ending as the one behind. The sky is blue and stretches into the same infinity. I crane my neck backward, but it feels like it's full of cactus prickles, and I let my head fall again onto the mammoth.

"Old Mother?"

From a few paces away I hear, "Over here, you fool. I'm far too old to be carrying bears around."

I smile and it hurts. Everything hurts. My lower body is little more than an assortment of bone fragments.

"Believe it or not, Kerg, you're in much better shape than the man we found lying underneath you. Not enough left for a buzzard there. Oh that reminds me." She reaches her trunk behind her ear. "That cub of yours will make quite a hunter some day. This poor bird's feet had barely touched the ground before he was hanging from Kip's mouth. Though for the life of me I don't know how you eat this stuff." She tosses me something.

It's the leg of a condor.

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*ADAM DUNSBY has published speculative fiction in venues such as Story Quest Magazine and The Nautilus Engine. He has also published nonfiction in the field of investing. He lives in Connecticut.*

*When Neanderthals — born from surrogate humans and raised in human households — kill a man for just cause, will the court let them have their say? Should they be tried as humans or treated as animals?*

## **TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT**

*First published in Cosmos Magazine #35*

by Kyle Aisteach

It started with the deposition. "State your name and occupation for the record." I glanced at the computer to make sure it was recording.

"Sara Wiedergeburt." She spelled it without me asking.

Dr. Wiedergeburt carried herself with class. She sat erect in the oversized leather chair, wrinkled hands folded on the oak table in front of her, silver-grey hair folded back in a style that should have looked thirty years out of date, but somehow just seemed right on her. "Ph.D. Retired."

"You understand," I said, reading off the notes, "this deposition is in connection with the disposal of the results of experiments in which you participated?" I looked for a non-verbal reaction. "That would be prior to your 'retirement.'"

She inhaled deeply before answering. "If by 'results of experiments,' you mean my daughter," she said, "then yes, I'm aware they want to kill her."

The district attorney had warned us that the participants referred to the Neanderthals as their children. Probably Dr. Wiedergeburt's idea — her field was cognitive psychology. "According to the notes I've got from the depositions of the other participants, they say the experiments were your idea."

"That's correct."

"Can you tell us how they came about?"

She nodded slightly to one side, a very distinctive gesture. "I had a friend in Connecticut at the time who was working on sequencing the Neanderthal genome."

"That would be Dr. David Latham, is that right?"

"Yes." She seemed to relax, crossing her legs and placing her hands on her lap. "You may recall that in the late 1990s, President Clinton ordered a federal funding ban on human cloning."

I just smiled politely. I wasn't born until the following decade, but I've always looked older than I am. Most people don't realize that the lawyers who get stuck taking depositions are the ones with the least seniority, and I considered myself lucky to even have a job, given the economy.

"I was having lunch in the cafeteria with a geneticist colleague of mine, Dr. Babar Kurup," she continued. "He passed away in 2020. He had worked out a reliable way to clone apes. He commented that the process was theoretically ready for human trials. But since the university, like most schools, received federal funding, human cloning was absolutely forbidden. I merely noted that a Neanderthal wasn't technically human, and I knew someone who had access to the genetic sequences."

I stared at her, dumbfounded. "You mean to tell me—"

"—That the greatest paleo-anthropological experiment ever conducted was actually just an attempt to circumvent a stupid human-cloning ban," she finished for me. "Yes."

I remember I felt like laughing, but didn't. "And you didn't think it through beyond that."

She shrugged. "In that moment, no, it was an offhand remark. But Babar, David and I gave it a lot of thought before we actually proceeded."

"What did you think you were going to do with a Neanderthal child?"

"Exactly what I did." Her tone turned suddenly clipped. "I planned to raise it as my own child. A Neanderthal child. Raised in a human household with a human parent. Brought up in our culture. An experiment that would demonstrate what sort of cognitive and physiological differences there were between *Homo sapiens* and *Homo neanderthalensis* — to let us see what was cultural and what were, in fact, species-specific differences."

"And you thought this would work."

"Yes. My niece is autistic. I saw no reason to predict, even based on low-end estimates of Neanderthal mental abilities, that it would be any harder. "

"And, what, you planned to send her to school like all the other kids?"

She smiled through tight lips. "At the time, we did not know that Neanderthals were orange."

I remember just staring. Of course, it would have only been after the cloning that we actually knew what a Neanderthal looked like. Pictures in old textbooks always showed Neanderthals appearing to look like modern humans, but with shallow foreheads. "You planned to pass her off as human."

She closed her eyes and sighed slightly. "Honestly, at the time, I thought she would be human. There were two schools of thought then. One said that Neanderthals were a different species, a genetic dead-end, and that *Homo sapiens* had emerged independently from *Homo erectus*. The other school of thought said that Neanderthals were modern humans, but basically a different ethnic stock, one not found in modern populations. The genetics favored the former theory, but, as you know, I'm not a geneticist."

"And what were you going to do with her when your experiment was done?"

"Again," she remained cool this time, "exactly what I did. Raise her as my child, let her become what she wanted to become, and then do what all parents do."

"And you never thought about the consequences."

"No," she said. "And I still don't. Rennie has done nothing wrong."

"Dr. Wiedergeburt," I said, "a man died."

"Rennie didn't do it."

I looked at the notes. They only said that a clan of Neanderthals deliberately stalked and killed a man. Nothing indicated which of the animals had been involved. "Do you have some evidence of that?"

"She was at home with me when it happened." She stared at the table. "But, I'm her mother. Of course I'd say that."

"You're aware of the laws that prohibit keeping and raising dangerous animals, right?"

"She's not an animal. Mr. Jackson, I need you to understand that. I accept now that she's a different species, but ... she thinks. She has hopes. She has dreams. The differences between our species — they're so minor. If it weren't for the skin color and the body hair, you'd never doubt she was human."

I let myself go down the tangent. "What are the differences?"

She seemed to consider for a long time before answering. "For one thing, she only gestated seven months. When I had the embryo implanted, we just assumed I'd carry her to a normal human term. But she came out two months early, and

appeared to be fully developed. Orange and covered with body hair, but fully developed. After that, we warned the obstetricians first."

That was quite an image. But either she hadn't been joking or her timing was acute enough to know when to press on, because she continued immediately. "I named her Rennie. It's short for Renaissance. Sort of a bad joke, actually."

My mother's name was Renée, a more common take on the same theme.

"She grew quickly. Very strong. Linebacker build, and we had cloned one of the smaller female samples. Amazing sense of smell. She can track me like a bloodhound. But she's red-green color-blind. Another contribution to our gene pool from the genetic 'dead-end.' We found, observing her, that she's much more literal than the average human. Genuinely atheistic. She and the later Neanderthal children all sincerely don't understand how we can imagine a God that can't be seen or touched. And really, that's it. Skin color, body hair, sense of smell, color blindness, different sense of symbolic representation. That's all the differences there are. Somehow that was enough to let our species out-compete their species 25,000 years ago. And really, except for the skin color, I could name *Homo sapiens* who exhibit every trait we've observed in a Neanderthal, behaviorally or physiologically. Even the body hair."

"How many clones did you end up making?"

"Twelve." There were fifteen being held, which meant three were subsequently bred. "When Rennie was two and the brouhaha had died down, we decided it was worthwhile to try again, to ensure that we had a broader sample base. So we didn't conclude, for example, that all Neanderthals were good at math because Rennie was. She was counting at eighteen months and adding at two. And it's a good thing we did, because Rennie was unique in that. The second one, Joseph — that was Maria Rodriguez's son — can barely add to this day. But, oh, what a talker he is."

"Was he one of the ones who killed Dr. Wanaker?"

She exhaled deeply and studied the bamboo floor. "I believe so, yes. He was always very protective of Rennie."

The notes didn't give me any hint of what she might mean. "I'm sorry?"

She looked directly into my eyes. She had piercing gray eyes, the kind that seem as though they can pull thought and emotion directly from the minds of others. "Didn't they tell you the circumstances, Mr. Jackson?"

"I have here that a group of five male and two female Neanderthals stalked and later killed Dr. Wanaker at his home. Dozens of witnesses saw them drive him

off the roof and then jump and cheer as he convulsed on the sidewalk. They made no effort to summon help, and showed no remorse."

"They also didn't resist when the police placed them into custody." She folded her arms. "Nor did the others, when officials came around to take them, too. And if there hadn't been so much debate about how to kill them, they would have all been executed without due process before we got the injunction."

It's always a little annoying when laypeople spit out a vague legal principle out of context, but I pressed on. "Dr. Wiedergeburt, the Neanderthals, by your own admission, are not human. Therefore they are animals. That means they're dealt with according to the laws regulating any other animal. And an animal that attacks a human is, by law, properly put down."

"Dr. Wanaker raped Rennie."

That stopped me cold. But, of course, manipulating emotions was her expertise. "That's a rather sensationalistic accusation."

"He submitted a paper about it!" She nearly spat, the biggest crack I'd seen in her demeanor. "Rennie has always been very passive. Especially around men. I'm not sure why. She certainly didn't get it from me."

That I could see. "Is this paper available anywhere?"

She directed me to a preprint online. I scanned it quickly, but it was written in technical jargon. "In a nutshell," she explained, "it tells how he informed — not asked — Rennie that he was going to see if modern humans and Neanderthals could interbreed by impregnating her, and proceeded to try. On four separate occasions. She didn't tell me, of course, until afterward, when I asked her at the zoo what Joseph and the others had been thinking."

I scanned through some more. It did seem to corroborate what she was saying, but none of that would change the law. "I don't think that's going to affect the case."

She stood up and walked over to the window, looking out across the rooftops below. Our office had one of the best views in the city, if you were lucky enough to be near a window. "Our lawyers agree," she said. "The first step is to get them declared legal persons. Then, well, if we can get a fair trial we might use that as a mitigating factor." She turned back to me, her arms folded authoritatively. "I'm not asking you to condone what they did. None of us do. Rennie doesn't. I'm just asking you to accept that they're not animals. They protected one of their own."

"Dr. Wiedergeburt, I'm afraid I'm only here to take your deposition."

She smiled. Genuinely, as best I could tell. "Of course." She sat back down.

"Where did the Neanderthals learn to kill?"



I remember the cold look that came across her face to this day. It literally sent a chill down my spine. You can almost hear the expression on the recording. "That would be Dr. Llorneil's contribution." Again, she spelled it. "He was interested in studying Neanderthal acquisition of life skills. So he set out teaching them best-guess reconstructions of Neanderthal technology. Stoneworking. Leather crafts. Pitch-glue making — they never did figure that one out, Lord knows how the prehistoric Neanderthals did it. And, yes, hunting. I have no idea what he got out of it, but the children seemed to enjoy it."

"He thought these skills were innate or something?"

"Something like that." She paused as if trying to recall something. "*Homo habilis* made stone tools, but showed no evidence of evolution in toolmaking. So it's thought that they made tools the way birds make nests, on instinct, not intellect."

"And he taught them to chase prey with fire and sticks?" I asked.

"It's thought that they hunted larger prey by chasing it off cliffs, yes." Her voice had gone flat, resigned. "The murder of Dr. Wanaker is exactly what Dr. Llorneil taught them to do ... only with human prey and a city environment."

"And no one thought that what they were being taught might be dangerous?"

She exhaled strenuously. "You don't expect your children to grow up to be murderers, Mr. Jackson. No parent does. In hindsight, I think we were grateful for the break. We had to teach them ourselves. We couldn't send them to school, you know. No, ten families, twelve children, and one really raucous home school. And now three of them have children of their own..." She just shook her head as she trailed off into silence.

I waited a moment before pressing on. "Do you feel you could have done something differently to prevent what happened to Dr. Wanaker?"

She pierced me with those eyes again. "You mean would I advise another mother raising a Neanderthal child to do things differently, or was there something I should have known at the time?"

"Either."

"I did the best I could. We all did. We did nothing that any ten other families wouldn't have done. But obviously, we learned a lot in the process. Just as any grandmother has more experience than any new mother, yes, I could think of things I'd do differently. I still regret losing my temper when she chewed up my African woodcarving."

I let a laugh escape. "That wasn't on your list of differences in the species."

"That's because my brother also teethed on anything and everything," she said.

"Did you have any other children?" I realized only after the words came out how I had phrased the question.

"No," she said. "I never married. I was 37 when Rennie was born. I think that was part of the reason I was so ready to volunteer."

"Just one more question, Dr. Wiedergeburt. Were there any warning signs of violent tendencies among the Neanderthals?"

She stood up and walked to the window again, hesitating a long time before answering. "No more so than with any other child."

"But you had no children."

"I've studied child development extensively," she said quietly, not turning around, "and written two books on the subject."

"Very good," I said, bringing the recorder back to the foreground. "Do you have anything to add?"

"Just that they're people," she said, still not turning around.

"Thank you," I said, pressing *stop* on the recorder.

"Is the recorder off?"

"Yes."

She finally turned back around. Her whole demeanor had changed. Suddenly she looked frail, vulnerable. "Mr. Jackson, there are fifteen scared people being held in a zoo. A zoo, Mr. Jackson."

"Dr. Wiedergeburt—"

"I know," she said, holding her hands up placatingly. "I know that officially you're powerless to do anything. But I'm not asking officially. I'm appealing to your humanity. They're trying to kill my daughter."

"There's really nothing I can do," I said, quite sincerely.

"Yes," her voice dropped a register as she sat back down across from me, reaching out to rest her hand on mine. Her skin felt leathery, but her touch was gentle. "Actually, there is."

"I'm just —"

"A junior lawyer at a law firm hired to take depositions for the government, yes," she said. "But tell me, when was the last time you saw a dangerous animal case where the animals in question spoke English and could speak for themselves?"

She was, of course, correct. The Neanderthals weren't human, but they weren't ordinary animals either.

She apparently took her cue from my reaction, because she continued, more earnestly. "Would it be unheard of for your firm to depose everyone involved in the case?"

The prosecutors really didn't seem to have given any thought to interviewing the Neanderthals. It would be unprecedented. "You think it will help your case." Of course, under discovery rules, the district attorney would need to turn over any and all depositions to her lawyer.

"Having all sides out certainly wouldn't hurt anyone's case, unless the case is based on fallacy."

I understood. "If I can get access."

She grinned wickedly. "The zoo staff is pretty accommodating. Especially if they think your presence might help calm their wards."

"I assume they're not happy about keeping them?"

"No," she said. "Even the ones who don't think the Neanderthals are human agree that they're human enough..." She looked down at our hands.

"Then, what, jail?" I asked. "Put them in with human inmates? Isn't that asking for more trouble?"

She looked directly into my eyes again. "And that, Mr. Jackson, is the part of the equation that we didn't really consider. All of us involved in the experiment, we believed, we knew, that Neanderthals were human — or close enough that we could raise them as human."

"But they're not."

"No," she admitted. "Off the record. Or even on it, they're not. They're Neanderthals. Very, oh, so very nearly human, but not human."

"But not animals," I said.

"No more so than you or me," she said. "People. Different. The same. People."

"So what do you want me to do?" I asked.

She inhaled deeply, letting go of my hand. "I'm a mother, Mr. Jackson. And my daughter is all grown up. It's time for her to be on her own."

Again, I had no idea what she was getting at.

"Mr. Jackson," she said, voice dropping to a near whisper. "They're perfectly capable of surviving in the wild."

Neanderthals. In the "wild." It seemed an even bigger recipe for disaster, and certainly not legal. "We're talking about a potentially dangerous species," I said.

"One that, if we believe the paleontologists, we competed with for tens of thousands of years," she said. "That's the part of the experiment that went

wrong, you see. Two species with identical needs cannot exist in the same biome. Now that they're established, they must compete with us. And we must compete with them."

"Now it sounds like you're arguing for putting them down," I said.

"No," she said deliberately. "The part you're missing is 'in the same biome.' If they were located elsewhere —"

"Our species wouldn't come into contact," I finished for her. "At least not for now."

She nodded. "Believe me, I'd rather have Rennie just come home. But we're past that point now. But, they're well-suited to living in cold climates, where we don't do as well. The Yukon, maybe."

I had to admit, it was a more pleasant alternative to consider than simply killing them all. "What can I do? Legally, I mean."

"For starters," she said, "get depositions from them all. And then, well, you know what to do from there."

And I did. "You realize you're just delaying the inevitable."

She nodded. "I can hope that as a species, we've learned better."

"You can hope." I stood up, making myself as professional sounding as I could. "Dr. Wiedergeburt, I'm afraid that I'm in no official capacity to help you."

She laughed, rising, and held out her hand to shake mine. "Then I shall leave you to your unofficial capacity."

I shook her hand. She was a smart lady. "You have a good day, Dr. Wiedergeburt," I said, and slipped my computer into my hip pocket.

I walked her to the elevator, which she entered silently. As I headed back to my cubicle, I pulled out the computer again and scanned through my schedule. I had time after lunch to run down to the zoo and take a few depositions – twelve, perhaps. Plus a few zookeepers.

And that's how, in my first year as a lawyer, I began my criminal career.

~ ~ ~

*KYLE AISTEACH lives with his husband, two cats, a dog, and a tank full of tropical fish in Fresno, Calif. Before turning to fiction writing, he worked in the education and outreach group for a major NASA observatory. He feels a strong personal connection to his subject matter because his friends often refer to him as a Neanderthal.*

Website: [www.aisteach.com](http://www.aisteach.com)

*What if the legends of angels arose from an extinct human branch? Lucia doesn't believe in angels — but she might believe in a little boy cloned from a forgotten race.*

## THE ANGEL GENOME

by Chrystalla Thoma

Lucia smoothed her black dress over her legs, wondering what her ex-husband wanted now. She patted her hair, twirled a dark curl around a finger, pulled it behind her ear. Grabbing her lipstick, she applied brick red to her lips — her armor against a bad day — and snapped on the phone's loudspeaker.

"Hey, Fred." *Deep breath.* "They tell me you've called ten times this morning already. What's so important?"

"Lucy?" His bright voice grated on her sorrow. The accident had happened barely six months ago. How could he sound so happy? "You've been avoiding me. Listen, I won't take much of your time. Do you remember the Angel Genome Project?"

*God, not again.* She opened a financial report on her computer and stared at the numbers without really seeing them. "Yes. What about it? They were going to sequence the genome of whatever it was they found in Iran. Angels, they said. We've got the mammoth parks and the Neanderthal town. Let's clone angels, have ourselves a park with cherubs, a wish-fulfillment fantasy with merry-go-rounds and everything."

"Such a cynic, girl. You used to believe in science. You even signed that donor card after we had Sammy, remember?"

Stiffening, she closed her eyes. She had, hadn't she? There had been a time she was hopeful and happy and believed in so many things. "Don't call me *girl*, Fred, it's patronizing. I'm not your girl or anybody's. And hurry this up."

"All right." His voice darkened. "Listen, I'm going to break some big news to you. Ready?" When she didn't answer, he sighed. "Right. You know I've been financing part of the project." He paused. "It's done, Lucy. We cloned one. We've got an angel."

She froze, blinking, fingers poised above the keyboard. "What did you say?"

"It's a boy. He's six now. I want you to meet him."

"There're no angels, Fred. Wake up. And I don't want to meet anybody."

"I got you a private session."

"For what?"

"To meet the angel, of course. In person. Go to the Angelus Project Foundation and ask to talk to Marcia. She'll let you in. You cannot imagine —"

"Fred." Cold gripped her spine. "Stop calling him an angel. He isn't one." She didn't believe in angels, not anymore, not since Sam had died in that accident. Not after she'd struggled so hard to have Sam, the whole ordeal of the *in vitro* fertilization, the failed attempts, the spontaneous abortions. All the blood and pain and despair, all the joy at giving birth to Sam, only for death to take him so soon. She didn't believe in a god that had let Sam die, nor in his fluttering army of angels.

"As you like. Still, can you do this for me?"

"I don't want to meet the child. You know it would remind me of Sam." Her eyes stung, but she refused to let her voice break. "Why don't *you* go? It's your project, not mine."

"The boy is closed up, not talking. Two days ago he stopped eating. You've got that mother filter, you can—"

"I've got work." The icy fingers curled around her middle, squeezing. "Did you need anything else?"

"The whole project could fail if the boy dies. Too much money was invested in him, and everyone is just waiting for the chance to bring us down. Think, Lucy. He will be the news of the millennium. Imagine the headlines, if this angel boy lives to be studied and his cells harvested—"

"You have no clue, do you, of what you're asking me to do." She gripped the edge of the desk.

"Please."

That was a word she hadn't heard from Fred's mouth in a long time.

"Jesus, Fred. You brought to life some ... creature," she bit her lip, "with mutant DNA, when the constitution says that our son —"

Fred said in a harsh voice, "I don't make the laws."

"— is not allowed to be cloned." Her chest ached. *Sam...*

"What do you want me to say? They won't clone people, 'cause then everyone would do it all the time, and nobody would stay dead. You know this."

"There's a reason we got divorced Freddy. You never —"

"Sammy's death, that was the reason, and it wasn't my fault."

"— never think of other people's feelings."

A silence. "That's unfair, Lucy."

Maybe it was. Many things were.

"Just go meet with this kid. Please. It's the last favor I'm asking you."

*Christ.* She shook her head. "What is he, really, Fred? What have you cloned?"

"We've called his race 'angels' for thousands of years." He sounded guarded. "Talk to Dr. Andrews, he'll explain."

*Intriguing.* "Why should I do this for you?"

"Legally you own part of all my projects. It was in the divorce agreement, or did you forget?" His voice had gone cold and clipped. "Marcia wants you to sign some media releases, so we can go public with the results. Nobody can force you to meet the child. I just thought that you might want to help him."

"You thought wrong." *As usual.* She bowed her head, fury tingeing the world red. "I'll sign the goddamn papers, but that's it." She checked her calendar. "I have a break at 5 this afternoon."

"Great. I'll tell Marcia to wait for you."

And he hung up, leaving her to glare at her computer screen.

*An angel.*

She stabbed at the enter key, sudden panic constricting her breathing. *I don't have to meet this child.* She straightened her shoulders. *I don't have to believe in angels or Fred's projects. I'll just sign the papers and go home.*

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The Angel Genome Project was housed in GenLife, one of the major private genetics institutes, in a cubic grey building out of the city. It towered among manicured lawns.

So, it was here they cloned these so-called *angels*, when they wouldn't clone her son. *Angels indeed.*

With a knot in her throat and her heartbeat too loud in her ears, she stopped her car at the entrance. The guard sent her nervous glances.

"I'm here to see Marcia, I was told she's waiting for me."

He spoke into a headset, then turned back to her. "Boss says first floor, room 187."

*Let's do this.* She parked, grabbed her purse and hurried through the automatic doors into the quiet lobby. Green carpets gave the impression of meadows, and slender flowers were painted on the white walls. A glass wall faced onto a small grove of cedars that swayed gently in a breeze. The strong smell of antiseptic permeated the air, rendering the whole illusion fake — the flowers too perfect, the cedars beyond reach. The smell reminded her of the morgue, where she'd gone to identify—

"May I help you?"

She jumped at the female voice behind her. A nurse in white smiled, her cheeks dimpling.

*Oh Christ.* She was in the land of happy people. "I'm here to talk to Marcia. About some media releases I'm supposed to sign."

The nurse's smile faltered and slipped. "You're here to meet Zeph."

*Oh? "Zeph?"*

"From Zephon, the name of a fallen angel."

Dear lord, how cruel. As if being a genetic experiment didn't guarantee enough trouble, the kid had to have a weird name as well. "I'm not here to meet him." She clutched her purse like a shield. "I need to sign some media release papers Marcia has prepared for me, that's all."

The nurse nodded. "I'll inform Dr. Andrews."

She checked Lucia's driver's license, called someone on the phone and made agreeing noises. Then her eyes flicked uncertainly to the heavy metal doors on her right, and up at the ceiling. "Oh dear, not again," she murmured. "On the wall? Really?"

That sounded ominous. And it was all taking too long. Lucia resisted the urge to tap her heels on the floor.

"This way please. Sorry you had to hear that."

Resigned, Lucia followed. "What happened?"

The nurse glanced at her. "I'm not to talk about the project to outsiders, but Marcia said it was okay to talk to you." She had a slight foreign accent Lucia couldn't quite place. "Zeph was acting up again. He refused to eat, and threw his food on the wall."

Trying to stifle a snort, Lucia coughed behind her hand. *Fantastic.* "Not very angelic behavior, is it?" If that wasn't a clue, she didn't know what was.



The nurse laughed lightly but said nothing. She waved a card over a blinking sensor, and the metal doors whirred open. Lucia followed her through a corridor all in grey, her steps muffled on the thick carpet.

The nurse led her through another set of heavy doors, swiping another card through a reader, typing something, then pressing her thumb on a glass sensor. Lots of security.

The heavy glass door opened. A tall, thin man with grey hair and a goatee gave Lucia a faint smile and opened the door wide. "Ms. Winter. I'm Dr. Andrews. Marcia notified me. Please, come in."

He stepped inside and around a desk laden with papers and books. He walked to the other end of the long room and opened another glass door.

Hadn't he understood her? "I was told to go to room 187—"

"That's the code number for the project." His voice floated back to her as they entered a dimly lit corridor.

"Those papers I need to sign—"

"They will be brought up shortly." He walked on and she rushed to catch up. "Do you like children, Ms. Winter?"

Her chest tightened again. "Yes." She would skin Freddy, then fry him in hot oil. *Bastard*. "Where are we going?"

He stopped before a glass pane. "Zeph isn't exactly likable."

*Right*. She should turn around and leave. But she hesitated. Maybe just one question, and then she'd go. "Why do you call him an angel? Is he winged or something?" She'd been wondering about that, how different he would be, in what ways. It could be some genetic deviation, maybe due to interbreeding.

Dr. Andrews touched a spot on the panel, activating a window of transparent glass. He peered inside, and his hand hovered next to his face. "You are aware that humans and chimpanzees share 99 percent of their DNA." He didn't wait for her acknowledgment, which was annoying. "With this being, this angel, we share even more. He isn't an abnormal human, if that's what you're thinking. He simply belongs to a different branch of the human family."

A thrill went through her. "Another branch of modern humans? That would make huge headlines. Why say he's an angel then? Why not tell the truth?"

"Ms. Winter, his DNA has certain ... particularities."

"Particularities. Like what?"

"I don't know if you'd believe me."

She shook her head, losing patience. "Listen, I wish you luck with your research, but I've got precious little time. Where are the papers? What are we doing here?"

He threw her a sidelong glance, a sheepish grin on his face. "Ms. Winter, Zeph is ... difficult."

"Many children are." But she didn't turn to go. She nodded at the window. "Is he in there?"

"Yes."

*Damn it.* "I knew it." Still, she didn't move to leave.

He turned his attention back to the window. "Zeph isn't like other children."

"What's his problem then?"

"He hasn't become attached to any of his caretakers. Not even to me." He sounded wistful. *Interesting.* It looked like he'd come to care for the boy. "He never speaks. He's clever and learns fast, but—"

"Not deaf, I assume."

"No."

"Autistic?"

He shook his head.

"Atypical autism then? Some syndrome or other?" Sam had some of the symptoms. They'd thought...

"Unlikely. Mild depression was the diagnosis." Dr. Andrews stroked his goatee. "Certain of his genes have led us to consider that perhaps Zeph's kind can recognize DNA from the same genetic pool — their relatives — through smell or some other sense we haven't yet identified. It appears he just realized that there's nobody around that he can call family. He realized he's alone."

*God.* "What are you going to do? He's the only one of his kind, isn't he?"

"That is correct." Dr. Andrews rubbed a hand over his face. "Ms. Winter, meet Zeph." He motioned her to the window.

The little boy sat on the floor of a large room with colorful paintings on the walls. His chequered shirt was wrinkled and clashed with his plain brown shorts.

She blinked, her body paralyzed. His hair was a pure white, cut short and spiky. He held a small book in one hand, and rubbed his hip with the other as he knelt in the middle of the room. The harsh light of overhead lamps cast his small face in serious lines, and his lashes cast long shadows on his rounded cheeks.

*Six.* He was as old as Sam would be. As young as Sam was.

Damn her curiosity, damn her for staying. She knew she had to get out of there before she began to weep. She trailed her fingers on the glass.

The boy raised his head and looked straight at her. His eyes were dark and intense, his mouth a small, soft circle. God, he looked so much like Sam — his eyes, the dimples in his cheeks, the straight brows. “He’s just —” Her voice cracked. “Just a normal kid.”

“With all due respect, Ms. Winter,” Dr. Andrews shoved his hands into his pockets, and chewed on his lower lip, “he surely isn’t. Appearances can be deceiving.”

She leaned her forehead on the cool glass, feeling the floor tilt. The boy never moved. “Can he see us through the glass?”

“No.”

She swallowed hard, licked her lips, tasted her waxy lipstick. “What makes him different?”

