

# On·Spec

WINTER 1999

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1999 AURORA-WINNER  
Jean-Pierre NORMAND

NEW FICTION BY:  
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Candas Jane DORSEY  
Mary Soon LEE  
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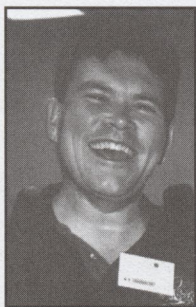


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# On this issue...



## ConSpec '99

—breaking out of the box  
—of ordinary SF conventions

*Edward Willett*

**I**F REGULAR SCIENCE FICTION CONVENTIONS, with their multiple sessions and audience and panel participants skipping from room to room one an hour, are like a series of disjointed conversations that often end just as they are getting interesting, then ConSpec '99, with its single track of programming in a single room, was like a single conversation spread out over three days—and like any other conversation, it built upon itself as time went by, with occasional forays into side-topics.

And a fascinating conversation it was, too, thanks to an impressive collection of guests, including **John Clute**, **Michael Swanwick**, **Nalo Hopkinson**, **Sean Stewart**, **Yves Meynard**, **Candas Jane Dorsey**, **Dave Duncan** and **Peter Watts**, and an equally impressive audience (if I do say so myself), whose questions and comments also added to the enthralling and stimulating discussion.

Throw in book launches for Peter Watts' *Starfish* and the Clute-and-Dorsey-edited *Tesseract's*<sup>o</sup>, plus readings, a hospitality suite and a banquet, and you had the makings of the most enjoyable (and thought-provoking) SF-related events I've ever attended.

"Breaking Out of the Box" was



*Candas Jane Dorsey presenting Nalo Hopkinson with the John W. Campbell Best New Writer Award*

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*photos: Edward Willett  
& Derryll Murphy*



the weekend's stated theme, and a lot of boxes were identified, either explicitly or implicitly, as the symposium flowed from session to session: the boxes writers put around themselves, the boxes put around writers by readers and the marketplace, and the boxes created by definitions, of science fiction in general and Canadian SF in particular.

Books create their own boxes, panelists suggested in the very first session, "Who are writers writing



*John Clute and Candas Jane Dorsey  
(Timothy Anderson in background)*



*Michael Swanwick*

for, anyway?" Although writers begin by writing the kind of book they like to read, eventually the book itself takes over, Sean Stewart suggested. "The book is a pattern that completes itself," he said: it is a box that contains what it must contain, no more and no less.

A good book, said Michael Swanwick, is a box that contains the

truth. Good fiction draws the author out of his or her own box of personal ideology, and forces him or her to write the truth—truth that may actually break the walls of the author's box of belief.

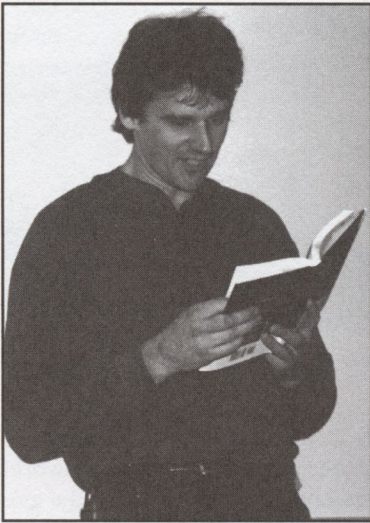
Such books deserve to be noticed and read—but are trapped in a different type of box that prevents that, the box the publishing and reviewing industries puts around SF titles to keep them separate from "literature."

Many ideas were presented to help



*Susan MacGregor, Derryl Murphy, Michael Swanwick and Diane L. Walton*





*Peter Watts reading from Starfish*

break those particular boxes. Nalo Hopkinson felt more and different awards for SF are needed (and by the end of the weekend, a group had been formed to discuss the possibility of establishing a new SF award). Yves Meynard felt that more people are needed who can act as translators and bridges between the anglophone and francophone SF communities. Promoting Canadian SF, Candace Jane Dorsey

noted, is very much like housework: it has to be done over and over again.

Of course, "Canadian SF" is in itself a box, and one whose virtues—or even dimensions—are not universally agreed upon. In one session, Michael Swanwick suggested a definition was unnecessary and probably impossible. In biology, he pointed out, you can't define something until you have a dead "type specimen." SF in general, and



*Derryl Murphy and Sean Stewart*



*Dave Duncan and Edward Willett*

Canadian SF in particular, can't be defined because it is a living, breathing, moving organism. It may be a box, in other words, but it has somewhat amorphous, semi-transparent walls.

Nalo Hopkinson, on the other hand, felt that the "Canadian SF" box was a benefit: that

rather than confining writers, they should be using it as a soapbox. Both she and Swanwick suggested that the best place for writers to start is where they are, with their own culture. "Where you are may not be great," Hopkinson said, "but it's likely interesting!"

In a solo session, Swanwick elaborated on his views of culture in SF—and on the fact that culture, like SF itself, is living, breathing and moving. In the electronically-driven blender the world has become, he said, national cultures are being swallowed up in the global culture. Unfortunately, it tends to be a culture of the lowest common denominator (and not necessarily an American one; at one convention he attended, Swanwick said, Americans said the culture that is developing worldwide can't be a global culture "because it doesn't reflect our values").



*Candas Jane Dorsey, Nalo Hopkinson  
and Yves Meynard*

Americans, but "Canadians, Philadelphians, Scots"—anyone who knows they are not central, Swanwick said. The future of art lies with the people on the edges—the people from outside the box.

Living outside the box of mainstream SF has already produced interesting results in non-English-speaking world, Yves Meynard pointed out in another session. Because the main stream of SF is very much a product of



*Peter Watts, John Clute and Yves Meynard*

In the developing global culture, cultural centers like New York, London, Hollywood are no longer needed, Swanwick said. Art can be made anywhere and delivered anywhere. The future of books, he said, belongs not to publishers, but to "tribes"—common interest groups that will inform each other when there's something that needs reading.

The writers who will have the advantage in the new global culture aren't





*Dave Duncan and Candace Jane Dorsey*

the American publishing world, Meynard said, other nationalities, to be true to themselves, often write against the standard American model of SF.

And what is the “standard model” of SF? That’s something keynote speaker John Clute is searching for, something comparable to the model he has developed for fantasy (elucidated in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*). But even as he

searches to define SF, Clute wonders if all the genres—SF, fantasy and horror—may be coming to an end. Clute believes the world is changing so fast that these genres, which helped us deal with the 20th century, may prove insufficient to help us deal with the 21st. Science fiction, fantasy and horror are increasingly running together, he pointed out. The walls of the boxes are breaking down, and the contents are mixing in the maelstrom of the millennium.

If that’s true, the science fiction, fantasy and horror, Canadian or any other origin, may be on the verge of being transformed into something entirely new and unanticipated.

Perhaps, when ConSpec 2000 rolls around, we’ll get a glimpse of what that something will be.

ConSpec 2000 dates and guests of honor will be announced shortly. Keep an eye on <http://www.compusermarts.ab.ca/clear/conspec.htm>. ❁

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### ABOUT OUR COVER ARTIST

JEAN-PIERRE NORMAND is a professional illustrator who has specialized in science fiction and fantasy for the past 20 years. Over one hundred book and magazine covers featuring his work have been published in Canada and the United States. He generally works in ink and liquid acrylic, applied with brush and air brush; the average size of his originals is 9 x 16 inches. His work has been shown at various conventions and other exhibits, winning several awards, notably the Aurora for artistic achievement in Canada in 1996, 1997, 1998 and 1999. He was published twice in *Spectrum: the best in contemporary fantasy art*, and says, “I am still a big science fiction fan in many of its aspects.” ❁





# Now Entering the Ring

Tanya Huff

illustrated by Ronn Sutton

**K**EVIN CHISOLM STOOD AT THE DOOR TO THE GYM—*No, “training facility,”* he amended—and wished there was someone he could tell about his unexpected good fortune.

Maybe he should have made more of an effort to keep in contact with his family after his parents died, but they’d been so disapproving at the funeral. His Aunt May had gone so far as to say he’d killed his mother in all but physical fact when he’d gone out west after college to become an actor. His mother had always wanted him to become a priest, although, as she wasn’t particularly devout, he wasn’t sure why.

He had nothing against the priesthood; it just wasn’t what he’d wanted. From the moment he’d made his first run for a touchdown in junior high, shoulder pads bouncing under the too-large jersey, and the crowd had risen to its collective feet cheering, he’d known. He wanted the crowd to keep cheering for him. So he’d disappointed his mother and gone to a small midwestern college where he’d be assured of a place on the team. Dreams of being a star runningback had ended when he hadn’t been quite good enough to go pro.

A throwaway credit in theater arts had suggested a new way, and he’d disappointed his mother again.

He wasn’t a bad actor but, although he tried and tried again, he just wasn’t quite good enough to go pro. Death had allowed him to keep that disappointment to himself.

When the elderly woman had first approached him on the street, he’d assumed she was fronting for the porn industry. Too polite to run her down, he’d jogged on the spot and listened to her pitch. Not porn, not this time. Wrestling.

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"They're always looking for blondes," she'd told him. "Big, pretty boys to play the hero. I've seen them come and go for forty years..." Washed-out gray eyes had narrowed. "...and I think you've got that special something."

He'd turned her down, politely, and started to run by.

"I know, I know, you're an actor." Her sigh had been as dramatic as anything he'd ever done. "But I can name three wrestlers off the top of my head who've done movies."

So could he.

The old woman's name was Trixie Hobble...

"Name I was born with, swear to God."

...and she was an agent. Of sorts.

Three weeks later, Kevin found himself under a pile of sweaty midguts in a scrubby arena out in the valley listening to people scream out the name Trixie had given him. It wasn't the feeling he'd been looking for, but it was a start.

Wrestling lost him the few friends he'd made. He didn't understand why, given how popular it was. Okay, maybe the country fair circuit he'd found himself in wasn't all that popular, but everyone knew that it could lead to other things.

In only seven months, it had lead him here.

To this *training facility*.

Third time lucky.

Given the flamboyant image of the sport, the three letters on the door were almost classically subdued. In the wrestling world, this was varsity—not only because of the letters that showed up on every-

thing from jackets to boxers, but because this was as good as it got.

Shifting his gym bag to his left hand, Kevin rubbed a suddenly damp palm against his thigh and pushed open the door.

"ALL RIGHT, KID, LET HIM UP."

Kevin rolled onto his knees and stood, reaching down a helping hand to Washington "The Titan" Jones still lying on the canvas.

"Thanks, man." Massive fingers wrapped around Kevin's wrist. "I gotta say, that was a textbook reverse atomic."

"You all right?"

"Just knocked the breath out me, that's all." The older man clapped Kevin on the shoulder and dragged his towel off the ropes. "I think he's ready, JT. He has the moves down cold."

"I think you're right." Beckoning Kevin out of the ring, the trainer led the way across the gym to a set of metal risers against one wall and climbed to the top. "Can see everything from up here," he said, sitting heavily. "Come on." A three-fingered hand patted the space beside him. "Sit."

Kevin sat.

"You got a knack for this sort of thing, kid. It takes a better athlete than most people'll credit to keep from getting seriously hurt up there, and enough of an actor to keep the whole thing from degenerating into farce." Scanning the wrestlers practicing below, JT sighed. "Although lately, I think we're way over that second line. Even five, six years ago



wrestling still had a little dignity. Now..." Straightening, he waved the end of the sentence away. "Anyhow, Trixie, bless her black heart, has a good eye. You think you're ready for a real fight?"

Kevin had been watching the practice rounds, taking mental notes, but this snapped his head around. "In front of people?"

"I sure as shit hope so." JT scratched at his arm through his sleeve. "Damn patch. Doc never mentioned it'd itch. Crowds make you nervous, kid?"

"No. They make me feel..."

"Stronger?"

"Not exactly." He'd been going to say "whole" but something in JT's face changed his mind.

"Not exactly?"

"I like it when they like me; it gives me a buzz."

"You want a buzz, suck back an espresso. You need approval, you get it from me or you get it from your peers. You can't connect to a wrestling crowd, kid: it's not safe. You have no idea what kind of crap you'd be forced to deal with. Now," he continued before Kevin could speak, "what'll we call you?" A long look brought both eyebrows down. "Too bad we retired Golden Boy."

"My mother wanted me to be a priest. Maybe we could..." He wasn't surprised to see JT shake his head, but he'd needed to make the gesture.

"Forget it, kid. We don't tangle with the church. You think the Mounties got nasty, wait'll you have to deal with a group of pissed-off nuns."

"Nuns?"

"Don't ask."

"Trixie called me her White Knight."

"Yeah? Well, given what we paid her for you, I'm not surprised." A few moments of scratching later, he sighed. "Okay, White Knight it is. It's old fashioned but it'll give the pussies in the office an image to work with plus it might bring in any fans you impressed on the cornfield circuit."

Fans. People who came to see him. Kevin stared out at the half-dozen men practicing mayhem and drew in a deep breath of the warm, sweat-scented air. "Who will I fight? Gargoyle?"

Gargoyle was the only wrestler who practiced in full costume—from the body stocking and the fingerless gloves right down to the fright mask with the double row of little ivory horns arcing back from his brow. He came after the others finished and worked with JT alone. Kevin had stayed to watch one afternoon and, after being pinned by an amazingly penetrating red stare, had been told in no uncertain terms to bugger off. Unlike the rest of the team, who only wore their over-the-top wrestler personae when the cameras were running, Gargoyle wore his all the time.

Kevin got the impression Gargoyle was probably the only wrestler in the entire industry who took it seriously. *This isn't what I do*, he told the world, *this is what I am*. If he fought Gargoyle, people would know who he was. They'd be cheering for him, not the name he'd been

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given.

“Gargoyle?” JT laughed loudly enough that The Axe Man, distracted by the sound, got clotheslined. “Gargoyle’s out of your league kid.”

“For now.”

It was the trainer’s turn to snap his head around. “Yeah,” he said after a moment, “for now.”

Satisfied, Kevin leaned back on his elbows. “I think I remember watching Gargoyle wrestle when I was in public school.”

“Trust me, kid, that was a different Gargoyle.”

Kevin felt his ears burn. “Well, yeah. But you didn’t retire the name.”

“No. That’s a name we never retire.” The trainer sighed and dug at his arm. “There’s always a Gargoyle wrestling somewhere.”

*“NOW ENTERING THE RING, WEIGHING 270 pounds and ready to rip the heart out of his upstart challenger—TITAN!*

*And coming down the aisle, having sworn to make his mark on Titan’s broken body, to take his fight for right to the bad boys of the ring, WHITE KNIGHT!”*

KEVIN DIDN’T REMEMBER MUCH of the fight. Distracted by the noise in the packed arena, he took an elbow in the face a lot harder than was intended and bled all over his new white tights. The crowd loved it. When he finally pinned Titan to the canvas in a prearranged finish, there were as many boos as cheers but the cheers were enough to get under his skin and start the buzz.

Three months later, after JT had vetoed his entering with a drawn sword—“We don’t wanna to give the fans any ideas, kid.”—he was leaping into unfair fights, evening the odds, and just generally being on the side of the good guys. It was hokey as hell but the fans ate it up and he began getting bags of mail.

But he wasn’t any closer to fighting Gargoyle.

“WHY NOT?”

JT pinched off his butt and tossed it in the garbage, shaking another out of the pack in almost the same motion. “Just because you’re the flavor of the month, it don’t mean you’re up to Gargoyle.”

“Yet.”

The pause lasted longer than it took to light the cigarette and draw in the first slow lungful. “Yet,” JT admitted at last. “You might, and I say *might*, have what it takes to make it to the top in this business. If you learn to distance yourself from the crowds.”

“At least I’m not dragging guys out of the audience and shaking them.”

“Ah, that’s just part of Train Wreck’s schtick. Point is, kid, he knows where he stops and they start and I’m not sure you do. I watch you out there and I see how the screaming pumps you up. That buzz you used to get, is it stronger?”

“No.”

“You’d think it would be, wouldn’t you? More screaming, more buzz, but it don’t work like that. The more you get, the more you need to pump you up.”



"I guess if they're pumping me up, that explains why my clothes don't fit anymore," he said with a laugh. When JT didn't answer, he stopped struggling with a knot in his bootlace and turned. The trainer had sucked the cigarette down to the filter and his face was almost as gray as the falling ash. "JT?"

"You're just..." He coughed, tossed the pinched butt away, and began again. "You're just putting on some muscle mass."

"But..."

"Leave it."

Kevin didn't know what he'd said to cause such a reaction, but he left it. Because he hated the thought of carrying JT's anger with him when he went out to the ring, he attempted to change the subject. "Do you think they know?"

Knowing only ever and always referred to one thing.

"Who? Your ever-loving fans? Of course, they know. Well, most of them know when they stop to think about it. Which is why we give them no time to think. They're here for the spectacle; they don't care how real it is. They're here to take all their petty problems and all their unrealized aggression and throw it in the ring with you."

Straightening, Kevin carefully closed his locker door. "I heard someone say on the radio that wrestling makes people more violent."

"People? I don't know about people, but when the fans leave here, they're too goddamned tired for violence. If we don't wring 'em out and hang 'em to dry, we're not doing our jobs. Now then—" He

jumped off the massage table and gestured to the door with the glowing end of his cigarette. "Get out there and do yours."

"Those things'll kill you, you know."

"Not soon enough, kid. Not soon enough."

SPECTACLE.

Except for Gargoyle, they all indulged in it.

Except for Gargoyle, they all did the dumb-ass posturing, the fake feuds, any and everything to whip the fans up into a frenzy.

The fans didn't seem to mind that Gargoyle only walked to the ring, slid under the lower rope, stood, and waited. They'd sit, almost quiet, expectant, until the second wrestler stepped into the ring when, as one, they'd scream preapproval to the fight.

Gargoyle seemed like an empty form until the screams from a thousand mouths filled him. Completed him. Then, massive hunched shoulders came up, lips drew back off a mouthful of crooked teeth, and red contact lenses gleamed as he raked the air with blunt black nails and howled.

Astonishingly, not one fan ever claimed him as a favorite. That puzzled Kevin until he realized that favoritism was transitory and Gargoyle was something more.

Not spectacle.

Symbolism.

Kevin started cutting back on the one, hoping it might lead to the other. He watched all of Gargoyle's fights. On tape if he couldn't be

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there in person. He analyzed every move, began incorporating them into his practices. He no longer only wanted to fight Gargoyle, he wanted what Gargoyle had, a real connection to the fans.

“WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT?!”

“Just something I saw Gargoyle do. You all right, Titan?”

“The name’s Washington.” The older wrestler batted aside the offered hand and stood alone. “Titan’s for the ring.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Good. And when you’re practicing with me, you stick to the script. Your Gargoyle might not care about having his ugly mug smashed into the canvas, but I do.”

He was angry, but more than that, he was afraid. “In fact, you can stop that whole Gargoyle crap right now, you hear? You do your job, you collect your check, and hopefully you retire with both ears still on your head.”

“There’s more to it than that for me.”

Eyes narrowed, Washington searched his face and deflated so completely, it seemed as though someone had let the air out of a blowup doll of a man. “Yeah. I can see that.” He sighed deeply. “Just be careful. You let the crowd in and you can’t never let it out again.”

“I just want to be the best.”