“Many of his major bones are hollow with criss-crossing trusses. It gives him a light skeleton, like that of gliding birds.” He raised one hand to rub his forehead. “More fragile, true, but lightweight. And he has air sacs.”

“Like a bird?” She wanted to laugh but the boy’s strangely serious gaze sent chills down her back.

“Yes. Air sacs,” he made a circular gesture, “in his chest. Makes for very effective breathing. They function like bellows, and they store air as well. Birds have them as well.”

Mind going in circles, she returned her gaze to the glass, and gasped. She took a wobbly step back. The boy stood so close to her, only the glass pane separating them. When had he risen and walked there? That had been damn fast. She lowered herself, sitting on her heels. His rapid breathing fogged a perfect circle between them. “What is he doing?”

“He has probably sensed us.”

She took a deep breath. “Isn’t the room sealed?”

“Yes, it is. Yet he always knows when someone is watching him.”

She shivered and pressed her hand against the glass. “So these traits he has, these bird features, serve some purpose?”

“Well, we think that his race lived in an isolated community up on Mount Sahand of Iran, one of the highest places in the world. Their light skeletons and augmented lungs allowed them to run upslope when hunting, in the thin air, and, using mantles fitted with the wing bones of black vultures, to air glide from slope to slope. They must have been revered like gods.”

She shook her head. “You’re just speculating.”

"We found such wings in the tombs. Feathers of silver were sewn on some of them, probably for ceremonial purposes. It's possible."

She thought about the image. "From afar, high up on the mountain slopes, dressed in these silver wings, they must have been blinding."

"Indeed."

*Angels. The rise of a legend.* Lucia shivered, bowed her head, and glanced up again.

The boy stood in the room, looking up, face intense as if listening.

An angel. A messenger, so the name went.

"What will you do with him?" she whispered.

"Examine him more. He's got some interesting abilities. His clavicles have dorsal protrusions, which have been developing. The possibility of growing real wings, even if they're vestigial, is ever present. And some of the samples have shown promising implications for the cure of a number of immunity-related diseases."

*Wings. Samples. Needles and pain.*

"In any case," she swallowed hard, remembering how it hurt to have Sam undergo any painful treatment, "this is no life for a child."

His face darkened, his fingers scrabbled against the glass. "It's not up to me. He has no rights. Technically he isn't human. We're still fighting this out in court. Ms. Winter, we did our best to give him a family here, at the institute. But he doesn't seem to pay us any attention."

The sadness pulsing in his voice touched her. He wanted Zeph to be happy, and she liked him for it. *And yet* — "You brought Zeph to this world. And you can't protect him. Can't save him from pain and depression."

"Can parents always save their children, Ms. Winter?"

She flinched. "That was low."

But it was the ugly truth. She'd been unable to protect, to save, Sam.

Dr. Andrews looked away.

The nurse appeared, coming toward them. "The papers, Ms. Winter."

Lucia took the papers and the pen. As the nurse turned to go, she started after her, but the boy's face drew her back to the glass. She shifted on her high heels to better watch the serious, boyish face, upturned, eyes closed, as though listening to music.

She had failed Sam. Could she help Zeph? Fred thought she might be able to.

She knew she should just walk away, call Freddy to send him to hell, and go home.

But, instead, she handed the papers to Dr. Andrews, and said, "Could you hold them for me? I would like to meet Zeph."

Dr. Andrews tucked the papers under an armpit, gave a faint smile, and entered a code on the panel. The door slid open with a hiss. Lucia stepped inside, heart racing.

~ ~ ~

"Zeph?" Her pulse roared in her ears and her palms sweated as though she were facing a monster or a wild animal, someone dangerous, about to hurt her or eat her up. *Ridiculous*. He was just a little boy. She wet her lips. "Hi, Zeph. I'm Lucia."

He cocked his face sideways, like a bird, regarding her with his dark eyes. The movement unsettled her more, thinking of what Dr. Andrews had said about the hollow bones and the air sacs.

His chubby hands clenched and unclenched at his sides, pale against the khaki shorts. His legs were strong for a child his age, muscles showing in his calves. He didn't move when she took a few steps toward him, only lifted his head to look up at her, to keep the eye contact.

*A brave kid.*

She knelt before him. His pale skin looked marshmallow soft, his cheeks still plump like a baby's, his white hair silken and shiny, curling a little at the temples. He was so little. His size made her eyes sting. He could fit perfectly in the circle of her arms, against her breast, as if he belonged there. *Sam, Sam*. Her heart lurched. *Sam, is it you?*

She squared her shoulders. *Not Sam. A strange, mutant being.*

Lucia swallowed hard. "So, Zeph. What do you do in here all day?" She glanced around. A few toys were strewn on the carpet: a toy railway with a red train and a stuffed teddy. "Playing, right?" A green stain marred the wet-looking wall. Hadn't the nurse said something about that? About Zeph throwing his food against the wall? "Do you like games?"

He shook his head, dark gaze fixed on her, mouth pressed small. *Suspicious of me, huh?* His large eyes never left hers. Could he tell she was upset? She tried to relax, and laid her hands palms down on the floor.

"Do you play with toy cars? Most boys like cars. Race cars." *Though you aren't most boys, are you?* "Where are your cars?"

He reached into his pocket, took out a tiny wooden object, shaped like a race car, painted green. He hesitated, raised his chin, and offered it to her on the rounded palm of his hand.

The corners of her mouth tugged, and she smiled. Her gaze cleared, and the grey, gloomy veil lifted for a moment, leaving it its wake bright colors and possibilities, laid out before her like the map of a world without end.

She picked up the toy car, placed it on the floor and rolled it back to him.

He watched it pass, body still, only his eyes moving. His gaze flicked to her and back to the toy.

"Roll it back to me." She beckoned. "Come on, Zeph."

He sat on his heels, picked the toy car up, eyes on her face — a deep, knowing gaze.

"Come here, Zeph."

Again he shook his head. His breathing changed, coming faster, like he was afraid. Afraid of her?

"What's wrong, baby?" Like she had called Sam. *God. Stop it.* She shook. Still, she couldn't leave, not yet. "Come here. I won't hurt you."

"Yes," he said.

"What?" She wasn't sure she hadn't imagined the tiny voice. "What did you just say?"

"Yes, you will." His voice rasped like small pebbles rattling down a slope.

Hadn't Dr. Andrews said that Zeph refused to talk?

Her heart lurched. "Have the people here hurt you?" As she asked, she knew what a stupid question it was. He was a new specimen. They must have taken samples from him from all over, from every organ, every bone, every stretch of skin. "I'm so sorry, baby."

He reached out, grabbed her hand. His small, chubby fingers curled around hers with remarkable force. "Lucia."

She scooted closer, to touch him, feel him. "Baby." His skin was warm. He smelled like warm milk and baby talcum. She caressed his soft hair, and he giggled.

*No.* She pulled back reluctantly, yet firmly.

His eyes sobered, not a child's eyes, more serious, more grown-up than they ought to be. He held onto her hand. "Mama?"

The word tore through her like a knife, left her gasping.

"No." She pried his fingers off her hand and stood, shaking her head over and over, trying to control the urge to run. "No, please, don't." To hell with the job and Freddy and everything. She couldn't, shouldn't stay longer. It was too much. "I'm sorry, Zeph. I have to go now."

"Will you be back?" he asked and she thought she might weep.

She staggered away, and shoved past Dr. Andrews on her way out.

"He spoke to you!" He grabbed her arm, but she twisted out of his bruising grip. "I heard him. Ms. Winter, please. We hoped for that."

"You set this up?" Hot tears pricked her eyes. "How could you? Why did you think he would talk to me?"

"Because," he sounded tired, "we used one of your ova. But that isn't all. He's got some of your DNA, and I think he can sense it."

Frozen, she stared at him. "What did you say?"

"He isn't a true clone." Dr Andrews scratched his cheek. "His DNA was well-preserved in the dry, cold, high-altitude air, but there were gaps in the sequencing of the genome. Your DNA was tested and found highly compatible. We think that perhaps you have distant relatives from that area. In any case," he looked up, straight into her eyes, "we filled those gaps with *your* DNA. Zeph is a hybrid. And part of him comes from you."

Her stomach cramped. Cold sweat rolled down her back. He did look a little like her, didn't he? This boy — this child — carried some of her DNA. When had she agreed to that?

*The donor card.* Freddy had asked her, back then, when they had been trying to have a baby, if she might think about donating the remaining collected eggs for research. She'd signed a paper. Ecstatic to be finally pregnant, she hadn't given it a second thought. *Fred.*

Fred had done it, without asking her first. He'd okayed the process of using her eggs for this, testing her DNA for compatibility, running all the tests.

He'd pay.

In a blur of faces, voices, and noises, she strode down the corridor, pushed past the other representatives, and left the building.

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The ringing finally broke through the dream. Groggy, she picked up her cell phone. "Yes?"

"Lucia! I couldn't find you anywhere."

"Damn it, Fred. What do you want?"

Images from the dream replayed behind her closed eyes: Sam playing in his room, Sam running in the playground, Sam eating his oatmeal.

Why was his hair white in the dream?

She rubbed her eyes.

"You can't just walk away from everything that scares you, Lucy."

"Shut up, Fred." Her head felt stuffed with cotton. "What do you want?"

"You sound strange. Have you been drinking?"

"You know I don't." Though as memory returned, she decided she could use a stiff drink. *Zeph*. With frightening clarity she'd seen what must have gone before. Fred was behind all this mess.

He sighed. "Lucy. Look, I'm sorry I asked you to meet the boy. I thought, you know, he's your son, you—"

"No, he's not my son, Fred! Why didn't you ask me before doing this?" Fury hazed her vision. She fought the urge to throw the phone across the room. "Only Sam, do you understand? Only Sam is my son. I'm only Sam's mother." And she'd been stripped of motherhood. Her only son was dead and buried.

A pause. "Yes. I'm sorry." A cough. "Listen, Lucy, I just thought you might want to know. *Zeph* asked for you."

"Really?" She clutched the covers at her lap with her free hand. Sweat trickled down the side of her face.

*Zeph* wasn't her son. He could never replace Sam, DNA be damned.

"Dr. Andrews called me. He insisted you go back there."

The moment stretched. "I don't want to talk to you again, Fred. All this—"

"I never thought you'd mind. You believed in cloning back then, in helping science."

"You planned this since Sam's birth, didn't you? *Zeph* is six, just a few months younger than Sam would have been. All these years you never said anything. You thought that losing Sam would mean I'd accept *Zeph* as replacement?"

"No. Yes. Lucy, you wanted more children. I thought that you'd like this."

"This?" She thumped her fist on the mattress. "What, you thought you could bring *Zeph* home, and we'd live all together like one happy family?"

He said nothing.

"You did, didn't you?"

"We still could, Lucy. He could—"

"No." She thought of the boy's soft face and felt empty. "No, he can't. We can't."

He sighed. "For God's sake, he's got your eyes. You can pretend you felt nothing when you saw him, but it's *Zeph* now, isn't it? Not just a creature with no name."

That stopped her cold. *Don't panic*. "I can't see him again."

"Lucy." He sounded cautious. He was about to try the rational approach. "He doesn't bite, you know."



"No. You're right. It's worse than that. He looks like Sam." *He looks like me.*  
"He's—" She had to swallow. "I can't."

"Please think about it."

The pain in his voice matched her own. But she couldn't go back now, not to Fred, not to being a mother, not to the past. She had to move on, or go mad. "No. Goodbye, Fred."

She hung up. All the pain she'd manage to bury since the accident tore her up. Images, sounds, Sam's face crowded her thoughts.

But time and again Zeph's face replaced Sam's. God, how small Zeph was, how frightened, how alone. She thought of the secret, windowless room where he was kept, about the doctors and nurses, about the smell of his skin and the feel of his soft hair against her hand.

About that dark brown gaze that resembled Sam's, and that was her own.

Getting out of bed in jerky motions, she tried to erase that gaze from her memory. She pulled on a robe and unlocked Sam's room. Everything was as he left it. She pressed her hands to her mouth, feeling her eyes ache, and entered. She caressed his photos on the dresser, his favorite teddy, his toys. She was looking for a sign, she knew, to help make up her mind.

*Damn it, Sam, Sammy, talk to me. Say something. Is it all right if I go? Would you mind?*

But the room was silent and still, and she found nothing she could interpret as a sign.

Lucia sat on Sam's bed, on the light blue covers, and knew that it was up to her to decide.

Some time later she took her broom and mop and began cleaning. She aired the house, scrubbed the floors, threw out old clothes and old magazines. Spring cleaning in autumn. She thought maybe she was putting off her decision, but maybe she wasn't. She was making room, changing things, preparing. Maybe she had already made up her mind. She could swear she heard Sam's laughter in the rooms.

In her mind she could see the fear in Zeph's dark eyes.

She called Dr. Andrews.

"Ms. Winter." He sounded relieved. "I am so glad you called. I don't mean to pressure you, but Zeph has asked for you repeatedly. It's a remarkable change, and it's undeniable that he feels a connection to you. I had my doubts about this working out so well, but here you have it. Would you accept to meet him again? Maybe you could be friends. Zeph could use a friend, Ms. Winter."

That was good. She wasn't required to be his mother. Friends. She could be friends with Zeph. "Yes," she said, "okay, when do you want me to come over?"

Lucia didn't believe in angels, or fate. But as she stepped out of the house, a golden wind rushed through her. Lighter, she strode to her car and she thought that, maybe, she could believe in Zeph.

~ ~ ~

*CHYSTALLA THOMA, a Greek Cypriot with a penchant for dark myths, good food and a tendency to settle down anywhere but at home, likes to write about fantastical creatures, crazy adventures and family bonds. She lives in Cyprus with her husband and her vast herds of books. Her stories can be found in AlienSkin, Lorelei Signal, The Shine Journal, Encounters Magazine, and Bards and Sages Quarterly. She is also an author with MuseItUp Publishing, where her YA Urban Fantasy novella Dioscuri is now available.*

Blog: <http://chrySTALLATHOMA.wordpress.com>

Twitter: <http://twitter.com/ChrySTALLATHOMA>

Author Page at MuseItUp Publishing:

[http://museituppublishing.com/musepub/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=91&Itemid=82](http://museituppublishing.com/musepub/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=91&Itemid=82)

## **TOMORROW**

*Speculative fiction that reminds us of our impending mortality  
and our immortal aspirations*

*Geri's father is one of the scientists who finds the remains of an alien culture, providing proof we are not alone. For Geri, though, her father's involvement with another world leaves her feeling more alone than ever.*

## **IN RING**

by Scott Thomas Smith

"I wouldn't know."

"You wouldn't know, huh?" He smiles at her as if he can find her secret with his eyes. Lift her gaze to meet his. "You wear it but you don't know where you got it."

"It's just a ring." She holds her hand over it to hide it from him. She doesn't want him to talk to her anymore.

It doesn't matter if he knows where she got it or if she is supposed to have it; she just wants to be left alone.

"Yeah, alright. Your father is in his office. Go ahead up."

The exchange proves once again that her father's work is not a place she wants to be. Too many questions, too much intensity. But she has promised to visit him, and he is gone so much of the time.

The ring, which he had given her, was brought back from *there*. It was all over the news, and people practically boiled over in the halls and meeting rooms of the high tech station where he worked. The scientific find signified first contact with another species — an abandoned colony on one of the newly discovered planets. Earth, still in her maiden days of interstellar travel and colonization, had already found evidence of alien life. Theory held there would be living civilizations discovered soon nearby.

She walks down the corridor to his office.

"Hello Geri," her father says as she comes in. The room is like entering a museum. She is suddenly full grown.

She loves the ring. She loved it the moment he gave it to her. Even before he told her where it was from. The simple, glassy material set in a single colorful band, smooth all around.

When she sees the pictures of the planet it came from up in his office, she believes in the distance between the stars. The lost civilization makes sense in existing. Neither the ring nor the news stories — not even the strangers asking her questions — made her think of that world and its people as real before. But his office seems set up to point to evidence to convince her.

She makes a perfunctory hello and stands at the side of his desk to drop her backpack.

A young, red-haired man in a suit and tie comes in behind her.

"Sir, you have a phone call from a ... Doctor ... Wukovits? He's calling about the ... condensed life theory?"

"OK, I'll take it in here." As the man ducks back out, he says to Geri, "Sorry, I have to talk to this person." She shrugs her indifference.

"Yes, hello Doctor."

She walks around his desk to get a closer look at the images of the planet: mostly landscapes and buildings.

"Yes, I'm familiar with the anthropic principles, and what you're saying does make sense, although these theories are all a bit ... conjectural."

One picture must have been taken by an aspiring amateur photographer, and could have been the illustration for a book of pictorial poems about wheelbarrows and such things. Or rather their alien versions, as the main subject looks like a cross between a gavel and a mini scythe propped next to some kind of barrel divided into two compartments.

"Well, yes, if there are aliens around every other star, I suppose we might have to worry about resources, but on the other hand what if it *is* only us?" His tone and a brief eye meeting indicates to his daughter that he is humoring the Doctor. They share a smile.

He stands up and walks to the window, his tone now clipped, indicating his desire to end the call.

Waiting, Geri sits in his swivel chair and, spinning back and forth, studies the titles on his bookshelf. *Astrophysics and Technology, Alien Civilizations: Projections of the Mind, The Mind of Man in Space*. He has made up his mind on possibilities. She admires him deeply. And tries to imagine what it would be like to have his knowledge. Almost like having built a space station inside yourself, a stepping stone to the stars. It could also give you a firmer grasp on your home

planet. But she always wonders where he really lives. With no memory of her mother, he is the earth and stars, and space as well.

The phone is cradled.

"You said on TV you don't know much about them."

"Well, we know a lot about them, but there's so much to know, it's hard to say what a whole race is like."

She thinks about it.

"We know they look something like us, and had a similar evolutionary history. And their technology was about at the level ours is now."

"But you don't know what happened to them."

He leans against his desk. "It could have been a couple of things." He hesitates, a tape recorder pause, like he doesn't want to be quoted on it, even by her. "They could have been in a war. Or maybe they left the planet because the colony wasn't doing well. Or they might have died out. Or maybe they just abandoned the place, for whatever reason. We've barely done any study on it, so we can't say anything for certain."

"Are those pictures from there?" She points to an album on his desk.

"Yep," he says, gesturing for her it's okay to look at them.

It isn't like looking at a group of images from a TV show where they show you a ship landing on an alien world, and you see the headquarters of their government and everything is stylized to look like a *certain* culture, with one taste, uniform and homogenized. Instead it is much like Earth just a handful of years back before the big thrust for more planning in cities' constructions, with buildings of all sorts and jumbled purposes clashing and rising up against each other in the mostly natural landscape. Like a soft grid of streets surrounding a metropolitan community — a nerve center, with strong industrial capability. It looks run down by a few decades of overgrowth and decay, rusted and jungled. Resources and terrain, technology and construction methods make it alien, but the same would make it home.

"So they're going back then."

"Yeah, and soon."

"You'll probably be going with them."

"I'm not sure."

"Sounds like the opening to a horror movie."

~~~

Riding her bike home, she thinks about what her father is doing. Everyone knows who her father is. She's popular at school. She could have any boy she wants.

She sprawls out on her bed, surrounded by books she's bought since junior high, from popular science thrillers to philosophy and non-fiction on *The Varieties of Religious Experiences* and *Art and Aesthetics* to *Metaphysics* and *Being and Nothingness*. And thinks about the hype everywhere.

*I mean!* — If any of those newscasters busy bothering all those scientists up at where Dad works discovered *this bookshelf!* And thought this bookshelf were from outer space... They'd put more work *into studying these texts* than they had in reading anything else in their lives. But they'd never pick them up otherwise.

People are stupid.

If I grow up to be the writer I hope to be, she thinks, I'll put that in a book.

Or no, she thinks. I *won't*. Some things you shouldn't write down. That...

*That* would be saying too much, maybe. It's a truth everyone should see so obviously. It'd be obscene to put it down.

Yes, she decides, I won't write it down. I'll keep that one for myself. And she wraps it around herself to keep.

I imagine the civilization out there is much like ours, she thinks. They may be surprised to meet us, or maybe they've already met many others like us. Maybe they'll change us when we meet them. Maybe it will change us all.

She pulls a blanket over her. *It's nice to have someone else now to think about* — or so the planet thinks, she thinks. But really, life here is life here. And that shouldn't change. She wants — needs — to think about her own life, and the things going on at school, with her friends, with the boys she talks to. There's a lot going on right here, even in this boring capeside town, she thinks, as she drifts off to sleep.

~ ~ ~

"I thought you were still working on the Pre-Columbian excavation?" she says across the table. Her father's finally home for dinner.

"I ... was."

"The one you said was going to bring up more answers to man's past than *any dig in history ...* And was the most important thing you *ever* did? Could *ever* do? And? You're just quitting what you've been working – worked — so hard on?"

"They need someone to head up the offworld excavation. They asked me. I couldn't say no. It wouldn't be right."

"What does that even mean?" She slams her fork down. "You know I always go with you on your trips. But I can't go with you offworld."

He nods.

"So I'm just stuck here — by myself."

"I know, but — It means so much for us. It's a big opportunity! I can't stay on an old project when the state-of-the-art is being written out there."

"Who cares about the state-of-the-art?"

"Geri, this could mean so much more for humanity. It's a chance to give my previous work a context that's been ... lacking."

She waits. She palls. It isn't an affront to her. It is a statement that just makes her wonder about the man her father is. And that makes her wonder about all men.

His crumpled expression tells her he sees it in her eyes.

She starts, coming half out of her chair. "Letting things go ..." she struggles for words, "isn't the virtue you think it is!"

She storms to her bedroom.

~~~

She holds her hand — the one with the ring — out into the night, fingers spread, feeling a web running in her bones that expands beyond her physical hand, out to everything, and at the point where it cruxes, reaching to the sky...

She doesn't go to the launch, but over the cityscape she catches glimpses of the small transport taking off; even more visible is the ship her father will meet in orbit, on this clear night.

The ship hovers in the sky like a blinking reminder for a higher nature and a lesser world. She's used to seeing UFOs in these skies. The arc of the expunged fuel from the transport engulfs the moon in its curve, turning the horizon into a jackknifed dream.

She caresses the ring on her middle finger with her thumb as though playing a string on an instrument, then tilts her head down and starts to run after the ship, so far above and so far away.

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When you hang something up in your room, and only later realize why, you understand how the mind works. That's how it was with her and the plastic glow-in-the-dark stars, and the images of the moons and planets around the ceiling.

In such actions there is a meaning waiting to be realized. Only later can you see how that action *really* relates to you; that somehow you knew you *would* realize it, and that's why you started the series of events in the first place. Why you decorated the walls, why you chose to come in contact with the meaning — and it's like what must start a thunderstorm. Some fuse jump of electricity like a



neuron firing. And maybe she never wanted to think of the stars. Like that. Like beacons from all the individual could-be homes, so distant and calling...

But she knew she'd not be at home on any of them, looking at their pale imitations, their perfect replications. She lies in her bed beneath the cool blanket, making a wish on a plastic star to stay on her home world, in this bed, and find one to land on. Maybe one where they give you a ring to let you know you belong. And she holds on to the ring, and listens to the cool night breeze through the open window, and breathes in with her eyes closed.

~ ~ ~

She decides to bury it.

She takes the automatic shovel from the garage.

The moon watched her carry it along the back fence to the yard where the motion light came on and bathed her in a weary yellow light.

Watched it churn up the soil as she poked it into the firm but yielding earth.

And then ... pausing...

Tossed her care below.

Neatly covered the site. For future archaeologists to discover. *Perhaps after we're all gone.*

And she walks away. Thumbing the possession she still keeps, having only pretended, like playing a string on an instrument, twirling in the moonlight and dancing beneath it, running ahead to catch a ride.

~ ~ ~

*SCOTT THOMAS SMITH is 26 years old, lives by himself in St. Louis (with two cats) and has been writing seriously since high school. He finished his first novel, Down With Strangers, in the same year he shipped off to Chicago to attend Columbia College. Quickly deciding college was for suckers, he dropped out before completing his first semester. Now he spends most of the day reading and writing. Hard at work on many new projects and stories, you can find out more about what's going on with Scott at his website and blog at*

<http://www.theneonheart.com/>

Facebook:

<http://www.facebook.com/GarterBeltSupremeOfTheCosmoDemonicSlagheap>

*Had it been left to protocols rather than human ingenuity, Commander West's expedition might have easily overlooked one of Mars' greatest treasures.*

## **BONES OF MARS**

by D Jason Cooper

"You've had anomalies before, Casey. Martian soil isn't uniform—"

"It's a lot more uniform than Earth's. No seas here to stop the wander of sand and there are fewer chemical processes to change constituents in the soil and—"

"Casey. *Anne.*" West paused as if telling his troops not to charge. His muscles relaxed, though that took a conscious effort. "Could we actually have a conversation where we let each other finish sentences?"

"Lose the balls. Seriously. As a scientist, I always look to the widest possible range of explanations that fit the evidence. That means stopping and checking. As commander of the mission, your job is to focus on getting a result and moving on to the next site. We'll never stop being at loggerheads if we keep working at cross purposes."

"So you'll stop fighting if I just let you have your way?"

"More or less," said Casey without irony.

Commander Howard West looked at the walls. They were supposed to be battleship gray, but in an early defiance of protocol, every bulkhead, girder and rivet was painted a different color — except red. West turned to the porthole and the evening landscape of Mars. This far south the sun set reluctantly and evenings lingered. Political opinion about the mission was divided back on Earth, but he could not join the chorus who described the landscape as barren. Both politically and aesthetically he sided with those who called it rich in form and stark in content.

"We have a limited number of days here," said West, "and we have used up way too many of our unallocated test days tracking down the previous..." he waved fingers in the air to indicate quote marks, "anomalies."

"Who was unhappy I found that gold? Did they tell us to move on or did they tell us to take ten extra days to assay the potential mining site?"

He put up his hand to stem the onslaught. "Casey. The date for the end of the mission is fixed. We have a relatively short launch window. So thanks to several extra stops and extra days at sites — that we took largely by your recommendation, I'll point out — if we spend more time here, there's a danger we'll have to cut other sites altogether. I recognize your scientific reasons for wanting to stay, but there are also scientific reasons for wanting to check every individual site possible — look at the Moon."

"The Moon has become the Vietnam of space exploration. It's the ultimate reason to not do anything," she said.

Not needing to hear her opinions on the failings of previous generations yet again, Commander West ordered her to go.

Anne Casey put what dignity was possible into her low-grav bounce out the cabin door.

"Don't forget the restrictions Buggy A puts on us," West called after her.

She came back and slammed the door because — well, because she could.

West stared out the porthole at the rim of the Secchi Crater, its ancient solid-stone formations dusted with undulating patterns of sand. In the depths of winter, like tonight, it sometimes snowed.

Here, flakes came from pink or black skies and individual crystals tended to cluster into huge colonies before gravity pulled them toward the ground. Usually, fierce winds, common on Mars, would shred them out of existence long before they touched the surface. But tonight was calm and the snowflakes drifted peacefully, tipsily, to Mars.

"Hey, West, what's Casey on the warpath about now?"

With a sigh, West turned from the snowflakes. Standing in the doorway doing a fair imitation of a door was Aoki.

"Something about an anomaly in her latest readings. How's Buggy A?"

"After the refit it got, its engine systems should last longer than the ones on this buggy. But the electrical and life-support systems are still on the fritz. Schmidt's working on an idea now." After a pause, Aoki added, "I assume you're hard up for time?"

"No. Finish what you've got to say," said West.

"We don't have to launch from Site 1. If we launch from Site 3, the trip will be more Spartan, but we'll have an extra fourteen days we can put in on Casey's stuff."

"Did Casey tell anybody what the anomaly is?"

Aoki shook his head, so the Commander told him.

"Forget I said anything," said Aoki as he left.

West turned back to the topsy-turvy snow. A breeze had come up, sweeping sand and snow into playful little piles. After a very long while he turned to the computer to bang out some more names for Martian features. That job was his and his alone, not to be delegated, or so the news always said. What it didn't mention was that to name features, West had to use drop-down lists with names of people influential politicians owed favors to. As the features were cataloged, they were assigned to the appropriate lists already prepopulated with names for the first active volcano, the biggest cave, or whatever other natural formations were found. That was the real protocol.

West activated the hack and gave a few places some imaginative names. When there was nothing more he could do to stuff things up for the politicians back home, he checked the clock and made his way to the galley.

"Did everybody get hungry and ignore the schedule?"

The galley was crowded most times, an unavoidable consequence of the breakdown of Buggy A and the transfer of her crew to Buggy B. It meant there were fourteen people in a place designed for seven that could officially sustain only twelve. Everybody was on everybody else's nerves, and the crew was dealing with a lot of unforeseen stress.

"Casey said there was a bug-hole in the numbers," said Barry Schmidt.

"True?"

"Chemical profiles of some samples have spikes we didn't expect. Like the gold find, maybe we need to follow that up."

"But it's not gold, is it?"

"No, it isn't."

"Then we should move on to the next site and see if there's something there that might make more money." With that, Schmidt crossed his hairy arms over his hairy chest like the decision had been made.

"First of all, Schmidt," West said, "you haven't made dinner yet. Hop to it. Second of all — all of you — we're scheduled to be here, testing and digging, for four more days. This is one of the big scientific digs. So there's to be no talk of moving or staying until that four days is up. Now, those of you scheduled for rest,

go get some sleep. Those of you with duties, get to them. And those of you scheduled to eat, stay seated."

Of the ten, only four remained behind. Unfortunately, one of them was Schmidt. And another was Casey. "So I have four days—"

"To run any tests that protocols require, plus any additional tests protocols allow and for which you have the time and resources – without shortchanging any of the other test sites we're scheduled to visit."

"Can I have an extra assistant?"

"No, Casey, you work with what you've got. I'm not diverting any additional resources to you."

Schmidt gave a condescending grunt. "Four days here, we could try to reopen Buggy A. Use it for something more than a mechanical pack mule."

"So what do you plan to do? Replace the damaged solar panels with God-knows-what or repair the heating coils God-knows-how?"

Schmidt took a deep breath and put microwaved meals before the crew. "No one makes solar panels that big as a single unit. They're actually a series of panels screwed onto a frame as part of a closed circuit. From reports and photos, I think there are at least two panels that can be brought online. That will at least provide light and run the scrubbers for a couple of people."

"What about heat? The coils are gone."

"We leave the shielding around the reactor but take the insulation off the drive engine. Instead of venting the engine's heat to Mars' atmosphere, we shunt it to the cabins. With the insulation gone, we should get to temperate conditions within a few hundred kilometers. At worst, we wear our thermal underwear 24/7."

"How much power did you use to work that out?"

"One screen, twenty minutes, all on my personal ration."

West looked down at his unappetizing meal. The air might be safe, but the smell of bodies eventually tainted everything. "What resources would you need?"

"I'll cannibalize my down time; I can unscrew the panels by myself and hold them on the rails. I'll need somebody to help put them in their new places. We'll both need suits."

"Start working on the panels. Use Buggy A's power as needed. We'll cable power or, if the cable won't reach, beam power to the dig site from some other source. Give this project your full attention. And Schmidt ... this better work."

"Commander, you can't—"

"Shut up, Casey," said West.

The rest of the meal was eaten in uncomfortable silence. The place still smelled like a gym with the air conditioning off. Getting even two people to Buggy A would be a boon, but they'd have to do something really good to be sent over there.

West finished his meal and went to his office. He passed Aoki standing in front of a vent, inhaling the least tainted air in the general access section. The crew had been chosen based on people with needed skills who could handle difficult situations. Even when there were standouts, the testing procedures had been kept long and arduous, so being selected still made them feel special. But no one had calculated on months of pressure like this. They were packed too tight, always tripping over one another, always feeling each other's sweat and smelling each other's bad moods. It wasn't a day-by-day as much as a minute-by-minute grind.

Little wonder that West let people do things in their own way and blow off steam as needed. It took the cocooned Earth politicians to think reality out here naturally conformed to whatever was written on letterhead emails.

West opened the door to his office. Susan Green sat on the floor, legs outstretched, back to the wall, sound asleep. It was a rare place to be alone. West closed the door and tried to decide how to occupy the time before his sleep cycle.

"Schmidt's suiting up," he said to no one. He thought he could help, but when he got to the airlock's antechamber, there was already a crew doing that.

"Commander, I have to talk with you now." Casey's urgent tone drew West's attention.

"Get me some results, Casey."

"I've got them, *Commander*. That's why I have to talk with you."

"Well, then, *Science Lieutenant Anne Casey* should—"

"In private."

As if that wouldn't feed the rumor mill. He glanced at the six men and women suiting up. Some of them were skipping sleep to do this. West watched as they put on the thermal underwear embedded with hoses that carried fluids and circuits that carried information. The suit was armor over that, and it was designed to be put on fast. That had saved lives in the Buggy A disaster. Put on the boots, stand in the template and interlocking rings linked up around the body, using thread and screw to tighten to fit.

On top of that went each person's customized helmet. A standard pack then latched itself onto the armor and connected itself for air, power, recycling, and sensors. All-in-all, it took maybe two minutes from boots to airlock. The suited-up

crew all waved as they went out the hatch, and the people in the antechamber moved off.

Waiting for the crew to clear out, West wondered, not for the first time, why this room out of all of them had been left battleship gray.

"All right, Casey, the audience is gone. Now, what do you have to say?"

She pursed her lips. It was more like a pout than anything else. It seemed she was trying to not say something, which would make sense only if she was going to tell him less than the full story.

"The original anomaly was found in sand outside the main Secchi Crater. Instead of just repeating samples —"

"You broke protocol," said West.

"Commander, if you get an anomaly in statistics you need to check with an absolutely fresh sample. If you include the original sample in the new one, you will still get the same anomaly because you polluted it—"

"Did you break protocol, yes or no?"

"I got a new sample that had an increased level of anomaly. Greatly increased. Do you have any idea what that means?"

West didn't answer. Outside, through the viewing port, it was night and the stars were abundantly clear. In the dark, the crew repairing Buggy A were merely bouncing bobble lights. Buggy A itself sat in the shade of a hill. With no starlight to outline its position and no power of its own to put on any lights, it was invisible.

"Did you break protocol or not, Lt. Casey? If you don't answer the question, I will have to suspend you without pay and conduct an investigation."

"I'll take it to Earth—"

"Go ahead, Casey, but if you do, you give your enemies in Congress leverage in the next election. Investigations there aren't conducted to solve a problem or to get an answer but to affect an election outcome."

There was a pause. Outside the bobble lights were bobbling in unison.

"I took a sample prior to surface tests — a bore of about two feet," said Casey.

"About?"

"Twenty-two inches."

"The von Erich Coefficient." West was secretly pleased at the look of surprise that crossed Casey's face.

"Her work was —"

"I might have done the same. But —"

"I found ... I found calcium carbonate and magnesium sulfate."

“Ordinary constituents of Martian soil,” said West.

“Not in these concentrations. And not associated physically but not chemically. Naturally I broke protocol. Protocol is just Earth’s buzz word meaning *obey me*. By protocol, sand is taken, mixed, ground and then tested to get its chemical composition. Solid stone, like in a core sample, can be taken and cut into layers and the chemicals examined to see which ones are in some kind of association. We do that all the time to assay sediment soil to check how valuable a mine is likely to be. In this case, the calcium is next to the magnesium sulfate, and between those two deposits is phosphorus. The deposits are next to each other, but they aren’t mixed up together.”

She took out her tablet, the ones that under protocol only the lieutenants and the commander could have. Onscreen was a slide of core matter. There were several deposits of calcium carbonate, which were near phosphorus — but always physically separate. Likewise, on the far side of the phosphorus was nearly always a distinct deposit of magnesium sulfate.

West flipped through over fifty screens of core samples. They certainly didn’t seem random when looked at in that light, but Casey had just framed the whole thing for him. Having been told there was a pattern, he would look for it and possibly find it even if it wasn’t there. Hell, after decades of refutation, the images of scenery they sent back to Earth were *still* being analyzed for remnants of canals.

“Were all these slides from one core sample?” asked West.

Casey hung her head.

“That’s an awfully small sample to draw a conclusion from.”

“The only conclusion I’ve drawn, is that there *is* an anomaly.”

There was a clanking and a whirr as people entered the airlock. The bobbles had come home.

“From now on, Lieutenant Casey, you’re under direct management, and that means you will be micromanaged. I can get the reference to the protocol, if you like, but believe me, my order will hold.”

Airlocks were still a slow process, though they’d sped up considerably since the early days of Lunar colonization. What used to take hours now took twenty minutes. But sometimes it was a very long twenty minutes. And while West waited, the crowd gathered again.

The antechamber to the airlock was not built as a piazza. It couldn’t hold audiences for speeches, especially with six occupants in suits. West decided to simply rely on the pressure of numbers to drive out those near the door; that way



he didn't have to decide who was worthy and who was not to stay. In the end, he didn't even have to rely on that.

Only one person came in, clad in armor. The helmeted head turned to take in the crowd. The camera lenses gave the impression of the eyes of a nocturnal creature. In fact, the lenses just cast what they saw onto a screen on the inside of the helmet. That way there was one less opening in the suit that could rupture.

Clamps released and the helmet came off revealing the face of Aoki.

"Couple of capacitors are gone. We can rig an ammonia battery, but it would be better if we could do phosphorus-neon. With that we'd have a closed system with only energy for input-output. If we use ammonia we'll need a constant supply of it and we'll use a lot of energy just maintaining the system."

There was a low rumble and hiss as voices around the room played Chinese whispers and American mutterings.

"Given the phosphorus-neon batteries, we can bypass most of the problems with the capacitors. As an estimate — but I'm pretty confident about it — we'd be able to sustain four people, maybe five."

The Chinese whispers stopped. The American mutterings continued. It didn't take long for the noise to swell. West thought of shouting them down but then came up with a better plan.

"Aoki," he said loud enough for everyone to hear but too softly for anyone to hear comfortably. Then he lowered his voice a little more. "When will the buggy be ready for occupation?"

Aoki gave his answer, put on his helmet, and went back into the airlock. Behind him the antechamber grew quiet.

"When will the buggy be ready?"

"Should have listened instead of talked, shouldn't you?"

Commander Howard West walked out of the antechamber. It wasn't exactly a piazza, but it could be just as useful. He'd remember that if he ever ran for a place in Government.

In his quarters, Susan Green was still sleeping. Overpopulating the buggy had people looking for a quiet place — and sometimes just *another* place. Three cramped levels, all with low ceilings, gave everyone a wanderlust that couldn't really be filled. He wouldn't wake Green, so he decided to head to Console.

Console was called Command Deck by Earth Headquarters, though Earth's terminology was being steadily replaced as the mission went on. With its large view ports forward and to the sides, Console was where the buggy was driven. The windows, of course, were redundant. Readouts and ground sonar did more to

find hazards than mere eyes ever could. Since they weren't moving at the moment, West figured the driver's seat should be free.

*Should be.*

As soon as Commander West walked in, the room fell silent. There were five in the room, two more than standard on a stationary night watch.

"Aren't you supposed to be sleeping, Commander?" asked Lieutenant Commander Bruno Laurer.

"Green is borrowing my bunk. I didn't want to wake her."

"So that's where she goes. She's not been in her assigned bunk since she and Ellison had a dust-up weeks ago. Hazard of sharing bunks, I guess. Still, Ellison holds grudges."

"If you knew about that, you should have taken it in hand. There are protocols to handle this sort of thing," said West. "I'll not have bullying in my command. I'll talk to the two of them, but you should do better than some Earth manager covering his own ass."

"Ellison will take it out on you."

"Then she wears a suit and walks to the next site," said West.

"Can I do something wrong? I could use the alone time."

"Shut up, Reesman. You and Yorkston shouldn't even be here; active duty isn't time for socializing."

The two left sheepishly.

"I need a console," West told Laurer. "Why don't you go relax or sleep."

Laurer slid out of his seat and West slid in. Face recognition let him log on.

He accessed Casey's core samples, overriding her lock and no doubt triggering any number of warnings for her that someone hacked into the system. This time he didn't want to just look at slides, he wanted to know how she'd generated the samples in the first place.

The slides did indeed all come from one core sample because she drilled only once. But if it had been ground, as protocol required, the quantities of elements would still have been an anomaly.

West double-checked the figures. The anomaly was present in both the core sample and the surrounding sand. But it was more extreme in the core. West checked weather patterns, which on Mars were still not well understood. What readings had been taken could be interpreted to mean the south polar winds were isolated. Sands made here largely stayed here. Of course, there would be some mixture of sand from elsewhere — that couldn't be stopped entirely. So if

contamination reduced the amount of anomaly in the sand, then finding more of it in intact stone meant one thing. They had found some kind of singular deposit.

West hadn't realized how long he had been working until the console pinged him that Earth Headquarters had sent him a message. It was plain text, which was always a bad sign. If the news were good, or at least exciting, someone would want their face on camera in case the media picked up on it. West read the file:

*The following names are unsuitable for features of Mars.*

*These names will be deleted.*

*Please amend and reply immediately.*

Commander West replied that he confirmed all fourteen names and reminded Earth Headquarters he had the unilateral authority to name all features. He had to compose a hack on the fly, but he managed to contact several news sites for whom the text would confirm prejudices one way or the other. If they made a meal of it, they'd use up all their space exploration news on names and not anomalies in sand and core samples — at least for a few days.

West turned around to find Schmidt standing behind him. He wondered how long he'd been there.

"Buggy A is not restored, but we have enough extra power that we can run scrubbers and sustain two, maybe three, people who don't mind being alternately sweaty and freezing cold."

"Is that during travel or when stationary?"

Schmidt thought. "Keep it two and it can handle both without problem."

"Is it going to stink as much as this place?"

"No."

And that concluded all the important details.

"OK, give me the calculations and I'll send them to Earth."

"You don't trust my calculations?"

"Even if we don't like protocols, we have to obey them for now."

Technically, West knew he should put Schmidt over on Buggy A; he'd repaired it, after all. But Schmidt tended to run his own agenda and needed outside direction to keep him focused.

Schmidt left, perhaps sensing West's thoughts. West looked at the console. Pings were still coming through. Once, the only indication of an incoming message was a little icon of an envelope, but that wasn't annoying enough for Earth Headquarters, which wanted immediate replies to messages that would take over half an hour to travel between Earth and Mars.

West relented and called up the screens required. Earth Headquarters was having serious objections to his vivid names. Strange, since his last message could not have gotten to Earth, yet. Clearly somebody had seen the original list and was picking up on it.

He looked at the clock. Without realizing, it he had been awake for more than a Martian sol. It was only about forty minutes longer than an Earth day, but it could suddenly be a long time to stay awake. He put his elbow on the console and his head in his hand. When West finally woke up it was better than twenty minutes later and, if anything, he felt worse.

West looked at his wrist before he remembered he had not worn a watch since before launch. Weight limits really were that tight. And so, he realized, were the limits to his patience. He logged out and marched to his office. Before he could yell, he realized Green had already gone. Indoors all the time it, was easy to lose track of how much time was passing.

He unfolded his bed from the wall and easily jumped the four feet to land among the rumple of sheets he should have already been changed. He was asleep almost instantly.

Awake took longer. There were images to explore and dreams to remember. He did not feel energized, so he guessed his dreams hadn't presented him with a solution to anything. He got the local time from the computer. He'd slept for over nine hours. Despite his talk that everyone would crash eventually, it was his first breach in the months since the Buggy A disaster.

West breathed deeply. He didn't know why they put an extra scrubber on his vented air, but he was grateful. It cut most of the smell of other human bodies. Buggy A would probably smell bad, but at least it would smell bad different. The smell there, though, wasn't his main concern. Why were the estimations of how many it could hold so different? Somewhere between two and five people? A lot of rubber in those figures.

He jumped down and pushed the bunk up against the wall. It would be yet another week now before he could wash the sheet and pillow case. That would be Levinsol in the Martian week. Since he was supposed to have Levinsol, Zubrinsol and Clarksol off, he should have been happy, but he wouldn't be getting the time off given current circumstances. West checked the tablet in his room while he had the chance. He'd collected a lot of pings. People were arguing who should get to transfer to Buggy A, most of the suggestions being extended versions of *me*.

Earth Headquarters was still objecting to the names West had sent for geographical features, and the tone of the messages was becoming angrier. West

checked the select websites that were automatically sent to the buggy and noticed a lot of support had coalesced for the new names. The support had named itself the Spread Legs Gulch Convention after the gulch the United States Government still refused to mention on its maps. West decided the United States was a culture with too much time on its hands, largely because it had grown allergic to work.

"Damn."

Green had done more work while he and Casey were scheduled for sleep. Following protocol, she had notified him. The core sample slides had been sequentially numbered. Green had taken the deposits and linked them up to get a three-dimensional image of the deposits as a whole.

Clearly this wasn't happenstance. The deposits were tapered at either end and expanded in the middle. It wasn't universal, but it was common enough to be the norm. What that meant, West couldn't tell. Geology wasn't his specialty.

The coding of sample slides and providing a three-dimensional image of them was such a standard procedure, even West knew about it. Why hadn't Casey already done it?

Then he realized she almost certainly had. Protocol demanded it and these results could only advantage her case. Unless, of course, she had something so much stronger that sequencing seemed petty by comparison. But if she had killer evidence, why was she keeping it a secret? There were several reasons why Casey might want to keep her powder dry, and from West's point of view, none of them were any good. The time had come to pay her a visit.

The tablet told him she was at the Cranberry dig site. Hack name. West did his own hack and checked the code. It was designed so the computer would assign the results to another site. So she didn't want the data secret, just secret from him. That could mean she just wanted to be able to sell something once they got back to Earth. But that didn't sound like Casey. Certainly she was greedy for recognition and to be proved right, but money had never been her priority. She was like a panther, hunting things down and toying with them, like the big cat she was.

So what was she playing at here?

If the computer wouldn't tell him where the site was, there was one thing guaranteed to lead him to it.

"Lauer! Is the dig site on cable or beam?"

"We're cabling over the lip of the crater, then we're beaming to a site northeast of that." He stared at West, waiting for an explanation.

“Cut all comms. Just do it. My order.”

Laurer reached behind him, still staring at the Commander, and pressed a single function key.

“Any other melodramatic orders you want to give, Commander?”

But West was already out of Console. He raced back to his room and put on his underwear, boots, and gloves. Then he headed to the airlock and stood in a template in the antechamber waiting for it to suit him. He stepped to the second template to get a pack, then pulled his helmet out of his locker and fastened it on. And, for the first time, he took with him the one prerogative of Command, the one thing that set him apart from all other crew members: a gun.

He followed the cable and climbed into the Secchi Crater. As predicted, they were beaming energy, but not northeast. They were sending microwaves to a receiver in the northwest, up one of the fjords of the crater. He entered the fjord and saw a number of caves.

The receiving unit, which turned microwaves back into electricity, was easy to find. But the cables, well-buried, would take too long to follow. From here, he was on his own. He began checking the nearby caves. The first couple drew blanks, but even West could see the stripes of sedimentation in the walls and what looked very much like the fossils of some kind of polyp.

In the ancient past, Mars had had life. As the atmosphere leaked into space, atmospheric pressure dropped and water evaporated to fill the gap. As the seas dried up, life retreated to areas like this crater, the last places where Mars would have had ample liquid water. This is where the last complex life lived and where their remains would be found.

Polyps — if that’s what they were — had been cut away and were left on the floor. This was the worksite until they found something more compelling.

When West entered the next cave, chatter died. Radios echoed only breathing. West looked from mask to mask as if plastic, metal, and twin lenses could show regret or remorse. But there was none; they were just masks. Computer links identified who was in what armor.

On the floor of the cave were a host of complex animals — or at least their remains. They were clearly not from Earth. Apparently, they had retreated here to nest. Small holes dug into the cave floor housed families of creatures that seemed to have had no nostrils or fur. West was no biologist, but it looked like they respired through the mouth and skin. He peered into one of the small pits. It took him a while, but no one hurried him.

These things made nests and nurtured young that were — tadpoles.

"They were amphibians."

No one disagreed. But the adult form wasn't a frog. It was nothing like that. Their strong front legs ended in heavy claws for climbing. Their equally strong but shorter back legs had much smaller claws set in webbed feet.

It dawned on West that these creatures swam to get food and climbed to escape predators. The Secchi Crater was once a sea. Somewhere further down might be the fossils of those predators, but the odds were likely there would be relatively few of them and the sea would have preserved them less well than this cave.

West looked at all the small pits dug for breeding. Clearly, the soil was soft when there was water here. What surprised him was how close the pits were. Then he saw the teethmarks and the tadpoles bitten in half. The wall had breached between two pits, and the two adults had torn each other apart, seemingly stepping on their own young in the process.

"This was an environment under pressure. We're looking at their last sols."

He'd used the Martian word by habit, but it felt right. Their last sols, the first sols of human habitation.

They were kind of like a barrel-chested bulldog but with a completely different face. They seemed to have brought fresh water to their young in a throat pouch. They brought food in, too, in the form of — head, clawed hands, tail — only a rough parallel, but the headline would stick. Mermaids. Small, like a sea-born Rhesus monkey.

Gradually, an even greater truth swept over West.

"These aren't fossils." The color was right but much else wasn't. He should have realized sooner. "They're mummies, aren't they?"

"They were probably freeze dried, Commander."

"Earth Command has to know. But when they do, they'll invoke Protocol I: We're here for good." No one said anything. "We can mine the gold we found and sell it for supplies and immigrants. With a bit of luck we can mine, melt, cool, and send a shipment at the next launch window."

"Will they let us do that?" asked Casey.

"If Earth Command doesn't like it, we'll declare ourselves the Indigenous Republic of Mars." He looked at the mummies in the pits surrounding him. "Their extinction has given us a forever."

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*JASON COOPER was born in Fort Erie, Ontario, but grew up in Buffalo, New York. While in Buffalo, he attended a school for gifted youngsters when he was still a youngster, and gifted, and before the school closed. He went to Australia and got a Bachelor of Arts degree. He now lives in Perth with his daughter, Shadra, and his son, Darius. He has authored seven books, including the novel Slums of Paradise (Twilight Times [http://www.twilighttimesbooks.com/SlumsParadise\\_ch1.html](http://www.twilighttimesbooks.com/SlumsParadise_ch1.html)). He has wrestled professionally twice, but in an unrelated accident injured his knee, and the reconstruction didn't work too well.*



*Endless Power, Inc, had prepared Angel Perez for the physical dangers of harnessing the newest source of unlimited energy. But no one thought to prepare him for how to cope once his tour was up.*

## **HUNTING THE MANTIS**

by Adam Knight

The needle jabs into Stomper's arm and he grits his teeth. Amphetamine solution squirts into his artery and his heart thuds in his throat. Sweat bursts onto his face and his legs twitch. His brown pupils dilate. Light and shadow tangle among the arches and spires of rock. Starlight streaks across the blackness.

Stomper stands on asteroid C13398, which hurtles end over end and shudders with the impact of debris. Yet Stomper remains securely attached to the rock in his magnetized boots and bulky, pressurized suit. A six-pack of neutralizing spray cans dangles from his belt. The amphetamine boost — standard operating procedure — leaves him wide-eyed and twitching, drenched in sweat as the drugs filter through his lanky frame. Within a minute he feels like pure electricity. So do the four other men on the scouring crew, as well as clusters of men on hundreds of similar asteroids in the Belt, all employed by Endless Power, Inc.

"Clear it out!" shouts Splash, the squad leader. All five men scream in their helmets, charging headlong into the caverns of C13398. Zappy and Clown shine beams of light from the phosphorescent lamps mounted under their EP-19 blasters, scanning the surface of the porous rock. The rifle-style blasters fire non-lethal pulses of energy, the only projectiles of any use in the constantly spinning, shifting Asteroid Belt. Stomper and Custer prowl behind them in combat stances, wielding their J-4s. Those long, light, titanium-graphite blades do the killing. The five men move like fleas across the asteroid surface, turning their magnetized boots on and off, propelling into space and crashing to the surface. Space dust and distant stars whip across their vision.

"Report," commands Queen Bee in the headset. He is in a distant, orbiting command station.

"Negative for Wasps and Spitters," Splash replies.

"Nucleite?"

"Negative."

"Damn," says Queen Bee. "Keep looking. Activate scanners."

Splash aims a beam of blue light at a distant patch of rock, which glitters.

"Bingo," he says.

"Wasps ahead!" shouts Clown. The swarming Wasps are as big as labradors and camouflaged to the rock, with stingers like steak knives. Clown and Zappy lift their EP-19s. Two electric blue orbs smash into the Wasps, knocking them back. Stomper's heart and brain buzz like live wires. He and Custer hold their J-4s in attack position and activate their boots. From a dozen meters up they crash toward the surface. Stomper's empty stomach climbs into his throat. Like lightning bolts, they slam onto the Wasps, and the J-4s puncture the alien exoskeletons. Iridescent fluid sprays out and the bodies thrash. All around, dozens of hidden Wasps flutter. More EP blasts smash into the pests, and Custer and Stomper charge from one to the next, jabbing the blades into the armor, cracking the shells apart. Minutes later, inert Wasp bodies hover above the surface.

"Good work," Queen Bee says. "If there are Wasps, there's nucleite."

Nucleite. The word has been so embedded into the men's minds that hearing it spoken is like hearing one's heart beat, or hearing one's own breath. With their every sensor scanning and every eye probing the twisted lattices of rock, the scouring team careens over the asteroid's surface, moving and thinking as one.

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Angel Perez stands shirtless on the volleyball court, laughing, a can of beer in one hand. He and his friends, all young men in their early twenties, play without strain, letting the ball drop often. In two weeks they will report to the Endless Power training facility before deploying to the Asteroid Belt. In seven months, Angel, who will then be called Stomper, will stand on C13398. Now, charcoal heats on nearby grills. Local kids run and yell through the city park, drawing the scorn of many, but not the six men. The heat and beer make them sloppy and cheerful.

"C'mon, serve," says Darren, flipping the ball to Angel, his best friend. As Queen Bee, Darren will coordinate attacks from the distant command station because a heart murmur exempts him from scouring duty. The ball bounces off Angel's thin chest. He curses, but he's laughing. Not letting go of the beer can, he

stoops and picks up the ball with his free hand, tosses it in the air, and smacks it into play.

The park and surrounding cityscape have changed a lot in a decade. Because of the Energy Wars, the men did not play there as boys. Strict energy quotas meant most civilians spent very little time indoors and milled about the city from dawn until dusk. Mobs with short tempers collected in open areas, such as parks. While civilians wandered the cities, soldiers and mercenaries fought over the remaining drops of oil and gas in remote corners of the world. Angel's father had died defending a derrick in Alaska. Chinese mercenaries overran his platoon and claimed the oil, which ran dry in a week. Angel had been too young to know him, but imagined his father as a valiant crusader in a hopeless crusade.

Escalating violence had not ended the Energy Wars; the discovery of nucleite had.

"Scared?" Darren throws the question out to no one in particular. Scoffs and macho denials pepper the air.

The man who will later be called Splash swigs his beer and taps the ball over the net. "No more scared than I get weeding the garden or setting mousetraps."

"It's gonna be dangerous." Some of the men feel a tweak of resentment when Darren says this.

"I'm not scared. You scared, babe?" Angel calls to Lisa, who sits in the shade, reading. She lays her book in the grass and strolls to the court. Her long black legs move smoothly in denim shorts, and Angel is proud when his buddies sneak glances at her.

"Hmm?" she purrs, putting her arms around Angel's waist.

"You scared for me?"

Her four-second pause is answer enough. "Well ... I've heard about the Belt. Accidents. Debris. Oxygen. Wasps, Spitters and who knows what else. I mean, one pinhole in those suits and—"

Darren chuckles. "Chicks," he says. Lisa glares over the rims of her sunglasses.

The ball rolls to Angel's feet. Lisa elbows him and he scoops up the ball and hurls it at Darren, beer can still firmly in hand.

"What about the amph solutions?" Lisa asks. "I hear it's hard to stop. I hear you hallucinate and your heart can burst."

"Don't worry, babe," Angel says. "Endless Power sets it all up. After active duty, they terrace down our dosage until we're clean. All safe. It's all there in the manual."

The 388-page manual from Endless Power is titled *A Guide for Tomorrow's Pioneers*. The cover shows a firm-jawed young man and woman, superimposed over stars and nebulae, staring into the distance. Angel has only read the first three paragraphs:

*You are a young person with courage. With character. With a hunger for adventure. We know this because you have signed with Endless Power, Inc. Your contract opens not a world but a galaxy of opportunity. You will tread ground untouched before by any human. Your excitement and fear are the same feelings shared by other explorers: Christopher Columbus, Daniel Boone, Lewis and Clark, the crews of the Apollo missions.*

*Wood. Oil. Water. Coal. The sun. The atom. Of the many energy sources to fuel mankind's progress, none has changed us the way nucleite has. Since its accidental discovery by the space probe Providence, our newest element has astounded physicists. Held in the hand, a nucleite crystal is no more harmful than quartz, can be split and transported with ease, and is capable of rapid self-replication. And yet a single, pencil-sized crystal of nucleite can produce a cold-fusion reaction powerful enough to power the city of New York for several hours or propel a five-man spacecraft to Pluto. While traditional cold-fusion reactions require large inputs of energy to overcome the Coulomb Barrier, nucleite seems almost eager to react for us. When the Energy Wars reached a crisis point, science pointed us to nucleite.*

*Endless Power is at the forefront of exploration, research, harvesting, and development of nucleite, rapidly converting old fossil-fuel and nuclear power stations to nucleite reactors. In the near future, everything from flashlights to space stations will be powered with nucleite batteries. You and your fellow team members are the brave pioneers who will blaze mankind's trail across the Solar System. Exterminating the pests that infest nucleite deposits is the first crucial step in harnessing this revolutionary energy.*

The manual sits under a bottle of sunblock. Angel knows he must read it before he reports to training in two weeks, but right now he and the other men would rather play volleyball and drink beer.