“No, you don’t. The best learn to keep their distance. The very best learn to do it before too much damage is done.”

“Gargoyle doesn’t keep his distance.”

“You’re making my point,” Washington told him sadly and never got in the ring with him again.

GARGOYLE DIED ON NATIONAL television as part of a Saturday afternoon network sports program with millions watching. The millions didn’t know he was dead, of course. They saw him raise both hands in triumph after winning his bout, saw him open his mouth to give his trademark howl—although the noise from the crowd drowned out any sound he may have made—and then they saw him collapse. He was dead before he hit the canvas, but the network kept him cheerfully alive and recovering at an undisclosed location for the sake of their younger viewers.

To Kevin, who’d been watching in the dressing room, his own match long over, it almost seemed as though Gargoyle had collapsed under an enormous weight.

THE FUNERAL WAS PRIVATE, AND no television cameras meant that only those wrestlers who hadn’t been fast enough to avoid JT attended. Not many of the mourners actually mourned. Gargoyle had no family, no close friends, and, it seemed, no name.

It was a closed coffin, soon to be cremated, so there would be no graveside service.

To Kevin’s surprise, there was a priest.

“Anglican,” JT muttered. “Gargoyle wanted one. Now, shut the fuck up, he’s trying to pray.”



“Almighty God, we commit to you the soul of our dear brother, in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change our vile body that it might be like unto his glorious body whereby he is able to subdue all things unto himself...”

THE PLACE EMPTIED QUICKLY. Too quickly for anyone to notice that Kevin had stayed behind. The coffin sat alone at the front of the big empty room, and as he walked toward it, he tried not to think too hard of what he was about to do.

The lid hadn't been secured.

In case one of the relatives had wanted to say a last farewell.

Lifting the lid, Kevin supposed he was as close to a relative as Gargoyles had.

He'd never understood why people said the dead looked as though they were only sleeping. His mother, her face remarkably unblemished by the accident that had left her both a widow and a corpse, had looked dead. Lifeless. He hadn't known where she was—Heaven, Hell, or going around again—but he'd known, without a doubt, she wasn't there.

Gargoyles, his great bulky body filling every available space inside the extra-large coffin, had been laid to rest in a suit and tie that looked ludicrously out of place. The gnarled hands with their blunt black nails had been crossed demurely over a charcoal pinstripe.

He was wearing his mask.

Kevin, who'd wanted to—needed

to—see the face under the mask, reached out a trembling hand.

When the leather peeled back, the double row of ivory horns remained. So did the protruding brow ridge and the deformed cheekbones. The dead wrestler had looked more human with the mask than without.

After a long moment, Kevin realized he wasn't surprised by what he'd found. He felt more as if he were waiting for something.

“They had to break his legs to fit him into the coffin.” JT's voice was too matter-of-fact to be startling, even while standing over a coffin staring down at a corpse.

“If I pried open an eye?”

“Red. People thought they were contacts.” The trainer snorted. “Well, what else would they think?”

“What was he?”

“He was just a wrestler, kid.”

Studying the deformities, Kevin felt as though he were close enough to understanding to reach out and touch it—but something kept him from making that final move. He had a thousand questions but he very much doubted he'd get the chance to ask more than one.

A thousand questions.

“What was his name?”

Ignoring a half dozen signs thanking him for not smoking, JT shook a cigarette up into his mouth. “Gargoyles.”

“No.” Bracketing tensed shoulders, the seams of his jacket threatened to give way. “His real name.”

JT exhaled, and for a moment, Kevin thought the smoke was the only answer he was going to get.

## 16 Now Entering the Ring

Then, as the older man reached out and closed the coffin, he said, "Michael Hamilton. Now two of us know it. And I don't want you mentioning this to the others."

Staring down at his own reflection in the polished wood, Kevin shrugged. "What would I say?"

WITHOUT GARGOYLE ON THE BILL, the crowds changed. The screams for blood got louder, the ugliness moved front and center. The fights grew more vicious as time and time again the careful choreography fell apart under the onslaught.

Waiting to go on, Kevin stepped aside as The Axeman left the building on a stretcher.

"Is he going to be all right?"

JT shrugged. "Doc wants X-rays—who knows?"

"What happened?"

"Again, who knows? We can go on like this for a while, spreading it out over the entire team, but eventually something's gotta give." He ran a nicotine-stained hand up through thinning hair and sagged against the wall.

Kevin had the feeling he'd been forgotten. "JT?"

When the trainer looked up, his eyes were bloodshot and ringed with shadow. "Something's got to give," he repeated.

"What?"

For a moment, Kevin thought he was actually going to get an answer, but then JT started groping in his pockets for his cigarettes and the moment passed.

"You're up next, kid."



HE KEPT HIS EYES ON THE RING AS he walked to the aisle. Usually he could ignore the way his boots stuck to the concrete, every step pulling free of the mess with a sound like ripping velcro, but tonight it almost seemed as though the floor was actually trying to hold him back. Usually his handlers kept the fans away, but tonight, a woman with breasts almost as pneumatic as his own pecs threw herself at him and stuffed her tongue in past his teeth. She tasted like popcorn. Usually he loved the sound of the crowd calling out for him. Tonight, although he still got the buzz, he heard the threat.

THE MATCH STARTED BADLY AND got worse.

The noise was like another wrestler in the ring. Or another thousand wrestlers, since nothing held the myriad voices together. Nothing completed them.

Driven into an adrenaline frenzy, Train Wreck missed cues and very nearly did some actual damage. For the first time since he started wrestling, Kevin found himself really fighting. The ref, as much of an actor as any of them, suddenly discovered enough good sense to stay out of their way.

One eye had swollen shut and pain, gouging a signal from hand to shoulder, suggested a broken bone. Up against the ropes, twisting frantically to avoid a knee in the groin, Kevin saw only one way out.

Whether the crowd recognized one of Gargoyle's old moves or they just liked the sight of Train



Wreck bleeding face-down on the canvas, Kevin had no idea, but they rose as one and howled.

He could feel the building vibrate.

The roar of approval lifted him onto his feet and turned him to each of the four corners arms spread wide. When Train Wreck dove at him from behind, he skipped nimbly out of the way and laughed at the sight of his enemy sprawled half out of the ring. The crowd laughed with him.

For the first time, he had a *real* connection with the crowd.

They were his.

He was theirs and they poured themselves into him.

He'd never felt so powerful.

So whole.

They told him what to do and he did it.

Anything was possible. The buzz built until it filled his head. It took over his body. It began looking for new territory to conquer.

It all ended in a blazing white light of pain.

HE WOKE UP IN A HOSPITAL BED, but not in a hospital. It still smelled like the gym. And cigarette smoke.

"JT?"

The trainer stepped out of the shadows. "I'm here."

"What happened?"

"What had to happen." He reached up and pulled down a shaving mirror attached to the wall on folding metal brackets.

Kevin stared at the unfamiliar face. Red eyes stared back at him. "I broke some blood vessels."

"No."

A padded mask with a double row of small ivory horns landed on the bed.

Kevin picked it up and turned it around in hands no longer quite his.

"The changes don't happen all at once," JT explained. "I'm not even sure the crowds would notice, but the television cameras might, so I got a series of them to help you look like you're going to."

"Gargoyle rises from the dead?"

JT sighed. "In a manner of speaking, he never really dies."

"Did you always know?"

"That it'd be you? No. Only that it *could* be you."

He could hear the lie. "Why didn't you try and stop me?"

"I told you not to let the crowds in. I heard Washington tell you. Hell, even Trixie told you. You chose."

Trixie. Who'd seen something special in him right from the beginning. "What if I won't?"

"Won't what? Won't go back in the ring? It's up to you. Can you give it up?"

A thousand people screamed his name inside his head. It wasn't enough. He needed...

JT read the answer off his face, nodded once, and turned to leave. At the door he paused, looked back toward the bed, and answered the question Kevin hadn't asked. "The ugliness has to go somewhere, kid."

*"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, HE'S BACK!  
The moment you've been waiting for!  
The moment every other wrestler's been  
dreading! Now in the ring, 282 pounds*

of red-eyed fury, **GARGOYLE!**”

THEY WERE SCREAMING HIS NAME. The only name he had. He straightened massive shoulders and howled. They howled with him.

“We want blood!”

“Grind him into the canvas!”

“Knee the bastard!”

“Hurt him! Hurt him bad!”

And underneath it all, along the real connection he had with the fans, “*Bless me Father, for I have sinned...*”

He wished he could tell his mother.

She’d have been so proud. ✻

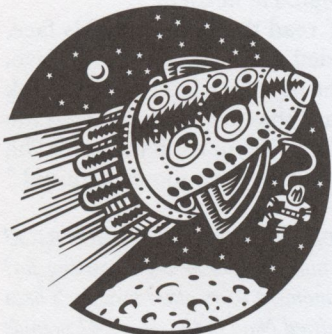
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## Call for Submissions

### *On Spec* Theme issue Spring 2001: "World Beat" Deadline: August 31, 2000

Here at *On Spec*, we take pride in marching (and dancing) to the beat of different drummers. And that's what we'd like you, the writers, to do for our 2001 theme issue, "World Beat."

The mainstream literature of North America comes from any number of sources. Yet time and time again, we see the same old fantasy themes, as if they have come from a rigid style book. Most revisit themes from the British Isles, and many try to recreate something that's been done before, e.g. *Lord of the Rings* clones, Arthurian knock-offs, Celtic rehashes. Some reach as far as Europe, rewriting the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Anderson, but it's as if no fantasy exists except in this narrow region, just as no hard SF seems to exist except in the "Americans in Space" realm.

We'd like to see some new mythologies as well—stories don't have to be set at the beginning of time or creation, and they don't have to be from the indigenous perspective alone, either. Settlers, newcomers, people moving from place to place create their own cultures and folklore.

Stories also don't have to be strictly fantasy. Let's see some hard SF or horror or magic realism exploring different cultures.

#### WE'D LIKE TO SEE:

- Fantasy stories that make use of themes the North American audience may not be familiar with: stories from the African experience, the Balkans, the Arctic, the South Pacific, Asia, and so on—and not just from the indigenous perspective.
- Hard science fiction, horror or magic realism stories exploring new mythologies or different cultures.
- SF stories that don't always assume a North American cast of characters.

#### WHAT WE DON'T WANT:

- Rehashed folktales or myths or fairy tales thinly disguised as "original."
- Overly cute "one afternoon with the gods on Olympus" stories.
- Well-known myths told from a different point of view (we really don't want to know that the Minotaur was *not* having a good day).
- SF stories such as "Jason finds the Golden Starship" (well, you know what we mean).
- No "fractured" fairy tales. Ever.

There are rich cultural themes, folklore and myths from every country in the world. Listen to their drums, create your own rhythms, and share them with our readers.

All submissions in standard format, 6000 words max, should be mailed to: *On Spec* "World Beat" issue, Box 4727, Edmonton AB T6E 5G6. ♣







# How Many Angels Can Dance

Candas Jane Dorsey

*illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk*

**I** IT SEEMS THE GOLD SKY IS VERY FLAT TONIGHT. None of the angels are dancing on the sable pinnacles of the city. The metallic glimmer overhead is featureless and low but no one is frightened.

They should be frightened. They should understand the closing fist of the atmosphere and their breath should stop and catch in their terror-constricted throats.

It is easy not to laugh at disaster if its face is showing; all the city sees is a lowering of its normal skies and an absence—if an absence can be seen—of angels. Across the city, several rooms glow with the presence of those glittering wings. The angels gather in shelter, in murmuring apprehensive crowds, to question the motives of their celestium.

## II

“HERE, I’LL SELL YOU WHAT I DON’T NEED.”

“I don’t want it.”

“Forget your silly pride.”

Two urchins in a gutter are exchanging bread for meat. It’s a familiar image and the angels smile on it. The urchins are broken open by a sharp fingernail along a seam and out surges something quite different. A great bundle of hope, fear and rebellion. It is not enough merely to want to be devoured or to devour others. A kindly hand must help you grow. There is a dull reflection from a burnished surface not far above your head. Features shadowed from below, shot with light from above, the faces begin

## 22 How Many Angels Can Dance

to look diabolical, the discarded skins are brittle and drift away in the turgid stirrings of inner city air. Scritz, scritz, they scrape lightly along the pavement. Mechanical rats are grappling for the discarded food. It was the barter that began it all. The sale of commodities.

Now you are cold, hands curling and nose feeling brittle in the wind. The bronze light seems not to warm you at all though the color is warm, warm as the rooms where the angel dancers huddle, fearing day and darkness, retreating into a golden oblivion.

### III

TRYING TO RETREAT AT LEAST INTO some kind of oblivion, if not golden perhaps semiprecious or even basaltic. Obsidian breaks in just such a way, crisp and secure and then suddenly moved and torn. Fall further and further through that tear, into sleep, into cold fact, into bur-nished winter in the black city.

### IV

VERY WELL, WE HAVE THE COLOR of it. Unresponsive, in our hands. Changed our names according to a code that came from counting the dancing angels on those spires. The sky is creaking down, is resting heavily against the city's resistance. Pressure and relentless passion. For advancement.

### V

THE ANGELS ARE COMING DOWN. They are filtering down into the city as they never have before. Every-thing is being driven downward,

even the spires, the pinnacles that are sharply digging into the flesh from which the city grows, the underpinnings, the tender land, founda-tions pressing deeper than they were ever meant to grow. And down from the very tops of every-thing stream the angels. They are so beautiful they must be watched. There is too much danger to let them advance.

They are coming down the air, down the walls, down the immacu-late ladders of perception and into the rooms where we used to live. Every piece of the future is split away from us and the pieces blow away. There is dissent in some ar-eas. But what am I to do? Who, un-protected, waits?

I am going down the levels, go-ing into the streets.

### VI

"THERE IS NO ROOM FOR EVERYONE driven down. Unless something is done, some of us must go under-ground."

"I can't go; I'm terrified of en-closed spaces."

Then learn to live in terror of your city, because it is going to be crushed, and crumbling, crush you too.

### VII

"A GUTTER'S A GUTTER IN ANY town. Don't patronize me with flowers and talk of doom. I watched you in your dancing nights. I know where you come from."

It's a noble speech from a peas-ant opera. In fact, though, the speaker is *nouveau riche*.



"So I've stolen some of it. Don't I deserve something for the years of effort, holding it up?" Unworthy, but predictable: after all, grace cannot exist without the contrast of a fall from it.

Justifications on the night street.

### VIII

WHAT DOES IT MATTER THE FATE of the street dwellers who go out amid their grasping transactions into the street to look up and watch the entertainment? Do they think the angels perform for them? Do they think they are the justification for the existence of the few bright ones on high? But now when they go out they see only a threat in the sky, a dream of destruction that sends them back into their carapaces at the base of the city.

High in the spires there are lighted rooms where the sound of oversized wings brushing together is all that is heard, the dancers silent except for the crowded inevitable collisions as they turn and hover. They forget the ceiling and their excited wings flutter up, to bend against roofish resistance, and as their motion is punished, they turn their eyes up, remembering what it is they fear more than confinement inside the buildings. The city is trapped. The wings are ungainly when angels are not dancing, and clumsy against walls and ceilings and each other. The angels turn their eyes down then, and see nothing to reassure them.

### IX

I'VE BECOME A PART OF THE NIGHT.

It folds around me its fluid warmth then hardens and becomes cold. Cold and stiff and resentful. The giant holding it up for so long has stolen a sliver, enough to keep him rich for life, and the rest of it comes to reclaim the loss. The giant refuses to take up the burden. "What's it to me?" And what's it to me, whether I know the motivations of midnight or not? Too many poems are written as it is. Too many artists are trusted. What's one city in the cosmos, or even in the cosmology, and who has said that I'm the savior? Only another dancer, only another dancing pretty face.

### X

"IT REMAINS RELENTLESS. IT IS coming to get what was stolen."

"What's that to us? Will dancing cure it? Will breaking our wings and heart against it restore safety or merely glorify sacrifice?"

Argument late into the day, and on. Dagger of sleep cuts deep, but the wound is fast healed, and again the ruffled dancers unfurl their doubts.

### XI

BENEATH THEM ONLY A CITY AFTER all, gutters, urchins, all the usual clichés. Only a place of crowded endeavor, only an audience that finds them mysterious and is not friendly despite their art.

Urchins never grow up into angels, so what's the use of them? One or two of the spires are crumbling a little at the bottom. On the street the people are afraid. They don't even speak the same language.

## 24 How Many Angels Can Dance

They only populate the city.

What's an angel without an audience?—that's the question. If you can't win them with bathos, appeal to their self interest. It isn't much of a life, but it's all they've got. Who's the antecedent? Whoever you'd like it to be. There's a pattern of logic somewhere. Someone will get the point.

### XII

UNTIL THERE IS NO POINT THAT IS not a point to the city, strenuously dimpling the invasive bronzing ceiling of the world.

### XIII

THE QUESTION USED TO BE *How many?* Now it has become *How brave?* Bruited about? Hardly, but a subject of conversation.

"How dare you dream me into your automatic writing? These scribbles save no one. Make something that counts! Make it important to rich *and* poor. I'm not a prince, you know."

"You're not a pauper either, anymore, or a fairy tale. You have a lot on your shoulders, that's all."

"Not now: I put that weight behind me. I let it fall. Now I have just got a lot on my mind. The rest is up to you."

"What if we don't want it?"

"Time you took responsibility for yourselves."

This is a rank metaphor for machinery. Its clanks and moans are useless. The flywheel spins freely—the propulsion arm has snapped. Enough of this technical talk. Don't

you have enough clues to understand what must be done?

Who can take the place of the city's symbols of freedom? Who can dream of intervention?

It's all according to regulations.

### XIV

KEEPING SECRETS FROM THE SKY. It will learn the weak spots of the city, of the angels. Too much to lose. Their dancing evasions.

"Someday I will intersperse your stories with another story. I will find a story strong enough to support the dance of angels, and make of it a tower of shadow."

And dancing dangerously close to definitions, self-indulgent almost to the end, the angels continue.

### XV

PERHAPS THEY LOOK BRAVE because they still have the strength to spread their great wings, even though they have not the space in the rooms they have invaded for refuge. But they are tired, very tired. They want to climb back to their dancing places on the roof of the world, and be renewed.

Finally, to do so is more important than safety; finally, to rise again is all they can safely do.

### XVI

SO WHAT IS IT THAT IMPELS THESE lonely bodies to drive themselves like wedges between the golden night and the black city's brilliance? The inspiration of a crushed dream, soft and subtle motion inside sleep.



## XVII

THEY COME TREMBLING OUT OF the rooms of the city and into the harsh light. Night dawns on them. On their faces. They can barely climb onto the cruelly-pressed spires below the lowering skies. They reach their graceful arms up and place their tender hands against the golden threat. They trembled at first, but in their unison, their resolution became strong.

Now they spread their wings in unison and beat, beat, beat in chorus. Those powerful strokes, up up and against the power of destruction

## XVIII

and the sky is driven back from the black spires

## XIX

and up and past the flat apex of the city until the reaching fingertips are freed, until, space on their pinnacles restored, the angels turn to dance. They dance not for the audience, nor for the saving of the spires, nor for the obvious reasons.