"You worry too much," Darren tells Lisa. She folds her arms over her chest.

"Get him," she says, and Angel drops his beer can. He charges Darren and tackles him. All the men laugh and kick sand at the wrestling pair. Angel stands, brushes off, and strides over to Lisa. Wrapping his arms around her waist and slinging her over his shoulders, he trudges off to the shade where they kiss.

"Promise me," she whispers, her lips brushing his cheek and ear, "Promise that after you've done this job, we can get a nice house and live a normal life."

"Promise," whispers Angel, kissing her on the nose, the chin, the jaw, the neck. Lisa's pleasure mingles with her worry; her love for this silly and lighthearted Angel Perez swirls with her fear that he will return from the Asteroid Belt a different man — or not return at all.

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Clown yelps and curses. A glob of white acid bubbles on the back of his suit. Stomper tears an aluminum can from the pack on his hip, rips it open, and sprays neutralizer over the acid. For a stretched-out time, the acid gnaws into the protective lining, but the spray takes effect, and the bubbling stops.

"Systems check!" Clown screams, and two seconds later Queen Bee replies, "You're clear. No leaks."

"Where's the Spitter?" asks Zappy.

"Nest, fifty meters to the right," says Splash. "Incoming!"

Globules of white, viscous acid come lobbing in from a rocky outcropping. The squad scatters, and the acid floats past. The Spitters are neon tubes protruding from the rock. They swell, then spit more acid, like cartoon blunderbusses. Clown and Zappy crouch and aim their EP-19s, firing pulse after pulse at the nest. Stomper and Custer swoop in, swinging blades. Like scythes, the J-4s slice through the Spitters. The foamy tubes drift upward, becoming debris in the Belt. Stomper's arms and shoulders and back work fast, slashing and swinging. His body feels electrified, rushing. When the Spitters are dead, Stomper drops a detonating charge on the nest. Rock blasts away, exposing a chute below. The squad rushes in.

Clearing the Spitters leaves Stomper sluggish, weak, and thirsty. "Boost me!" he shouts to Queen Bee, whose signal sends the needle back into Stomper's arm. The amphetamine rush lifts him, and he screams down the chute, stabbing everything inhuman that moves, hacking at Wasps and Spitters. Boots pound the rock as the squad uses magnets, gravity and muscle to navigate. Hearts beat insanely, pumping blood to muscles working too fast to ache. Like ichor-stained knights of old, the acid and fluid-spattered squad from Endless Power charges into the depths of C13398. After seven months of training and service together, the quintet butchers Wasps and Spitters with hyper-efficiency. Always, they watch for Mantises. More machine than organism, Mantises are supposed to be death walking on jagged joints. Better to see them before they see you. But they find no Mantises.

Nucleite crystals glow like dew in moonlight. Splash reports to Queen Bee, who congratulates them and orders them to clean up. He sends boost signals to all five men, who wince at the pricks of needles inside their suits. In cleanup, speed is critical. If one organism were to survive and reproduce, when the harvesting teams came to C13398, they would be swarmed by hundreds of new, angry Wasps. The men hack the Wasp and Spitter bodies, probing every surface with maniacal efficiency. Stomper's dilated eyes flash at every movement, seeing Wasps and Spitters everywhere. They have never seen a Mantis. At the surface, all is still, and Splash calls to Queen Bee.

"C13398 clear. Ready for evac."

"Copy, Splash," says Queen Bee, and the men hear the smile in his voice. "Prepare for—"

Clown screams and the men whip around. A Wasp clings to Clown's back. Its stinger has thrust through the suit and shattered the polarized visor. Blood oozes and hangs in the air. Zappy fires a pulse that hits Clown, spinning him end over end. Custer lunges out and grabs Clown's leg. Stomper slashes his J-4 at the Wasp, chopping through the armored body. He hacks again and again, his limbs supercharged, and Splash pulls him back. Clown's lower body lies on the rock; the upper half is a grisly, spattered mess.

"I'm sorry!" Stomper screams at no one. "It was a Wasp! I had to—"

"It's cool, man. It's cool," Splash says. "Clown was dead. You had to."

Splash reports to Queen Bee, who orders the evac vessel to pick up the squad and Clown's corpse.

For three hours Stomper feels no emotions, only the momentum of the amphetamines. Once the drugs drain from him, though, and he realizes what he has done to the body of his friend, he sobs and shakes. Queen Bee places a hand on his shoulder, tells him not to worry, that he was doing his job. The consolation does not help. Stomper feels older, harder, emptier. The hollowness comes from the broken promise of adventure — the knowledge that he was racing along the vital edge of some frontier.

~~~

Angel stands among rows of cultivated nucleite on Mars. Eighteen months have passed since Endless Power released him from active scouring duty. In his hand, a monitor counts the ever-growing crystals and transmits data to the Endless Power satellite. Researchers discovered years ago that nucleite self-replicates when "planted" on barren rock. The first nucleite "farmers" on Mars joked that it was an easier crop to raise than dandelions.

Angel stares ahead, focusing on nothing. Under his pressurized atmosphere suit, he wears a collared shirt and the silk tie Lisa bought him before they moved to Mars. Clown is dead. So are Custer and Splash. Zappy lives in the Mars colony, but never speaks with Angel. Queen Bee still coordinates scour missions.

Angel has still to see a Mantis, but he knows the stories of how they can eviscerate a man with a single stroke. In his dreams, it's a Mantis' metallic claws that hack Clown into pieces. And sometimes, alone in the nucleite fields, he sees Mantises crouched low among the crystals, their polygonal carapaces camouflaged among the jutting angles of glittering crystal. His heart thumps and rises and the twitch in his legs explodes and he is running, running down the rows to get away until he realizes he is quite alone, that the Mantises are far away in the Belt and not on quiet Mars. Quiet, cold Mars, whose centuries-old mystique has withered into red, dusty, sterile disappointment.

Mars reminds Angel of Little League, before the Energy Wars. His coach would push the chalk spreader that draws white lines from home plate to the outfield wall. At game's start, the lines were fresh and crisp. After four or five innings, though, they blurred and disappeared. Angel, a fast runner but a weak hitter, would run hard with every hit. Legs burning, eyes watering as he pounded into the dirt, he would run along the white line that was invisible but understood.

The insistent beeping of the monitor finally draws Angel's attention. He transmits the report and packs his gear into his transport, a six-wheeled vehicle that looks like an enclosed golf cart with a joystick. The tires crunch against the rocky surface as he drives in silence. There are no roads on Mars, just designated routes marked with flags that Martian colonial law requires drivers to respect.

Feeling an itch around his neck like his tie is choking him, he claws at his pressurized suit. His cheeks tingle and sweat beads on his forehead. He swerves from the flagged route, slamming his foot onto the accelerator, and the engine buckles and grinds into new life, whipping the landscape by in an orange rush. The transport heaves like a panicked animal, charging across the Martian wastes. Angel sucks in air as his fist clenches the joystick. Tiny rocks clatter against the windows. He sees a ridge ahead, a sharp line on the horizon, and his leg spasms out, flattening the accelerator. A hissing squeak escapes Angel's throat, and for a brittle second Angel is Stomper again, rushing and raging with power. The transport speeds closer to the peak of the ridge, leaping and bucking with every bump, gaining speed. The squeak grows into a full-throated scream, and the transport bucks as it soars over the precipice. The ground falls away, and Angel rides the high, feeling like electric current, feeling his brain come alive again. For a

deathless moment the transport hangs suspended in air, without momentum, tricking gravity. And then they plummet, Angel and his transport — a little red wagon for the little red planet — and the surface rises up and smashes them.

The wreck lies a few hundred meters from the colony where Lisa and Angel live. Their home is the EnviroDome 4002, the most advanced artificial environment dwelling available. Angel purchased it for Lisa delighted at how easy it was to make her happy. Now, Lisa sits at the formica countertop with a cold cup of coffee, decidedly unhappy. Darren sits opposite her. She has invited him over to discuss why she is not happy with Mars or with Angel. Distracted in her kitchen, Lisa does not see the crash.

~~~

As a new recruit for Endless Power, Angel's pride is apparent: his spine is straight, his smile is wide, and he laughs easily. He slaps friends on their shoulders and kisses Lisa in public. Like the other young men being initiated into manhood, he is vigorous and sharp-minded. Mornings are spent in physical training; in his afternoon classes he learns about the Asteroid Belt, about nucleite, and about the challenges they will face.

"You are not soldiers," says the instructor. "Soldiers kill. You exterminate."

One recruit raises his hand. "I don't understand, sir."

The instructor, a thickly built, crew-cut man places his hands behind his back and paces across the classroom. "Sentience, recruit. Sentience is everything. Taking the life of something that can think is killing. That's what soldiers do. But you didn't join the army. You were hired by Endless Power. Your job is to exterminate the vermin that impede our expansion to the Outer Planets. Wasps and Spitters don't think; they just build nests and eat nucleite and shit out corrosive acids. They're no better than termites."

"But sir, they must think. The Wasps build homes. The Spitters are like garbage collectors. The Mantises are guards. They cooperate; hell, they practically have a civilization. Sounds pretty smart to me."

Biologists who had aired similar qualms in the early days of nucleite exploration were quickly labeled as weak-thinkers who were anti progress. A few specimens of Wasps and Spitters were preserved for study, but the appeal of nucleite technology dazzled even the impartial eyes of science. Because Wasps and Spitters reproduced so quickly, most agreed that exterminating the few that lay in the way was more than justified. Such was the spirit of the times.

The instructor slams a fist on his desk. "A civilization? Goddamn. For them to have a civilization, they'd have to be human. And if they were human, then this



would be a war. And if this were a war, then it would be fought by an army. And if this were an army, then you'd be soldiers. But you aren't soldiers, and you aren't in the army, and this is not a war, and Wasps and Spitters are not humans, and they sure as hell don't have a fucking civilization! You've got to draw a line, recruit. Killing Wasps, or Spitters, or Mantises or a goddamn ant at a picnic is a god-given right. Even an old lady could do it and not feel a thing! If you're going to be a pussy, maybe I'll call up your momma and have her pick you up and take you home."

The instructor is panting. The recruit shuts his mouth. Angel looks at his paper, taps his pencil. He draws a line down the middle. On the left, he writes *SENTIENT*. Under it: *HUMANS*. On the right side of the paper he writes *WASPS*, *SPITTERS*, *MANTISES*. He crumples the paper and shoves it into his jacket.

~ ~ ~

Angel sits at the kitchen table in his EnviroDome 4002. He pulls threads from a dishtowel, mutilating it. He and Lisa have not met eyes all morning.

The home is sound-proof, self-contained and thermally controlled, with adjustable humidity and airflow levels. The advertised "more Earthlike than Earth" quality brings Lisa comfort against the loneliness of Martian living. Angel considers puncturing a hole through the barrier of the EnviroDome 4002.

Bandages, slings and titanium pins hold his body together. Though Lisa calls the crash an accident, Angel knows better. He soared over that ridgeline and smashed into the red rocks to drive toward something, to find something indefinable. The crash has placed a wedge of understanding between the two. Though Angel and Lisa once exchanged thoughts freely and easily, now Lisa wonders about Angel's mind while Angel yearns for the innocent ignorance Lisa once possessed.

Angel knows nucleite is responsible, to some degree, for this loss. The quickly accessible energy source allowed the colony on Mars to prosper and exploratory vessels to venture to the Outer Planets. Probes now refuel in depots right in the Belt, allowing them further reaches into the frontiers of space. Angel knows nucleite has saved mankind, not only solving but erasing the energy problem. Only a couple of decades ago civilization was sinking into a culture of bandits and savagery, when his own father was killed over a few hundred gallons of Alaskan oil.

Yet he cannot help but compare this age of Endless Power to two centuries earlier, when eager young men had torn across the United States in search of gold, heedless of native landscapes, wildlife and tribes. When the continent was

conquered, and the lust for gold faded, those rugged, ruthless men struggled to find new purpose. By the mid-twenty-first century, the eyes of Manifest Destiny, which had grown restless since running against the Pacific Ocean, gazed into the night sky.

Lisa jumps at the electronic chirp of the telephone. She answers and, after snatching the mangled towel away from him, hands the receiver to Angel. He listens, acknowledges, looks down, acknowledges again and hangs up.

Lisa stares at him. "Well?"

"Zappy's wife."

"Zappy?"

Lisa only knew the men before they had call signs. Angel cannot remember Zappy's original name. He tries to explain, becomes muddled, and Lisa places her hands on her hips and frowns.

"Zappy's dead," Angel says. "Amphetamine OD."

"How'd he get it?"

"We have connections in the Belt. It wouldn't have been hard."

"We?" Lisa says. She reaches out for the sugar bowl, not with an ebony arm but with a neon yellow proboscis, swollen with corrosive acid. Angel twitches, his fingers playing around the handle of a butter knife.

"He. Whatever. I do too."

"You make no sense," Lisa says. Angel looks at her arm, which is normal again.

"Don't worry about me, Leese," he says, trying to sound light. He blows her a kiss. She turns away.

"You're not back yet, are you?" she asks. Angel says nothing. "Let me know when you are." She walks out of the kitchen, slamming the door.

Angel crosses to the closet. On the door is a sticker, reminding him that in case of an emergency, one can enter the closet and seal it from the inside. The closet/emergency pod has enough water and oxygen to support human life for 96 hours. Angel digs at the sticker with his nail, then peels it off. *Safety wrapped in safety*, he thinks, and a shiver of shame runs through him. His friends had died in the Belt; he had not. Other men are still dying in the Belt; he is alive and safe. He flicks the sticker away and opens the closet.

Each movement stirs pain in his broken body as he dons his pressurized suit and goes out to the new transport. He sits in it, not thinking, just hating the safety he cannot escape. Then he turns on the ignition and, obeying all Martian colonial

traffic laws, drives along the flagged routes to Zappy's home. His head feels stuffed with insulation.

Angel parks in front of Zappy's EnviroDome 3090. It is surrounded with a white plastic picket fence, a standard EnviroDome feature. Angel wants to kick the fence down. At the front door he buzzes the intercom. There is no reply, but he is not expecting one. Zappy is dead because his heart exploded, and Zappy's wife is at the hospital with him. The front door is unlocked; Angel opens it and walks to the bathroom, where he knows he will find his old comrade's remaining supply of amphetamine.

---

Angel is a boy of eleven, reading a beaten paperback on his front step. Though his friends tease him for reading when he isn't playing ball, he cannot read enough fantasy stories. This book is a tale of adventurers who seek dragons and slay them out of duty to their king. All day long, Angel daydreams of the thrill of traveling to a distant, unforgiving land; hunting dragons; and slaying them. But at night he dreams he is a dragon being pursued by cruel, armed men. When he wakes he feels cold and confused, one question nagging him above all: After the knights slay the dragon, after so long training and practicing the ways of killing, what would they do in life? Could they ever return to their old lives, or to any sort of life at all?

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Stomper squats between two jagged rocks on asteroid S093, his pupils wide in the darkness, his fingers twitching, his mind flashing like heat lightning. Custer floats around the cavern.

Zappy glues legs from dead Wasps on his pressurized suit with super-strength adhesive. He extends one of these dead legs to Splash, who is writing a report for Endless Power in corporate jargonese. "Welcome to the neighborhood," Zappy says with an affected rasp. "Don't know if you've met the mate and larvae yet—" Splash floats away to finish the report.

Clown's replacement, Lizard, fires meaningless energy pulses into the rock. The other men rarely speak to him. S093 has been a grueling, confusing mission. A dense asteroid with narrow crevices and sharp angles. No nucleite. No Wasps or Spitters. Every shadow might be a Mantis, and turns out not to be. Stomper wonders if the Mantis is real. Reports insist that it is. Just like reports insist this rock is loaded with resources — and the crew is not allowed to evac until the

resources have been secured. Stomper buffs his J-4 blade with a micro-abrasive cloth, like a knight of old polishing a longsword.

He thinks about knights and whether plowing a sword through a man would be sickening or thrilling. *Intoxicating*, he decides. Making oneself toxic. Filling oneself with the poison of killing. He wonders if killing humans becomes easier with each kill. Cross that line enough, he tells himself, and it disappears. The line between life and death, right and wrong, not killing and killing — like those chalk lines on the Little League field. Step on the line enough and it gets smudged out. The line between killing space creatures and killing humans. Stomper thinks that is a line better left uncrossed.

Three Wasps pounce on Custer, jabbing spikes through his armored suit. The man thrashes before going still. Lizard fires his EP-19, and one energy pulse knocks a Wasp against the rock. Stomper propels himself into the fray. Holding out the blade, he pierces the carapace of one Wasp. Zappy snatches Custer's J-4 blade and hacks at another. Wasps swarm out of the tunnels into the cavern. Splash screams into his com for support, though reinforcements are hours or days away. The men scream and pounce, crushing and stabbing everything that moves. A needle prick in Stomper's arm makes him pant and sweat. Weightless, he is pure energy, invincible. He smashes and splinters the Wasps, the fragments of their bodies going slippery with slime. Any emotional reaction to Custer's death is incinerated in the amphetamine fire running through his veins. Stomper feels as alive as is possible. Not good, not excited, but raw and alive.

When it is dark and quiet again, the men lie on the cold rock like limp fish. Stomper does not know if he is awake and trying to fall asleep, or asleep and dreaming of being awake. In that sleep fog, he sees another Wasp, jolts awake and chops it into slime and shell.

Then Splash shakes him awake. "Mantis," the leader whispers, and Stomper is awake and sharp again. The four men make their way further into S093, burrowing into the darkest depths of the space rock. They see nothing, but the needle jabs into Stomper's arm, and he feels sparks running through his veins. Something moves in the dark ahead. It is a Mantis; Stomper is sure of it.

Then Splash shakes him awake again, and he stares in disbelief at everything.

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Splash and Lizard step on a nest of Spitters, and the acid bores through their suits faster than Zappy and Stomper can react. The men spasm like hooked fish, then go still, and their bodies float in the vacuum. Stomper screams through his com to Queen Bee, safe in the distant, orbiting command station, "Evac! Evac! Evac!"

Then he cries.

~~~

Angel packs his few belongings because Lisa told him to leave the EnviroDome 4002. He feels no emotion; he thinks only of escaping the artificial bubble. He listens to an audionews broadcast from Mars' single station.

*Reports from Endless Power, Inc. indicate that larval Wasps, and worse, may have been transported to the nucleite farms on Mars. An infestation could ruin the corporation's investments. For more on this we—*

Angel contacts Endless Power headquarters. He speaks with an operator and volunteers to scour the nucleite farms. She asks his name, which he provides.

"Mr. Perez," the operator replies, "you have an exemplary record of service with our company, and your eighteen months of scouring in the Belt already exceeds our maximum recommended—"

"Please," Angel begs. "Give me a J-4. I can jump, I can attack, I can slay—"

"Let me transfer you," the operator says, and Angel disconnects. He wonders if this is how a knight of old found his way into knight errancy — when the knight's need to serve outlived the king's need of his service.

~~~

Angel looks out at the nucleite, replicating itself in rows. The crystals jut up from the rock, promising profit and power. *Endless power*, Angel thinks, *but for whom? What does mankind do with endless power and no boundaries?* It comes to Angel that Endless Power has been harvesting nucleite, but the harvest has been fueled with another unlimited resource: young men, and the reckless, undirected enthusiasm that defines them. Like the Spitters that consume nucleite, which is filled with potential energy, and spit out acid, Endless Power consumes promising men — and Angel realizes now that he is the waste product.

Something moves. A Mantis. Angel knows it. Polygons on polygons, grinding against one another, swiveling with machine speed. Angel's heart thumps in his chest. He places Zappy's vial of amph solution in the medical access slot of his suit. A syringe stabs into his scarred arm. In seconds, the rush returns. A Mantis, for certain.

Angel scrambles into his transport and slams the accelerator, spinning the tires and clawing through the nucleite fields. Crystals shatter and smash to powder as Angel screams, feeling alive. The Mantis looks up, sees the vehicle and turns. Its mechanical-looking legs propel it toward the colony. Angel speeds up and screams. Spittle flies from his lips and his bleary eyes dilate.

Though it is twice as large as the transport, Angel thinks only to knock the monster over then smash it under the tires. But he cannot reach the Mantis, which bounds toward the distant dome houses, toward the EnviroDome 4002 where Lisa still lives. In an instant, Angel crosses over the boundary between the colony and the wild Martian plain, crosses into his neighborhood, crushes the white plastic picket fence on his property, and smashes into the EnviroDome 4002. He hurtles through the windshield, smashes into a table and dies.

Stomper leaps up, clutching a fragment of the polycarbonate windshield. The Mantis tromps across the living room, lunging toward Lisa, who is screaming. Darren stands by her side. Darren, Queen Bee, who never felt danger from his distant, orbiting command station, who has treated Angel with cordiality and nothing more since the Belt, who has been comforting Lisa over cups of coffee and under silk sheets. Stomper leaps, raising his polycarbonate longsword and swinging it down onto Darren. The man crumples, and Stomper stabs and stabs, feeling weightless, obliterating. Stomper keels backward as Lisa strikes him with a dish. Stunned, he looks up. Why did she attack him and not the Mantis? She staggers and gasps as the Martian atmosphere leaks into her miniature Earth. She crawls into the closet and seals it. She has 96 hours, Stomper knows.

The Mantis crawls, too — out of the EnviroDome 4002. He cannot let it escape. As he raises his bloody blade, it catches the flickering recessed lighting and glitters. He climbs out of the house and sprints after the Mantis. His legs are bolts of lightning, his head a supernova, his heart a live wire. He is running to first base; he is pursuing the dragon; he is hunting the Mantis.

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*ADAM KNIGHT is a writer and an English teacher in northern New Jersey. His work has been accepted at Brain Soup, Halfway Down the Stairs, Golden Visions Magazine, and Hall Brothers' Entertainment's Villainy anthology. He can be reached at [adamknightbooks@gmail.com](mailto:adamknightbooks@gmail.com).*

*Building bridges of meaning through symbols — such as flags, status, and nationality — is as much about alienating as connecting. But the Virtual Bridge Sri plans to build could reconnect the lost hopes of a dying civilization.*

## CONNECT

by Kenneth Burstall

By any reasonable measure we are dead.

Unity — slow, cold and broken — is leaving me behind. It's a slowly boiling mass of speckled gray now. I'm walking away from it, building, understanding, memorizing as I go. And to do these things, to tie them together, I use my memories. Of being alive, of dying, of being dead.

---

The centre of the quadrangle was forbidden territory for displaced persons. Sometimes, though, the machine gun crew, drunk on loneliness or alcohol, would let some children in for a while. We would run and scream, ecstatic and terrified by the alien view the soldiers had of our people. A full 360 degrees of crowds on hard plastic seats and primitive bathrooms half-way down each thirty meter side.

We would play king-of-the-castle on the chunks of limestone there, a child on a rock pulled down and replaced by his or her peers.

One strange night the drunken soldiers let us into the central area. We rushed around, scaring each other with screams and unskilled kisses. We played king-of-the-castle, and it was a completely different game in the dark. When those trying to pull the king down were invisible, they were vicious and fast. The game moved at a startling pace, generating bruises and tears by the score.

For a brief moment I was king and the air on that rock seemed cold, thin and clear. The stars were brighter than I'd ever seen, pinholes in the fabric of the sky

letting onto a blazing aurora. Then I was pulled down and the soldiers screamed us back to the edges at an officer's approach.

I was eight years old.

~~~

Why my parents married, let alone adopted me, was a mystery.

"Fuck you! If it weren't for my money, you'd still be living on EU food parcels." A stream of obscene Russian followed Mother's outburst. Father was touchy about his origins in Neutral Scotland.

"And if it weren't for me, you'd be an uncultured parochial bitch. You may have made a little money but I was the one invested it, so excuse me while I go and spend some." With that he stormed out, infuriating Mother even more by beating her to it.

We looked at each other, then at the beautifully inlaid door father had just slammed.

Weirdly, we started throwing numbers at each other, estimates of the effect that veneer would have on the aluminum honeycomb underneath.

I was ten years old.

~~~

The ship is perpetually cold. It slows irreversible processes and conserves energy. Still, with energy not being a problem here, there are other ways to solve the first issue. Our tokomaks have enough fuel to run at full capacity for the full 5000-year trip. We could run warm.

I believe the cold was imposed, unconsciously, as a penance for our deserting a doomed world. All but the fanatics claimed to wish us well, but I think that everyone really hated us.

We were leaving behind a biologically immortal population ten billion strong on top of an ecosystem crashing back to blue-green algae.

We got our last, anguished signal from them 513 years ago.

I am 3124 years old.

~~~

Kids with parents who were live and free were the elite. They got more and better food than the rest of us, live and free parents tending to stay that way by being bullies.

"So where's your mum and dad today, Smearly?" Tall, blond and, hatefully to me, intelligent Smethills was my main persecutor. "Oh yes. Losing it in Wales!"



None of us knew what this stuff meant, of course. At eight years old, we simply latched on to whatever hurt the most. The Leary name was well-known, however, even among kids.

Mum and Dad were up in the mountains of the DMZ, shooting at and failing to kill US patrols. The numbers of their fellow insurgents were continually being reduced by packs of augmented dogs, the only weapon the US deigned to use.

Their disdain did not, however, prevent massively disproportionate reprisals against the camp populations for Mum and Dad's activities.

I ran at Smethills, fists swinging, leaving him bleeding, crying, running for his mother.

That night his father and his goons visited. They beat my uncle so badly he pissed blood for a month.

~~~

Mother and Father made up, of course, with plenty of make-up sex. I could hear it through the very strong but very light door to their room.

To distract myself I laid my head on the brass grab-bar that ran all around the room. The distant bass of the big engines suddenly became clearer. More interesting to me was my distorted image in the rich glow of the polished metal: one eye huge, one small, mouth drawn out in a long snarl. I could sense these distortions somehow mapped back to the original me.

As I devised a mathematical framework to express the transformation, I felt a cold happiness at the conclusion. I map continuously back to myself.

~~~

Most crew engineer themselves to ignore the cold.

Some of us endure it, pulling ourselves along the drums dressed in thick furs. We're regarded as eccentrics of course, among a crew of people selected for eccentricity.

I'm supremely odd for my choice of flag above my cabin door.

On a ship covered in EU, US, Russian, Chinese, Brazilian and other modern national flags, only mine triggers rage, embarrassment or sadness in the viewer, even after all this time. No one has a simple response to that red cross on a white background.

~~~

Food was brought on trucks through an armored garage door that took up the middle third of one side of the quadrangle. Through the gap one could see the

next, identical quadrangle. There were dozens of the things. Prefabricated carbon fiber squares, each one the same as the others, tiled who knew how many times.

After Uncle Fred was so badly injured, Aunt Mary put in for a transfer to another square. Amazingly her request was granted.

---

The giant airship was something mother wished she had designed. That she hadn't been asked she put down to sexism and racism.

Father put it down, vocally, to her reputation for hugely impressive, hugely disparate projects.

Of the big three projects she'd worked on: one was a domed city on Prometheus, the skyhook anchor; one was a modular space-port in Ulan Bator and one was a chip-fab in Cape Town.

Even in an age that abhorred specialising this was felt to spreading oneself too thin.

The fact that each project was so successful somehow made it worse.

No one so singular could be trusted with a project on the scale of the airship.

---

Everyone knows my family connection to the dog and its journey from Snowdonia to Liverpool.

Some find it impossible to talk to me despite the gap in both distance and time.

To hell with them.

The sociologists decided a little encouragement to national feeling would add some seasoning to the crew. They probably were thinking something along the lines of pan-European cuisine accompanied by a tango with Bengali dancing.

Instead they got a bunch of simmering, low-level, ethnicity-based interpersonal conflicts. Conflicts that lasted millennia without resolution. If it weren't for our annual mnemonic adjustments we would have wiped each other out. We'd be zombies with nothing but emotional scars.

---

The new quadrangle had a different atmosphere to the last. The central soldiers were stricter — no excursions onto the rockless mud. The kids were sadder, the adults quieter.

I heard Uncle Fred tell Aunt Mary this was a punishment quadrangle. If insurgents shot at US troops, the people here would be decimated — marched into the centre and one in ten would be shot.