They dance so they can be counted. They are only a symbol after all, they appear in their turn. They turn again, and dance. ✱

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# The Halfhigh Vexation

Sherry D. Ramsey

*illustrated by Adrian Kleinbergen*

THE DAY I MET THE DESPICABLE SNIPPET started out deceptively well. Nissio had entrusted me with the task of herb-gathering on my own for the first time in the two years since I'd become his apprentice. The morning was gone in a trice, as always when happy work keeps the mind busy.

I was almost ready to head for home when a glimpse of pale green tendrils stopped me. Just to my left an oak tree stretched elegant limbs to the sky, its trunk closely hemmed by a deep bramble thicket. But the curling vine encircling its trunk was what had caught my eye. It looked like Shadowgreen.

I had never seen it before, but its uses were legend. Almost a cure-all, Nissio said, but rare as humble wizards. He had drawn pictures for me, made certain I would know it if ever I saw it, for it was flighty and fickle and grew where it wished. I was certain this was it.

"Whole leaves, cut cleanly from a healthy vine," I muttered, reciting the mantra for collecting Shadowgreen. "Kept in the shade once cut, and not crushed or mauled until dry." It sounded like a tall order, especially considering the depth of the bramble thicket around it, but I was resolved to try. If I came home with usable Shadowgreen, Nissio would teach me another spell for sure, bringing my total to three. It was worth any number of scratches.

I gauged the best place to try my reach, laid a waiting pouch atop the brambles, and hitched my skirts around my knees. Silver knife in hand, I inched into the brambles as far as I dared, then carefully leaned...leaned...leaned—

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*Splunk!* Something small and hard thwacked into my nether end with a stinging blow. I screamed, jumped, overbalanced, felt the sting of brambles, grabbed for a handhold and found only the Shadowgreen, and tumbled sprawling into the thicket, tearing the tender vine from its place.

Laughter echoed through the meadow. High-pitched, gleeful, uncontrolled laughter.

I swore aloud as I ever-so-carefully began to extricate myself from the wicked thorns. The Shadowgreen was a ruin, leaves wilting with terrible swiftness, and I left it where it lay as I inched out of the thicket.

The hooting behind me subsided, but no one approached. I backed away from the thorns, arms and legs and face scratched and stinging, and saw the smooth, rounded slingstone that had felled me and my dignity. I spun to face my tormentor.

There was no one there.

Not a whisper of movement stirred the meadow grasses, not a branch swayed in the nearby wood. Not the ghost of a chuckle lingered in the air.

Cursing, I retrieved my things and started home, sparing not another glance for the wrecked Shadowgreen. But I was on the alert. I called to mind the words of “Tempergast’s Frightful Apparition,” one of the spells Nissio had finally taught me. It was used to scare away enemies, by making the caster appear to be something the enemy feared and would flee from. Sounds powerful, but it has its limitations. Works best in an ill-lit room

or a shadowy forest, with surprise on your side. But it was worth a try, if anything threatened.

A few hundred feet down the path I rounded a bend and met my first halfhigh. He was seated comfortably on the weathered stump of a long-gone tree, short legs crossed, ostensibly cleaning his fingernails. A bulging pack leaned against the stump. He looked up at my approach, brown hair curling boyishly over his forehead, and greeted me solemnly.

“Good day, mistress. Blessed bark and berries, you seem to have had an accident!”

Now, I had heard about halfhighs. The tallest of them might stand three feet, and their perpetually young features were generally charming and sweet. But their reputation for mischief, devilry, and downright meanness was well-known. There was a jest that went; “What do you call a group of halfhighs? A vexation. And how many halfhighs does it take to make a vexation? One.” Wise folk gave them a wide berth and a polite smile.

I smiled politely. “Good day, sir, and thank you for your concern. But I’ve only met with a minor misfortune, and am quite well.” I slowed my pace but kept walking as I spoke, thinking it best to keep the encounter brief. Suspicion was niggling at me that this was the very creature responsible for my “accident,” but I knew better than to accuse him.

“But perhaps there is something I can do to assist. Eldazar Snippet, at your service.” He hopped down



from the stump and bowed. He was perhaps an inch or two shy of three feet tall, and impeccably dressed in an apple-green doublet and brown hose. "Some pouches I could carry?"

I kept walking, turning as I passed so that I still faced him. "Thank you, thank you, no. I shall be fine, and am almost home." My face was beginning to ache from the mock smile I grimly held to. "Good day to you, Master Snippet."

And I turned my back, keeping my pace deliberately casual and holding my breath. The attentions of a halfhigh I definitely did not want to attract.

"Well, as you wish, mistress," I heard him call after me. "I only wished to help." And then, almost as an afterthought, he added, "Perhaps a sore bottom has given you a sore head!" And broke into helpless laughter.

Laughter I recognized.

I rounded on the little man, and my careful speech went by the way-side. "You!" I hissed. "Do you know, sirrah, that your little prank cost me and my master a very valuable herb?"

He laughed harder, doubled over.

"And do you know," I continued heedlessly, "that my master is Nissio the Ponderous, a wizard of great power and puissance, and that I am his apprentice, and a wizardess in my own right?"

I was glaring daggers at the little fellow now, who leaned helplessly against the stump upon which he had sat, wiping tears from his eyes and gasping for breath.

"Do you think it is wise," I asked in what I hoped was a withering voice, "to make enemies of powerful people?"

Something in my tone must have gotten through to him, for he finally stopped laughing, pushed himself upright, drew a deep breath and looked up at me.

"Do you know," he said solemnly, "that the scratches on your face make you look like an ill-sewn rag doll?" And he was off in a bubbling fit of laughter again.

I turned on my heel and stalked off for home.

Of course he followed me.

HE SHOWED UP AT THE DOOR OF the cottage that night, begging supper. I would have sent him away with a flea in his ear, but Nissio would have none of that. Nissio had a soft spot for strays and underdogs, for all he liked to play the gruff old curmudgeon. So Master Snippet was welcome at the table and I could do nothing about it. I slopped a bowl of hot stew in front of him with bad grace, and he thanked me politely. I was boiling hotter than the stew when I sat down.

"I met your lovely apprentice this afternoon," Snippet said conversationally to Nissio, "But I did not catch her name."

I could feel Nissio's eyes on me. "Albetra," I mumbled shortly.

"Just Albetra? I understood you were a wizardess, mistress, and so expected an honorific as well."

Nissio chuckled. "Well, now, Snippet, she's on her way in the magic arts, to be sure, but I don't know that two spells really qualify

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her as a wizardess. I think she's happy to be just Albetra for now. Wouldn't you agree, my girl?"

*Gods.* I forced a smile and nodded weakly. The halfhigh's grin came close to splitting his face. He wasn't through yet, though.

"The stew is most savory, Mistress Albetra. You must have gathered some extraordinary herbs this afternoon." He wasn't looking at me, but he emanated malicious enjoyment.

"Thank you. I did."

Nissio frowned at my rudeness, and changed the subject. A little later, the halfhigh turned to me solicitously.

"You seem discomforted, Mistress. Perhaps I could fetch you a pillow?" He had the audacity to wink at me.

I got up without a word and began noisily tidying away the supper, not caring by this time what Nissio thought. Snippet asked if he might have lodgings for the night, and Nissio graciously offered him the tiny loft in the animals' shed. I felt my face begin to burn. I know, I know; it was only the shed, but in many respects it was in better repair than Nissio's ramshackle cottage.

Nissio took the halfhigh out to show him the loft while I finished in the kitchen, and then we all retired. I still don't know how he did it, but there was a frog and a handful of ants in my bed when I went to get in it.

I hated that halfhigh.

NATURALLY, SNIPPET DIDN'T LEAVE the next morning, nor the next, nor the next. He made himself useful

for Nissio, fetching and carrying and amusing him with tales, and spent his free time thinking of ways to torture me. He had a lot of free time.

He left things in my bed every night, and I never failed to check it carefully before getting in. He broke things, and lost things, and stole things, and managed to get me blamed for them. He took credit for chores I had done. And he played pranks on me with merciless endurance.

I appealed once to Nissio, but of course he had to turn it into a lesson. He barely even looked up from stirring a foul-smelling concoction and said, "He's found a weakness in you, girl. It's up to you to change that or find one in him."

The pranks culminated one day when I was to make the journey into town for supplies. I had looked forward to this trip, because my new "wizardess" robe was complete and I hadn't yet had a chance to wear it. It was dove-grey, with a robin's egg border at the hem, and I had spent weeks working arcane symbols across the border in costly silver thread. It had lain hidden since the onslaught of Snippet, as I feared he would find it and do something terrible. But the chance to wear it in public for the first time was too tempting. I put it on, resolving that the loathsome Snippet would not spoil this day for me. Then I waited until the halfhigh was closeted with Nissio and made my escape in the rickety cart that Nissio has the nerve to call a wagon.

I pushed poor Benna, the mule, a little harder than I should have on



the drive into town, but I was filled with such fear that Snippet would follow me that I couldn't help myself. When we finally arrived, my neck was weary from looking over my shoulder and Benna was lathered. I tied her near the water trough, smoothed out my new dress and composed myself, and began to make the rounds of the merchants.

My list was almost complete and I had begun to relax when it happened. I had left the herbalist's quarter and was heading back into the main market square when I heard my name called, in a voice that filled me with dread. Snippet. But even as I whirled around, searching for the horrible halfhigh, I realized that he had not called *to* me. He was speaking *about* me.

"Newest wizardess in Teleria! Albetra the Outlandish will magic away your troubles with her vast knowledge of arcane lore! And for only pennies a spell! Don't be overcharged by high-priced wizards and crank magicians!"

It was nightmarish. He had set up a little booth with crudely painted stars and moons scattered slapdash all over. He was actually taking names and accepting people's coin. Then he spotted me, probably because my face was burning hot enough to ignite my parchment list. He climbed up on his stool and sang a terrible little song.

*Her powers are mysterious,  
Her moonface is so serious,  
Her fees make you delirious,  
Albetra!*

*She'll cure you when you aren't*

*well,  
She'll take away that awful  
smell,  
You'll pay a pittance for each  
spell,  
Albetra!*

For a seeming eternity I stood paralyzed while he sang and pointed me out to passers-by. I was horribly aware of muffled sniggers and averted eyes, and some outright laughter at my expense. My new dress hung about me as though I were draped in rags. When the paralysis began to wear off, I still couldn't move right away. I was fighting back tears.

And then an amazing thing happened. A woman strolled out of the crowd and over to Snippet. She was unremarkable, clad in a russet daygown, her brown hair coiled neatly at the nape of her neck. She stopped a few feet from the halfhigh.

"Well, aren't you the sweetest little mannie," she drawled in a voice like honeyed cream. "I'd like to take you home...for my cat to play with." She reached out as if to stroke the halfhigh's cheek.

With a shriek that clove through the market bustle like a knight's sword through silk, Snippet hurled himself away from the woman's outstretched hand. He tumbled from his stool and pitched headlong into the dirt, but didn't even hesitate to catch his breath. Scrambling to his feet, he lurched into his booth and then was off like a scalded hare, not glancing back even as the booth collapsed with a crash.

My savior chuckled and nodded,

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and began to walk away. I found my legs and ran after her.

"Please," I begged, and I couldn't keep the tremble out of my voice, "please, please, how did you *do* that?"

She smiled and put an arm around my shoulders. "You must be Albetra," she said kindly. "My name is Blinnet. Come along and we'll have a little chat about half-highs, shall we?"

"IT ISN'T ANYTHING I CAN TEACH you, I'm afraid," Blinnet warned, offering me a steaming cup of spearmint tea. We were settled in the kitchen of her cottage, a clean, sturdy and welcome change from Nissio's tumbledown home.

I know my face showed my chagrin, because she reached over and patted my hand. "But there is hope, especially for someone in your position.

"When I was a child, barely out of swaddling, my mother was pestered by a halfhigh. He tormented her mercilessly and paid scant attention to my father's threats. Papa always said halfhighs are the only vermin we're not allowed to poison." She chuckled and shook her head. "Mam finally had enough, saved her egg money for three months and went to a wizard. She paid him to cast an aversion spell on the whole family, so that our presence would be repulsive to that particular halfhigh."

Blinnet passed me a plate of delicate teacakes and continued. "The spell went a bit awry. Since then we've been repulsive to *all* half-highs. That's what happened to

little Master Snippet today." She grinned. "Not a bad miscast, in this case. I've never found cause to regret it."

"Blinnet," I declared, "I would give just about anything right now to be repulsive to halfhighs."

I slumped back in my chair. "But it doesn't help me, I'm afraid. An aversion spell is far out of my reach yet, and I know Nissio won't do it for me. He says I have to find my own way to deal with Snippet."

"Could you do what my mam did, save up your money and go to another wizard?"

"I'll be driven mad before I save enough, considering what Nissio gives me to spend," I said. "And he'd be sure to find out I went behind his back. No, I'll have to think of something else."

"If I can help at all, let me know," Blinnet offered.

"Thank you, and thanks for the tea." She hugged me before I left and I felt marginally better. At least I had someone on my side. Now all I needed was a plan.

That night my bed was filled with cold, congealed porridge. I needed a plan *fast*.

THE NEXT MORNING I PLEADED A headache and stayed in my room to think. I ran through my entire repertoire of magic, which unfortunately did not take long. I knew several dozen small talents, the first spells an apprentice learns, but they were for household tasks; sewing, lighting candles and suchlike. Could I twist one in some way to use against Snippet? Not with any result beyond antagonizing him



further, I decided.

The two real spells I knew were no help, either. "Tempergast's Frightful Apparition" might give the halfhigh a scare, but it wouldn't send him packing permanently. My other spell was for the creation of a love philtre. I had beaten Nissio at cards one winter evening and won from him the promise that he'd teach me the formula for the next potion a customer requested. I'd been disappointed that it was a love philtre, but a spell was a spell, and Nissio had kept his word. Right now, however, it helped me not at all.

I gave up and emerged from my room in time to fix lunch. Snippet, I discovered, had spent the morning coating all the cookpots with soot, and I had to wash every one before I could begin to prepare anything to eat. Nissio grumbled about the delay, and unfairly decided that, as punishment, I would have to make some deliveries for him on foot that afternoon. He was taking Benna and the wagon into town.

I wasn't fifteen minutes away from the cottage when I knew that Snippet was following me. I'd hoped he might go into town with Nissio, but the temptation to torture me must have been too great for him. And something in me finally snapped when I sensed his despised presence behind me. It was time to try and fight back.

I watched my chance and ducked off the path just beyond a bend and out of Snippet's sight, and concealed myself as best I could in the underbrush. Then I called the words of "Tempergast's Frightful

Apparition" to mind and waited.

A moment later Snippet crept into view, peering ahead to try and spot me. He was carrying an unstoppered vial, which I was certain contained something foul-smelling and vile, destined for my hair or the back of my gown. Without hesitation I whispered the words of the spell and let the invisible force flow out and envelop the halfhigh.

The conditions were perfect. In the dappled light of the forest, I should make a very believable apparition of Snippet's worst fear. Taking a deep breath, I emerged from my hiding-place and confronted the halfhigh.

The result was gratifying. Snippet's eyes widened and he dropped the vial. Some of the contents splashed up his trousers, but he didn't notice. He took a step backward.

"Wha-what are you doing here?" he squeaked.

With no reflecting medium at hand, I had no idea what I looked like to him, but I ventured a few words.

"Looking for you," I said.

In Blinnet's voice! I heard it as Snippet would hear it, the same mocking drawl she had used to address him that day in town. I quickly pushed my advantage.

"I'd like to get to know you better," I said, taking a step closer. I didn't want to get too close and spoil the illusion, but I was enjoying this. I reached out toward him as Blinnet had done.

Snippet squealed, turned and shot down the path like an elven-

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fledged arrow.

Once he was out of sight, I laughed as I had not laughed in weeks, not since the day I had met the halfhigh. And although I knew it was not a permanent solution, I felt a vast satisfaction at having gotten the upper hand for once. I went on to do Nissio's deliveries with a glad heart, and didn't let myself think about the halfhigh for the rest of the afternoon. I arrived home just in time to start supper.

My bed was covered in raw, freshly shorn wool; ticks, fleas and all. Snippet had apparently recovered from his fright.

At supper he twitted me as usual about my lowly two spells. I was fortunate that he didn't know the details of "Tempergast's Frightful Apparition," or I suspect he would have made the connection with his afternoon's fright. He did, however, know that I could produce a love philtre, and found it endlessly amusing.

"Well, at least you've taught her something useful, if she can't make the grade as a wizardess," he said to Nissio. "She can always brew herself a love philtre and make a rich man fall in love with her."

Nissio chuckled. He seemed to take an exaggerated pleasure in Snippet's baiting of me. I refused to look up.

"It is a *potent* spell, I trust," the halfhigh continued. "Our dear Albettra, although a deft hand in the kitchen, is not overburdened with good looks. Or other ... attributes." He reached over to pat my hand comfortingly. "But with a good hearty spell, anything's

possible, isn't it, dearest? Even you could find a husband."

I snatched my hand away and glared at him, and as I met those taunting brown eyes I suddenly had my plan. I bit my tongue to keep from laughing and kept my glare in place. *Tomorrow*, I was thinking. *Tomorrow we'll see who's laughing.*

I hardly even minded when he put my best shoes in Benna's stall for the night.

NEXT MORNING I ROSE EARLY AND started a brew on my little brazier. Of course Snippet wanted to know what I was doing.

"Keep away from me," I growled at him. "I have a job, if you must know." I added a pinch of powdered herb to the mixture.

"Someone is actually paying you for magic?" He guffawed. "That's a better joke than any I could invent."

"I suppose I should thank you for advertising my existence that day in the market," I said grudgingly. "If it weren't for you I don't suppose I'd have this job."

He swept to the floor in a mocking bow. "Glad to be of service, my dearest girl. And which of your frightfully intricate spells are you concocting?"

"The love philtre," I said. "And I have to make it exceptionally strong, so please leave me alone."

"Exceptionally strong? Are you sure it's not for yourself, then?"

I threw a wet rag at him and he ducked, grinning.

"My customer's name is confidential, of course," I snapped. "And don't think about following me when I go out to deliver it this after-



noon. If you interfere, I shall tell Nissio, and he'll have something to say about it."

He made a show of solemnly crossing his heart, stuck out his tongue and swaggered out the door, whistling. I knew for certain he'd be right behind me when I set out for town.

I made a great show of heading out to deliver my potion, changing into my new gown and taking Benna and the cart. Snippet was conspicuously absent, but I was sure I could sense him right behind me on the road. I made certain Benna didn't go too fast for the halfhigh to keep up.

Once in town, I drove straight to Blinnet's house. She was glad to see me and offered me tea, and I told her my plan. Once she stopped laughing long enough to drink her tea, we had a lovely chat and then I set my plan in motion.

As she let me out, we stood and chatted in the doorway.

"He's there," she whispered after a moment. "He's peeking around Old Haggin's porch."

"Can he see us?" I asked.

"Definitely. He blanched when he saw who you were talking to." From her twitching lips I knew she was trying hard not to laugh out loud.

I very deliberately placed the potion back in my belt pouch, so that Snippet could see me do it. Feigning dejection, I said goodbye to Blinnet and went to fetch Benna. I didn't bother holding her back on the ride home. Let the halfhigh run if he wanted to keep up.

As I dished up supper that night

I said to Nissio, "I hope I didn't make any mistakes with that love philtre today."

Snippet chuckled.

"It can be administered in any food or drink, isn't that right?" I asked.

"Certainly," Nissio answered. "You added the powdered pearl at just the right time, I trust?"

"To make it tasteless. Yes, I know I did that right." I ladled up a heaping bowl of aromatic stew for Snippet and placed it in front of him. "And if it's strong enough, it should be able to overcome a previous enchantment?"

Snippet began to eat, but his shoulders were shaking.

"I would say so," Nissio agreed. "Especially if it were some time since a previous spell had been cast."

Snippet could contain himself no longer. He swallowed down a spoonful of stew and said, "Nissio, she's pulling the wool over your eyes. She's trying to disguise the fact that she failed abysmally in the job she had today."

I tried to look innocent.

"What?"

"Her customer didn't even keep the potion," Snippet said eagerly. "I saw her give it back. So it must have been no good."

I slammed a mug of ale down in front of the halfhigh. "That's not true!" I yelled. "The potion is perfectly good."

Snippet regarded me smugly for a moment, took a long draw from his mug and wiped his mouth deliberately. "Temper, temper, my dear. Then why did she give it back? I tell

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you I saw you put it back in your pouch.”

I sat down across from the half-high and looked him in the eye. I grinned.

“If you must know, she wanted my help in administering it. To the object of her...affection.”

Slowly I reached out and patted Snippet on the cheek.

For a long moment he just stared at me, still smirking, then horrified realization crawled across his face. He looked down at the stew, then at the half-empty mug.

“Nissio,” I said sweetly, “when does a love philtre take effect?”

The wizard was barely keeping a straight face. “The next time...the next time he sees her,” he managed to choke out.

“I hope you don’t mind, Nissio, but I’ve invited a new friend for tea this evening. Blinnet, her name is.”

Snippet leapt to his feet, knocking his chair over. “You—you wouldn’t! You didn’t! You’ve poisoned me!” He was shaking again, but not with

laughter this time.

“Oh, calm down,” I said. “It’s not poison. Just the next time you see Blinnet, you’ll fall hopelessly in love with her.”

“But—but I hate her! I can’t stand to be near her!”

“Well, I *think* I made it strong enough to overcome that,” I said. “We’ll find out soon, I guess. I have no idea what will happen if I didn’t do it right, but we’ll hope for the best.”

He made one last appeal. “Nissio?” It came out in a squeak.

Nissio shook his head. “Nothing I can do against a spell that new. In ten years or so, maybe...”

“Oh dear, do I hear a horse? I hope she’s not early!” I went to the window and peered out.

With one last shriek, Snippet bolted for the door. I had thoughtfully left his pack outside, and I heard him trip over it, swear luridly, then take to his heels again.

I almost felt guilty when I went to bed that night and found it just as I had left it. Almost. ♣

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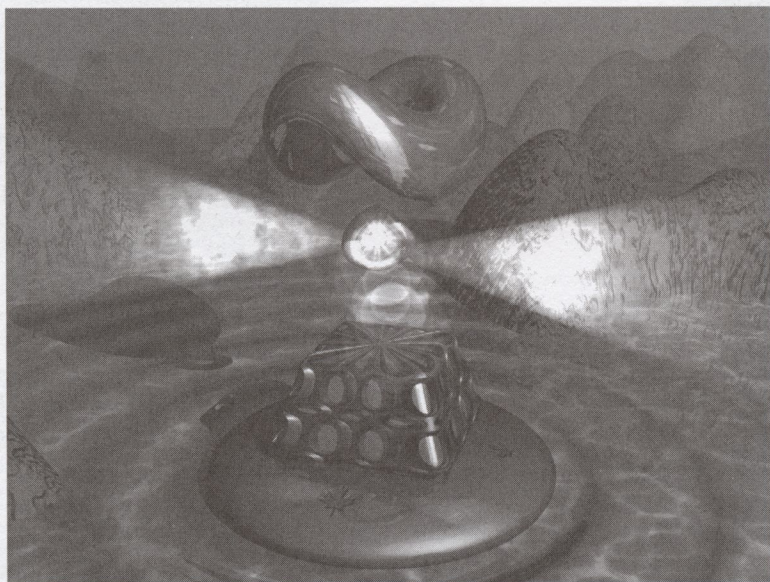
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# The Skeleton Crows

Randy Schroeder

*illustrated by Peter MacDougall*

EVERY DAY AT SIX O'CLOCK, AS THE SUN washed up on the autumn horizon, the employees and patrons of Roarke's Piehouse bid Roarke the Pieman an insincere good evening. Tonight for a week, on occasion of Roarke's annual October holiday.

"That man is an unregenerate scrooge," Notch the Priest muttered. "Hope he doesn't come back this time."

Goody Shivers, who knew all the town gossip, said Roarke was malicious because he was bitter, and bitter because he was lonely, and lonely because he was greedy. Whatever the case, Roarke the pieman was rich. And mean: he thrashed other tearooms right out of business, threw their proprietors into the streets, all with the glee of a child ripping a bug's wings. Almost every cafe or deli the Roarke monopoly seized was boarded over and left to weather and rot, a sinister reminder to the remaining competition. Of which there were two.

Well, one as of today. Thus Roarke's exuberance as he walked the tree-lined pathway to his riverside estate.

"Ah, Roarke," he said to himself, stopping to light a smoke beneath a giant poplar. "How sweet to author the misfortunes of others with impunity."

A crow cackled in the treetops. Roarke smiled. "Yes, my dark friend. You and I are much alike."

He thought of poor Edwig Marquis, scant hours earlier, begging off Roarke's seizure of the Marquis Tea and Cakes.

"Please," Edwig said, kneeling and grasping the lapels of Roarke's coat. "Have you not a hint of sweetness beneath all that bitterness?"

"None for you to taste," Roarke said, without looking down. He wagged a finger at Oscar Grimmins, the banker, and the deal was done.

Roarke smiled again at the memory, butted the cigarette. But under his mirth he was vexed. There was still the matter of Spudnuts, owned by Heinrich Schimmler and his grubby sons. Somehow that place seemed to stay open, with a loyal clientele, despite Roarke's best efforts.

Roarke turned under the giant poplar toward his own cobblestone walk. But wait: where was the walk? And this was supposed to be an apple tree, not a poplar. He quickened his pace, stepped over evening shadows, curling leaves, twists of last light.

In minutes the woods darkened, and still he had not arrived at his estate. He slowed, looked for the apple tree. But not a sniff of apple here, only giant cinnamon sticks, birch and poplar. The smell dizzied him. He stumbled into a gallery of confections, bark swishing spice, cracker leaves crunching underfoot, teabag moon steeping night sky. Some of the light misted his eye. He tripped, fell to his knees.

"Welcome," someone said.

He looked up, and disbelieved entirely what he saw.

Three skeleton crows hunched on a low bough, bones whitened with moonlight.

"I am Hex," said the middle crow. "These are my brothers, Bitter and Darkin. We're here to take you to the other side."

Bitter clacked his beak.

"Other side of what?" Roarke said.

"The river." Hex bobbed, rattling his vertebrae.

Roarke stared out at the muddy river. "What's on the other side?"

"A different fate for everyone," said Hex. "Appropriate to each life. How have you lived, Henry Roarke?"

Roarke felt a swell in his lungs, a pinch in his throat, and all of a sudden he was compulsively telling the truth of his life. "I have cheated many under the guise of legitimate business," he said. "Gouged prices. Scooped up controlling interest. All my advertising is false. I love to trick people..."

"Go on," said Darkin. "Tell us your latest triumph."

"I told the Marquis brothers that—if they took me on as partner—I would double their profits within the year. Which I did." He snickered. "Just didn't tell them that they'd no longer be part of the business. Best lie always contains a hint of truth."

"You are a fiend," Hex said.

"First thing, I threw out all their family recipes." Roarke was rolling now. "My pie fillings contain eighty percent sawdust, ten percent sugar, with the balance composed of guar gum, cottonseed oil, sorbitan tristearate, food colorings number—"

"We get the idea," said Hex.

"Bad man," said Darkin.

Bitter clacked his beak.

Roarke, on his knees, began to sweat against the cool evening air. He gazed out across the river to see what was on the other side, but could make out only a wash of leaf



and bark spattered with twinkles of light.

"Time," Hex said.

"Wait." Roarke stood, brushed the dirt from his trousers. "What awaits me?"

"Whatever transformation you deserve."

"Eternal life?"

Hex cracked a vertebrae. "We find the opposite is more often appropriate."

Roarke fell back to his knees, a tightness in his throat. "I beg you," he said. "I have money, means, influence."

"Filthy rags," Hex said.

"My soul?"

"Overrated."

"Please." Roarke folded his hands. "Please. I'll do whatever it takes."

Hex paused, turned one eye to brother Darkin.

"Well," Darkin said. "You do have particular talents. Perhaps there is one thing."

OVER AT ROARKE'S PIEHOUSE, Mayor Bunkle Teat nipped pie, sipped coffee. Bunkle Teat was losing weight at a good clip; his diet seemed so easy to keep these days.

He grimaced. "What I wouldn't give for a good piece of pie." He looked up at Roarke's logo—"Best Pie You Ever Tasted"—then snorted.

Oscar Grimmins, town banker, nodded. "And a reasonable price. Why, over at—" he stopped. Nobody in Roarke's pocket was going to mention, let alone patronize Spudnuts. Meaning nobody in Roarke's pocket was likely to get a decent piece of pie anytime soon. Meaning

Mayor Bunkle Teat was well on his way to dissatisfied gracility.

"I tell you, Notch is missing nothing here." Teat set down his fork. "Where is Notch, anyway?"

ROARKE STOMPED LOUDLY THROUGH the underbrush, ear tuned for the sound of water.

"Follow the sprinklers," Hex had said. "Find the hidden pumpkins that grow by moonlight, and the granddaddy pumpkin, which you must steal for us. Use all your guile, Henry Roarke, for the scarecrow is subtle yet dangerous."

Ahh, Roarke thought. Here's the pressure point.

"Is the scarecrow your enemy?" he said.

Hex looked at Darkin.

"Hmmm." Darkin cocked his head. "Yes. Our mortal enemy."

"Immortal enemy," Hex added.

Roarke smiled. "Well, then. I have a plan."

Such a plan. A classic manipulation: pit two enemies against each other, sneak gracefully through the middle. All Roarke needed was confirmation of the scarecrow's own malice toward the crows.

"Whatever you do, stay off the path," Hex had said. "Follow the sound of sprinklers."

Sprinklers, Roarke thought. There are no sprinklers at the river bottom. Then he felt spray on his cheeks, heard a *tffff*, *tffff*, *tffff*, water striking metal. He turned west, followed the sound ten paces. But suddenly the sound was east, in his right ear.

"What on God's earth?" He turned east, ten paces, stopped.

Now the sprinklers were behind him. Again he shifted direction, quickening his pace, until the sprinklers tapped from the west again. Then east. North, south, west... He thought he might go mad. Still he was mizzled with droplets, until his black garb clung like wet feathers. He was about to give up when a waterfall of leaves dropped before him, revealing a slice of dark peeled from between trees, and beyond the dark, a clearing thick with pumpkins.

Roarke held his breath and tiptoed through the slice into the garden. The air was instantly charged; his ears tickled and hummed. The pumpkins were brilliant orange, glossy, plumped with corrugations. He laid a hand on one, felt warmth, a pulse of restless green melody. He looked about. All the pumpkins pulsed, as if plugged into some electrical root system.

Roarke's eye roved, then stopped. The garden's center nested a pumpkin so ripe it looked to burst, so glossy it looked to be shined with spit, so alive each furrow grinned. He crept inward, stopped; he could almost feel generations of earth and pulp in his sockets.

"Quite a prize, isn't it?" someone whispered at his ear. "Who comes to my pumpkin patch?"

Roarke started, but seized his composure, mind immediately looped to familiar patterns. Don't answer, he thought. Don't even look. Make him suspicious. Get it out of the way.

"Who comes?" the voice repeated.

Roarke looked up. Feign surprise, he thought. Make it real.

At his shoulder stood a tall man in a stiff black puritan, silvery hair tumbled out to shoulders, long arms curled around a hooked staff.

"Who are you?" Roarke said. "You have a rather frightening demeanor, and must forgive my surprise."

"A fair question. I am the scarecrow. These are my pumpkins."

Roarke lit his face with as much awe, joy and wonder as he could manufacture. "My God." Sink it, Roarke. "I have travelled a great distance to see your pumpkins, sir."

The scarecrow tightened, eyes compressing. "Yes...?"

Careful Roarke. Drop your jaw, wait a beat... Now—"I have endured nasty weather, unfriendly locals." Leaven it with a bit of truth, Roarke. The best kind of lie. "And worst, the malice of crows—"

"Crows?" The scarecrow stiffened.

"Why yes." You've hit the nerve, Roarke. Pinch it. "Are the crows friends of yours?"

"Are they friends of yours?"

"Absolutely not," Roarke said.

The scarecrow nodded, lips pressed.

Pinch a little harder, Roarke. "Three crows, in fact."

"Three." The scarecrow's knuckles whitened on the staff.

Drive it home. "Yes. Three skeleton crows, if you can believe—"

"You lie!" the scarecrow snapped.

"No."

"Where?" The scarecrow raised his staff and jammed it into soft dirt.



"Why, not a mile north of this very place."

The scarecrow looked down, teeth grinding, knuckles a-quake on the staff. "Insolent corvids," he muttered. "I'll crack their little bones."

Be still, Roarke. Let him boil over.

The scarecrow looked up, eyes whorled with dark pixels. "Do you hate these damnèd crows?"

"I do."

"And if they were to...disappear?"

"I would be well pleased."

The scarecrow appraised the pieman. Then nodded. "Stay and guard my pumpkins. I will attend to the jackdaws." He gripped the staff hard enough to crack his knuckles.

Roarke feigned hesitance. "But, sir. I—"

"Guard especially this." The scarecrow lay a hand on the giant pumpkin. "This be the granddaddy. Touch it, feel its secrets."

Roarke stroked the smooth electric skin.

"Priceless," the scarecrow said. "In this pumpkin dwells a bright magic. The magic of time." His voice hushed. "Its flesh can never be consumed, for it renews itself eternally."

My God, Roarke thought. With this pumpkin I could put Spudnuts out of business in a week.

"Guard it well," the scarecrow said.

Ah Roarke, you could trick the devil himself. Play it cool. "But I have not the—"

"Take my staff," said the scarecrow. "It will preserve you against every evil, for it is watchful and sees all things. I will not return till morn-

ing." Then he stepped nimbly over the webbed vines and vanishing in a cascade of leaves.

Roarke laughed. How sweet. He reached down and lifted the granddaddy pumpkin, finding it surprisingly light.

"It wants to be stolen."

He floated across the pumpkin patch, then into the woods and the *tfft, tfft, tfft* of sprinklers. "Stay off the path," Hex had said. "Follow the sprinklers back to our magic circle."

Yes, Roarke thought. To freedom, won through my own devilish talents. Won from crows—

He stopped, gazed at the electrified orange of the pumpkin. Suddenly he could smell nutmeg and cinnamon, taste freshly whipped cream, feel wet pulp and strings of pumpkinflesh scored with seeds.

Magic, he thought. A forever pumpkin. No need for guar gum, sawdust, sorbitan. How I would put that Schimmler and his grubby sons out on the streets, nail that Spudnuts tighter than a black cat's ass. Why not steal this wonder?

He put down the granddaddy and sat on it. Oh, how sweet to stick it to the scarecrow, the crows, and the Schimmlers, all in one elegant stroke. And how easy: the scarecrow and crows would presently be at each other's throats, out of the way, courtesy of Roarke the Beguiler. His blood rushed, flushing his face. His fingertips twitched and tingled.

Yes, he thought. This will be my masterpiece.

He rose and picked up the pumpkin. The sprinklers were west at the moment. He looked east, saw the

path, recognized it as the route to his own estate. He laughed. Roarke, you are getting too good.

A WILD-HAIRED HEINRICH SCHIMMLER burst into Roarke's Piehouse and skidded to a stop in front of the arborite counter. Bunkle Teat and Oscar Grimmins looked up from their roadkill pies, set down saucers of cold coffee.

"Big Autumn sale at Spudnuts," Schimmler said, banging the countertop. "Affordable prices, delectable spices. All home-baked pies, all natural ingredients. A cornucopia of epicurean delights, gentlemen—freshly whipped cream, hand-beaten eggs, delicate meringue, fluffed, peaked and browned—succulent lemon, aromatic apple, exquisite blueberry, pungent pumpkin..."

"Enough," Bunkle Teat said, dropping his fork.

His diet was suddenly in serious jeopardy.

ROARKE CLUTCHED THE STAFF and the granddaddy pumpkin tight. The pumpkin seemed to be getting heavier with each step. Probably just his arms tiring.

"Stay off the path," he mocked the crows. "Follow the sprinklers. Ha! Henry Roarke makes his own luck and his own fortunes."

He saw the lights of his estate between the trees, and smiled, for the damned pumpkin was starting to slip on his fingers. He increased his pace. Schimmler and sons were in for it soon. And Roarke would be the undisputed King of Pies.

Ahead was his castle, with all its

charms: garden stream, two hanging lanterns bobbing in the wind, red alabaster columns, blue parapet. The scene washed slightly as Roarke stumbled forward. He wiped his eyes. The house washed again, colors running like water-paints.

Wind rocked the lanterns. Clouds shredded, dispersed. The house bled all its color to liquid black, squeezed itself thinner, thinner, thinner, each squeeze a loud crack. Then it buckled and collapsed in a spray of dust.

Roarke dropped the pumpkin. "What in the name of..."

But the house was not finished. The rubble began to stack itself skyward, block by block, until it stood tall and thin as a tree. Its skin cracked and furrowed, then snapped out a series of branches hung with bricks. The bricks dropped, turned to leaves, floated earthward.

Roarke was speechless.

One of the lanterns began to drip light into the garden creek. The water gushed, muddied, widened. When all the light had trickled to black, the lantern sneezed. Drops of dark sprayed, changed to feathers, floated.

"Oh," Roarke said. "Oh Lord, no."

"Welcome," said Hex, as the wire turned to a thin birch wand.

Roarke stood tall. "I've brought you the pumpkin."

Hex clucked. "Nice try."

The staff softened in Roarke's fist, wrapped around his arm. A series of little bones cracked out. A



clacking beak.

"Darken has seen all," Hex said.

Roarke stared in horror at the skeleton crow perched on his forearm. Sharp nails pricked his skin.

"Never attempt to trick a crow," Hex said. "Especially a skeleton crow."

"But I—"

"You've dug yourself so much deeper, Roarke. Which pleases us."

Roarke regarded his tricksters. "I don't—"

"You've been set up, fool." Hex bobbed, snapped those tiny vertebrae. "Give a man enough rope."

Roarke slumped. "My fate?"

"Much worse," Hex said. "Much worse. Serious business to try and trick a crow."

"But you tricked me!"

"You're not a crow. Not even close." Hex chortled and clicked his skeleton wings.

Roarke fell to his knees. "Have you not a hint of sweetness beneath all that bitterness?"

"None for you to taste." Hex looked at the second lantern, nodded.