No wonder the lieutenant had laughed as he signed our transfer papers.

~~~

"What do you think the chances of success are?"

"Slim to none. The project was put together too hastily. An entire biosphere cannot be treated like building a city."

"You're saying they're being hasty? That's a wee bit hypocritical coming from you."

Sensing an argument brewing, I butted in from my seat at the head of the table. "When will the first iceteroid hit?"

"Next year, Hellas Basin. Pure grandstanding to make people think of it as a first step to an ocean."

"Did I tell you I got the graphic design contract for the impact visuals? Very high-profile contract," said Father.

"Well done. Another worthless parasite on a noble project."

"Don't piss me off, woman. Failing to get the contract for this ship doesn't give you the right to belittle my work."

I gave up on defusing the argument.

~~~

Really, we are passengers. Our beautiful ship runs itself. We can access controls and any damage we cause is instantly fixed by the nano paste that is everywhere on the ship and in our bodies. A twinkling gray the consistency of clay it cleans and, we suspect, calms us. Some think we should use it to slow our bodies down so our journey would seem to be over in months. Some of us, I include myself, have other plans. We'll have to organise a mutiny to get them built though.

~~~

The rhythm of life in the quadrangles was syncopated, deliberately kept off balance. From the random meal times to the lack of night-time lights we were kept deliberately anxious. The poor food and lack of exercise made us easy to control.

The soldiers became gods to us, angels here to redeem us from our childish mistakes.

A food cart slipped off the walkway as it trundled by, its front wheels stuck in the mud.

"Kid, get your ass over here," said the corporal pushing the cart.

"Yes sir." I ran to the cart and helped lift it back onto the path. To be honest, I didn't do much but the corporal seemed to find my efforts amusing and gave me a handful of sweets.

From then on I was his pet, his helper in small tasks and his spy among the DPs.

~ ~ ~

The airship powered slowly back to the Martian skyhook. The High-Celebrity in the skyscraper-on-its-side-sized gondola got bored and returned to their casinos, pools, and circuses. In a structure that size, there was something for everyone.

The management panicked. When the High-Celebrity returned to Earth with tales of crimson monotony, who would buy tickets for the *Jules Verne*?

"They are fools. They don't understand engineering has emotions. Here, people want destinations. I would have built them. Pleasure domes, haunted mines. Places for ships to stop and people to experience."

I looked up at Mother, more fascinated by her than the panoramic view out of the window.

"Space is boring. These dust and ice balls separated by voids are only interesting if we engineer them, bring them closer to us."

~ ~ ~

She was wrong in a way. Space is terrifying when you're moving through it at 0.15% of the speed of light. Dust motes have the kinetic energy of an oncoming truck and are only dealt with by our large ablation shield of dirty ice.

We would get used to it and it would become boring if we let it, though.

Instead, we all allow a certain background of panic to make sure we keep our collective edge.

Mother was right in a more important way, though. Traversing the void, as we are doing, is not enough. We have to close it, make it a place in its own right.

~ ~ ~

The people around the quadrangle observed my favorite status with the soldiers with dull contempt. The children hated me for a traitor without being able to do anything about it. I was untouchable and even my Aunt and Uncle despised me as they ate the extra rations I got them.

The soldiers took to giving me forbidden gifts. Jeans, sneakers, music patches loaded with the latest thrash from Cleveland, the latest hip-hop from El Paso. My family ate better than any other, I had more sweets than I could eat — but no one would share them with me.

Then came the Events.

~~~

Soon after returning from Mars to Tallinn, Mother and Father began work on projects that, mysteriously to me, somehow dovetailed.

They made and received tenders to and from a multitude of places, generating clouds of financial data that gradually turned red. If they didn't get this one, even I could tell we'd be on the rocks.

Thankfully it all came through.

"Look son, your Mother does the large-scale drum design, subcontracting everything from biosphere to fabrics. I use her data to come up with an idealized Virtual used, and steadily adapted, during construction."

Father's face was animated in the pure white light reflected off the snow outside the window. He always seemed more present when Mother wasn't there. Mostly, though, he was nondescript with gray eyes, brown hair and features that tended always to a look of resentment.

His gaze kept skipping to a print leaning precariously on top of a bookshelf, one of the only physical objects in his Virtual-infested study. He pointed at the multicolored fungoid towers and said, "It's called 'Europe After the Rain.'"

Looking at it seemed to make him sad.

Yet he kept looking at it when he told me, "Everyone has to be involved in a project this big. Russians, Chinese, even the US. The brains behind it are all European, though. You of all people must see how important that is."

I closed my face to him and walked away.

~~~

I can't complete my project if we don't reach our Destination. Now, 3100 years into the journey, it becomes clear we won't.

We and the ship are too complex to retain integrity in these conditions over these timescales. From the very beginning we have calculated and recalculated the time at which we erode completely away. Gradually, that estimate has fallen from 7500 years after launch, which was comfortably greater than flight time, to 4000 years — 1000 years before our flight completes. We're left to count on some leap in technology to give us the time, lacking any other realistic hope. Or rather, any hope but one — unlocking the nano.

~~~

As part of their indulgence, the soldiers allowed me onto the central area whenever I wanted as long as no officers were around.

One day, as I stood on the mud at sunrise, I watched a bird fly up fault lines of azure sky and out of sight. I ran to the concrete bunker to tell one of the soldiers, an amateur ornithologist, what I had seen. As I entered the doorway an unbearable heat raked along my back and I saw an impossibly bright light flash in front. I screamed and fell to the ground. A soldier, well-trained reflexes cutting in, slammed shut the heavy bunker door and then rolled me over and over to put out the flames.

As I lay in a corner whimpering and descending into shock, I heard a voice counting off seconds. The longer the gap between flash and shock wave the less force the shock would have when it hit us.

---

Mother and Father were several years into the project when I found out what they had done to me.

Two metallic rocks and one dirty snowball were on their slow way to L5 while a disposable skeleton of the ship was being built from materials mass-driven from the moon. Father's Virtual was hung from it and became a Virtual for those on site.

For fun I had a crude MRI done at a friend's house. She wanted to be a neurosurgeon and her parent, approving, bought her a cheap, off-the-shelf kit.

The scan showed a lattice of metal threads running through my brain.

"What is it?"

"Let's find out." She ran a utility to map the lattice onto a sphere tagged with brain areas and uploaded it.

A comparison with maps available online gave us a result.

"Mathematical reasoning, spatial awareness, intellectual flexibility. And OCD." She giggled. "They add OCD to everything. It's like salt."

I was too shy to ever talk to my parents about it.

---

Stoney comes to visit.

Out of deference to my history, he always changes the stars and stripes on his chest to a Starship Unity flag: a circle of twelve gold hands on a royal blue background. A sweet but unnecessary gesture. It's been a long time after all.

"Either way we die. Eroded or engulfed, we're doomed," he says.

"Why take such a dim view of nano unlocking? It's a short route to our aims."

"I expected something more — gentle. Something that might leave us walking around in things that at least look like Real bodies."

"With current technology there's essentially no difference between Virtual and Real bodies."

"We'll be complex computer programs running on blobs of gray goo, somewhere between the stars, moving at an appreciable fraction of the speed of light. We won't be human."

"Look," I say, losing patience. "We aren't human now. We don't have DNA, we have twists of buckytubes laced with metal ions. Our bones are mostly a ceramic lattice, filled with adapted coral polyps that act as a secondary immune system. We're already covered inside and out by gray goo and we don't know exactly what it does beyond tumor busting. So don't give me any shit about being human."

We contemplate the starfield on my wallscreen. My cabin is an exact replica of my parents' cabin on the *Jules Verne*. Not an act of respect. More one of spite.

"We lose what's left of our humanity, yes. We gain by becoming places."

~~~

The voice reached fifteen when the wave of destruction hit us with an unbearable roar and a rain of concrete dust.

I heard one of the soldiers praying and I joined him.

Eventually the wave passed and none of us was buried under rubble.

After seeing to their own, the soldiers cut my clothes off and rolled me onto a precious mat of nano that cleaned, sterilised and attempted to heal my burns.

They put in an IV then turned to their EMP-hardened comms equipment to find out what had happened.

At no point did they look outside, even through their periscope.

The US troops slid easily into their damage control routines, improvisation and planning melding perfectly to get themselves onto the medevac chopper. Amazingly they took me with them.

"Amazingly" because I briefly saw what was outside.

The carbon fiber walls had blown away in the blast leaving an uninterrupted landscape of horror over the already bleak Yorkshire moor.

~~~

When I saw Mother's designs I was almost awed. Her skills had never before been so apparent.

"Spinning drums along a central axis. Engines at one end, a large micro-gravity life-dome at the other. The whole capable of surviving 1g axial

acceleration during speed-up and slow-down phases and artificial 0.8g rotational acceleration during cruise.”

She glanced at me to make sure I was paying attention.

“This is all basic, given design. I work to fill in gaps.”

We were in her work area, a riot of British stained glass and Russian icons. She herself had ancestry far east of those icon makers, demonstrated in her small stature and gentle Asian features, incongruously topped with a shocking cloud of Auburn hair.

“The drum produces 0.8g, same as at the surface of the Destination. We run triple helices down drums with cabins, storage and recreation off these loops, with different routes between them available. Mystery in familiarity.”

She built upon this mystery, allowing efficiency at all turns, but always in comfortably enigmatic ways. I could see how she would take all this technological sophistication and force it into some deep template we all carry.

Or rather, not force. Both technology and template were based on the same physical substrate after all. Couldn't they be mapped onto each other? At some level couldn't a complex neuronal tangle map continuously onto a more direct application of physics.

The answer is no, of course. To map like that, a common symbolic underpinning is required.

~~~

The transformation takes two hours. We all sleep through it, seeming to wake as normal in our normal ship. To my horror it is still fucking cold.

Most of us immediately punch up Real and shift our viewpoint out ten kilometers. Our beautiful dragonfly is now a seething needle of sparkling gray fifty kilometers long. The dome-shaped ablation shield of asteroid ice is being eaten. There's no longer any need for it.

“Doesn't feel too bad, does it?” I say to Stoney.

“No. But being a Virtual I could *make* it feel bad.”

“Do you have to be so negative?”

“Yes. I actually understand that we are really dead.”

We are in a copy of the *Jules Verne* stateroom, a place my parents hated and which nearly finished their marriage.

It's warm in here now; I've made it that way. Mars is visible out of the window.

“You think the colony is still there?” asks Stoney.



"We haven't heard from them in centuries. They had a very shallow, unstable ecosystem."

"I guess they're gone. I'd like to think the Hellas Sea is there, though."

He's avoiding the issue. I stand beside him at the window holding the cold brass railing in un-mittened hands for the first time in millennia.

"We're all over three thousand years old, Stoney. We're insane. We play games that last centuries. We devise forms of sexuality like fashions in clothes. We have excess memories scraped from us annually like barnacles from a wooden ship."

He looks at me, the image of his face distorted in the rail.

"We are now Virtual beings and this could break us like nothing before. Unity doesn't care about us now. We're toys. It could populate the Destination using stored templates without us. Better without us, in fact. No demi-gods strolling around fouling things up."

"So what now?"

I allow the Virtual engines to increase the airship's velocity. The red desolation outside moves past more swiftly and the background roar becomes louder.

"We carry through the plan, OK?"

"Ninety percent of the crew won't agree."

"It's the only way we'll survive, even in Virtual. We have 1900 years to go. In our present state we'll not exist at the end, except as happy little routines in Unity."

---

Burned and burning bodies were everywhere. Most of the living were dying. Some, who had been facing the blast, had no eyes. Many had flesh burned to the bone. There were none of those famous shadows; we had been too far from the blast for such merciful vapourisation. Instead we had a world of meat: some dead, some living; some crispy black, some bubbling red; some cut clean by flying carbon fiber, some with burned ragged holes.

Over it all, over the burned limestone pavement covered in flesh, floated a low moaning from many throats. A ragged song of pain and sadness and rage.

And, amazingly again, the soldiers, who surely knew who I was, didn't leave me there.

---

Ship design and construction carried on through my adolescence and beyond.

My parents worked continuously, handing me over to child-care collective after child-care collective. The requirements shifted with my age and educational level, each set of metrics recorded in a continuously updated document controlled and monitored by Det Norsk Veritas.

I hung out in alleys with friends and smoked bad weed.

I spent a week in Copenhagen on a field trip and smoked good weed. The next day I was introduced to drugs that had an even greater effect on my neurotransmitters. I liked those, and returned to Tallin with some interesting addictions.

DNV noticed this.

~~~

We can't start the mutiny until we subvert almost every system on the ship. Unity must know what we are doing but is staying out of the way. We can't harm it, although we may be able to shut it out of certain systems.

The philosophy of the program may be alien to a ship, of all entities, but it is still capable of making jokes about it. Changing the view out of my window one day to a loop of the famous Tacoma Narrows collapse was one.

To achieve our program, though, we first have to understand it.

~~~

The chopper flew us north, and as we flew a small vial of black medical nano was hooked up to the rigid mat of nano fused to my back.

The soldiers said nothing to me and little to each other.

Later I was told what had happened.

A Cumbrian nurse whispered to me of subverted activate codes; of centuries-old US controls on the "Independent Nuclear Deterrent" being bypassed in seconds; of every English nuclear weapon on missiles, bombers and submarines exploding simultaneously.

For reasons never entirely clear, every nuclear power station on the island had been surrounded by nukes.

England was gone; Scotland south of the Highlands and Wales lower than Snowdonia were gone. All despite the Peoples Republic of Scotland and the Welsh DMZ having no nuclear weapons of their own at all.

Ireland and most of the west coast of Continental Europe were left dying under clouds of radioactive dust.

The US blamed the insurgents in Snowdonia in general, and my mum and dad in particular, for the attack.

I was treated with the best care available in a hospital in Russia, a very public symbol of mercy by the US. Meanwhile, Snowdonia was carpet-bombed, the first real attempt to root out what had previously been a convenient and weak adversary.

This was the trigger for the far more terrible Event #2 — indisputably insurgent devised.

~~~

DNV informed my parents who, irritated at being dragged away from designing the garden maze accommodation of Drum #5, dragged me into the house conference room.

“Do not fuck this up. Fail and no space on ship.”

Mum’s hair always seemed to stand on end when she was angry, as though it were carrying an electrical charge. I began to idly calculate how much charge would be required.

“What if I don’t want to go on your stupid ship?”

I knew the answer, of course. I was just being petulant.

“Then you die within 1000 years, along with the rest of us. The ecosystem is becoming shallow. There’s no buffering anymore. When it crashes, anti-senescence drugs will be of no use.”

I knew the obvious arguments. “You go then,” I said.

“I wish we could, son. We’re too old.” As so often, my father got the last, slowly fading word.

~~~

Everyone knows who we are, everyone knows we’re up to something, everyone knows our abilities. We haven’t done anything but conspire, and that’s not currently against the rules in our Nomic-driven legal system.

Still, we’re frozen out of everything important. Those of us who had been part of the movers-and-shakers now find ourselves ostracized at their carefully casual lunches. Our data flows are crudely monitored.

Twelve against 188. We’ve planned for this.

~~~

A single dog escaped the fire-bombing of North Wales. A golden retriever as far as anyone could tell, it got as far as the ruins of Liverpool where radiation killed it. That was far enough.

The virus it carried interacted with adapted harmless gut bacteria released into the wild years before. The resulting airborne virus infected, and proved extremely virulent in, primates.

Soft-hearted US servicemen fed the dogs and returned home at the end of their rotations carrying a virus with an incubation period of 18 months and a fatality rate of 75 percent.

The rate of increase of global population began to fall six months after the dog escaped. The total population of the US began to fall at the same time.

The US lost five million people before the vaccine was perfected; it became a military dictatorship in order to survive.

I proved to be immune to the virus.

~~~

After rehab I returned to my studies with a little more enthusiasm than before and cut back on the drugs.

I soon got back my usual stratospheric grades and DNV, using some arcane, trade secret, adolescent behavior metric, gave me a six-month recertification.

All was good. Even my parents' marriage.

"It works better when we're together and we're going to be working as a team for a very long time."

"And when the ship leaves?" I asked.

"We'll still be working on improvements and fixes to send on for centuries, if we live that long."

I could tell Father felt the conversation was over and that I should leave his office.

Other than the cluttered bookshelf, it was clinical in there, all white with Virtuals — with their slightly off look when projected — everywhere.

"Why did you adopt me?" I asked, the question coming out of nowhere.

"You needed to be safe. You were all over the news and everybody wanted you dead. So we adopted you; that gave you EU citizenship to protect you from the US and her clients. Plus, that turned news coverage to cute and cuddly and away from son of mass murderers."

"And what was in it for you?"

He hesitated, looking at the projected artworks around the room. I realised he was looking for something to hang a lesson on. Not finding it, he was forced to come clean.

"You filled the gap between us."

~~~

"Stoney, do you think it's too soon?"

"It was always going to be too fucking soon. I wish I'd never come."

He speaks as though he were talking about a school trip.

Perhaps for him it was, raised as he'd been from birth to to be an engineer on the ship. Provided as he'd been with the modifications necessary for ship engineer, plus ones for sunny optimism.

Now, Unity controls the engines and his optimism circuits have burned out.

"It's too late to back out now. It's begun."

The vast amount of now redundant code contains about 0.005% extra code. Foreseeing this, I had forced my parents to infiltrate an adaptive virus. It was left untouched through three millennia on the general principle that no one screws with working code.

~ ~ ~

For a time I was a media darling, especially the US media which loved the symbolism surrounding me. I was even presented with US citizenship by the First Husband. A poisoned gift in a Europe moving steadily towards virulent anti-US feeling once again.

Then came the virus, then the media backlash. Nine years old and lost in the gale of rage at my mum and dad.

I relied more and more on my paranoid nurse from Carlisle. It was she who told me, "When the US found out that England was providing arms to Western Sahara, undermining it in its Northern Africa wars, the US invaded."

It had the pleasing rhythm of a bedtime story. The dreamlike feel of one as well.

All the bodies were buried under a comforting layer of words.

One day the nano sheet came loose and the doctors said I was as healed as I could be. They showed me my ruined back and said it was a miracle of modern medicine that I was alive, let alone with skin on my back.

They threw me in front of the media who assumed that my tears were of gratitude.

The next day a Scotsman and a Russian woman appeared in front of me. "We would like to adopt you. We would like to be your mummy and daddy, my darling. Would you like that?"

Father smiling blandly. The cameras blindly watching.

It was the first and only time she called me *darling*.

~ ~ ~

I held, via Mother and Father, Russian, Scottish and EU citizenships. Courtesy of the First Husband, last seen hanging from a lamp-post near the Whitehouse, I had US citizenship.

I was also part of the very small group with English citizenship, a potentially lethal affiliation, and one that caused problems during the crew selection process.

The bureaucracy functioned as it should and defaulted to whichever flag fit the system best.

People were a different matter.

I stubbornly insisted on wearing a badge with St. George's cross on it. The little splotch of red and white tended to produce a cascade of reactions.

First, horror that someone would wear such a symbol.

Second, horror at finding out where I was from.

Finally, a strange mix of horror, sympathy and anger on my explaining who I was.

I made the crew, of course. With my connections and skillset there was no doubt I would. In true Ageless fashion, training was scheduled to take the rest of the construction and fueling phases of Unity. That was about twenty years.

We all held down high-powered jobs during this time, too. Immortal, heavily modified overachievers need plenty of outlets.

~~~

Subverting the human accessible parts of the system was the easy part.

Now we need to, in Virtual design jargon, build our project, understand our project, memorise our project.

Building is proceeding at a satisfying pace.

The 188 who refused to join us are corralled in a large blank room and left to get bored.

The twelve conspirators are engineers, astrophysicists, cosmologists, Virtual designers and myself, a monad analyst. I moonlight as a numismatist, though.

After we reveal our true purpose to the 188, we gain a few recruits including, crucially, a semiotician, along for the ride in case the Unity encountered any alien symbol sets.

"Why didn't you ask me earlier? I would have joined willingly."

"We wanted to keep our numbers to a minimum. You'll be working on the deep symbolism of the structure. The team includes two Virtual designers and an architect. There's a parallel Real team consisting of engineers and another architect."

"Is all that design firepower really needed?"

“It’s the largest thing ever made. If we don’t get any more recruits we’ll have to start training in secondary specialties. That could take decades and I want at least a skeleton of this thing out there inside five years.”

~~~

The pre-launch parties were dull, formal affairs. The ones on the ship were worse — expensive wine and food, stilted conversation, billionaire crew sneering at guests worth mere hundreds of millions.

Launch itself was fairly spectacular. An antimatter Orion drive with AM bombs exploding against a giant kickplate to provide smooth 1g acceleration.

~~~

Now that the team’s highly skilled brain map analyst has installed and activated my leadership modifications, I’ve become more confident, I smile more often, and I see people in simpler terms than before, as components in a larger structure.

I’m one of the few who still rest at night, an hour of sleep improving my thinking the next day. It also allows me, for a few moments, to drop the itchy, eyes-too-wide leadership pose.

I’ve also been able to return to my twin loves of monad analysis — a very arcane study of the small-scale interface between Virtual and Real — and numismatics, the study of the mathematics of coins, the latest theorized objects believed to underpin space-time.

Coins of all shapes, sizes, orientation and spin fill space, their edges representing a very localised entropy measurement. Every coin is unique and distinct — or rather, their relations between each other are, coins themselves not existing except within these relations.

And yet, for all that coins are distinct and unique, they all map continuously onto each other.

~~~

Centuries into the voyage we conspirators met for the first time on the ship. It was our last chance to stop the program.

I’d guilted Mother and Father into installing the dog virus during construction.

“Short of a block-by-block deconstruction it’s invisible,” Aileen, a software engineer, assured us.

“The skeleton is built in Virtual,” I said. “Filling it out will be by far the bigger job. I’m going to need a semiotician, someone to deal with the deep symbolic structure of this thing. People won’t be able to use it if they don’t believe in it, so

we need a usable symbol set, only this one needs to be larger and run deeper than anything built before. Actually, a Jungian analyst might be more useful."

"No more weird specializations. Someone learning that would definitely attract attention. Joanne?"

Our nano specialist told us that one-third of the ship's mass, when converted to nano, would be enough. No one liked to think too hard about what that level of conversion would look like.

Every one of the twelve agreed to continue with the plan. This was easy to do when it was still a game, before time and distance could only be overcome by converting Unity into a lump of glittering clay.

~ ~ ~

The teams gradually grow larger and Unity lends us computing resources, a sure sign of its approval. Progress is slow with each of us having to learn new specialisations. Our parents, generalists all, would despise us.

Small clouds of smart dust are released aft, dying in milliseconds, abraded by the gas and dust clouds. More complex and tougher dust is launched and lasts long enough to reproduce.

New dust that forms light-mediated links is launched. These links form distributed computing networks, which allow the rapid computations needed to form and maintain chains and nets.

Dumb matter chains that form and break millions of times a second link smart matter clumps that pump out speckled laser light. They shine like dappled stars and sing *I am here! I am here! Now I am here!* like lost children on a beach.

A three-dimensional net forms, infinitely flexible, growing larger with time.

A final burst of pure viral computing dust is released into the net, filling gaps, being reproduced by the old bacterial dust. Being smart.

I project myself into the sparsely distributed structure and find myself in a gently undulating net of cloud, each intersection marked by a blazing star. "Indras Net," says the soft non-voice of Unity. "You must know about that given your ancestry, Sri."

"I'm English, all the way back to the corner shop. Don't be racist."

"Sorry."

I can sense it smile, a gin-and-tonic over fresh-mown grass.

"What's the point, Sri? I promise you'll all be safe in me and I'll re-incarnate you when we reach the Destination. Why this elaborate scheme to get away?"

"If you didn't already know, you wouldn't have given us so much support." I relent, though, and tell it what it wants to know. "It's a Bridge. It's sparsely linked,



it wobbles a lot and it's going to be very long. But it could carry people and objects far easier than you — in pods with life support, like the *Jules Verne* gondola. It's designed to carry dumb matter objects by disassemble-move-reassemble.

"Above all, it's a symbol, made up of symbols. Other bridges give it a gentle curve and pylons. There are hydrogen bond analogues in there. There are assemblages that look like coin lattices. There are hundreds of other symbolic linkages in there, mapped into it by our semioticians and Virtual designers."

"It's a mess Sri." Thunderclouds over that perfect lawn. "A barely coherent jumble of smart matter, dumb matter and light."

I make the beauty of the current representation fall away to reveal the ugly truth. Symbolic cancers ripple over a landscape of randomly shimmering numbers.

"That's why I'm here. To fix this this. In two thousand years this Bridge will be the largest, most beautiful structure the species has ever built. You will be at the Destination and the Bridge will give you a way back to heal Earth."

"You will fail, Sri. This is certain. The others know this and will not come." Rain falls across the grass, mixed with a bitter smell of burned oil. "You deleted your indexes. No copies can be made of you now. Why?"

I start to understand the Bridge and I stabilise the numbers over a large section of it. The cancers disappear. "I want to be an angel and angels can only be in one place at a time. If the others won't come, I'll be the whole of the Bridge. The maps are sophisticated enough to allow that."

"I can't support this project anymore. I never anticipated you failing so comprehensively, so quickly."

I plant a million saplings. They die but one hundred grow green shoots.

"I understand. All I want is to build bridges: bridges with our technology, bridges between us, bridges within us, bridges to our past. You should want that too, Unity." I'm far enough gone into angelhood that my laughter is yellow blossoms blowing in a breeze.

We are all dead. Yet soon I will make us alive as anyone in our species has ever been.