The lantern melted, stretched like taffy to the grass, oozed a grinning scarecrow in a black puritan.

"Now." The scarecrow crystallized, took a step forward. "I am Darkin. These are my brothers, Hex and Bitter. We're here to take you to the other side."



FOR DAYS, GOODY SHIVERS TOLD anyone who would listen how she had seen a tall man deliver an enormous pumpkin to the alley door of Roarke's Piehouse.

"Something strange is afoot," she would say, looming at the arborite counter. "I can smell it."

Mayor Bunkle Teat barely heard. He was deep into an extraordinary piece of pumpkin pie, and his diet was six feet under.

"Gad," Notch the Priest said, mouth full. "With pie this good, Roarke will soon put Spudnuts right out of business."

Oscar Grimmins slurped hot tea and nodded.

Goody Shivers leaned down and sniffed.

"The crust," she said. "Smells like old money."

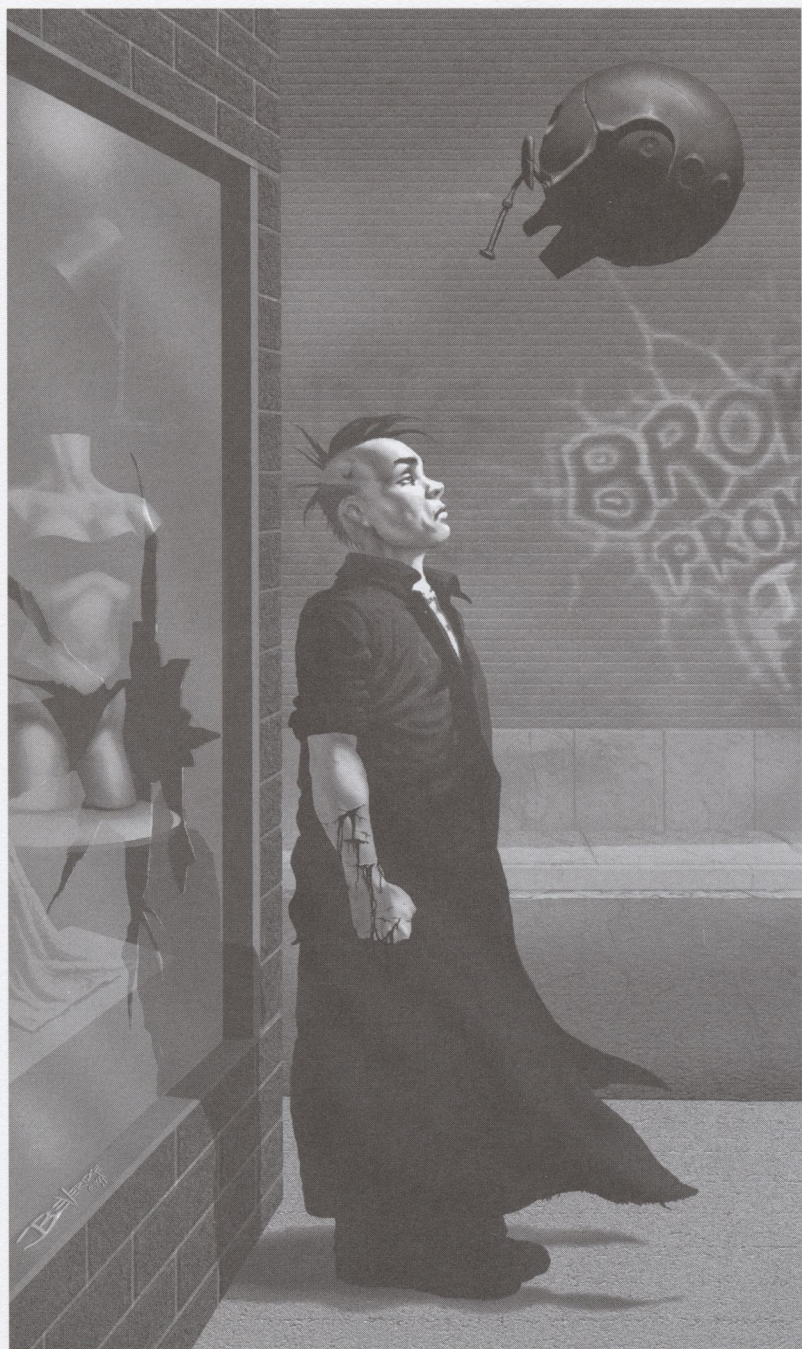
Grimmins gobbled. "Ah well, Shivers. Best chocolate cake is made with sour milk."

Bunkle Teat swallowed and put a finger to his chin.

"You know," he said. "Come to think of it, what makes this pie so good is that under all that sweetness is a hint of...bitterness."

"Yes." Oscar Grimmins paused, pumpkin on tongue. "I do think you're right. Shivers, have a bite."

They commended the absent Roarke on his brilliance, then ordered seconds, in agreement that it was the best pie they had ever tasted, and that Roarke deserved congratulations upon his return. 🍁





# Smashing Windows

Douglas Ivison

*illustrated by James Beveridge*

**P**ULL ON A GLOVE. MAKE SURE IT COVERS MOST of your wrist. Flex your fingers; you want movement. Make sure the glove's not so thick or padded that you can't feel. You're standing in front of a store window; it could be Eaton's, Future Shop, or The Bay. Doesn't matter, but it should be a recognizable tradename. Move directly in the middle of the window. Look around, find the storecamera, make sure it's directed right at you. Make sure it's watching. Smile. With a short, sharp motion drive your fist right through the window. Feel the splinters fly in your hair. Take one last look at the camera. Run.

William sits down at the table, looking gloomy as ever. Strange smirk on his face, but we know it doesn't mean anything much. It's his current facial gesture. We keep telling him that it's time for a change, but he hasn't done anything yet.

"Hey."

"So, where were you last night?" I ask, though I'm pretty sure I already know. "We called."

Rolling up his sleeve, William shows me the scattered scars on his lower right arm. Smiles. Rolls his sleeve back down. Proudly.

"You know, smashing windows. Nothing much."

"Did you get caught?"

"Not yet, obviously. What did you guys do?"

"TV, climbing, drifting...nothing much."

“Oh, well. Yeah.”

He pulls out his cigarette holder. Drops it on the table. He claims it's some sort of Nazi relic, but then everyone claims that. It's all affectation anyway; he doesn't smoke.

“Yeah, you're so cool, Will,” half-heartedly mocks Steven, then stops for lack of interest. Too many times to keep bothering. We can all rerun the dialogue and don't need to waste energy re-enacting it.

The waitress comes over, looking threatening. None of us have ordered yet. I mumble something in French and point at what I want, or at least what I can afford. At the thought of poutine, I start feeling sick, but I always feel that I should order it when I'm here. Like speaking French, it's a gesture toward something, though I'm not sure exactly what.

William's been telling last night's story to those of us who bother to feign interest. “It was like fucking Kristallnacht. I felt so good.” It's not worth quizzing him on the details of his analogies, as William's grasp of history is a little vague. Mostly, he remembers the cool German words, which he recites whenever possible.

Steven used to be bothered by it, but I think he's decided that William's just too stupid to worry about. Plus, they've known each other forever. A certain indifference.

The waitress drops the food on the table. The grease, the cheese, the clumpy brown “sauce”; it's the kind of food that proves you're wrong, that you're not worried about heart attacks, that you don't

think about dying. To clarify: not that you don't think about death; but death as art, as pose, as statement, as cynical career move—rock star death. Not the death where your arm goes numb and you start wishing that you'd cut back on those greasefests a long time before the pain overwhelms and, maybe, you wake up in some emergency somewhere being poked and prodded and stuck with tubes, looking up at the fuzzy faces peering at you as if you're in some alien operating theatre on the mothership. No, this is concentration camp death: a romanticized fetishization of amorality and nihilism, devoid of specific experience, devoid of suffering—a clean, smooth, futurist death. Like William's “Nazi” collection, the thrill of transgression and a denial, or more accurately, an ignorance of the costs. Death is cool. Death is what we all want, until we realize that it's actually going to happen. Death as adolescent fetish; it's there in Steven's vague Jewishness; it's there in William's inarticulate middle-class WASPness. I feel my usual vague superiority to them, though to be truthful, I'm no different in my fetishization of boredom, another adolescent privilege. If my life were a movie, Iggy Pop would be singing about being bored right now. But it's not, so they're playing the usual crap.

The floater interrupts my thoughts and whatever Steven and William were talking about. It hovers over our table, the camera slowly rotating, stopping at each of our faces, sending the image to cop headquarters where the computer



runs it for any matches. As far as we know, none of us are wanted for anything. It's hard to imagine Steve or Will, or me for that matter, putting together the effort to actually do anything seriously criminal, no matter how many things become illegal. I mean, like, possession or vandalism yeah, but they don't have time for that anymore. I remember at one point being angry about the floaters; I think I even sent off a letter to the Solicitor General about them. But after a while, you don't think much about them. Not everyone adjusted. James, who used to hang out with us, won't leave his house, so paranoid is he about them following him. It's sort of sad though, because he's no survivalist polygamist waiting for Jesus to come back so he can fuck his teenaged blonde daughter with a clean conscience—just doing his bit for the Kingdom of Heaven—though there are times when he does think he is the Second Coming, though sadly they're much rarer than they used to be. No, he prefers the Unabomber to the Posse Comitatus. Even then, the Unabomber runs counter to his pacifism, not to mention his dislike of Nature or wilderness and his love of the most popular pop culture. Of course, hiding out at home, he has to do all his banking, etc. from there, which sort of defeats the purpose. I miss James but can't be bothered to visit his little hole.

"Where to?" asks Steven.

I'd tuned out so I'm not sure what he's talking about. "Where?"

"Where to now?" He shrugs and gets up and we follow. The floater's

eyes follow us before it buzzes over to the next table. The red light of the streetcamera is on as we look up at it before we open the door. We huddle in our jackets against the Montréal "cold," not nearly so cold as it used to be but it's sort of a reflex, and start walking.

William mumbles something about kicking in the window of some immigrant flower shop and wanders off. I, or Steven, I'm not sure, mutter "Idiot" and watch him stride through the traffic as if he had half a brain. "God, he's a prick." Still, I yell, "Hey, Will, wait up!" and leave Steven behind.

WE STAND THERE WAITING. WAITING for the storecamera to make its way back to the center of the storefront. All three of us stand there with bricks in our hands. Steven doesn't approve, nor do I for that matter, but he's there anyway, afraid of being left out, afraid of being left to himself. We wait for the camera and when it finally focuses on us, we throw the bricks through the window, Will with enthusiasm and Steve and me sort of half-heartedly. William yells his usual slogan, "Fuck the future!" He thinks it's so clever, forgetting that it comes from some 80s song by Sonic Youth. I briefly get carried by the violence and begin kicking the shit out of one of the mannequins, at the same time trying to cut my hands with the broken glass; nothing better than the sweet exhilaration of self-inflicted wounds. The camera has cycled past and William wants to leave, but I want to stay and cause as much damage as I can. They

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leave and finally I get bored and follow them. The alarm's wailing behind us but we know no one will show up.

William's got his spraypaint out. We take turns spraying BMWs with banal slogans. It's not as much fun as it used to be, now that most cars have a spraypaint-resistant coating so you can just wash off the paint the next morning. The perfection of the act is only there if we pretend that it will stick. The streetcameras are following us, and I stare into the eyes of the ones ahead. We are only a few of the millions of images being processed. Most likely, no one's watching. The thrill, the hope, is that maybe someone is, that our rebellion is being recorded for posterity. The can runs out and we each head home.

I RUN INTO WILLIAM JUST AS THE copter flies over. He pulls a gun out of his pocket and takes a couple of wild shots at it, though I don't think he hit anything. I know nothing about guns; I do have a fully-loaded Uzi kicking around the apartment, mainly because I read in an old article in *Rolling Stone* that back in his heyday, Axl Rose had guns all over his apartment, including an Uzi under the cushions of the couch. It just seemed like a suitably paranoid rock star thing to do. Anyway, I'm on my way to James' place; thinking about him yesterday made me want to see him. Before, we were nearly like one; we'd lived together for years and gone through tons of shit. Plus, I needed to believe in his messianic pretensions again.

For a paranoid, James has no

security. William kicks in the crappy little wooden door before I can ring the doorbell. James freaks and hides behind the couch but after a couple of random nowhere shots by William he stands up and smiles. As usual, his place is stacked full of TVs silently playing news channels, music videos, and some random movies. All the drapes are pulled, as he's afraid of the floaters, and the only light comes from the tvs and the computer screens. That weird loser glow of the lonely male. James tries to search us for bugs, but William motions to kick him so he just sits down.

"So..." James mumbles. Being alone so much, I think he sometimes forgets how to speak, but then again he was always sort of like that.

William proudly pulls out what he claims is an SS knife and motions to me to take it. I don't take it, and neither does James, so Will dejectedly puts it back. Without Steven around, little as he cares, William just doesn't seem to get that much pleasure out of the whole Nazi thing.

"So how goes the fight?" I venture, letting James decide what fight to talk about.

Unfortunately, he decides to tell us: "I've been getting lots of signatures for my petition against X-ray floaters, and I've put together a paper examining the illegal use of floaters, pointing that they run counter to the Charter of Rights, and yet the government failed to reinvoke the notwithstanding clause when it expired last year..."

William, fidgety on grease and caffeine, gets up and sets up a



disposable digicam. Obviously, he's going to act out another of his teenage violence fantasies. He leaves the camera on top of one of the tvs and sets it to shoot every 5 seconds. He slowly moves over to James and kicks him in the knee. James crumbles and falls to the floor while William takes a few desultory shots at his head before losing interest. I imagine kicking the shit out of James, but I much prefer destroying inanimate objects. There's just something, a purity about that kind of destruction, something that's only matched by the controlled, pummelling, cynical, liberating violence of guitars, drum, and bass galloping together. It's not so much the act of violence but the imagining of total release, of rendering everything that creates meaning into pieces. True, beautiful violence is a grayish blur as we speed into the future. It is the feeling of the glass sharply, bloodily penetrating into your hands and face. It's a perfect moment when time briefly stops, when fury erupts into control. But then it's gone, and you're left with the mess.

William, bored, leaves but I decide to hang out with James, flipping channels. I haven't had a TV for ages, and though there're still images everywhere around there's still nothing like being surrounded by dozens of TVs in silence. Well, not real silence, as James as usual has his homemade music whispering all around the room. Music, for James, should be ever-present but unnoticeable, but he's always being frustrated by brief moments when, against his will, the music escapes

its role as aural wallpaper. This is his real quest.

YOU FEEL THE HEROIN-SHIVER OF indifference eat into your soul. You want to destroy, but no one cares if you destroy. You are full of shit, and you know it. But you are the least of God's mistakes—Childish self-indulgent ramblings, but also true as most childlike things are—though you know there are too many gods now.

You break the window with your fist. Pull out spraypaint but can't think of anything to write. You drop the can and pull out your gun, wait for the floater to come by. You hear the drone in the distance and begin to see its red light. You aim and fire. Explosive bullets that will take out anything, anyone. It was just a lucky shot but still you feel pleased with yourself. You smile, reload, prepared for the next wave, pull out the minilauncher. You take out every storefront, the explosive trail of the minimissiles glowing faintly in the underlit night. The wail of alarms, the crunch of collapsing buildings, the heat of exploding fuel tanks. This is as close as you will get to Dresden, to Saigon, to Hiroshima, to Kinshasha. You made them watch this time. The whine of speedcopters, the shriek of laserfire...

I AM ALONE, PRETENDING TO WRITE. The phone rings. No picture, must be James. But it's Steven. "Will's on TV." I turn it on, flip quickly through the junk until somehow I know to stop. It's William smiling, just before the lasers hit. Replayed over and over, from every angle.

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They did the job on this production.  
He finally made it.

"Idiot," Steven mutters.

I nod my agreement. "Talk to  
you later," I say, and hang up.

I don't know how to feel.

I sit down and start writing:

*Walking home through piles  
of rubble & trash—glowing like  
snow or, actually, diamonds in  
the deathlight. Crushing the  
scattered remains of houses &  
cars, of bodies; can't tell the  
dead ones from the live ones.  
"We are all dead"—it sounds  
highschool, and it is, but yet of  
course it's true as well. Before  
the satellite crashed there was  
life here. And there still is—but  
you know it's changed. We  
can't go back, nor do I want to.  
This is a much better world.*

*The future has finally com-  
pletely collapsed into today.*

*The TV eye watched my sul-  
tlenly adolescent wanderings. Si-  
lent—recording, but sending  
pictures where? No doubt being  
stored somewhere—but we know  
no one will ever play the files  
back. The TV eyes make me feel  
safe, though, as if nothing could  
possibly happen to me when I'm  
on TV. See, whatever you might  
think, I do have faith.*

*The night crashed into the  
half-life of day and I was still  
out there. Pretending. Pretend-  
ing that the future still existed.  
This notebook—this notebook is  
past, present, and future. There  
is no distinction for us, or for  
this writing. This story really  
happened, or it is happening, or  
it will happen. \*✦*

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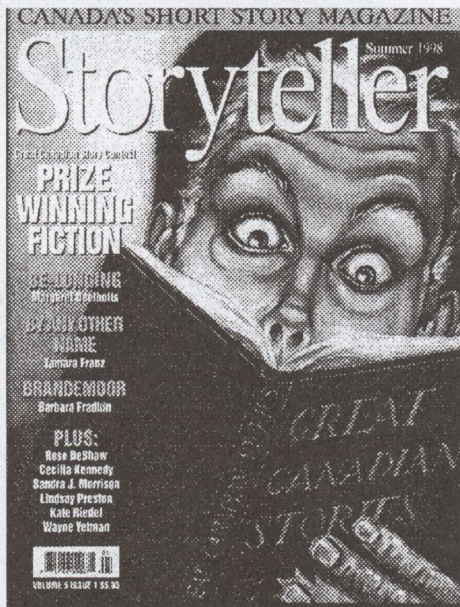
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# Waking Day

Robert H. Beer

*illustrated by Ron Lightburn*

ON THE MORNING OF HER SEVENTH BIRTHDAY, Loryn Covington ran into the kitchen of her parents' immaculate ranch house clutching a thin piece of electronic equipment tightly to her chest. A shred of lilac wrapping paper and tape still clung to one corner.

"Mommy!" she gushed. "See what Daddy gave me for Waking Day?" She waved the PAD happily. Her mother, Darlene, smiled and began to dry her hands.

Loryn stopped short and grew suddenly serious. "Oh, I'm sorry, Mommy. I know it's from you, too. Daddy told me." She hugged her mother's leg tightly. "Thank you."

"I know you'll look after it," her mother said, kneeling down to be on a level with her daughter. "You *are* seven, after all. You can use it for your lessons."

Loryn frowned slightly. "Yes, but—" and here she lowered her voice "—it's also a *diary*. It's very secret. It even has a password."

Loryn's mother laughed lightly, and Loryn skipped out, heading straight for her treehouse. Her father had built it the summer before in the crotch of the old pear tree in the back yard. It was Loryn's hideout—her secret place—yet safely within sight of the kitchen window if she stood up and waved. She set the device down on the floor of red cedar and crinkled her nose prettily. Then she smiled.