Soon I will begin to walk the Bridge, memorizing as I go.

~~~

*KEN BURSTALL is a middle-aged Englishman living in Austin Texas, with far too many children. He works, intermittently, as an oilfield geologist, and has calculated that he has spent six of the last twenty years on oil rigs far offshore. "Connect" is his first published story. He has a strange, unpopular weblog at <http://fallslikesnow.blogspot.com/>.*

*Fleeing with the last remnants of the Oshen race, Indigo has only one chance to ensure his people are never forgotten.*

## **INDIGO'S GAMBIT**

by Adam Israel

Three. Two. One. *Bang.*

The *Drifting Star* skipped on the wave of a collapsing micro-sun, soaring through the void between the stars. The astronomical library contained surveys and charts on hundreds of thousands of star systems within the alliance of civilized worlds the Fringe called Sing Xu. This would be the thirty-eighth Indigo had visited since his journey toward the core planets began. So far none contained a world suitable to revive the Oshen race.

Indigo's three light-blue fingers and thumb moved gingerly across the computer console. The sinewy web between each digit was dried and cracked, as was much of his skin. Too long away from home — or what was left of it. His last memory of home was of fire raining down from the warships in orbit and the seas burning as he fled in his stolen scout ship. Now he and the fertilized eggs preserved in the cryotank at his feet were all that remained of the Oshen.

Navigation confirmed the ship's arrival at the edge of Theta 4127, a six-planet system with a single red giant. He plotted a course toward the fourth planet, close enough for the scanners to analyze the surface. If the environmental conditions didn't match the specific balance the Oshen needed to survive, he would continue to the next system, never stopping until he found one that was suitable.

The Oshen had been content living beneath the seas and on the land, ignorant to what was happening among the stars. Indigo had never heard of the Sing Xu or the Fringe until the first scout ship arrived. Soon after, more Fringe vessels appeared, offering promises of knowledge and prosperity in exchange for the naturally occurring mineral that the Fringe needed to construct their ships.

The two races worked together to excavate and process the mineral. Some of the Oshen, like Indigo, showed an aptitude for the alien technology and worked with the Fringe on their assembly lines. Life was good for the Oshen, until the land was stripped of its resources. That's when their relationship with the Fringe ended, along with their hopes for the future.

Indigo leaned forward in his seat and scrutinized the results of the planetary scan. Sixty percent dry land but the seas contained a high concentration of sulfur — too high for Oshen physiology.

Another system, another disappointment. Thousands left to visit. The search continued.

The next potential system on the list would take three skips to reach. Once he programmed the destination into the navigation system, the ship settled into a stationary orbit and began the calculations for the first skip. The only thing to do now was wait.

An alarm blared inside the small cabin. Indigo sat up stiffly and tightened his grip on the chair. The countdown to skip was still running. All of the ship's systems were normal. He cycled through the external cameras, looking for any sign of trouble. The dorsal aspect appeared on screen and Indigo caught his breath. Just within camera view was the last thing he ever wanted to see again: a Fringe warship.

The enemy vessel must have just skipped into the system. If not for the energy signature of the skip, he might not have known they were there until it was too late. As it was, it would take them a few moments to get their bearings and notice their stolen ship hanging prone below them. Ninety ticks left on the countdown and any course change or movement would reset the clock.

Indigo turned the comm to an open channel. He just had to stall them for a short time.

"Attention Fringe vessel," he said in his native tongue. "I am Indigo of the Oshen. I escaped the destruction of my world by your warships, the last witness to your ruthless genocide. And I would like to negotiate my surrender."

Thirty ticks and counting. The extra ticks it took to run his transmission through the translation filter could mean the difference between life and death.

"Oshen." The slow, rough Fringe voice rolled the word over his tongue as if savoring it. "The last of your race. Your escape only delayed the inevitable. It is time you joined your people in oblivion."

Fifteen ticks to go.

"Wait," Indigo said. "I can still be of value to you. I worked in the factories, was trained to fly your cargo ships."

"You are inferior, easily replaced. We have no use for you."

Ten ticks. The jump drive started spooling up, something their sensors were sure to detect.

Silence from the comm. The stalling was over.

Five ticks. Their guns would be locking on, if they weren't already. The order to fire would be given.

Three. Two. One.

The jump drive engaged as the Fringe ship opened fire. The *Drifting Star* lurched and disappeared.

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The *Drifting Star* popped back into normal space. Indigo's teeth chattered and his blue skin was already mottling with deep reds and purples where it had collided with the console. The discharge from the Fringe weapon had done more than knock him out of his seat. Red lights on the console flashed and the deafening blare of alarms filled the cabin.

Fire suppression systems had been activated all over the ship. The jump drive registered offline and the repair subsystem estimated over six hours to restoration. The ship was self-sufficient; Indigo begrudgingly gave the Fringe credit for that much. He wished he could speed up time, though. It wouldn't take long for the Fringe warship to follow.

One by one he silenced the alerts, until the only ringing was in his ears. According to the logs, the blast from the Fringe hit at the exact moment the jump drive engaged, knocking the ship off-course. He was lucky he didn't materialize inside a planet or star.

Astronomical charts overlaid with the visible star field flashed on the screen until one map finally matched the ship's location. A relatively young system, its sun still yellow. He set a course for the center of the system and hoped his pursuer was far behind.

Every star system Indigo passed through was a unique wonder. Every time he thought he had seen it all, he found himself gaping in awe with the next skip. The sixth planet, a gas giant, proved no exception. A wide ring of ice and rock revolved around the planet and dozens of moons joined it in orbit.

Every living planet had a natural rhythm, an inherent balance that it strived to maintain. It was beautiful to see a planet with a healthy biosphere. Some of the

worlds he had seen during his journey were tortured places, damaged beyond hope by their inhabitants. All he could do was mourn their folly.

The third planet came into view. Much smaller than the gas giant, more likely to be hospitable to the Oshen's delicate frame, and a moon in orbit around it. Its proximity to the sun, along with the slight rotation and its elliptical orbit, meant its climate would be uniformly distributed.

Alarms went off around Indigo again. The long range sensors detected a faint burst of energy from the direction of the ringed planet. The signature matched that of a jump drive arriving. The Fringe had found him with the *Drifting Star* still hours away from being able to make another skip.

Indigo scoured the scanner's results, looking for anything that might mask the presence of his ship. He could make a run for the third planet, but it would take too long to breach the atmosphere without leaving a wake behind for the Fringe to follow. The debris floating in orbit was too small and fragmented to hide among. The heavily cratered moon showed more promise. The soil contained a high concentration of iron and several clusters of metal spread across the surface. It might be enough to fool their sensors, if they didn't look too closely.

The Fringe vessel was still too far away for visual contact but they were closing the distance. Though designed for deep space reconnaissance, the *Drifting Star* did have several defensive options, including a decoy drone. Packed tight inside was a complex set of counter-sensors, navigation and power system. Once released, the decoy would spool up its small jump drive and wait to be scanned. The Fringe would see the signature of a small scout ship just beyond the edge of visual range before the decoy skipped away.

He released it and set course for the largest cluster of metal on the surface of the moon. The thrusters ignited, giving the ship a boost as it arced toward its target. The image of the moon's dusty surface filled the console. The *Drifting Star* banked for its approach and Indigo closed his eyes. The booster engines fired a tenth of a second too late and the ship touched down hard, throwing him forward.

Indigo groaned as he pushed himself off the floor and scrambled back into his chair. At the rate the Fringe had been closing on his position they would be in visual range soon. One by one he shut down every nonessential system and switched the engine core offline. Within moments the ship was running on minimal reserve power, the darkened cabin illuminated by the refracted light from the external cameras. Indigo's heavy breathing cut the silence as he watched the console.

The space around the decoy twinkled and it was gone. The decoy had enough fuel for three skips, hopefully buying Indigo enough time for the *Drifting Star* to complete repairs. If the ruse worked, he would be long gone before the Fringe returned from chasing the decoy.

Indigo waited in the darkness. The Fringe vessel drifted into view, passing over where the decoy had been. It lingered above his position. He held his breath, half afraid that even the smallest sound would attract their attention. If they decided to investigate the moon's surface, he would have nowhere left to run.

After what felt like a lifetime, the warship skipped away and Indigo released a long sigh of relief.

~ ~ ~

The engines sputtered to life. With power restored, the ship's subsystems resumed repairs and Indigo got the first good look at his surroundings. The artifacts scattered around the perimeter of the ship didn't appear to be native to the moon. Spacecraft and other debris from the nearby planet perhaps. The design seemed crude in comparison to the *Drifting Star*, but Indigo wasn't one to judge. Before the Fringe invaded his world, the Oshen barely looked to the sky with anything but a passing interest. These aliens looked to the heavens and saw something more than just pinpricks of light on the canvas of night. They reached outward and set foot on another world.

Indigo took control of one of the remote probes and sent the small, angular device drifting toward the ancient landing site. Magnified images reflected off of Indigo's wide eyes as the probe's lens swept over the landscape. One object seemed deliberately placed: a rectangle of fibers with alternating colors of red and white, and a corner bit of dark blue with a field of white stars superimposed, affixed to a metal pole driven into the surface.

Several other objects rested nearby, but the largest artifact – a vehicle — drew his attention next. Four gangly legs, covered in silver and copper and gold, supported its weight, and scorch marks covered its flat surface. The composition of the burns belonged to a chemical accelerant, consistent with a rudimentary fuel. The probe followed the ladder attached to one of the legs. Light reflected off of a metal plate midway up. The probe paused and zoomed its lens in on the flat map representing the planet and the writing printed across the surface. The linguistics sub-system anatomized the block lettering, building a cipher. Translated text scrolled across the screen.

HERE MEN FROM THE PLANET EARTH  
FIRST SET FOOT UPON THE MOON

JULY 1969, A. D.

WE CAME IN PEACE FOR ALL MANKIND

A small white pouch lay on the surface at the foot of the ladder. Tiny arms extended from the probe and pulled at the edges of the pouch. A round chip of metal slipped out and fell into the dust. Something had been written around the edge of the disc. Embedded in the center was a thin wafer of metal with microscopically small script etched onto its surface. The probe uploaded the image for translation and continued its circuit around the landing site.

Oddly shaped but precise indentations criss-crossed the surface of the moon. They tapered slightly from top to bottom and grooves ran horizontally across them. The probe hovered over one clear sample and stared at it for several ticks, contemplating the image.

The shape reminded him of footprints in the sand, like those left behind when the first of the Oshen crawled out of the water that was the only home they knew. The urge to know what lay beyond the edge driving them to reach into the unknown. The awe and wonder these people must have felt, stepping into the heavens and gazing back at their home, far in the distance. The excitement of knowing they were where no one else had ever been. These people, like his own, strove to break free of the bonds that held them.

Indigo tore open a nutrient packet with his teeth and nibbled while he read the messages inscribed on the small silver disc. Seventy-three messages, left for posterity by the race of Human. A species with binary gender spread across many nations. The text revealed these people had endured numerous hardships. And much like the Oshen, they had not always enjoyed peace among themselves.

The planet called Earth rose over the horizon. Deep blue waters and green and brown masses of land obscured by swirls of white clouds. Night had fallen on much of the world, but no lights twinkled in the distance. No voices remained to tell of their fate. Yet another cry silenced by the cruel chaos of life.

When he found a new world suitable for his people, Indigo would return to the stars and go to the central planets of the Sing Xu. There, among the peaceful races of the galaxy, he would bear witness. It wasn't too late for the Oshen to see justice, and the race of Human should not be forgotten.

Indigo rubbed his eyes and yawned. As soon as the repairs were complete, he could finish his long journey.

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The console beeped, waking Indigo from a deep sleep. Every joint in his body ached. He yearned for the smell of a living world and the warmth of sunshine on



his skin. It had been three long terms since leaving his home behind, with few cycles since to break the monotony of life inside the cold, sterile ship.

The ship's repairs were complete and the jump drive back online. The *Drifting Star* was ready to leave. Indigo keyed in the launch sequence and stretched his arms and legs while the ship broke free of the moon's gravity. The ship settled into position high above the Earth, close enough for the sensors to scan the planet while navigation calculated the next skip.

Indigo's eyes grew wider as the sensor displayed its results. The planet was mainly covered by water, with the largest areas containing high concentrations of salt, a rich blend of life-sustaining minerals and flourishing ecosystems. Deep canyons and rifts covered the floor of the sea. Indigo yearned to dive into the blue sea and feel the waves rolling over his cracked skin. It had been far too long since he felt its healing touch.

The atmosphere was a mixture of nitrogen and oxygen, perfectly breathable by Oshen standards. And the soil bore only trace amounts of Astatine, the element the Fringe were after.

The land masses, as he suspected, showed minimal signs of life. High concentrations of iron in the northern regions suggested a large meteor had struck, upsetting the precarious balance and triggering the end of an era. Too, large masses of ice were receding to the north and south edges of the world. Everything in the path of the ice had been ground to dust, leaving a healthy world behind. Earth was a perfect candidate for the new Oshen homeworld.

Once the cryotank was in the water and activated, he could leave for Sing Xu and find justice for his people. By the time he returned, he expected the children of the Oshen would have many questions.

He chose an island off the eastern shore of the largest land mass as the likeliest landing site. There the colony would grow and thrive among the reefs and spread out by way of the strong currents that led to the deeper sea.

The *Drifting Star* had just entered the exosphere when the first blast hit, rocking the ship. Indigo pitched the ship and dove deeper into the upper atmosphere. The Fringe warship loomed overhead.

"Do you think you know our technology better than we do?" The familiar voice crackled over the cabin's speaker. "That a decoy would fool us for long?"

Indigo switched the comm off and turned his attention to dodging the incoming fire. He was running out of options. He couldn't skip unless they ceased fire — and that was a mistake they wouldn't make again. The *Drifting Star* was

smaller and more maneuverable than the warship, but couldn't return fire or outrun them. There wasn't anywhere it could go that they couldn't follow.

Indigo opened the engines to full power. The ship shuddered under the stress of bouncing between the exosphere and thermosphere. The turbulence, though, would make it difficult for the warship to get a clear shot. The *Drifting Star* raced on.

They orbited the planet, the Fringe keeping the *Drifting Star* in their sights, bombarding it with anti-armor projectiles. Glancing blows scored the hull and sensor lights lit up as several of the armor plates disintegrated under direct hits. The Fringe could afford to be patient, Indigo knew. It was only a matter of time before their target's defenses failed.

Sweat dripped down Indigo's face as his mind raced for a solution. There was too much at stake for him to give up this close to the end of his journey. He programmed a new course into the navigation system. He wondered if those early Human explorers felt the same fear and hope in their souls as they reached out from the Earth to the stars. The rewards of success far outweighed individual mortality.

Indigo knew what he had to do.

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Indigo ran through the narrow passages of the ship, the cryotank clutched to his chest with one arm while the other fought for balance as the ship pitched and rolled. The chronometer strapped to his wrist continued its final countdown. If he was successful, the Fringe would never bother the Oshen again.

It was bitter, giving up any chance for reparation, but the need to survive far outweighed his desire for justice.

There was only one way in or out of the *Drifting Star*. He reached the door to the airlock. Thirty ticks. The cargo hold was small, but the scout ship didn't need much room. He flipped a switch on the control panel that turned on the comm.

"I am the last Oshen. I may not have lived free, but I will die free," Indigo said and switched the comm off for the last time. The *Drifting Star* had served him as refuge in the darkest storm he could imagine, but it was time to go home.

The Fringe warship closed in on the *Drifting Star*, a superior foe stalking its wounded prey.

Smoke was filling the corridors. Indigo hoped the ship would hold together long enough for one last gambit. It was almost time.

He rummaged through the storage lockers. None of the environmental suits were made to fit his slight physique, but he did find a length of cord. He tied one

end around his waist and the other to the cryotank. When he was confident the future of the Oshen was secured to his body, he stepped into the airlock and sealed the door behind him.

Silence enveloped Indigo. Flashing lights warned of the peril as the time ticked away. The ship vibrated from the forces buffeting it. Through the airlock window, Indigo could see even more red lights blinking in alarm. Fog replaced the smoke in the corridor as the fire suppression system fought for the ship's survival.

The chronometer beeped again and the *Drifting Star* plunged into the mesosphere. Indigo clasped the handle of the airlock door and took a deep breath. Howling wind filled the airlock as the outer door slid open. He squinted his eyes against the bright blue light. In the distance, the sea waited for him. He released his grip and was sucked out of the airlock to meet his destiny.

~ ~ ~

Arms and legs held tightly against his body to minimize wind resistance, Indigo's free-fall accelerated. The cryotank, still secured to his waist, trailed behind him. The cold wind whipped mercilessly at his body. He continued the countdown in his mind. Above him, the *Drifting Star* would be carrying out his final commands.

The ship would pull up sharply, as if bouncing off the atmosphere, and all repair sub-systems would go offline. The Fringe warship would have a clear shot at its target as soon as the *Drifting Star* cleared the turbulence. With the damage his ship had already sustained, it wouldn't take much of a hit to complete their mission.

The ticks leapt by. He worried that his plan had failed, that the Fringe had seen through the ruse and would at any moment unleash their devastating firepower on the world below.

The explosion that rang out left Indigo's ears ringing and singed his skin. The blast sent him tumbling end-over-end as the remains of the *Drifting Star* shot streaks of fire across the sky. Indigo continued to fall, helpless and out of control. His arms and legs flailed wildly, trying to stabilize his body. His eyes, painfully dry, no longer had the ability to focus, but what he could see below was vast and blue and getting closer.

Numb fingers fumbled with the cord around his waist and reeled the cryotank close to his body. He caressed it as he worked the controls from memory, activating the device. The thaw sequence would begin as soon as it was submerged. The gyroscope would keep the container on its course as its micro-engine propelled it to the deepest abyss it could locate. Soon, life would begin anew.

*When we leap, sometimes we fall.* Indigo understood this, as he believed the former occupants of this world must have too. Driven by an inexplicable curiosity and a desire to know the unknown, both races had explored beyond their boundaries. They left the place they called home and reached out to what lay beyond.

In time, perhaps, when the new generation of Oshen stepped out of the waters of their adopted world, they would look to the night sky and feel the same ambition to reach the stars. *Might that they touch the moon and discover the legacy left behind by the race of Human and know for certain that they were not alone.*

Indigo's descent ended abruptly. Warm water washed over his broken body, and for the last time a smile spread across his face.

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*ADAM ISRAEL, after having lived and worked in Chicago, New York City and Los Angeles, expatriated to southwest Ontario, Canada, with his wife, three dogs and three cats. He attended SFWA Grand Master James Gunn's short fiction workshop in 2007 and Clarion in 2010. When not writing, Adam is a freelance software engineer, consultant and blogger. His fiction has appeared in several venues online and off, including Crossed Genres.*

Website: <http://www.adamisrael.com/>

Website: <http://www.inkpunks.com>

Twitter: <http://www.twitter.com/AdamiIsrael>

*When his pampered world loses the technology it depends on, extinction looms faster than lonely survivor Levo could ever have expected.*

## **BLOOD FRUIT**

by Shona Snowden

Most people died the first night. When the electricity went out, the StayClosed doors and windows did exactly what they were supposed to do. I don't know how long people lasted in their sealed units without the recirculating air. I guess most were sleeping. Like my family. I hope they were sleeping real deep and never knew a thing about it.

Anybody who was awake figured out what was happening. They had long enough to batter against their StayClosed doors and windows. Long enough to ram them with chairs, tables, anything they had to hand. We saw that afterwards, as we wandered through the empty streets. People and their belongings all smushed up against the windows. Shattered furniture, broken kitchen implements, bleeding fists and crushed feet.

And the faces pressed up against the glass, purple and swollen like overripe Jufruits. People's faces pressed so hard up against the glass, like they had been trying to breathe through it — like they believed they could, if they just pushed hard enough. Some had pushed so hard their skin had burst open, coating the glass with red slime, all splattered and oozing. Everywhere we walked, we saw bulging eyes through the windows. Empty, but still kind of pleading.

So I hope my family were sleeping real deep. I never went to see. Vin wanted to, though. That first day, with his arms full of candy he'd just swept off the shelves of the store we were looting, he was all keen to check it out. "Don'cha wanna know, Levo? See that fat Meshie-eating father of yours all squished against the window like a big Jufruit? Mama trying to bite through it with those shiny Bleach-O-Dent teeth all smashed up? Phrocking beautiful, mano!"

Vin was a TubalChem baby, so he never had a family. He didn't understand family and he never would. Let alone why I cared about mine, even though they'd pretty much disowned me when I opted out of the Graduation Module and went for Manual Labor Status III. There was no point in getting mad at Vin.

"Forget it, mano," I told him. "They're all gone, and that's it. It's just us now."

"You, me and a phrockin' city full of Meshies and PinniPods!" He grinned through a mouthful of PinniPods, brown gunk oozing between his teeth. I glanced towards the back of the store where a face was plastered up against a tinted glass window in the door that must have led to the storeroom. The tint in the glass made the splatter of gunk on the window look like the melted candy smeared around Vin's mouth. I just wanted out of there.

"Forget the candy," I said. "Let's see what else we can find."

Vin's brown-edged grin grew wider. "Like Beppies?"

"Whatever. Candy stores aren't the only ones with old-style doors."

Vin let the candy drop out of his arms. "Mano, you are a phrocking genius. Let's hit it."

I hadn't done any of the hard stuff for a couple of months. I was kind of thinking of cleaning up; not that I'd have said that to Vin. I just told him my belly was acting up and a couple of minutes after he'd taken his first Funbo or whatever, he couldn't have cared what planet I was on let alone what I was or wasn't taking. He was still roaming from job to job, just loading, pushing, whatever, getting the cash he needed to keep him in DrinCuls and Beppies. He didn't seem to have noticed that I'd been at PhillFast for three months or so, which was like a record for either of us. The work was easy and the people were nice, talking about maybe promoting me after a while. I'd been thinking about keeping on there, maybe saving up to get my own place — like a newer unit. Without Vin and with StayClosed doors that actually worked.

But right now I could really have done with some of the hard stuff. Then maybe I could stop thinking about the things I was looking at.

Pity there wasn't any hard stuff to come by. Turned out Pharma stores and DrugBanks were right up to date with their StayClosed doors. And it wasn't any easier to get through StayClosed from the outside than it was from the inside.

"Phrocking doors!" Vin tossed aside the Metallo bench he'd been using to ram the doors of the Drama & Stars DrugBank. The legs of the bench were bent, the StayClosed glass unscratched. "What the krig is in that stuff?"

I was sitting on the sidewalk, with my back against the wall of the BloMo store next door. I'd given up on the doors already. "Something no man shall ever

put asunder..." I intoned in a deep voice, mimicking the StayClosed ad that had perpetually played on the city screens — the same ones that still loomed above every store, blank and silent for the first time. My voice echoed along the empty street. Without the gabble of the screens everything seemed too loud.

Vin glanced nervously from one end of the street to the other, and then narrowed his eyes at me. "Don't freak me out, mano." His forehead gleamed with sweat and his fingers twitched against his thighs, curling up like he was getting a grip back on the Metallo bench. I wondered how many Beppies he'd had the night before. And the night before that. He'd been rolling pretty strong for a while.

"Rechill, mano. We'll find one," I said. "On the edge of City Central, near the river or over the Other Side, there'll be some places with the regular old doors."

He curled his lip. Then, so fast I almost missed the change, the big old Vin smile flashed over his face. "Better get moving then, mano. Wouldn't wan' to miss out on any of the fun."

There were other people around. Not many. They all moved past us pretty fast, like they didn't want to be seen. I got that. I wouldn't have wanted to get too close to us either. A couple of girls, kind of ripe-looking in tight-fitting Huddlesuits, had crept past on the other side of the road while Vin was trying to crash the DrugBank. He hadn't noticed them and I didn't say anything.

I stood up. "Better move on, then. Want anything to eat? This BloMo's got the regular doors."

"Naw, mano. Mostly I'm just hot." A bead of sweat from his forehead dribbled down his cheek, like a dirty tear.

I was hot too, and I hadn't worked even half as hard as Vin. My Bluesuit felt sticky. Which shouldn't happen. They're supposed to adapt to any standard ambient temperature.

But what if the temperature wasn't standard? I looked up at the sky. Blue, like normal. *The sun*. It was the sun that was different. Instead of the usual pale lemon disk that should have floated above us like a kid's AirPuff, an angry orange-red fireball glared down at me, searing my eyes with a flash of pain. "Phrock!" I looked away as fast as I could, but I still saw an orange globe – no, two orange globes, one stamped on the front of each eye. I shook my head, blinking fast, until they faded.

Vin sniggered. "Shake it out, mano!"

"The sun, Vin — no don't look at it!" With an effort, he looked back at me. "It near burned my eyes out. The Vault's filters are down. It's full blaze up there."

Now we needed a Pharma for more than Beppies — we'd need SunGear, SkinPro, LanoFill — all the stuff people needed for trips outside the Vault. Now we were going to need them inside, too. Or maybe enough Beppies not to care about fried skin and dried lungs. No wonder the girls had crept past. It wasn't us — although it might have been part of it; mostly they were clinging to the shade of the buildings on the far side of the road.

"Better walk fast, mano," Vinnie tossed at me. He turned on his heel, heading to the shadier side of the street, loping along on his long legs, almost faster than I could follow. I didn't complain. There was no point.

We moved forward steadily all that day, dropping into a kind of routine — walk for an hour or so, find a store and lift a few cans of Fizz or Tapo, walk again. All the time, eyeballing every Pharma we passed, even though we knew it would be tomorrow before we could reach the areas around the river with their shabby stores. The bad news was that older stores meant older units without StayClosed, so more people — which added up to less stuff to go around.

Even though we stuck to the shade, within a few hours the skin on Vin's face and hands was streaked with red and my hands were tingling. My face was beyond that, heading towards burning. I kept my eyes ahead, on the rippling back of Vin's Bluesuit, his muscles working rhythmically as he walked. Not looking to the sides, not looking at the purple faces pressed to the glass, the empty eyes looking at me. Mocking me, making me wonder if in fact they were the lucky ones, because it had only been a few hours for them. Grilling to death under an unfiltered sun could take a few days.

Just after dark, we stopped at a BloMo that still had plenty of Thinpax and cans, although gaps on the shelves showed where others had already been through. We'd seen people flitting along the streets, moving in the same direction as us, towards the river. Nobody wanted to go to the Other Side unless they had to. Now we were all heading there.

We gorged on multiple meal combos, and then built nests from crumpled plastiwrap to rest for a few hours. I peeled my Bluesuit off one shoulder. The skin there was almost as red as my hands.

"We could just stay here, mano," Vin said through cracked lips. "Eat candy and Thinpax 'til things are all fixed up."

"The food won't last forever. And when are things going to be all fixed up? Who's out there to do it? Seen anyone that looks like they know what they're doing? Plus, how're you doing without the Beppies?"



Vin just looked at me with red-rimmed eyes. His hands had gone from trembling to quivering. I'd had to open his Thinpax.

"We'll find you some," I told him. "If we keep moving."

Vin sighed and curled up on a bed of Virtue Pads. "I'll take your word. For now, mano. For now."

We slept for a couple of hours and then moved on, There was no full dark without the filter. Stars blazed above us, each one a burning sun in its own right, adding up to a grayish light that prickled our already-burned skin.

It was by this grayish light that we saw our first bodies outside the StayClosed. Vin walked into the first one — he didn't see it, hanging from a useless CityLec pylon. He grunted when he hit it and fell backwards, knocking me down behind him. We sprawled on the ground, side-by-side, looking up at the body, a darker grey shadow against the drab sky. He'd hanged himself with some kind of cord, looped over the Metoplex arm of the pylon. The sidewalk was scattered with the Thinpax cartons he must have stood on, then kicked away. Dark, curly hair stood out around his head like a black halo.

We picked ourselves up and walked on without speaking. There were more bodies over the next day or so. Mostly hanging. Some in stores, beside empty bottles of Drainfix and Stilosopa, sprawled out in gruesome puddles of bloody vomit, their bodies twisted in agony, their faces grey and rigid, stuck in a permanent howl of pain. The hanging ones were quieter, their purple faces and bulging eyes the outdoor twins of the people stuck to the StayClosed glass.

However they died, they soon began to stink in the queer, still heat of the Vault. We walked through the sweet and meaty stench, waded on through it, as our skin baked and curled under the relentless sun. We took turns to lead, the other following close behind, falling into the same rhythm, walking like machines, ducking into stores for fuel — just quick in and out, because in there the stink was often worse, the heat and the bodies trapped together. Vin seemed to be coping OK without the Beppies, although there was a hard set to his jaw that suggested he was clenching something inside, something he didn't want to let escape. We didn't talk.

A pale, silvery dawn was beginning as we crossed the broad strip of Geocrete that ran alongside the river that lay between City Central and the Other Side. When I studied history, one teacher showed us an old picture on FloScreen of something she called "nature": flat courtyards of green stuff called "grass," dotted with brown sticks with darker green fluffy stuff on top — she said nobody knew what they'd been called. Through the middle of the picture ran a coil of

blue, curving through the grass — she said that was what rivers used to look like. Our river didn't look like that. Our river was a swirl of brown running through a deep Geocrete channel. It ran across the whole Vault, and took a loop right around City Central, with a series of bridges crossing over to the Other Side, before rejoining itself to run through the rest of the Vault and out the far side.