She touched a button, and the small screen lit up with the words, "*Input Password?*" Quickly, she typed in "Pokey." That was her cat's name, and surely no one could guess she'd use that for her password. The screen said,

*"Message?"*

Loryn touched the "Yes" key and hesitantly typed her first message. "I love my mommy and daddy. Daddy promised that this summer he will teach me how to ride. I am so lucky. I have six whole months before I have to go to sleep again!"

HER FATHER'S STUDY, LIKE THE rest of the west wing, was usually off-limits to Loryn, but she took a deep breath and knocked timidly on the door. The thick cherry door muffled her father's gruff, "Come," but she marched in and stood on the rug before his desk.

"You wanted to see me, Daddy?" Behind her back, Loryn squeezed her right hand with her left. Had she done something wrong? She'd only been awake for two weeks, and couldn't remember doing anything terrible...

"Yes, Loryn." She saw that her father was holding a printed sheet of paper. "I've just received a letter from the Reproductive Council and, since it affects you, I'd like to read some of it to you. You're, what, eight now?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Well, I think you're old enough to begin to understand. You know how the earth is very crowded?"

Loryn frowned slightly. She always did this when she wanted to look older and more intelligent. "Yes, Daddy. Too many people."

"Right. And you know how this relates to your life?"

Her frown deepened. "You mean how I have to sleep half the year? So things don't get too crowded?"

Her father nodded. He seemed

very grave, so Loryn tried to pay close attention, even though she just wanted to look around her father's keep, find out what things he kept here. "Well, it says: '*...it is with regret that we must conclude that the restrictions presently in place are inadequate. Therefore, you are directed to reduce your child's period of wakefulness from six months to four. Please adjust your schedule so that he or she will be ready for retrieval on September 16...*'"

Father stopped reading and Loryn saw that his eyes looked tired and red. Surely he hadn't been crying? But what did all this mean? She never went to sleep until November. She woke in May, and went to sleep in November. (Just like a bear, Mommy always teased her. Her little bear.) She couldn't go to sleep in September.

Her father was still looking at the letter. "Daddy, I don't sleep in September," Loryn said softly.

"You do now, little one. You do now. But we'll make this the best summer ever." He came around the desk and put a hand gently on her shoulder.

"But Daddy. I'll miss the leaves."

TWO WEEKS AFTER HER ELEVENTH birthday, Loryn made a discovery. Someone had been using her treehouse. Mother was having one of her mood swings, so Loryn had taken her dolls out to play in the unseasonably warm late May sunshine.

This Waking Day had brought more bad news. While she slept, her parents had received word that her period of waking would be re-



duced to three months, starting this summer. Loryn treated the remaining time as a race, trying to fit in more than was humanly possible.

She climbed up the ladder—Daddy had finally fixed the third rung, she saw—and tossed her backpack on the floor. Opening it, she found her favorite Barbie and began straightening her hair. While she brushed, she looked fondly around at the familiar walls with their years of accumulated gouges and nicks. The old fort was starting to show its age. There was the old nail that had ripped her best dress last year. Mother had been so mad, but it had been late in her waking, and Mother hadn't said much. Mother and Father always seemed to get less strict as Sleep Day approached, and she was unlikely to be disciplined, even for something that a few weeks earlier would have resulted in a penalty.

Loryn cocked her head to one side. What was that? Near the floor to one side, there was something carved in the cedar, something that she hadn't noticed before. It was two letters—"D.C."—with a circle around it. The more Loryn looked, the more she was sure she'd never seen it before. The initials hadn't been here last fall.

IT WAS SEVERAL DAYS BEFORE SHE thought about the initials again, but the more she thought about them, the more upset Loryn became. Someone had been in her treehouse, and had defaced it. What if they came back when she was there?

Loryn found her mother in the

greenhouse, misting her ferns. "Mother, is our house safe?" Loryn asked. She wanted to get straight to the point. She found the atmosphere in the greenhouse stifling—how could Mother spend so much time here?

Her mother set her mister down, peeled off her gloves, and turned to face Loryn. "We have the best security system money can buy, Little Bear. Why would you ask that?"

"Well, I found something in my treehouse, and I didn't put it there."

"What sort of something?"

"Well, not really a *something*, if you know what I mean. Someone carved their initials in the wall."

Her mother paled so quickly that, for a moment, Loryn was afraid that her mother was going to faint. What had she said that was so bad? Then a suspicious thought occurred to Loryn. Did her mother know something about those initials? Loryn studied her mother closely; watched as she turned away and picked up her mister again, began to sprinkle the nearest Boston fern—even though it was already so wet that drips were hitting the terra cotta floor, leaving dark stains like specks of blood.

"What..." She made a great show of indifferently brushing a hair off her forehead. "Um, what were the initials?"

"D.C." Loryn replied, watching carefully. Why was her mother playing these games?

"Oh, well, that could be anyone, couldn't it?" her mother said airily. "I'm sure it means nothing, dear." She turned partially away from Loryn, then turned back and flicked

her fingers. "You run along, dear. I'm sure you have some school work to do. And I'll ask your father to have that board changed. No reason for it to be there, upsetting you."

Loryn walked slowly back to her room, frowning. She stopped long enough to grab a pencil and paper, then ran out the back door and climbed the ladder to the treehouse. Carefully, she copied the initials and their surrounding circle, rubbing the pencil over the indents, copying it exactly. She wasn't sure why, but if her father did remove the board, she wanted a record.

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, LORYN'S father left on a short business trip. At eleven, Loryn's picture of what her father did for a living was hazy, but she knew it involved taxes, and he sometimes had to travel, especially to the Caribbean. She didn't care at the moment, in fact was glad he was gone. He had, before he left, arranged for the strangely-altered board to be changed by a carpenter from town. Her mother was in the greenhouse again, hiding among the orchids.

The west wing was quiet and dark, and reminded Loryn as she tiptoed along of a museum, or maybe a crypt. She imagined that it was cold as well, although she thought that was probably unlikely. After a moment's hesitation, she tried the door to her father's study. It was locked.

The hallway continued past Father's study, its maroon carpet runner beckoning, and Loryn stood and stared for a long time. She had

seen an old map of Africa once. In the center was a big blank area. It was inscribed in Latin, which her school PAD had translated as: *Here there be dragons*. That was how she felt about the west wing. It was the unknown but, for some reason, she now had to know what was there.

Suddenly she wondered why she'd never come here before. If her parents were keeping secrets from her, this was where they would be. Of course, she had never been eleven before.

She started ahead.

The first door led only to a linen closet, the second, to a washroom. The third was a nursery, and had the smell of disuse. The air made her sneeze, but she looked from the doorway for a few minutes. Bright paper, full of bears and balloons, covered the walls, but the whole room looked sad, somehow. She closed the door quietly.

The next door was the last. Loryn hesitated in the hallway for a long time, but she knew that she couldn't delay too long. It would be time for dinner soon, and her mother might decide to come looking for her. She had no idea what would happen to her if she was found in the forbidden west wing, but Father would be furious.

She turned the knob and stepped inside, quickly pulling the door shut behind her. The shades were drawn and it was hard to see, so Loryn felt for the light switch. The sudden illumination caused her to blink, and what it revealed made her knees buckle.

It was a bedroom, the same size as her own. But there the similarity



ended. Where hers was a mixture of pastels, a clutter of shelves and nets full of dolls and stuffed bears, this was all browns and blues, packed with dinosaur models and rockets and sports equipment. A boy's room.

But what boy? Maybe her parents had wanted a boy so badly they'd made up a room. She must have been such a disappointment. But that made no sense. When they had agreed to the Reproductive Council's guidelines, they were allowed to choose a boy or a girl. So what was this?

This room didn't have the disused feel of the nursery. There was dust, but the maids obviously cleaned here. Walking further into the room, Loryn saw a teak desk beside the captain's bed. She pulled open a drawer at random, and found something that made her breath catch. It was a personal PAD, the same as her own. Lifting it, she found that the bottom of the drawer was scratched with the letters "D.C." exactly like on the board in the treehouse.

On the back of the PAD was written, "*Property of Derek Covington.*"

"WHAT ARE YOU WRITING, LORYN?" her mother asked her. "Tomorrow is Sleep Day, you know. You should go out and play."

Loryn resisted an urge to hide the PAD, and forced herself to speak calmly. "I will in a few minutes, Mommy." The PAD wasn't hers, but it did look the same. Her mother shouldn't suspect anything. Discovery wasn't the problem; deciding what to write to Derek was.

Derek. Her brother.

WAKING DAY—LORYN COVINGTON'S fifteen birthday—dawned bright and clear, the air with just enough bite to remind of winter past, and just enough of the scents of spring to promise more. The van from the Sleep Center rolled up the winding drive and, before the attendant could get around, the side door slid open. Loryn stepped out, ignored his outstretched hand, and walked stiffly up the walk. Her hips always ached at first, and her lower back, but she'd be damned if she would show weakness in front of the lackey from the clinic. He'd been eyeing her ass all morning.

"Where is everybody?" he asked from the drive, but Loryn ignored him.

The front door was locked, an edifice of cherry which might as well have been granite. Loryn rummaged through her hip pack until she found her key, and opened the door. It swung inward on well-oiled hinges, then snicked closed solidly behind her. No one appeared, and the house was quiet, so she headed toward her room.

*Isn't this a wonderful welcome home?* she thought as she neared the greenhouse door. Sure enough, her mother was there, digging around some plant or other. Loryn stood silently in the doorway until her mother noticed her.

Mother's head whipped up suddenly, then she glared at her watch like it had betrayed her. "Loryn! Already? Shit! What time is it?"

Loryn simply grunted and left. She heard her mother's voice

echoing down the hallway behind her, but tuned her out. “Honey? Little bear? I’m sorry, I just lost track of time...”

There was only one thing she wanted in this house where she lived three months of the year. Only one person she wanted to see here, and it was one she never could. Derek was only here from November to January, but after she’d found his room, she had left him a long, rambling letter of introduction on his PAD. He’d returned the favor the following year, and they’d done it ever since. It was what made coming home bearable—this secret they kept from their parents.

Derek seemed to be a better spy than she was, and always had interesting things to tell her. He also was able to suggest better password systems to protect their messages from prying eyes.

*But I discovered you first, Derek.*

He also seemed to be better with computers than she was, and told her how to encrypt video images. Last fall, she had left her first video for Derek. Today she would see if he had done the same.

Sometimes she wished he was a little less smart. But he was. Loryn turned the lock on her door—something else Derek had suggested—and pulled out her PAD. She turned it over in her hands—it was scored and worn, but still worked well. Sometimes she felt that it was her life preserver, her connection to something more than her bickering parents, her solitary, discontinuous existence. Something that resembled a real life.

A boy’s face appeared on the warming screen. Loryn’s breath caught.

At first she thought that the boy looked nothing like her. But the ears—and, yes, the eyes—looked a little familiar. She imagined that she saw the same haunted look in his eyes that she saw in the mirror.

“Hey, Sis!” said the image. “You looked taller than I expected. You’re only six months older than me, you know.” Loryn stared, transfixed. Derek was more alive now than he had ever been. Letters on a PAD couldn’t compare to seeing him.

“I’ve been busy this winter, as you’ll see.” Derek’s image paused. “Say, what’s this place *look* like in the summer? Think you could send along a few images for me this time?”

LORYN’S MOTHER BACKED AWAY from the fire in Loryn’s eyes until the back of her knees hit a bench, and she crumpled. “What is it, dear?” she asked querulously.

“I’m going to ask you a question,” Loryn said. “And I want an honest answer for once.”

“Why Little Bear, we’ve always—”

“Shut up, Mother. If you can’t be truthful, just shut up.” Loryn kicked a clay pot, sending some spiky thing flying. It felt better than it should have, just seeing the shock in her mother’s eyes.

“What...what do you want to know?” her mother asked quietly.

“Just one thing. Did I have to sleep?”

“I’m not sure what you’re asking. The Council controls such things,



dear.”

Loryn kicked over another pot. This time it didn't feel as good. “You're avoiding the question, Mother. I swear I'll tromp on every plant in this room if you don't tell me the truth. I've been told that when you had me conceived, you only had to sign me up with the Sleep program if you wanted a second child. With your money, you didn't need to make me Sleep. It was your own selfishness, wanting a second child. No one else has a second child. What the hell were you thinking?”

Mother's face was ashen. “Where did you hear that? At the Sleep Center?”

Loryn kept silent. Let her think that. She didn't want her parents to know she knew about Derek. Not yet.

“All right,” her mother said at last. “It's true. We could have had one child, in the normal way, and the Reproductive Council would have approved. But we were greedy; we wanted a boy and a girl. It was stupid really, but we signed the Sleep contract. Six months awake, six months asleep, and we could have our boy. But...but when we saw you, we just didn't want another. We couldn't get out of the contract,” she finished in a rush.

Loryn stood still for a moment, staring in horror. Then she turned stiffly and walked slowly from the

room, her sandals clunking on the tiles. When she reached the hallway, she ran. Away from the lying snake in the greenhouse behind her.

Back in her room, Loryn snatched up the PAD.

“I assume you've asked them,” Derek's image said. “And they probably lied to you. I've coded a copy of the papers I found in Father's study. They'll back me up. But there's one other thing, Sis. You'll like this even less. When you look through the contracts, you'll find a part that talks about the end of the contract. Since the idea was to cut down on population, a Sleeper can't ever have a real life until one of their parents dies. Only then can they be replaced by one of us. Until then, we're stuck Sleeping six months of the year. Oh, wait.” Derek smirked. “It's nine months now, isn't it?”

Loryn sat on her bed, sweating. Her parents were, what? Mid-forties? And they'd live how long? Somehow, she'd always assumed that when she reached the age of majority, she wouldn't have to Sleep anymore. Now what?

Derek's image seemed lost in thought. “That could be an awfully long wait, Sis. I'm not sure I can wait that long to live for real.”

*Neither can I,* Loryn thought. She slowly hit keys on the PAD, typing in a question for Derek.

“*Why wait?*” ❁





# The Fireweed Eldorado

Joe Murphy

*illustrated by James Beveridge*

**A** HELL OF A TIME, I DECIDE, STARING AT MY poor Caddy. Now I'd not only lost a woman, but my wheels as well. Chicks and cars, the two loves of my life, so different, yet so full of delicious possibilities. "Damn it all, damn it to fucking hell!"

My Eldorado had landed in this big patch of what they call fireweed up here in Alaska. Tall, spindly stalks hang motionless, their upper leaves a hot orange, lower ones the scarlet of campfire embers on a cold November night. They glare against the titty pink of my Cadillac, a mish mash of colors so bright my eyes hurt. So thick that I had to crawl out the window, practically swim through the stuff just so I could stand in the mud. Can't even tell if the Caddy's damaged.

Clouds drift over the hill above me, ragged shreds of dirty gray that hang down, hiding a two-lane blacktop the local yokels actually call The Nenana Highway. Two skinny lanes and they think it's a highway; I'm not too shaken to spit. Back in Texas we wouldn't hardly call it a farm-to-market road.

Don't think I can get the car back up an embankment that steep. Fall runs riot around me, the fireweed blazing among the dead grass. Aspen gold covers the ground around bare thickets. Densely packed spruce lie beneath the overcast gray. A *thunk, thunk, thunk* echoes in the distance as someone chops wood.

Most likely that's my best bet. I swipe at the wet spots on my jeans and shake some of the mud from my Tony Lamas. A mossy path seems to lead in the right direction.

"Oh, Jeez." I'm still in the brush when I see her, hair as fiery as the fireweed, spreading out beneath a black beret that she's wearing backwards of all things. Cathy, what a hot-looking piece of sweetness, swinging away

at the pale birch logs. The wood maul's bright yellow handle flashes in the twilight.

What do you do, what do you say, when you run into yesterday's one night stand? Damned if I know; but it's got to be awkward as hell. Just a few hours ago I'd left her in town. Right after a burger at C.J.'s, I told her I was heading on to Anchorage and the rear view mirror saw her standing in the parking lot, fists on those deliciously broad hips, high-heeled boots spread wide. But her eyes, man oh man, hazel shards that had glinted like the wicked points of combat knives.

Ask her for help? Not my style but what else can I do? The pile of split wood is about half the size of my car. Maybe that's how she works off a mad. Me, I just put the pedal to the metal and go like crazy. Time to face up to it; maybe she'll at least let me use the phone.

I push through a mass of head-high spruce into her clearing. Eyes down, she's fixated on a chunk of birch thick as my waist. Whack, but the maul can't split a piece that big and it bounces off.

"Damn." Comes out of her as a sigh, louder in the quiet than it should be.

"Howdy there." My voice cracks like it used to back in Chillicothe when a carload of college girls would roll into Daddy's filling station.

Cathy's eyes jerk up, and the swing she'd just started grinds to a stop. She squints a little in the yellow cone from the floodlight atop her cabin. "Who's out there?" She hefts the maul and stares accusingly in my direction.

"Just me." I pick my way between the mud holes, into the yellow light. "Jimmy C. Throckmorton." Her mouth opens, but I figure best not give her a chance to jump on my butt. "Listen, I'm sorry to bother you but my car and I, we had us a problem with a curve. Ran down the embankment a couple hundred yards from here. Just need to use your phone is all."

For a long time she just stands there, staring at me like I'm crazy or something. Almost a silhouette in the cabin's floodlight, a pretty well-shaped shadow, it'd be fair to say. Her legs, bared by camp shorts, gleam with sweat. My fingers tingle, remembering the smoothness of those heavy breasts just the night before.

"Do I know you?" she asks at last.

"Oh, come on," I mutter, but then louder, "Sure, Cathy, sure you know me. Look, I'm sorry for being here, all right? Sorry things didn't work out. Just let me use the phone to call a wrecker. I'll get out of here then."

"We-ell," she draws the word out, making fun of my accent. Lost most of it in the army. Least ways, more people talk funny in Vietnam than not, specially the locals. But that Texas drawl always comes back to haunt me. "There isn't a phone out here. Sorry."

I glance up toward her cabin roof to see if I can catch her in the lie. Dark, but I can make out the long stalks of fireweed bending down across the eaves, one of those sod roofs they love up here. The flood means she's got power but between the trees and the night, I can't even



find the wiring for that.

"You mean you live out here without a phone?" Fine place for a girl her age, not more than twenty, I figure.

"It's one way of not being bothered." Her grin sparkles in the floodlight although I can't see her eyes.

"Well, whatever you say." I look around but don't see her car. "Don't suppose you'd consider giving me a ride to town?"

"On a mountain bike?" She starts to laugh but never quite does. "I don't think so."

"Mountain bike?" I ask. "That like a Harley or something?"

"Look, I can't help you. There's a house about four miles up the road. I think they have a phone there."

"You just have a bicycle. So what, you ride thirty miles into town every day?"

"It's just ten. And I only go in when I have to."

"Gotta be farther than that."

"Well, it isn't. Now really, I'm sorry I can't help you but I've got too much to do."

So that's how she wants it. Okay, I had her, dumped her, and now she's pissed. But dumped ain't the right word, not really. We'd gone to the picture show. After, I'd driven around Fairbanks with her snuggled against me and things just worked out is all. But not that well, not so much I was ready to stick around. She was harder to leave than a lot of the others; it must have hurt her too. Now it's payback time.

"So which way is this house?"

"Up the path, then to your left."

"Going away from Fairbanks..."