With our usual brilliance, we managed to arrive at the river nowhere near any of the bridges.

Vin groaned and sat down on the cracked Geocrete a few metres away from the channel. "Just a moment," he said. "Just give me a moment." He clenched his fists and pressed them against the sides of his head, like he was trying to squeeze something out of it. I figured that by now he had the post-Bepie brain crawl, the sick feeling that some big worm is crawling around inside your head, looking for a way out and not caring which part of your brain it has to force its way through.

I moved a little closer to the channel and looked down at the brown river rolling through it. My hands were dark red and blistered. Every inch of my skin throbbed under the Bluesuit. The river rolled on, deep down in the Geocrete, lapping at the edges. The sound was rhythmic, rushing, splashing. I longed to bathe my hands and face in the soothing and refreshing water. I'd tried dipping one hand in Tapo at our last store, but it stung and left my skin stickier than it was before. The channel, though, was too deep, the river too far away. Even if I lay on my stomach I'd never reach it. If I dropped into it, I'd never clamber back up the smooth walls.

As those thoughts ran through my head, the first body went by. Half floating, half submerged in the swirl of brown, she swept past me. A woman with long, dark hair waving in the current and a single pale swollen arm slightly lifted out of the water. I thought for a moment she might be alive and reaching for help, but the only thing moving was the river. She rolled over in the current, and her arm swayed up and down, as if beckoning me to come and join her. For a moment, I let my muscles relax, let the pain of my burns seep through my body, imagined myself taking a step closer to the edge. Imagined letting myself topple over and fall, spinning in the hot fetid air, until I sank into the water, entwined my arms with hers and just let it go. Let it all go. The staring eyes in the pulpy faces in the windows. The picture in my head of my parents, scraping their fingertips to blood, trying to escape the StayClosed. The bodies we'd seen on our way here, hanging, poisoned. The couple who'd split each other's belly open with ButcherSharpies, sprawled on the sidewalk outside the store they'd taken them from, surrounded by their slimy insides, each holding a knife in one hand, their other hands clasped

together. I could fall into the water and let it wash me clean — wash it all away, outside and in. The muscles in my legs twitched. Just one step. Then a half step. One of my feet slid forward, involuntarily, scraping against the Geocrete...

A cough from behind me broke into the rhythm of the rushing water, interrupted the flow of my thoughts. "I'm ready, mano. Let's go. Gotta find us a bridge, then we're over to the Other Side, getting us some Beppies. Oh yes, gotta have some of those Beppies. Some SunGear, get us all healed up. Get us goin', mano, get us goin' real good. If you could, mano, just help me up here."

I turned and saw Vin, rocking on his butt, trying to lift himself up using only his legs. His arms were coiled tightly against his chest. His body had just moved into spasm, which meant he must have been fighting the brain crawl for hours. He was strong, stronger than I thought. He was also in more trouble than I'd thought. Spasm started with the shoulder and arms, but in an hour or two it would move to his legs. Within a few hours after that, he'd be curled in the fetal position, in silent agony, with his mouth frozen closed as the spasm moved to his internal organs. And if he'd taken enough Beppies, he'd never uncurl again. I'd read Disposals hated Beppie deaths. They had to break bones to get the corpses to fit into the narrow incinerators.

I glanced back at the water. The woman's body was long gone. And Vin needed me. He, at least, still had something to live for, even if it was just Beppies.

I grabbed one of his curled arms and hauled him up. I had no idea where we were. "Right or left?"

"Always right, mano, always right." He managed a kind of grin through his stiffening lips.

Once he was up, Vin moved along pretty well, even if it was more of a shuffle than a stride. We followed the Geocrete riverbank for so long it felt like we were walking in a straight line, although I knew it had to curve slightly to encircle City Central. Right or left, it didn't matter; we had to come to one of the bridges eventually.

What we came to was the ruins of a bridge. Dented Metallo panels and frayed cables hung from both sides of the canal — in the middle was nothing, just a great gap under which the river rushed onwards, oblivious.

Neither of us said anything, but our steps slowed as we grew closer, even though it was clear there was no way over the river here. The remains of the bridge couldn't have crossed a utility unit, let alone a river.

We stopped and surveyed it in silence. "Didn't know the electricity going out could do this," said Vin. His voice was utterly toneless; I couldn't tell whether or not he was joking.

I lifted my eyes from the wrecked bridge, gazing across the wide expanse of Geocrete that lay between the river and the low, shabby buildings of the Other Side. The sun was rising, almost over the horizon now, but the shadows seemed deeper there than over here. Some trick of the dying sun. I kept looking, peering into the spaces in between the buildings. The answer had to be over there — and I saw it. "There, between the buildings."

For a moment Vin was silent, then his voice hissed in my ear. "Phrocking little beasts."

The deepest shadows between the buildings moved, flitted around, stopped momentarily and then moved again. People. Going about their business, whatever that might be. Masked, covered, shielded in the dark carapace of SunGear.

"They blew the bridge," said Vin. "Keeping it all for themselves, keeping the Funbos, the Beppies, the whole krig for themselves."

Not to mention SunGear and large amounts of easily accessible food, drink and hope. But I didn't mention that to Vin. The Beppies were enough for him.

"Next bridge," said Vin. "They can't have blown them all." He turned and walked away, continuing on the strip along the river. "Walked" was generous; we'd been moving for half an hour or so and Vin's progress, hindered by his seizing muscles, was now more of a tilt forward. But his legs kept moving, kept churning along the Geocrete, and I followed silently.

Of course they'd blown them all. By the fourth ruin, even Vin's strength couldn't keep him moving any more. He slumped down, first in a stiff-legged sitting position that he couldn't maintain. Groaning, he toppled onto his side, his arms frozen against his chest, his legs starting to curl up towards his belly.

I looked around, studying the buildings that lined the Geocrete riverbank on our side, looking, without hope, for a door that would open. I'd scanned every building we'd walked past as we circled the river, but I hadn't seen a single one we could get into — StayClosed windows and doors had sold big in this suburb. Probably for safety since they lived so close to the Other Side. It was the same in the streets we'd walked as we approached the river — we'd found our last enterable store hours ago. Vin couldn't make it back that far. I wasn't even sure I could.

That was when I noticed the people. The first people I'd seen on our side of the river for hours — well, the first living people.

There were about twenty of them, 50 meters or so further along the riverbank, in a neat line, dipping containers attached to long cords or wires into the river and then passing them back along the line. At the end of the line, a couple more people loaded the containers on to a metal trolley, with two shelves and little wheels underneath. When the trolley was filled with containers of all shapes and sizes — Metallo bowls, plastic boxes, TuffChina jugs, and those were just the ones I recognized — the two people loading the trolley would push it away, and two more people would appear from the shade between the buildings with an empty one.

There was something odd about the people. I raised my hand to shield my eyes a little from the rising sun. They were smaller than I was used to. Most of them were hunched over; some moved awkwardly, as if their bodies were twisted. Olds. They were a group of Olds who must have gained permission to escape their 100-year Disposal for some reason – which meant most were probably veterans of the Illusory Wars.

They moved slowly, but rhythmically; not rushing, with a plodding rhythm even an Old could likely keep up for hours. Not just that, but they moved with purpose. They were working towards something that didn't involve crossing the river.

I was immediately interested in finding out what they were up to — but I was also envious of the water they were hauling up. I longed more than ever for the cool of the water to escape the pain in my skin, even just for a moment.

My legs were moving before I'd even thought it through. As I drew closer to the group, one of the men at the front of the line raised a hand and said something I couldn't hear. Immediately the person at the front hauled up a container, only half full, and everybody in the line apart from the man who'd raised his hand withdrew silently into the shadows between the buildings.

The man who waited was less bowed over than most of them. He stood, legs slightly apart, both hands in his pockets, relaxed, as if he was waiting for a 'cino at a café machine. His hair was silvery colored and his skin was only slightly pink. These people had shelter, and it was somewhere not too far from here.

I stopped a few meters away from him.

He nodded at me. "Good morning."

"Good morning. I was wondering if I might borrow one of your containers of water." I held out one of my dark red, blistered hands. "Just to soak a bit. And for my friend —" I tilted my head back at Vin.

He hesitated for a moment and then beckoned to the shadows. A hunched lady scurried forward, bearing a small Metallo bowl of brown water, handed it to the man and then scurried back. He held it out to me. "It will only help for a moment," he advised.

"I'll take a moment." I carried the bowl carefully over to Vin and scattered some water over his face. I couldn't see his hands, enfolded somewhere against his chest. I wet my hand again and dripped water over his head and the back of his neck, then did the same to my own head and neck. It smelt bad. I wondered if it would kill us if we drank it. Not that we had much choice. I held the bowl to Vin's mouth; he mumbled something, and then tried to drink. Most of the water spilled. Despite the color and the smell, I drank the rest, then carried the bowl back.

The Olds were back in their line, hauling, passing, filling. The old man stepped out of line to receive the bowl, and another Old stepped forward and another back to smoothly fill the gap.

I thanked him for the water and we stood together for a moment, watching the Other Siders. There was no fear now, no flitting between buildings. They walked on the other side of the river, in SunGear-clad groups of two or three, sometimes looking over at us, sometimes simply walking. It was hard to tell if they were guards, watching for any attempt to build a bridge, or just going about whatever business they had to do over there.

"They look inhuman in those masks," said the old man.

"It is inhuman, what they've done."

He shrugged. "It's only what we've done to them for decades."

I'd always thought those blank SunGear masks had no expression. But as I watched the Other Siders glancing over at us I suddenly thought they did. They looked smug. "Do you think they turned off the electricity?"

The old man shook his head. "I think they just saw a chance and took it. The electricity — I think that's got more to do with the crack in the Vault." I looked at him blankly. "Over on the east side. It's been in the FloScreen news for months."

"I don't watch the news."

"Ah. Well, the government swore there was no danger."

"I hope they're behind StayClosed."

A smile split his pale cheeks. "I'm sure they are."

"You seem to be well organized. Had you thought about building a bridge?"

He shrugged. "Too old, too weak. They're waiting for us anyway. They'd have us tipped into the river before anything we built even touched the other side.

Some strong young men like you, though..." He glanced over at Vin, in his distinctive fetal position, and frowned. "Beppies?"

I nodded. "Not long, now." Phrocking Vin. I'd tried so hard for him and now he was going to die anyway.

The old man hesitated. "Might be able to help you. If we could still get some into him."

"You've got Beppies?"

"Plenty where we are."

"Could we ... would you ... please?"

He hesitated again. Then nodded. "Sun's come up; it's time we headed out anyway. Think you can carry him?"

Normally, no way. But today was no normal day.

I sprinted back to where Vin lay, and heaved him up into a sitting position. I bent down, throwing one of his arms over my shoulder and around my neck and stood up, half carrying him, half dragging him back to the group of Olds.

Vin groaned in pain. "Phrock," he scraped out between clenched teeth. "Phrock. Don't ... want that ... be my phrocking las' ... word."

"Don't worry, it won't be." As long as it wasn't far to go. For my sake as well as Vin's.

The Olds were filling their last trolley, the line breaking up. They formed into small groups and walked away, through the buildings. The old man with the silver hair waited for us. With Vin hanging off my neck, my pace easily matched his slow steps as he led us along a few city blocks and down a narrow lane that opened up into a wide Geocrete courtyard. In the middle of the yard stood a wide building of only three stories. The building was ancient, built from flaking Fabbro, with six square windows on either side of the double front doors — regular doors. *Third Illusory Veterans Home* read a small Metallo plaque to one side of the doors.

Inside, the building was just as decrepit, with peeling yellow paint on the walls and ripped Plast-O-Lay on the floor. This was the honor that veterans won themselves. I wondered if Disposal wouldn't be better.

Their medical room, though — that was a whole other matter. A white-walled room opposite the front door, it was lined with cupboards with clear doors, every one packed with medicines of all types. I dumped Vin on a long narrow bed near the door. He tried to groan, but all that came out was a puff of air.

"I'm Nondo Wild," said the old man as he typed the code into an old-fashioned security panel: 123456. They sure trusted these veterans with their

Pharma. He lifted down a small yellow bottle. "I think we'd best dissolve one of these. His throat muscles are probably half closed already."

He dropped a Beppie into a glass of yellowish water he poured from one of many jugs that lined the counters. "We leave the water to settle and filter on its own." I could see in one clear-sided jug how the sediment had settled into a dark brown solid layer at the bottom, blending upwards through shades of lighter brown, to the pale yellow at the top.

I sat on the edge of the bed, propping Vin up against me. I forced his mouth open and Nondo poured the liquid Beppie in, bit by bit. Vin's face was frozen, but the muscles in his throat worked wildly, trying to get the stuff down. What he couldn't manage to swallow spilled out of the sides of his mouth.

"Give him an hour or so, then get him up," Nondo said. "That'll get it moving around his body faster. When he starts to twitch, that's the right time. When he's ready to move, come and find me. Turn right into the corridor and then turn right again. I'll be at the terrace — you can't miss it. Ah — and this is for you."

He handed me a little tube of Silveral burn healer. Once he was gone, I peeled off my Bluesuit and slathered it all over my body. I put it on the bits of Vin's skin I could see — his face and neck. The rest of him would have to wait until later. I looked down at the Bluesuit, a pool of stained Plast-O-Fabron on the floor. I didn't want to put it back on again. Not all of the cupboards had locks. I opened a couple, finding wipes and mats, and in one of them, a pile of loose Fabron pants. I put them on.

Alone, bare-chested and barefoot, I paced, with no idea of time, studying Vin, lying still on the bed. Drug-addicted, stupid krig that he was, he was all I had. I thought about the Beppies, about how much had spilled out the side of his mouth. I thought about the strength of Vin's addiction. The bottle of Beppies still stood on the counter. Just one more to make sure. I dissolved it in the yellow water and helped him drink. His lips closed tight on the glass. Only a few drops spilled out this time. It was working.

I waited, studying the cupboards, counting the bottles again and again, trying not to look at Vin, just waiting. They had everything a Pharma could offer; not just Beppies and Sudo, but the really strong stuff like Vinerol and Slancol. Finally Vin moved, spluttering and coughing. I turned round in time to see his arms and legs twitch randomly. His eyes rolled wildly in his head. It was time to get him moving. I dragged him off the bed, half dropping him, half catching him, but winding up getting him mostly on his feet with his arm around my shoulders. I started moving, walking him around the room chanting: "Walk, Vin, walk." His legs



dragged helplessly at first, then began to sway, then make more purposeful movements. When he started to feel lighter against my shoulder, I figured he was taking some of his own weight and was ready for the corridors. I turned right out of the room as instructed, walking Vin along a long corridor of blank doors. The walls were lined with container after container of water. I turned right again at the end, more blank doors and more water. I kept walking — Nondo had said I couldn't miss "the terrace."

We came upon it suddenly, double doors opening out to our left into a large courtyard. I saw now that the building was a square, built around this open area, this extraordinary area. I didn't know what to call it — Nondo's "terrace" would have to do. It was green this place, all green. On the ground grew what looked like grass from my teacher's photo. Rising everywhere out of the grass were the tall structures she said nobody could name — long brown poles, topped with that puffball of green. Unlike the ones in the picture, these green balls were dotted with color — red, orangish and peachy-colored bits in the shapes of balls, ovals, tiny marbles — all different. Some looked like Jufruits, others like Carnadines — like fruit, not growing in TubalChem but on these strange structures.

I heard a hiss of surprise from Vin, not quite in control of his mouth yet. A Metallo bench sat just outside the door, so I stepped through and dropped him down on it, then, out of breath, plopped down next to him, gazing at the greenness. Vin, still struggling for balance slumped against my shoulder and stayed there. The ground felt squishy under my feet, and I saw brown stuff oozing up between my toes. It felt soft and cool, not unlike the Silveral I'd just smeared over my skin.

The air smelled different here too. A little like the smell of fruit, but richer, darker somehow. And there was a gentle, fluttering noise from all around. The view, the sensation, the smell, the sounds — it all added up to something I hadn't known in a long time. Peace.

I couldn't see Nondo, but other older folk moved between the structures, some stroking them, others talking to them, some simply standing, looking.

Vin, still leaning heavily against me, muttered in a hoarse voice, "They're mad".

"Nice to hear from you, mano," I whispered. "They saved your life. At least that one did."

Nondo walked towards us through the greenery, smiling. "What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think," I said. "I've never seen anything like this before." Vin said nothing.

Nondo rested an arm on the on the back of the bench beside me, looking out in the same direction I was. "I'm sure you haven't. This is a garden. The green on the ground — that's grass." He pointed at the tall structures. "Those are trees, with branches and leaves. The smaller ones, bushes. All of them growing fruit."

"I've never seen fruit look like that before."

"No. These are antiques. Fruits people used to eat before TubalChem. The seeds for these were exported from Earth hundreds of years ago — by people who knew they wouldn't survive to see them arrive. Others planted them, knowing they would never see them grow. Now we take care of them. A hobby. We have plenty of time. Or rather *had* plenty of time.

"Now it's not a hobby any more, this garden. It's our hope for the future. To grow our own food, to take shoots from what's here and plant them elsewhere. If the electricity never comes back on — Don't flinch like that, you're obviously a bright young man. Who do you think is left who can fix the electricity station? Fix whatever's wrong with the Vault? Nobody, I'm betting. And I'm pretty sure those thoughts have run through your head as well."

They had. He looked down at me, flinty grey eyes fixed on my own. Reluctantly, I nodded.

"We could do with some help here. Some strength. Like you and your friend. To keep things growing, keep them healthy. Take the shoots and distribute them. Get over that river; share them with the Other Side. Stop the flinching. You know as well as I do that even if they don't want us over there, that's where our only hope lies. And with this garden, we may have something they want. There must be somebody over there who can understand what this means. Get something new started."

I looked out at the garden. All I knew was that it was the freshest, cleanest thing I'd seen. Something I could never have imagined existed.

Nondo moved his hand from the bench to my shoulder. "You must be tired. Your friend too. He looks like the Beppies are taking effect. What you both need now is rest. We have 50 rooms here and only 30 residents — there's plenty of space. Would you like to stay? And talk more tomorrow?"

Suddenly too tired to talk, I nodded. He led us to two rooms, side-by-side. They contained the bare minimum of furniture — a Metallo-framed bed and a few other bits and pieces I barely noticed. I deposited Vin, now close to walking,

on the bed of one of the rooms, and took the other for myself. Where Nondo went, I don't know; I didn't even say goodbye. I was asleep before I'd even hit the bed.

The greenery from the garden wound its way into my dreams, with its rich scent and beautiful colors. Even the sounds were there — the shivering leaves chattering gently, whispering gentle messages to me. I woke — I don't know how much later; it could have been minutes, hours or days — shaken awake by Vin, his big face looming over me, wild eyed.

He was in mid-sentence, speaking fast, “— phrocking Slancol, precious jewel. Mano, you gotta try somma this. Voices like angels, yeah man — and the colors, krig, those colors. Got 'em from that Pharma room. Krig, man, you were wandering about like nothing in there — like something lost. Thought you'd never make a grab. Got those sharp teeth aching. 123456 — call that secure — I don't think so.” He cackled with laughter. “Slancol, Vinerol — got them a batch of Adcarad somewhere in back too. I'll be moving on to them later, so come on, mano, get you somma too. Get a smile on that face. Get a look at the pretty colors, all red, mano, all red, and plenty more to do—”

I thought he'd never shut up, and then he was hauling at my arm: “Plenty there for all, mano. Such sweet stuff. Come help make a little more red—”.

I pushed him away. “Krig, Vin, let me sleep. I've dragged your phrocking half-dead butt all over the city.”

“Sure, sure, you take you your little naptime. Vinnie'll save you some for after. Plenty red to go round.” He let go of my arm and I slumped back on to the bed, back to sleep.

When I woke again, I woke to silence. Vin had left me two little piles of pills on the table by the bed; one of little red Vinerol, the other white-and-yellow capsules of Slancol. I didn't want them.

I lay in bed for a bit, savoring the memory of the garden, anticipating the moment when I would see it again. When I would talk to Nondo about the future. I wanted to stay here; I knew that already. Help and learn and discover and share. I reached up to the ceiling in a long, luxurious stretch, then rolled out of bed and on to my feet in a single move.

I padded along the corridor towards the garden. The home was so silent, almost as if nobody lived here. These Olds were quiet. I liked that. I was already smiling before I turned into the garden.

It took me a moment before I realized what was different. The ground wasn't brown any more, wasn't scattered with the tiny green shoots of grass. It was red,

all red. I didn't understand at first. Then I saw the bodies. The garden was scattered with the bodies of the Olds. The thin hunched bodies were twisted now with more than age, their limbs distorted and bent. Arms, legs and heads turned in impossible directions, some broken and torn away. Every one of them lay in a pool of deepest red, runnels of blood streaming from each body. My feet felt sticky. I looked down. I stood in a puddle of blood.

"Mano!" A high-pitched yell of excitement echoed around the garden. I couldn't see him at first. Then I saw a flash of movement between two bushes. Vin pushed between them, grinning widely, his mouth stained with some kind of fruit.

"All ours now! Phrocking magi, mano! Beautiful, beautiful stuff! No way we're sharin' with those krigs over the other side of the river. Ours, mano! We'll live happy here, keep those things seeding and planting, just like the man said. It all made sense, mano, apart from that sharin' thing. Vin don't share with nobody! Just his friend, Levo, mano, just his friend Levo. You saved my phrocking life, now I'm savin' yours. Enough here for two, oh yeah, plenty to go around without those Olds here. I've taken care of them for you, mano. Didn't want you to have to do that." He was closer to me now. "With that Pharma, enough in this garden to eat, enough in that Pharma to keep us happy — it's perfect, mano, just perfect. Just you and me!" Closer again.

It wasn't fruit around his mouth. His pointed teeth were covered in blood. I looked around. At the bodies sprawled across the red-stained garden. Then back at Vin, eyes rolling with drug-induced frenzy. This was what I'd saved him for.

All I had left was the garden. I'd look after it as best I could — do what I'd seen the Olds doing. Stroking the plants, talking to them, just watching them. I could survive for years. Let Vin have the run of the Pharma, keep him calm and happy, if he'd just let me take care of the plants.

I gazed around. The Olds — I'd look after them too. Find a Disposal centre. I'd clean up the mess here; wash the grass clean. There was plenty of water for that. I could make it clean. Afterwards, I wouldn't need much water, just enough for me and Vin. I could make it last a long time. They had so much, for so few Olds. I wondered what they were collecting the water for.

It didn't matter. I wouldn't need water. All I needed was the garden.

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*SHONA SNOWDEN writes fantasy and horror for adults and young adults. Many of her short stories have been published online and in print. Originally from Scotland, Shona has also lived in the US and Europe. She is currently based in Australia where she lives with her husband and children, and with the constant fear of finding a red-bellied black snake in her backyard.*

Website: [http://www.shonasnowden.com/Shona\\_Snowden/Welcome.html](http://www.shonasnowden.com/Shona_Snowden/Welcome.html)

## **TRANSCENDING**

*Because humor lurks even in our darkest hours*

*When a newly bio-engineered weapon in the wars on drugs and terror gets out of control, can the supplier really be held responsible?*

## **A THORNY DILEMMA**

by Rory Steves

"It wasn't our fault," I explained. "Not really."

The tribunal was silent.

"At Bio\*Verdant, we engineer seeds for agricultural use; in fact, our products have revolutionized the industry."

Silence.

"We've produced tomatoes and peppers that grow in Alaska. A fescue hybrid that's helping reclaim the sub-Saharan savanna. Even most of the bio-fuels come from the saw grass and soybeans we developed."

Not so much as a nod from our judges.

"Putting us on trial for crimes against humanity — it isn't right or just. We only produced the seeds."

One of the tribunal coughed, quite rudely.

"It's the DEA and the military who should shoulder the blame."

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The problem really started when a senior DEA agent and an air force general showed up at the Bio\*Verdant research facility.

First, they wanted the red-carpet tour of our facility, which we gave them. We're not crazy; what the government wants, the government gets.

Then they wanted a complete rundown on what we did and how we did it.

We gave them the abridged version. They huddled together in a mini-conference, talking in hushed tones.

We tried hard not to laugh; we could hear every word.

"We need you," the DEA agent told us, "to create a poppy whose pollen will sterilize opium-producing varieties."

"We plan to drop the seed from Stealth bombers," the air force general informed us.

"We need the same solution for coca and marijuana plants as well," the DEA guy continued. "We want to wipe out the drug problem once and for all."

"We also need," the general said, "a fast-growing vine that can be dropped from our bombers that will act like barbed wire to entangle enemy infantry."

"While we respect your intentions," I said, "that isn't the kind of work we do here at Bio\*Verdant. We develop crop seed for farmers around the world. We don't do any pollen-antagonist work here or military applications."

Then Nelson, our resident nut case, had to open his big, dumb mouth.

"We could weaponize kudzu," he told our guests. "We can't neutralize the drug-producing plants, but we could overwhelm them with a competitive, even aggressive, vine."

"Kudzu?" the general asked. "Isn't that the stuff they planted along rivers in the south? The stuff that is slowly," he emphasized the *slowly*, "slowly taking over the local vegetation?"

He seemed less than impressed.

Had it ended there, where it should have, life would now be much simpler for us.

But Nelson didn't seem to possess the "shut-up" gene.

"The city of Atlanta employs a crew of twenty-five people whose only job is combating the kudzu that would otherwise, eventually, engulf the city," Nelson told them. "The kudzu vine grows at a rate of up to a foot per week. Its roots grow up to seventeen feet deep."

He paused for effect. "Speeding up the growth rate is child's play."

"But will it grow in the different climates we need to control?" the DEA guy asked.

"Gentlemen," I cut in, "we specialize in manipulating the climate needs of crops around the world. Producing different strains of kudzu is doable — but expensive." Hey, I wasn't changing sides, but these guys not only had deep pockets but a noble cause. My conscience agreed with the idea of being involved with the destruction of the drug trade.

"How long?" DEA asked.

"Eighteen to twenty-four months," I replied. "We'll need to follow fail-safe protocols, and double-check to be sure we deliver a safe product."



"Fail-safe?"

"We need to check for climate tolerance, reproductive purity, lifespan and a long list of biological markers. Plus, it seems, an enhanced tolerance for being dropped from bombers."

"How about the barbed wire?" the general asked.

"Challenging but possible," I said.

"How much?" DEA asked.

I nodded over to Silvia, our chief accountant and office manager.

She nodded back and spent a few minutes with her ever-present calculator, her fingers a blur.

Finished, she showed the total to the DEA agent and the general.

"Agreed," said the DEA agent. "Have it ready for deployment in six months and we double the amount."

"Agreed," Silvia and I said in unison. I knew full well Silvia would have padded the numbers to give us room to negotiate; now the inflated amount would be doubled.

Deep pockets hardly described it.

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Thankfully, it was the start of our slow season, so most of us could devote all of our time to the project.

We grafted DNA from dune grass to extend the kudzu's normal deep-root system to twenty to thirty feet deep.

Shrub roses and Hawthorne trees provided the DNA for a wicked set of thorns.

The humble dandelion gave us an efficient seed distribution system. Plus regenerative roots.

All we had to do for the barbed wire variant was to punch the growth rate sky high.

Encouraging growth in various climates required nothing more than the same techniques we had mastered years ago.

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Our first test crop was a dismal failure. The kudzu seeds took too long to germinate, and the seedlings grew faster than the roots could provide nourishment.

Both problems proved remarkably easy to fix.

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"Big seeds," the DEA guy commented as he hefted a handful of the golf ball-sized seed packs. "Heavy, too."

"Our first batch had germination problems," I told him as forklifts loaded bags of seed into trucks for delivery to the general's bombers. "We solved the problem by first making the seeds larger. This provided more nourishment to the seedlings. Then we pre-germinated the seed and packaged it in a water-soluble fertilizer sphere."

The agent quickly dropped the seeds back into the sample bucket.

"These are the seeds for the central Asian poppy fields. They are engineered for the dry, mountainous regions where the opium poppy is cultivated. The seeds for the central American cocaine and marijuana will be ready by week's end."

"Very good," he said, handing Silvia a check. "Good doing business with you; we'll be in touch."

"How about the barbed wire?" the general demanded.

"We've nicknamed it Strangleweed. We have four varieties to cope with most climates you might need them for. They're bagged and ready."

"Excellent," he said, pumping my hand and grinning. "I have a couple of terrorist training camps I want to try them out on."

"If you drop them during a rainstorm, they'll never know what hit them."

"Perfect," he said.

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"You must admit," I told the tribunal, "our products worked exactly the way we said they would, with remarkable success."

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It was raining the night the general seeded the two training camps, and by morning both camps were knee-deep in the thorny, tangling vines. By the next day the vines were taller than the tents. In three days, the vines were impenetrable, and most of the tents had collapsed.

Then the sun baked the vines, reducing them to dust.

The perfect weapon.

When another batch of terrorists occupied the camps, they were amused by how fast weeds grew any place they drained their bladders.

Then it rained.

Did I mention the advanced root system?

The terrorists tried to fight their way out with machetes and flamethrowers, but were buried alive under the vegetation.

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The poppy growers were located in the same region. Poppy farmers looked out their windows in horror as our kudzu engulfed their fields.

Ever resourceful, the farmers sprayed the vines with petrol and set them ablaze. Once the vines were burned down to the ground, they reseeded their fields.

The next morning they were horrified to see new vines poking up through the soil.

They sprayed the vines with potent weed killers and plowed them under. The kudzu kept growing.

World prices for heroin skyrocketed due to the shrinking supply.

The cocaine and marijuana cartels were just as strangled by our kudzu vines.

And neighboring narcotics growers were dismayed to see the kudzu seeds floating into their fields like giant dandelion puffs.