"Yeah, it's the closest one."

"Sorry to have bothered you." I do an about face that would have made old Sergeant Blake bloat up with pride, and start up the path. Can't blame her, I guess. But the ache in my feet, the stiff spasms in my neck where I must have twisted something during the accident, that just plain drug out feeling, it all makes me wish I'd treated her worse. Stupid cow, I think, and feel my way through the night.

I WAKE UP WITH FLAMES BEFORE my face, close enough to burn and my heart jumps. The fireweed swims into focus; slender stalks waving like mad metronomes, the shriveled corpses of purple flowers still clinging to their tips. Curled up in the Caddy's rear seat, I rub the side of my face, a clammy slab of flesh from sleeping against the window. Out in a gray dawn, the wind moans through the spruce and bends old growth trees as if they were mere weeds.

Christ, what's a man got to do to stay on the road these days? I'll meet the day like a man at least, and walk, however far, back to Fairbanks. I can't just sit out here in the boonies forever.

The fireweed is thicker today, or maybe it just seems that way in the wind. Climbing out through the window takes awhile but helps work the stiffness out of my neck. By the time I reach the blacktop the wind has dropped some, enough to hear the steady thunk of Cathy's maul.

I turn back, heading down the path. It's a good day to piss someone off. I got the collar up on my

denim jacket but she's out in front of her cabin, wearing a man's undershirt. Her knotted biceps shine in the grayness. Her hair floats in the breeze, spreading out behind her as she busts another chunk into kindling.

"You're up early!" My shout makes her jump, the maul missing the log so that the head buries itself in the muddy chips surrounding her.

Cathy straightens, leaving the maul stuck. She wipes a hand on her butt and glares at me. She's breathing hard, her breasts pushing against that thin white cotton, nipples like buttons. "What are you doing here?"

"Couldn't find that house you mentioned. Been stuck out here all night." I step closer, until I'm just a maul swing away. "Had to sleep in the car."

"What do you mean you couldn't find it? It's right off the road."

"They had the lights off, I guess. I couldn't see shit."

"So what are you going to do now?"

"Walk in. Try and bum a lift."

Cathy nods and stares down at the wood. Her lips move just the slightest bit. Finally she looks up. "You want some coffee?"

"What I want is a ride."

"All I got is a bike. I told you that."

"What about your Falcon?" I remember now, her parking a car at C.J.'s. A dirty blue sixty-eight; they were good for Fords even with just six cylinders, feisty little things.

Her hand lifts to her cheek as if I'd slapped her. Her flat-mouth determination vanishes as her lips part

slightly. She shakes her head and says, "Come inside."

I follow her in to a single room. A big four-poster bed crowds against a metal desk covered with books and papers. This too-bright flowery print on one wall ought to add a feminine touch but can't quite overcome the black barrel-shaped stove in the center. A yellow bicycle with fat tires and flat handlebars like I've never seen before hangs from the ceiling by two large hooks.

"So this is home." I lean against the door, not wanting to crowd too close.

"Well, it's where the heart is." She grins suddenly. Braces? I slept with a woman who wears braces? How could I miss something like that? I remember the taste of burger in her mouth, an acrid undercurrent of cigarettes—but no braces.

"Coffee's on the stove."

It's hot in here; steam blots the windows between hemp curtains. A drain tray sits by a cluttered sink and the cups at least look clean. Her coffee sucks.

"Is this the car?" Cathy pushes an old Polaroid under my nose. The photo is curled slightly, in black and white.

"Yep, what happened to it?"

"It's not mine."

"So why are you standing by it?" I even remember the dress she's wearing in the picture. A tight black tube kinda skirt, her blouse all scarlet and shiny with puffy sleeves. A black vest matching the skirt shows off that flame-red hair and those knee-high boots—no wonder I hit on her.

"That's my mother," she says so



softly I almost don't catch it. "And the car belonged to her."

"Wait a sec. Your Ma?"

"Yeah." The lines of her face deepen as she studies me. "That photo was taken at a party back in 1977."

The 77 sounds right, but that "back in" drops my gut to the floor. "So you're saying I had a date with your ma?"

"When was this?"

"A couple nights ago. We saw that new *Star Wars* movie."

"Which one?"

"Hell, I don't know. Is there more than one?"

"Where did you see it at?"

"In town, don't recall the name of the place."

"Fairbanks?"

"Yeah."

Cathy turns away. She shoves some books off her desk and they smack the floor. She plunks down on top of the desk and stares at me. "Why don't you sit down?"

"Thanks."

She pushes the desk chair forward with her foot. It hits my shin before I grab the armrest and fumble down into it.

"That picture was taken twenty years ago. Just before she moved out to this place."

"Well, then it must have been you I had the date with?"

"No. Most certainly not. Nothing personal, but I don't even like men with crewcuts."

"You've got a mole on your left breast. Just below the nipple." I'm standing all of a sudden. Fists clenched, face hot, and damn am I pissed at where this is going.

"I don't."

"Prove it."

"In your dreams!" She's up too, standing nose to nose with me. Those eyes, with their combat knife glitter I remember from the rear view mirror. My hand starts up, wanting to rip off that damn undershirt.

"So what are you saying here?" I step back, just out of reach to be sure I can control myself. Ain't never done anything like that to a woman in all my life; I won't start now.

"Look at the calendar." Her head cocks to the right. I glance over at this big iris flower, a Georgia O'Keefe, I believe, but the bold black letters beneath it leave me shaking.

"Nineteen ninety-eight?"

"You say you had a date with my mom, but you don't look over twenty-five."

"I'm twenty-four, just big for my age is all." I reach back, feel the edge of the sink and find myself leaning against it. "Maybe it's not her. I had a date with a woman named Cathy McGill."

"That's my mother's name."

"But I called you Cathy and you answered."

"I'm Kathy. With a K. The only difference between me and mom is a letter."

"This is bullshit. Pure fucking bullshit." Something's in my eyes; I feel like crying. "All I want is a ride, or even a phone. Just need some help getting my car back on the road."

"Where is this car?" She even sounds like her mother, a curious sympathy filling her words.

"'Bout a half mile from here,

down in the brush.”

“That last curve before you get to my turn-off?”

“Yeah it’s a hell of a curve.”

“Pretty steep, too. It’s a wonder you didn’t hurt more than your car.”

“Tell me about it.” I rub at my neck, seems like I can’t hardly turn my head no more. “Now come on, lady. Just let me use the phone.”

“There *is* no fucking phone!” She screams, her arms above her head in an exaggerated shrug. “Never was and never will be!”

“Then I’ll walk!” My fists ball up. One slams down against her sink; dirty dishes jump. Something hits the floor but I’m already out the cabin. Running now, like I used to in Basic Training. Hate running, thought when I bought the Caddy I’d never have to run again. And I’m up on the road before I know it, charging through a mist that gets colder until the gray grows into drizzle. The blacktop vanishes, brightening into a ruddy glare of embers flowing from a hot fire.

Fireweed, and sitting amidst the cold damp flames, my car, the top still up, titty pink fenders peeping through the weeds. A cold rain begins, the thick drops beading up on the freshly waxed hood before sliding into orange red leaves speckled as if with ash.

“What the hell is this?” I tromp them damn weeds, mash ’em flat until it’s so much hot orange pulp and mud. Enough gone so’s I can open the door and fall into the back seat.

She’s just like her mom, Kathy is. She says stuff that gets to you, makes you think she cares, sensible

yet somehow scary. Just got to get away from her and figure things out for myself. Her coffee makes my stomach lurch but I huddle down on the floor and jerk my jacket over my head.

SOMETHING’S WRONG WHEN YOU don’t wake up in the same place where you went to sleep. It leaves the mind empty, thoughts stop when the heart seizes up, and then jerk wildly into gear trying to make sense of things. The possibilities, the explanations open into a blank terror that’s dark as death.

*Thunk. Thunk... Thunk.* Even her timing sounds off. The wall of mist around me bleeds through the twisted little spruce, dripping down on a patch of bloated orange skull caps that must be some kind of mushroom. Might be dawn, might be dusk, jeez, talk about fucked up.

The stunted spruce claw at my jeans and cowboy shirt. Maybe it’s the hiss of contorted little branches against denim that tells her I’ve come back again. Kathy McGill stands watching me. Camp shorts, undershirt, backward beret, and those glinting eyes above flushed cheeks.

“You know,” I say, “you sure do chop a lot of wood.”

“Winter will hit anytime now.” She sinks the maul into a stump and folds her arms, nodding in satisfaction at the head-high pile of split birch.

“Gets pretty cold up here, I guess.”

“Especially when all you’ve got is a wood stove. The snow hides everything, you see, need a lot of wood if you don’t want to freeze.” She looks



up at this big patch of empty gray sky. "Want some coffee?"

"It would be a pleasure, Miss McGill."

Inside her place it's hotter than ever. The wood stove grumbles as a log inside collapses. The upper part of that barrel stove glows cherry red and the coffeepot on top sounds like it's being strangled.

She pours us each a cup and sits cross-legged on her desk, kicking the rolling office chair in my direction with a deft ease. "I hate the winters up here."

"Try spending one in Texas."

"That an invitation?"

There's no way out through the cabin floor, but I study it anyway. "Yeah, we could have some fun. But I didn't really mean it like that."

"I understand." Kathy nods slowly, her eyes on the wood stove. "But it's kind of cool to think about. Maybe the next time you show up we could just pretend. You know? Make up some plans or something."

"I'm not coming back."

Her eyes look up. Her lower lip trembles just the teeniest bit. "I think you will, Jimmy C. Throckmorton. I think the next time I go out to chop wood, you'll be standing in the brush again."

"Lady, you are flat out wrong." I get up and push the chair back towards her. Sucking up a big mouthful of coffee I manage a swallow and plunk the cup down on the counter. "I'm going in to Fairbanks today."

"No."

"Hell, it's only ten miles. You said so yourself."

"True enough."

"Then I'll walk."

"I don't think you will."

I was ready to get angry but something in her voice kept it from happening. She didn't sound mad, spiteful, or anything like that. It was her mother's voice, filled with regret, so I asked: "Why not?"

"Because I can't leave either." Before I can say anything she jumps up, lifts the bike from the rack, and plops it down in front of me so hard it bounces. "Here, take it. Give it a try, you'll end up back here, or at least I did." The edge to her voice is a kind of quiet scream all in itself. She blinks and tears start down her cheeks. "Maybe you'll end up somewhere else and I'll be alone again."

It really sinks in then; my heart drops out of my chest the way the oil pan drops out of an old Chrysler. But I'm no asshole; I'm no coward. Just spreading my hands the tiniest bit is all it takes and she's in my arms, quivering. So soft, so wonderfully good, her warmth fills me up. Don't know how I got to feeling so cold.

"Show me your car," she says at last. "Maybe I can help get it back on the road."

If I could just keep my arms around her forever. I'd never get the Caddy fixed, but perhaps winter wouldn't come. A man could do worse; wish I'd held on to her mother like this. "Maybe that's not such a good idea."

"But I want to help."

"It's too far..."

"No, it isn't. And I won't get a chance after the snow flies." Her eyes take hold of mine with a power I can't refuse. I had her mom, and

wanted her at first—but I never knew either of them, and never really wanted to until now. Maybe that's why Cathy McGill shoved me in the car and told me not to come back until I was ready to stop running.

We walk out hand in hand into a throbbing silence. The game path lies just past her woodpile, marked on either side by those bloated orange mushrooms. Through the twisted baby spruce, the trail so narrow we go single file, hands still clutched together.

It's only as we step into the fireweed, a cold blaze in the grayness that everything goes wrong. Her hand shrinks up inside mine, so quickly when my head turns I'm looking down at a little girl maybe ten or so. Her eyes grow wide, her other hand up to her mouth as she bites down on a knuckle.

Another step and she's smaller still, a toddler's arms clinging now, a child maybe four, long red hair brushing the ground. Her eyes gaze up at me, mute with suffering and betrayal. As I reach to lift her into my arms she dwindles down into a baby, her thin wail shrieking in my ears. Blood on my palms and fingers, a ragged blob of tissue, a fetus lies curled in the center of my hand.

This unformed lump of mucus and blood, red and orange against my skin, hot as fire when it seeps into my flesh. Suddenly I'm falling, toppling down into the fireweed. The Caddy flashes by.

Fireweed blazes up through the tattered cloth top; orange red leaves cluster in piles on the crumpled hood. One great fiery stalk twists

through the rusted floorpan, clinging to the rotting seats and up through the ribcage of a headless skeleton, bones picked white and dripping moisture from the mist. A frozen flash fire, a mirror to the past.

If I could only run back to her cabin. But I don't feel my feet anymore, or my arms, just the back of my skull firm in the freezing mud. The fireweed's burned to a deep scarlet, framing a sky that grows harder, grayer. The first snow, shards of icy crystal, rasps down upon the Caddy's twisted husk. Not until the fall comes will I see her again.

But maybe next year when the fireweed burns I'll remember what it was like to take the curves so fast the darkness blurs. Perhaps instead of this red damned weed I'll look up into the rearview mirror at eyes that glitter with the fierceness of combat knives. Eyes that needed to fight the way I needed to run, yet they made me wonder: What would happen if I turn the Caddy around?

Marriage? Children? A beautiful daughter with eyes like her mother's? I had just hit the brakes to find out when I lost control of the car.

What do ghosts haunt? Not people or places but possibilities, all crammed into a few frantic moments, a jumbling of their lives that whispers only of things missed and out of place.

But what haunts a ghost? Pretty much the same thing: for me, a daughter who was never even conceived. A future I wouldn't want to run from, a possibility glimpsed only for a heartbeat in the back seat of a used Caddy. And never seen clearly until the wheels left the road. ❁



# ASK MR. SCIENCE!

**Mr. KJ and Mr. JH, both of Victoria, BC, ask:**

**Q:** Why do fools fall in love?

**A:** Fools, that is, all persons with an IQ of under 157, lack the observational capacity to recognize pheromonal and chemical attraction for what it is, and instead believe themselves to be “in love.” Incidentally, the answer to the other often asked question, “Does love make the world go round?” is no. But it does go up and down a little.

**Ms. LS, of Port Moody, BC, asks:**

**Q:** What does the groundhog do for the rest of the year?

**A:** As your question so correctly points out, the groundhog’s employment prospects are highly seasonal in nature. All the rest of society owes a large debt of gratitude to the groundhog, since it was for the benefit of this creature, which makes such an invaluable contribution to the science of weather prediction, that unemployment insurance was created. ♣

## Readership survey

*In order to give you, our readers, what you want, we need to hear from you. Please take a moment to email us, send us a postcard, or write us a letter, and tell us:*

What do you like best about *On Spec*? What are you not so crazy about? If we added more pages, what would you like to see on them?

In this issue, which was your favorite story? Why? Which illustration did you like best? In the past few years, which stories and illustrations were your favorites? Which didn’t work for you, and why?

Every issue is predominantly filled with short fiction, but we also offer poetry, editorials, cartoons, “Ask. Mr. Science,” and more. Would you like a nonfiction column on writing and publishing, real science, news, interviews? Or should we keep our focus on fiction, fiction, and more fiction?

Thanks for your input!

*On Spec*, Box 4727, Edmonton AB T6E 5G6  
onspec@earthling.net





# Pilgrims at the Well

Linda Smith

*illustrated by Adrian Kleinbergen*

THE WAYFARERS' INN CROUCHED LOW TO THE ground, seeking shelter from the winds that frequently swept the mountain. It was built of unpainted wood that had been bleached by the sun and scoured by the wind over countless years until now it looked as gray as the rocks that surrounded it.

Spartan though it was, the inn was often strained to its meager seams during late spring and summer, for it offered the last refuge to pilgrims on their way to the well at the top of the mountain. Tonight, however, only three guests sat warming themselves at the hearth in the common room—an elderly woman with sparse white hair and lively dark eyes set amidst a sea of wrinkles, an auburn-haired, fresh-faced young man, and an older man whose spare frame was soberly but richly clad. A fourth guest, shrouded in shadows, sat in a far corner of the room. The three by the fire darted furtive glances at her from time to time. They saw a tall, broad-shouldered woman dressed in worn homespun, but could make out nothing of her face, hidden as it was not only by darkness but also by a deep hood that covered her head.

"Do you truly think the well will answer our questions?" ventured the young man, breaking the silence that had fallen over the three.

"They say it does," the older man said shortly.

"Always?" A frown wrinkled the young man's smooth forehead.

"Always," said a quiet voice from the back of the room. The landlord, an unobtrusive, ageless man who had served his guests efficiently and then retreated, now stepped forward. "Sometimes the answers it gives may seem strange, but it always answers."

"I heard that even King Leopold went to the well," said the elderly woman.

The landlord smiled. "Over the years, most kings have gone to the well at one time or another."

The young man leaned forward eagerly. "Is it true that he asked the well whom he should marry?"

"So the stories say."

The old woman laughed. "Is that your question, lad? Which girl to choose? I'll bet my boots there's many a young lady would give her eye-teeth to marry you."

A warm tide of color washed over the young man's comely face. "Not Eleanor," he muttered.

"Eleanor?" She cocked her head.

The youth hesitated. "Is it all right to speak of the question you want answered?" he asked the landlord.

"I've never heard that it makes any difference to the well."

The young man hesitated again, then smiled, a bit shyly, at the old woman. "Eleanor's a girl who... Well, I'm quite fond of her. She's not as pretty as some girls in my town, girls who'd wed me gladly, but... Well, there's something about her. So I plan to ask the well whether she'll have me."

The older man snorted. "It might be easier just to ask the girl herself," he pointed out dryly. "You'd save yourself a long hard trek up this mountain."

The young man shot him an annoyed glance, but said nothing.

"It *is* a hard trek, especially at the tag end of autumn," the landlord said soberly. "It will take you the better part of two days' hard climb-

ing up a difficult trail to get to the top, and the same to get back down. And if the snows come early... You may want to think again, all of you."

"Nonsense," barked the older man. "I have no intention of turning back, not after I've come this far. Anyway, the skies have been crystal clear all week."

"And the question drives you, does it not?" the landlord asked gently. The other man said nothing.

The landlord sighed. "Well, take care. And remember, though the well always answers, the answers may seem strange."

"How do you mean?" asked the old woman, the wrinkles on her face deepening into a worried frown.

"Sometimes the well answers the question in your heart, not the question on your lips."

There was a moment of silence, broken by a snort from the older man. He started to speak, but was forestalled.

"I doubt the well will give me any answer, strange or not strange." The deep female voice, a bit rusty, as though seldom used, came from the shadowed recesses of the room. Three heads jerked its way. The landlord turned more slowly.

"What do you mean, Mistress?"

"I doubt that the well will give me any answer at all. I doubt that it can."

"Your question is that hard?"

"Yes." The voice grated like a raspy saw.

The landlord was silent. "Yet you still want to go to the well," he said at last, his voice very gentle.

The woman said nothing.



The ashes in the hearth shifted, then subsided, the fire sinking to low, flickering flames. The young man shivered, then shook himself and looked around brightly.

"I think I'll head for my bed. Tomorrow will come early. I'll see you all then. My name is Florian, by the way."

The old woman smiled at him. "They call me Granny Rankin at home, or sometimes just Granny."

"Master Hamill," the older man said shortly.