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"Terrorist camps and training bases have been pretty much eradicated," I pointed out. "Same with almost every drug-producing region around the world."

Our judges were impassive.

"China's planned invasion of Taiwan was forestalled indefinitely due to our kudzu."

The air force had seeded the Chinese Army's marshaling areas with a mix of leftover seed.

Taiwan remained free.

The tribunal remained sullen.

"We informed both the DEA and the air force about the advanced root system and seed propagation," I said. "There was full disclosure on our part."

No response.

"We only delivered the seeds." My voice crept up an octave. "They were the ones who used them."

The problem developed from the vine's extraordinary root system and how easily the seeds drifted on the slightest breeze. The various strains of kudzu had cross-pollinated, and the hybrids were even nastier than our original batches. The roots were quite adept at finding underground sources of water. Natural aquifers, modern freshwater and sewer systems were sucked dry.

"They only spread the seed three months ago," I said, sweat beading on my forehead. "We could still find a solution."

Kudzu had no known predators. Animals and insects did not feed on it, nor

bacteria. Weed killers were impotent; even Agent Orange was useless.

As a result, the stuff was spreading — fast. We had, after all, engineered the rapid growth rate. Most of Asia, from the Middle East to the Pacific, now lay buried under a heaving mass of the thorny vines, nearly thirty feet thick.

Ditto South and Central Americas.

The only continent free of the kudzu was Antarctica. However, our kudzu had shown its ability to adapt to various climates and was already being battled in Siberia and Alaska.

"It isn't our fault," I repeated.

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The judges conferred.

One spoke.

"You have thirty days to find a way to kill this stuff. Failing that, we'll put you in a helicopter ourselves and throw you nude into the nearest mass of vines available."

It wasn't our fault.

It wasn't.

And thirty days to save the world, and our own butts, wasn't much time.

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*RORY STEVES is just an old has-been who never was.*

*Capturing mammoths was all in a day's work for Deke Atwood. A saber-tooth tiger, on the other hand, was a problem that would require a solution bigger than an elephant gun...*

**INVOICE H10901:  
3 WOOLY MAMMOTHS**

by Robert J. Sullivan

Every now and then it's a good idea to review your career choices. Sitting in a Model T Ford at midnight guarding a baby wooly mammoth from a saber-tooth tiger is a better time than most.

I'm Deke Atwood and I run the Inter-World Trading Company in Manhattan. That's on Delta Earth. Here, it's 1921, and in some respects it's only a little different from the one in your history books. President Cox is in office and Roosevelt is his vice president. Two weeks ago I saw Babe Ruth hit two home runs against the Washington Senators and I've got tickets to see Dempsey fight Charpentier in Jersey City in a few weeks, if I live that long. The work isn't hard, I set my own hours, I meet interesting people, and there are always new challenges. Like collecting wooly mammoths. From other worlds.

My boss called me a week ago and asked if I'd like to pick up a few extra bucks. He had a client who wanted three wooly mammoths and would I mind a side trip to one of the worlds where they're still alive, pick them out, pack them up, and send them to him? I agreed.

There was a circus playing at Madison Square Garden. I headed that way, asked a few questions and recruited some cowboys who had been wrangling elephants, figuring that was as close to an expert as I was likely to find. With Steve

Bremmer's help, I bought camping supplies, cages, chains, rope, guns, food and transportation. We made the transfer and there we were.

"There" was Zeta Earth. Jumping between parallel worlds is more like time travel since the worlds don't run at the same speed. On Zeta Earth, for instance, there are no people – at least I never saw any — and critters that died out after the Ice Age on Earth Prime are still running around.

Like woolly mammoths.

And the beasts that eat them.

There was a noise in the darkness. There had been noises in the dark for three hours since I started keeping watch. I took one hand off the .600 Nitro Express rifle I was holding and wiped it on my shirt, then did the other hand. Anything I hit with this was going down. But I'd never shot anything live in my life.

What you do with an object depends on your training, background and inclination, with a factor for emergencies. Hand a pen to Bill Shakespeare and you get a sonnet or play. With Mozart, you get music to inspire. James Bond might stab you with it.

Whoever developed the technology to move between universes must have thought, "Wow! There must be a way to make a ton of money with this!" Their answer was trade, moving stuff from where it was cheap and selling it where it was expensive. When the business grows enough so the only thing holding you back from making more money is not enough manpower, you recruit people to run offices on both worlds.

I'm one of the recruits. I don't think there's anything special about me; I just happened to be in the right place at the right time, and it's worked out great. I deal mostly in luxury items with a high markup: second-hand junk in 1921 — pistols, swords, books, magazines, scrimshaw and the like — become antiques when shifted 80 or 90 years in the future. I can see myself doing this for a long time.

Except for the part about sitting around waiting for a saber-tooth tiger to show up.

The rest of the camp was quiet. There were eight of us: me and the two truck drivers, two animal handlers, and three cowboys I hired from the circus. They were doing a show at the Garden when I talked them into this expedition as a way to make some extra money. Parked next to me sat one of the trucks, and on the other side was the campfire, burning low now but still giving enough light to see fifty feet in front of the car to the cage with the baby mammoth. His parents were

staked down beyond the other truck. The elephant handler told me the ropes would hold a small ocean liner.

Another noise sounded in the night, this time behind me. I turned to look, saw nothing but darkness until I started to imagine things. I turned back — and the tiger stood between me and the cage. There hadn't been a sound from him. Sweat poured down my sides.

The saber-tooth was wildly over-muscled, like a bodybuilder who'd scored a tanker truck of steroids and had spent years bingeing. He reached out and batted at the cage, and the baby mammoth started bawling, wanting mama to come and get him. There was an answering trumpet from his parents and the tiger snarled like a chainsaw slicing through a trash can.

I was in an awkward position to shoot. I hunched forward and raised the rifle to my shoulder, hoping not to be seen. The barrel smacked into the steering wheel and the animal's head snapped in my direction.

All hell let out for recess.

The saber-tooth screamed and started for me, going from zero to oh-my-god in one bound. I jerked the gun to my shoulder and let off both barrels. It felt like I'd been on the catching end of a Bruce Lee side kick. The world narrowed to a tunnel with the tiger in the center heading straight for me. The animal leaped, all snarling maw and claws and I decided I didn't want to be there when he landed. In one spasmodic jerk, I went over the door and slammed into the ground with the grace of a bag of cement. The car sat high off the ground and I rolled under it. The car bounced on its springs and banged into me as it got a new occupant. I kept rolling, came up on all fours and sprinted for the cage, trying to suck air into my lungs.

By the time I was on the other side of the cage, everybody was in motion. Steve Bremmer, one of the cowboys, ran up in long johns, boots, hat and lever-action rifle, closely followed by Lathan Kohler wearing just boots, hat and pistol. Someone threw a bundle of sticks on the fire and we had light. The truckers came on the trot.

"Horses," Bremmer said. The horses were adding to the racket, whinnying in panic.

"Got it," said Kohler, the one without the long johns, and he was gone.

The mammoths' trumpeting escalated the noise level several decibels. Bremmer yelled to the elephant wrangler. "Byrne, see to your animals!"

The Model T was a dim bulk in the shadow of the truck, its top bulging and the chassis creaking and swaying. Pieces of leather, canvas and foam rubber flew

in the air and landed around us as the saber-tooth tore at the car, snarling all the while. Then he bounded free, tearing off the canvas top, and landed twenty feet away, still wrapped in black canvas. He shook his head and poked it out one side, like the world's ugliest grandmother in a shawl.

I realized that my rifle and I had parted company a while back.

I looked into the face of this primeval killer, with his fierce daggered incisors, and was struck by his expression; this thing was dumb as a bag of hammers. That figured. He was a shark on land, an appetite strapped in muscle. Brains would have been as unnecessary as frosting on a filet mignon.

Bremmer raised his rifle and fired just as the tiger sprang. Bremmer went left and I went right. I kept going until I was on the far side of the car, got my feet tangled and went down, slid, and ended up on top of my rifle. I scrambled back to my feet and remembered the rifle was empty. I groped for the spare rounds in my pocket, broke the weapon open, dumped the empties and closed it on two live rounds.

The tiger crouched on top of the cage, batting at the bars and trying to get in. I was lining up a shot when the mammoths showed up.

It had been amazingly easy to capture the mammoths, despite their size. The male stood 14 feet tall at the shoulder with great curved tusks and small round ears. The female was 12 feet tall. Both were covered with russet-brown hair. They'd been alone on the plain with their calf when we'd driven up in our caravan of cars, trucks and horses and had shown neither surprise nor dismay. Byrne had walked up to the six-foot-tall baby, slipped a rope around its neck and led it away. Mama and Daddy had followed. We fed them bales of hay and they seemed happy to go along. At night, they let our elephant handler put hawsers around their necks and stake them to the ground. The calf ran among us while we traveled, weaving between the vehicles and the horses. It took an effort not to hit him. At night, we put him in a metal cage.

Bremmer had spotted the saber-tooth around noon, pacing us and watching, too far away to shoot. The animal was the same tan as the grass and if he wasn't in motion, he was invisible.

Byrne had told me the hawsers and stakes would moor a small ocean liner. He was wrong. The male mammoth padded into the clearing surrounding the cage still trailing the rope. He reached out with his trunk, grabbed the saber-tooth by a back leg and slammed him on the ground like he was swatting a fly. A great puff of dust billowed out. The tiger was game and tried to get at the mammoth. The bull picked him up again, swung him in an arc over his head and slammed him



into the ground a second time. He got into a rhythm, wham on one side, wham on the other, and repeat. Clouds of dust rose into the air and started drifting away on the gentle breeze. After the first dozen body slams, the saber-tooth lost coordination and started hitting the ground hard. After a few more, he looked like a rag doll.

Byrne ran up, holding a pair of jeans and his boots. He started dressing. "They were already loose when I got there," he said.

The female mammoth walked up to the cage and the calf squealed in greeting. We backed off to give her some room. She put a foot on the corner of the steel cage and it turned from a cube to a trapezoid to a pile of junk. Mama and baby wrapped their trunks together.

The bull was just about done with the saber-tooth. The tiger was still alive but all his zip was gone. The mammoth dragged him toward the edge of the camp, flailing him from side to side to build some momentum, then took a couple of steps on the backswing and smacked the tiger into the bole of a tree.

If a field goal is getting the ball between the uprights, the mammoth performed an inverse field goal on the tiger: the saber-tooth got the upright between the balls. The predator curled over himself and made a high keening sound. The bull let him go and shuffled closer. He wrapped his trunk around one of the oversized canines and dragged the tiger across to the trunk of a tree lying beside the camp. He slammed the saber-tooth's giant incisors against the trunk, put a foot on the back of his head and, by a combination of tapping and pushing, drove the teeth several inches into the wood.

Dad, mama and junior held a brief conversation of trumpets and grunts. Then, with some prodding and pushing from mama, junior ran to our woodpile, selected a branch and trotted over to the saber-tooth. Baby gave him a shot. The big cat grunted. It must have been like taking a baseball bat shot from Ted Williams. After a few more whacks with the stick, the calf dropped it, stepped on the predator's back and peed on him. Then he ran back to mama.

The adults conferred while pulling off each other's halters and removing the baby's. As they started away, junior picked up his leash, waving it like a blue ribbon he'd won at the county fair.

Dad stopped to look at us, shook his head and followed his family into the darkness. Apparently we weren't the kind of playmates he wanted for his son. Then they were gone.

The saber-tooth lay limp on the ground. I raised the rifle and drew a bead on him. Bremmer put his hand on the barrel and pushed it down.

"Wouldn't be sporting," he said. "Let's see how he takes it."

The animal worked his head from side to side, pushing on the log with his front paws, occasionally stopping to rest. Finally he tore his fangs loose and laid his head on the log, breathing hard. After a minute, he rolled in the dirt, probably to get rid of the piss smell, got up and began a very slow, knock-kneed shuffle out of the camp. Before he passed out of the light, he turned and gave us a heads-up stare. I swear he wanted our agreement never to speak of this moment again. Then he was gone. I think I heard him fall down again before he was out of earshot.

"Yeah," I agreed. "He had a tough enough day without somebody shooting him. Come on." I moved my shoulder and poked at it with a finger. I made a noise.

"Rifle butt catch you wrong?" asked Bremmer.

"Yeah."

"You're gonna stiffen up before morning and I ain't wiping your butt. I got some liniment that might help, though."

We walked over to one of the trucks and he pulled a brown bottle out of his saddlebags. "Rub this on it. Stings like crazy and smells like crap, but you'll be able to move in the morning. Right now, I'm going to bed. Looks like I gotta catch another mammoth tomorrow. 'Night." He climbed into the truck and stretched out on a blanket with his head on his saddle.

"Good night." I started away. His voice came after me.

"You sure are one crummy shot, that's for sure."

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*ROBERT J. SULLIVAN worked for an insurance company for 14 years (proving he can tolerate anything) before becoming a computer programmer in a language so obscure system recruiters have never heard of it. He has a list of interests so varied it's easier to list what he isn't interested in, and follows the Red Sox at a safe distance. He is an obsessive reader of science fiction, detective stories and thrillers, and is very much taken with Neal Stephenson and John Sandford. He lives in Connecticut with his wife, and has two grown children who show amazing tolerance for his behavior.*

*George thought Stinson's window office would surely be his after making a momentous discovery while on holiday. When the distractions get too much, however, his wife cooks up a surprise to remind him love is always worth sacrificing for.*

## **DISTRACTIONS**

by Peter Dudley

"Remember sunscreen, George." Not ten minutes in Bora Bora, and she's already at me about melanoma. "You know you spend far too much time in that dungeon of yours."

"It's not a dungeon, Mabel. It's my office."

"Well, I still say it's outrageous that the maths professors have top story windows and the ornithologists get buried in the basement. Stinson stacks his texts right in front of the window, for goodness sake, because the drapes don't block the light enough."

She huffs a sigh and pulls a long, taupe cloth from her suitcase, which lies open on the bed. "Oh! These control tops get wrapped around everything."

As she extracts the threadbare hose from their stranglehold on a rumpled pair of flowered shorts, my eyes wander to the open doorway. It's a rectangle of beautiful, nut-brown wood framing an intense blue-on-blue horizon. Mabel had insisted on the last bungalow on the pier, so we'd have some privacy. I consider dropping my shorts and enjoying our sundeck *au naturel*.

I imagine Mabel will insist that I lather Mister Floppy up with sunscreen. Or, dear Lord, she might insist on doing it for me. There are only two things in this room that sag more than her jowls, and oh-my-god she's about to expose them as she changes into her swimsuit.

I rush out the door into the blinding afternoon.

"Sunscreen, George!"

The warm Pacific breeze flows over me as I flop into one of the chaise lounges and shove dark glasses over my eyes. From here we can see nothing but ocean and sky. Some *Gygis alba* and a pair of *Fregata minor* dot the blue. But dammit I'm on holiday. From now on, they're merely terns and frigates.

The only birds I'll let distract me this week will be wearing thong bikinis. There are plenty of beautiful specimens in the other bungalows to help me hone my keen powers of scientific observation. Perhaps I can find a mating pair and separate them, handing the male over to Mabel for her amusement while I examine the female with minute precision.

I breathe deeply of the salt-scented air in order to loosen the knots forming in my shoulders. Years ago, before we had kids, Mabel used to make other parts of me stiff. Now, she only stiffens my neck with her constant chirping and innuendo. She bore my children, and now I suppose I'm worried that my inability to perform will bore her.

As if summoned by subconscious devilry, Mabel waddles from the hut. In a one-piece, thank God. I don't have to scratch my eyes out. The suit's faux new-age modern-art pattern looks like it was made from drapery stolen from a cheap motel in Leeds. At least it covers the parts that must be covered.

"Now, dear," Mabel croons, a lime green tube clutched in her talons, "you've not put on sunscreen. Here. Let me do you."

I pop up and away, out of the chair, using it as a barrier between us. "That's all right, dear." I must get away. Any excuse. My mind races. At home, I'd claim work on a paper, or the need to meet with a student after hours. Just as her hopeful coyness is darkening to a frown, I hit on it.

"Beer. We have no beer in the bungalow, dear, and a man in this environment can't be fully relaxed, and ... well ... properly lubricated, if you know what I mean, if he hasn't had a decent pint."

She's unconvinced, and her expression is growing more stormy by the second.

"All that time in airplanes has put me in need of a brisk walk. I promise I won't be gone long. You saw that store near the check-in. I'm sure they have something." I slip around the chair and dart past her, back inside. She does not move.

I grab the yellow tee-shirt I'd only just removed, and as I slip it on I call to her, "Can I get you anything, love?" *A nice sedative, perhaps? A bottle of sleeping pills?*

She mumbles something I can't make out that sounds suspiciously like *muscled young stud*.

"What's that, love?"

"Oh, nothing." She's facing away, looking out over the water. "Take your time. I'll occupy myself."

I try hard not to visualize her self-occupation. When we were packing, she was overly conspicuous in the way she secretly slipped a pocket "vibrating massager" into her bag. I'm glad she brought it. Means I can get my beer, take a walk on the beach, and come back to spend the evening unmolested.

"Oh, dear, before you go?" Her voice has a bit of urgency to it.

"Um, yes?"

"You should come see this. There's a bird out here, in the water. It looks hurt."

"I'm on holiday, Mabel." Let the damn fishes eat the bugger.

"But it's looking at me, George. It wants help. Oh, do come help the poor dear."

I sigh and stomp back out onto the deck to peer over the edge.

"It's just a ruddy sandpiper, Mabel. They're *supposed* to be food for something else. Let it serve its purpose in life." As I turn, though, something stops me. "Hang on." The words fall from my mouth unbidden as my professional mind jolts from its holiday coma.

I look back at the bird. Remove my sunglasses. Peer down at it and squint against the sun's dazzling glitter rolling on the water. "Can't be."

"Can't be what? George? Can't be what?"

"Help me get it," I say. "Here, sit on my legs." I lie on my stomach on the deck and lean out as far over the water as I dare. Mabel's bulk settles onto my ankles and anchors me like shackles in concrete. I reach down and whisper sweet nothings to the bird, luring it closer.

I grasp it, pull it up.

My heart races. "It is. Dear God, I think it is." I'll have to go look it up, though. I need an Internet connection to be sure.

"Is what? George, what is it?"

I stand up and hold the bird in trembling hands, feel its quivering heartbeat.

"Extinct," I whisper.

"What? Of course it's not extinct. You just said it's a ruddy sandpiper."

"No, no. A Tahitian Sandpiper. Extinct for 200 years. Or, thought to be so, anyway." I turn it over in my hands. It's got an injured wing, but I believe I could mend it. "Mabel, do you know what this means?"

Her glassy stare is all the answer I need, but she says anyway, "Our holiday is

ruined? It's a working affair after all?"

"Oh, Mabel, don't be so dour." But she's right. This is all the excuse I really need to keep her at bay the rest of the week. I almost can't hide my glee. "It means publication. It means grant money. It means, in short, that this holiday has just paid for itself."

She seems unimpressed, but I've got work to do. I rush the bird inside, grab a hand towel and make it a cozy nest. I set the bird gently on the dressing table, and it seems content.

"It's hurt. I need to do some research on the Internet at the check-in. Oh! To be credited with finding a specimen like this!" I grab a wide-brimmed hat and shove it down upon my head, slip my feet into flip-flops and exit quickly.

I hurry down the long, wooden pier between the rows of huts, heading for shore. It will be magical, later, to fall asleep to the sound of the waves rolling underneath us. Most of the huts appear empty. Everyone must be at the beach, or parasailing or whatever it is young honeymooners do.

Only a few huts from where I am, the door slaps open. A young man, tanned and unshaven, his sunglasses not quite straight and his black hair mussed, staggers from the hut. A black rollaway suitcase clatters after him. A woman appears in the doorway, her finger pointed with malice at his chest. I can't hear her exact words, but their meaning is not lost on the young man, or on me.

She yanks something from her own hand — ah, a wedding ring — and makes to throw it at him. He cringes — get some backbone, lad, it's only a ring! — but she thinks better of it and clenches it in her hand. Must be worth a fair lot, I suppose.

The man grabs his bag in anger and stomps off toward the check-out. I continue to stroll along, hoping to get a sustained look at the beauty that just threw him to the watery curb. For a moment I consider catching up to the lad and convincing him to go let Mabel slather him with sunscreen, but he's already had a bad enough day as it is.

The girl leans on the doorframe, turning the ring over and over in her hand. *My God*. Her golden hair glints with heaven in the sunlight, framing her perfectly smooth, tanned skin. She wears a red bikini which uses only enough cloth to cover exactly those things that the law wants covered, exposing all the curves that want to be revealed.

My eyes soak her up. In years gone by, I'd have had to go into deep breathing to get Mister Floppy to stand down. She sniffs and wipes at her eye, then gasps a little when she notices my approach.

"Is everything all right, Miss?" I know it's the stupidest of questions, but if I don't talk to her she'll scuttle back inside and shut her door. I wouldn't mind watching her walk away, but I'm not ready for that just yet.

She sniffs again, and it's plain to see she's been crying. I've seen Mabel blubbing at her soaps, and it's not a pretty sight. This girl weeps so delicately, with such tragic beauty, that I want only to comfort her.

Almost without realizing I'm doing it, I reach out and take her hands in mine. "There, there, love. I'm sure you're better off without him." Her slender fingers are velvet on my rough skin. She smells of coconut and vanilla.

She looks down at our hands and nods, a teardrop gathering on the tip of her nose, letting go and splashing to the hot wood between our feet. She turns her gaze up to mine and shows me a sad smile.

"Actually, I've known for quite a while." American. California. The southern part. "We came here on our honeymoon three years ago. I thought if we came back, maybe he'd remember how in love we were, and he'd end it." She looks down at the ring rolling slowly in her fingers. "His affair, I mean."

I nod a sage, fatherly nod. There's no way this bird would ever invite me into her nest, but at least I can stay close a few more minutes if I act fatherly.

She laughs a breathy giggle, tears slipping down her cheeks. She looks up at the sky. "I even bought this bathing suit hoping it would make him notice me. And make him forget all about *her*."

My mouth has gone dry, and I keep it shut so I don't cough out words to get me in trouble.

"But who did I see checking into her own little bungalow down the beach this morning?" Her chagrin shows in her sad smile. "You guessed it."

"Ah, no. He didn't."

She nods in reply as more tears splash to the deck.

An idea pops into my head. "Listen, love, you shouldn't be alone right now. I know you must want to just go inside and cry for a while, but what you really need is someone to talk to."

"Oh, you're very kind. But really, I'm all right. I've known for a long time. I mean, I didn't have much hope if I was desperate enough — foolish enough — to try to win him back with a stupid bikini, did I?" She's about to lose it all over again.

"Oh, no, sweetheart. You mustn't think that way. Besides," I say, ignoring the warning bells going off in my head, "any man who doesn't choose this doesn't deserve it." I allow myself the luxury of a visual examination, *cap a pie* with a

return, taking the curves slow and pausing at all the junctions.

When I meet her eyes again, they hold a hint of mischievousness and her smile has lost its sadness. My heart races as I watch her deciding how to react to this dirty old, lecherous father figure holding her hands. Oh, how much I want her to invite me inside, to take off what little she has on ... but how could I? It would be the ruin of my marriage. And for what? We have nothing in common. She could never be with me for longer than a half hour, an hour tops. Then she'd see her error. And I can't face someone feeling the same disgust for me that I pretend to feel for Mabel.

Mabel, for all her baggy skin and thinning hair, has aged better than a man has any right to expect. She has always loved me more than I deserved. And the way my anatomy is failing to respond to this young beauty's touch, I realize I can no longer blame Mabel for my failures.

"But," I stammer, "of course I wouldn't know as I'm married myself." I give her an unconvincing chuckle.

"Yes, I noticed," she says with a playful pout that melts my knees into wobbly, gelatinous nothings.

I drop her hands and fumble for words. "Well, yes, um." I smile at her, unable to hide my titillation. "Actually, I, er, have to get to the check-in and look up some pictures on the Internet, you see, so really I must be going." I can't stand to leave, but I know if I stay here I'll do something truly foolish any moment.

"Pictures on the Internet? My goodness. I didn't take you for that kind of man." She's found the chink in my armor. Or rather, she's found that I have no armor. She's toying with me like a housecat toys with a baby chick it's caught. And I am powerless under her velvety, scrumptious paws.

"No, it's not like that. You see—" I can't tell her about the bird. It has to be secret until I'm sure of my identification. "I just need ... some information. I'm doing research while on holiday. I'm an ornithologist. I study birds."

She nods with a knowing smile, as though she does not believe me.

"No, really. In fact, I have a bird in my hut. We're the last hut, right on the end there. It's hurt, and I think I can help it."

"Really. You haven't even asked my name, and you're already trying to lure me into your bungalow with a story of a hurt baby bird?"

"It's not a baby. It's fully grown. And anyway, I'm not luring you anywhere. My wife is there."

"Karen," she says.

"What? Oh! Lovely. I've always thought Karen a beautiful name. I'm George."



She gives me a flirty wink and says, "King George. With the sexy accent."

No amount of sunscreen would keep the redness out of my face right now. This lovely called me sexy.

*Don't get ahead of yourself, old man. She called your accent sexy. And you've only got that because of thousands of years of history. Not because of anything you've done.*

"Tell you what," I say with a sudden epiphany. "I really do have to go. But I meant it when I said I don't think you should be alone right now. So why don't you come to our bungalow for dinner tonight. Just pop down to the hut and tell Mabel — that's my wife — that I've invited you. I'll pick up some wine. We already were going to cook pasta anyway, and we've got plenty. Not that you eat much, judging from your figure."

"It's true. My friends say I eat like a bird."

"Interesting fact, actually," I say, only partially aware that I've slipped into my professor voice. "Most birds eat half their body weight every single day. So I'm quite sure you don't eat like a bird. Although your body weight is, I must say, remarkably low."

That was a terrible recovery. In fact, not much of a recovery at all. Could I be more transparent? I feel my face flush red again, and I quickly excuse myself and rush away toward the shore.

It's an hour before the Internet terminals come available, and the connection is slow. But by seven o'clock I've got what I need. There's no doubt it's the Tahitian Sandpiper. How it happened to float to my bungalow, I don't know. Why no one else has seen one in two centuries — who cares? The fact is, they haven't. And I am on my way to a top-floor office with a window. Screw Stinson.

Whistling a made-up tune off key, I saunter back down the dock between the huts. I pass Karen's bungalow and note that the lights are off. My heart gives a little leap complete with clicking heels, and my pace quickens.

I arrive and fling open the door, a bag filled with wine and bread in one hand and a folder full of printouts in the other. "Mabel, I'm back. Sorry it took so long. The line for the Internet was bloody long." The scent of something roasting wafts on the warm, ocean breeze.

"Out here, dear. Dinner is ready." Her voice floats in from the deck.

"All right, half a mo, just want to check on the golden bird."

I slip into the bedroom. The bird is gone, but the nest I made from the hand towel remains. "Mabel?" My blood has gone cold, and my head begins throbbing. "Mabel, where's the bird?"

"Do you mean—? Oh," she laughs, "you mean the real bird. Is it not there?"

"No. It's not." I look all over, in the closets and in the tub, under the bed. It is gone. Truly gone.

Scratching my head, I emerge onto the deck. Perhaps she's just playing with me, and she's got the bird out here. The sun is down and twilight glistens on the horizon. But there's no bird in sight.

And no Karen.

"Um, sweetheart," I venture cautiously. "Did a young woman from down the way stop by earlier?"

"Oh, yes, I nearly forgot to mention," Mabel replies. "Oh! How thoughtful of you to get some wine. I'm parched. I'll just go open this, shall I?"

"I hope you don't mind, I invited her for spaghetti."

"Hmm? Oh, change of plans. We're not having spaghetti."

"Oh?" It's all we brought with us, but I suppose Mabel must have gone to the resort's shop and picked up something else while I researched.

"And your friend realized ... well, she was tied up."

Mabel pops back around the corner, two glasses filled with cabernet. She holds one out and takes a long sip from the other. "Ah. Isn't this just the most beautiful place on the planet? Isn't it just romantic? It makes me think of love and how beautiful it is."

I sip the tart wine, a cheap product in a very, very expensive bottle. Perhaps Karen's erstwhile husband had seen the error of his ways and returned to her. Perhaps they're rolling together in the surf right now. Lucky bastard.

"And how fragile," Mabel says.

"Mm? What's that?"

"Love. Fragile. How it can drown in an ocean of little distractions. How the distractions have to be eliminated to keep love strong." She gulps her wine once more. "To keep it alive."

With a sad sigh, I go to the rail of the deck and gaze at the horizon. *Eliminate distractions*. She released the bird back into the wild, I am certain of it. She probably just tossed it off the deck and that was that. But I can find it again. Now that I know it exists, I can find it again.

I look down into the water, the lingering twilight illuminating fish swimming in the crystal clear ocean. My heart stops when I see glassy eyes staring back up at me, wide as if frozen in terror, from six feet below the water's surface. Golden hair floats in a deathly waltz around Karen's face. Her arms are wrapped behind her, and her legs curl up under her. They must be tied with something.

"By the way, dear, I'm going to need to purchase some new control tops. I seem to have, um, dropped mine in the water."

My legs wobble as if the bones were suddenly removed. It's not the extinct bird that Mabel threw off the deck. It's the perfect specimen from down the way. *Oh my God.*

Mabel raises her glass to me after another big swig. "Come, Georgie! Even in this tropical heat, dinner can get cold." She beckons me to a seat, then disappears into the kitchen.

She emerges with a large plate bearing a freshly cooked chicken. Quail? My heart sinks as I realize what it is. What it was.

"Distractions, George. We're on holiday. I won't let work interfere."

She slices off a thin sliver of meat and slips it onto my plate.

"Sometimes, George, extinct really does mean extinct."

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*PETER DUDLEY writes fiction and poetry for people with a twisted sense of humor. Between his first story at nine years old and his 43<sup>rd</sup> birthday, he majored in engineering; co-founded two companies; worked on the B-2 bomber, the first PDA and the first smart phone; married; raised two boys to middle school (so far); wrote four novels; published a handful of short stories and a few poems; coached soccer; raised over \$100 million for charity; and became a scout leader. Today, he lives in California with his wife, two sons and two cats (Alice and Vuvuzela).*

Website: <http://www.peterdudley.com>

Blog: <http://cornerkick.blogspot.com>

## **About the Editor**

Over the years, several of PHOENIX SULLIVAN's short stories have been published under her real name in various pro anthologies and magazines. Marion Zimmer Bradley was her first editor.

Phoenix blogs at <http://phoenixsullivan.blogspot.com/> — a site to help writers hone their queries and synopses, and a place to show off the beasties on her small farm in North Texas.