The woman in the shadows was silent.

THEY LEFT IN A COOL GRAY DAWN. The landlord saw them off.

"You're sure I can't go on horseback from here on?" Master Hamill demanded.

"Yes."

Master Hamill frowned. "I expect to see my horse in good shape when I return," he said sharply.

"Yes."

"There'll be a few coins for you if I do. If not—" The words hung in the air, a threat.

The landlord nodded, unperturbed.

The four set off up the narrow, twisting path that wound its way through dark conifers. The odd aspen and birch stood among the evergreens, bare-limbed and trembling in the breeze that made the travellers wrap their cloaks more tightly around themselves.

The sun came up as a bright red ball. By midmorning, it blazed in an almost cloudless sky. The day still had chilly edges, but the sun's warmth and the strenuous climb

made the travellers loosen their cloaks. Only the tall woman, striding mutely ahead, kept hers tightly bound, its hood still guarding her face. The others cast uncertain glances at her from time to time, and their voices sank to low murmurs when she was near. Not that anyone spoke much: they needed all their breath.

At noon, they stopped for their midday meal. Granny Rankin sank onto a log with a gasp of relief.

"Are you all right?"

It was the first time the hooded woman had spoken that day. Granny Rankin's eyes widened in surprise. She nodded. "Yes. I just need to catch my breath for a spell, then I'll be fine. Thank you for asking." She smiled tentatively.

The other woman gave a curt nod and moved away.

The track grew steeper after that. It also became increasingly cluttered with overhanging branches and encroaching foliage. Florian stayed close to Granny Rankin, offering her a hand whenever there was a log to climb over or loose scree to traverse. Master Hamill seemed to be having difficulty too, his breath coming in short, rasping gasps, though he brushed aside any anxious enquiries. Progress was slow. The tall, hooded woman would stride ahead as though her long legs found it hard to moderate their pace, then stand waiting impatiently. The others looked at her resentfully.

It was she, however, who called for a halt for the night in a small, level clearing.

"There's plenty of light left,"

Florian protested.

"Dark comes fast and sudden in the mountains," she said, not looking at him, and set about gathering sticks for the fire. The others sank down onto logs and sat watching her. Master Hamill's face was grey.

Granny Rankin gave him a worried glance. "You look ill. What ails you?"

"Nothing."

She shook her head. "I've not dealt with healing herbs and sick folk half my life not to know there's something amiss."

He snorted. "You're as bad as my fool of a physician. He says I'm a sick man and need to slow down. As though I've time for that." He snorted again.

"Not the climb for a sick man."

"Nor for an old woman, I would have thought."

She spluttered and started to retort, but was interrupted by the other woman, who was now kneeling, laying the fire. "Best gather some moss to lay your blankets on, if you don't want aching bones come morning."

Florian, who had been sitting gazing into space, flushed and sprang to his feet. "I'll do it."

Dusk fell shortly, and was followed rapidly by dense blackness unbroken by star-shine or moonlight. They wrapped themselves in their blankets early, and woke to a chilly, overcast dawn.

There was little talk as they struggled up the mountain. The track narrowed, forcing them to go single-file. Florian followed closely behind Granny Rankin, ready to offer a helping hand. Master Hamill

brought up the rear. About midmorning, the hooded woman gave an impatient cry and strode on, soon disappearing from sight. They didn't see her again that morning, nor when they stopped for their midday meal.

"Not far to go now," Florian said encouragingly. The others nodded, too weary to respond.

In the afternoon, the wind picked up, whistling and moaning in the pine trees that pressed around them, and sending shivers running up and down their spines. As Florian had said, the way was not far, but it seemed endless as they trudged on, heads bent, huddled in their cloaks.

But then they were there, breaking free of the dark pines onto the summit of the mountain. And there it was, the well, its weathered brick outline barely visible behind the screen of trees that circled it. The three stopped, gazing at it in awe. They didn't see the long form of a woman seated in the shadow of the trees, face hidden on up-drawn knees.

"Well, there it is," Master Hamill said, and gave a forced, nervous laugh. "Well... Who goes first?"

"You may, if you wish," Florian offered.

"No! No, I... You go."

The young man hesitated. "Granny?"

She hesitated too, for a moment, then drew a deep breath. "Very well." She walked forward slowly and disappeared behind the veil of trees. The wind swirled fiercely, then stilled.

It seemed to the woman in the



shadows, who had raised her head and was watching intently, as though the old woman were gone for a long time. Finally, she emerged and walked back to the others.

"Well?" Florian demanded.

"Well what?" Granny Rankin asked innocently.

"Your question! What did... Did you get the answer you wanted?"

She paused, as though considering. "Yes," she said finally.

"You did?" Florian headed eagerly for the well.

The old woman waited patiently, though she shivered occasionally in the bitter wind that had picked up again and now blew straight from the north. Master Hamill fidgeted. The woman by the trees sat motionless, her head bent once more.

When Florian reappeared, his face was flushed, his eyes shining. Granny Rankin said nothing, just smiled and gripped his hand. Master Hamill took one look at his face and strode forward.

He was gone even longer than the others, and the grey sky had dulled towards dusk by the time he returned. He was frowning.

"Was it...?" Florian started. He stopped.

"Was it bad news?" Granny Rankin finished gently.

"I... No. Not bad, exactly. Unexpected. I don't see... It can't be right."

"The well is always right," Florian asserted.

"Hmm." Master Hamill's doubt was obvious. He glanced up. "We'd better be on our way. I don't like the look of that sky."

They left. The only sound to be heard was the wind, which moaned and cried as it tore across the flat summit. A fierce gust, stronger than the rest, finally forced the crouching woman to her feet. Her joints creaked as she rose. She stood, head down, hands clenched at her sides. Then, step by slow step, she entered the clearing.

It was strangely quiet. The wind could still be heard, but its howls seemed distant, unimportant. Here, it was still. Slowly, the woman walked towards the well in the center of the clearing and stood gazing down at it.

No one knew when the well had been built. Some said it had not been built at all, but had always stood there. Before there were tales to tell, it had existed. As far as anyone knew, no one tended the well, but its water remained clear, untouched by weeds, its bricks weathered but unbroken.

The water was very dark, and very deep, and very still.

The woman shook back her hood.

"I have a question for you," she said. Her voice shook. She took a deep breath. "Why?"

The water remained still. The question quivered in the air.

Then the water rippled, stirred, as though a hand were moving it. When the ripples subsided, a woman's face stared from the center of the well.

It was a long face, not in the first bloom of youth, but not yet in middle years, strong-boned, with a high forehead, prominent cheek bones, and a decided chin. It could

never have been pretty, but it must once have been arresting, even attractive in an unusual, angular way. Now, however, it was disfigured by deep pockmarks that spread like a rash from the right brow to the left cheek.

The woman stared at the image in the well, then laughed, a hoarse, choked laugh, and took a step closer.

"Is that my answer? My own face, staring back at me?" The image watched her, calm, unmoved. The woman laughed again.

"You even got the question wrong. Do you think my face is the question? Oh, I don't like it. Who would? But I was never one to put over much importance on looks. I was never one of the pretty girls that the village boys chased after. Only Thomas wanted me. As I wanted him. Always." She fell silent.

"Why? Why Thomas? Why was he taken? He was a good man, always. He could build anything, with his big hands that were so strong but yet so gentle. Yes, and his big heart. And his laugh... But even if Thomas had to...had to... Why my children? Molly, who sparkled like spring sunshine? And Peter...Peter was the sweetest little boy. And the babe. The babe was too young even to have a name yet. Why? Why were my children taken?" She stopped, her breath coming in ragged, jerky gasps.

The air was very still.

"And why my sister? Cecily, who was taken away with five young ones left behind, and a husband to grieve... Why her? If one of us had to go, why not me? Why couldn't

the pox have taken me, instead of just leaving me looking like...like... Why couldn't it have taken me, who has nothing left to live for? Why? Why?" Her voice rose, cracked.

The face in the water regarded her, grave, serene. Then, slowly, a hand joined the image, reached out.

The woman looked at it, her face writhing, then screamed, "I came to you for answers, though I knew you couldn't...couldn't... And all you give me is myself. What answer is that?" She stooped, picked up a stone, hurled it at the water.

The water broke into rippling waves, shattering the image. Then the ripples died and the face reappeared, and the outstretched hand.

The woman put her hands over her face and stood, wrenched by shuddering sobs.

At last she stilled. Her hands dropped, revealing a face on which the pockmarks stood out starkly against the blanched, drawn skin. She turned and stumbled out of the clearing.

She had forgotten the storm that raged beyond. She staggered at the wind's first blow, righted herself, then staggered again as the wind, howling in wild, pain-edged glee, tore at her.

She reached a hand to her hair, and felt the flakes that the wind had deposited there.

Snow.

It would be hard to get down the mountain, even halfway down to the shelter of the inn. Very hard.

Perhaps she should stay here, lie down at the edge of the trees, let the snow cover her, drift into sleep. It



would be so easy. Nothing waited for her at the foot of the mountain, after all. Nothing and no one.

But she had never been one to give up easily. She had worked and fought hard all her life. She drew her hood up, drew her cloak tightly around herself, and set off.

Her long legs were no help going downhill, for the track was too treacherous, and the snow, which swirled in ever-increasing flurries, too blinding. It soon covered the ground, clogging her steps, bewildering her eyes, as did the deepening darkness. Cautiously, stubbornly, she inched her way down. A branch snapped in the wind and fell at her feet. She started, then reached out an icy hand and picked it up. It would be her staff and her guide.

Even the branch couldn't save her. She slipped on unseen scree. Tottered. Fell. Landed in soft, cold snow. Lay still.

It would be so easy to stay here forever.

No.

Why not?

No.

After a minute, she pushed herself up and continued, her clothes wet, her hand on the branch numb with cold.

Where, she wondered, were the others? What had happened to them?

SHE FOUND OUT SOME FIVE MINUTES later, when she almost tripped over Florian's outstretched legs. He and the others were seated in a tight cluster under a tree that offered meager shelter from the wind and snow.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

It was too dark to see their faces. After a moment, Master Hamill's voice came out of the darkness. "Resting."

"You can't rest here. You'll freeze to death."

"We must. The tree gives some shelter. Anyway, it's too dangerous to go on in the dark."

"I have a stick to guide us. Get up."

"We can't. Granny Rankin's too weak," Florian protested.

"But you can't stay here." Why was she arguing? What did these fools matter to her? She should go on by herself. Or stay here. Let go.

"She's right. You must go. Leave me." Granny Rankin's voice could scarcely be heard above the wind.

"No!"

"You must, lad. It's all right. I don't mind dying, now that I know my grandchildren will be looked after."

The tall woman stood motionless for a moment. Then she stooped. "Climb on my back. I can carry you."

"But—"

"Climb on. As for you others... Master Hamill, hold onto Florian's arm. He can support you."

"I don't need help!"

She ignored him. "Follow me as closely as you can."

"But it's too dangerous! It's completely dark."

"So stay here and freeze to death," she snapped.

There was a moment of hostile silence. Then the two men struggled to their feet. Granny Rankin

climbed onto the other woman's back and wound her skinny arms about her neck.

The old woman weighed little, but after a short distance, her weight dragged like a millstone on the tall woman's strength. She dug her teeth into her lower lip and slogged on through the ever-deepening snow. But at least the old woman's body, pressed close to her own, offered welcome warmth. She was very conscious of Granny Rankin's breath on her cheek, and of the two men following so closely on her heels that they sometimes bumped into her.

Slowly, cautiously, stubbornly, she felt her way down the mountain, down and down and down, step after step, until she felt that nothing mattered, not even her muscles, screaming with tiredness, not even her chilled, clammy flesh and the hand that gripped the branch as though frozen to its rough bark. Only her steps, going on and on and on.

She didn't know when the wind quieted, though it did after what seemed like endless hours, leaving their labored breathing loud in the still night. Snow continued to fall, vertically now, not at an angle. Cold descended like a frigid sheet.

"Must...stop," Master Hamill gasped.

They were the first words that had been spoken since they'd started. The tall woman shook her head as though dragging herself out of a drugged sleep, and turned. Florian's arm was around the older man, who stood bent over, gasping for breath.

Her gaze swept the area. "There's a log over there. We can rest on it. But only briefly," she warned.

Unburdening herself of the old woman, she sank onto the log. Rest. Yes. A brief rest. It must be brief. But oh, she was tired. So tired.

They sat silently but for their gasping breaths and chattering teeth. The night was very quiet. At last Florian asked, tentatively, "Couldn't we stay here for the rest of the night? Make a camp?"

"Best not. We need to keep moving. Keep warm."

They relapsed into silence. The tall woman thought that she should insist they go on. She didn't want to. She sighed and opened her mouth, but Master Hamill spoke first.

"You said that you didn't mind dying, now that you knew your grandchildren would be looked after," he said to Granny Rankin. "Did the well show you that? Was that what you asked it?"

She stirred. "Yes. Yes and no."

"What do you mean?"

"I asked it... That was not my question. But the well showed me a picture of my grandchildren, looking as they do now, no older, and their father was with them, hugging them. I had not known... My daughter is dead, you see, and my son-in-law a seafaring man. I had not known whether he would return in time, or ever. But he will."

"What was your question?" Florian asked after a moment.

"I asked the well when I would die."

"Probably tonight," Master Hamill said harshly.

"Possibly. And possibly not." She



laughed, a laugh that was surprisingly young, surprisingly gay, despite her chattering teeth. "It doesn't matter. I was only worried that I live until the children were old enough to fend for themselves. Now I know I don't need to."

"Hmm."

"It answered the question in your heart," Florian exclaimed. "As it answered mine. I asked it whether Eleanor would marry me. I thought... I thought I could not bear it if she said no. And the well showed me Eleanor. Filling the well. Filling the world, at least for me. I knew, then, that I would ask, and ask again, risking hurt, for she is worth it, worth it to me."

Granny Rankin patted his hand with her cold, gnarled one, then turned to Master Hamill. "And you?" she asked gently. "You said your answer was unexpected."

"Yes."

They waited.

"I don't... Oh, it answered my question. At least, I think it did. But it can't be right."

"What did you ask?"

"I asked which son I should hand my business over to, since my fool of a doctor says I must slow down, and even... Well, even that I may not live too much longer. I thought either of my two older sons... But instead the well showed me my youngest son. He's a soft-hearted fool, like his mother before him. He'd ruin the business in no time, being too soft on the workers, too generous with the customers."

"You don't love him, this youngest son?" Granny Rankin asked after a moment.

"Oh, I love him well enough, though I didn't realize how much till I saw him in the well, and later, when I was stumbling down this cursed mountain."

"And have you told him you love him?"

"No," Master Hamill said slowly.

"No, I've always given him harsh words because... Well, because he doesn't act as I'd have him act. But he, above the others, is the child of my heart." He stopped, his arms wrapped tightly around himself against the cold, then said in a low voice, "When... If I get home, I will tell him so."

They were silent. The snow fell softly.

"So the well has answered our hearts' questions," Granny Rankin said. "And you?" she asked the other woman, a bit shyly. "Did it answer yours?"

"No."

"Are you sure? Perhaps in a way you didn't expect—"

"No." Abruptly, the tall woman rose. "We must go."

Florian groaned.

"A little longer," Master Hamill begged.

She swung away from them, took two long strides into the night. Behind her, she felt their eyes, their silent pressure. Well, let them sit there. Let them stay. Let them freeze, these people, these strangers. They had children, grandchildren, sweethearts to return to, but they didn't care. They wouldn't fight. Why should she? She, who had no one and nothing, not even an answer.

Only her own face, and her hand,

reaching out.

Slowly, she turned back. "We must go. Now."

Even after such a short rest, their muscles had stiffened. It was hard to force them into motion. But they did, somehow, and trudged on. On and on, staggering, gasping. Their feet grew numb with cold, and their hands clenched into claw-like fists. Once, the tall woman stumbled so badly that Granny Rankin would have fallen had Florian, walking close behind, not reached out a quick, instinctive hand.

Sometime before morning, the snow stopped and the clouds cleared enough to let faint light from stars and a dim crescent moon filter through. They stopped twice more that night, though the tall woman would not allow them to rest long. As a luminous dawn stole into the sky, they halted once more to share a cold, hard breakfast of bread and cheese.

"I think we're going to make it," Florian said.

"We've a long way to go yet," the tall woman warned, but even she sounded more cheerful, and as the sun warmed their chilled flesh and shone brilliantly on the evergreens around them, their spirits continued to rise. Florian even began to whistle, a trifle breathlessly.

It *was* a long way yet, and progress proved slow. The sun provided welcome warmth, but it also turned the snow into soggy slush. Granny Rankin insisted on walking, but made no protest when the hooded woman picked her up again after a short time.

As the sky softened into a rosy

dusk, they topped a small rise and saw the wayfarers' inn below.

"The inn," Granny Rankin breathed.

"Rest," Master Hamill said. His face was grey, but he was smiling.

"I'm going to soak in a hot tub in front of a blazing fire, then sleep for a solid week," Florian said. Then he grinned. "Though maybe not. I want to get home to Eleanor as soon as I can."

Granny Rankin slid down from the other woman's back. "And I to my grandchildren."

Master Hamill smiled at her. "I trust you will share my horse for the remainder of the journey."

She nodded. "I thank you. The ride will be welcome, not only for the sake of my old bones, but also so I can get home to my grandchildren sooner."

The three of them started eagerly down the slope. The tall woman stood staring after them.

Home.

Her village lay in the foothills, close to the mountain. She too would soon be home.

But how could she bear it, to go home to a cold hearth and an empty house? Oh, the villagers would welcome her, as would William, too frantic with worry over his motherless children even to mourn Cecily properly. And Cecily's children... Yes. They would welcome her. But how could she bear it?

The others had stopped. They turned to look at her.

"Aren't you coming?" Florian called.

She didn't answer.

They exchanged glances, then all



of them walked towards her.

"You must come. It's getting dark," Master Hamill said.

She didn't move.

Granny Rankin studied her shadowed face. "I know little of you, not even your face or your name. But I know you carried a feeble old woman on your back all night and all day. You saved my life—all our lives. You are a good, caring woman. And a strong one. Strong enough for anything. But even you need rest. Won't you come with us to the inn?"

Go with them to the inn. Then what? Home?

"Please," Florian said.

"We owe you so much," Master Hamill said.

"You must be with us, to celebrate our safe return," said Granny Rankin.

There was a long silence while they stood looking at her, their bodies sagging with exhaustion but their faces expectant.

"I'm sorry the well had no answer for you," Granny Rankin added softly.

The sun blazed in final crimson glory before sinking below the horizon. Somewhere, a bird was singing. A door opened below and the innkeeper emerged to stand waiting for them. Behind him, she could see the flickering flames of a welcoming fire.

They had turned back for her.

She took a deep breath. "Perhaps it did have an answer. In a way."

She had asked the well, "Why?" But had not her heart cried out, "How? How can I live?"

The well had shown her her own face, the face of a strong, determined woman. Strong enough for anything, Granny Rankin had said.

It had also shown her her hand, reaching out. As she had reached out to these others. As they were reaching out to her.

She threw back her hood. "My name is Hannah."

Granny Rankin stood on tiptoe to kiss her scarred cheek. "Thank you."

Together, the four of them walked down the hill to the waiting inn. ♣

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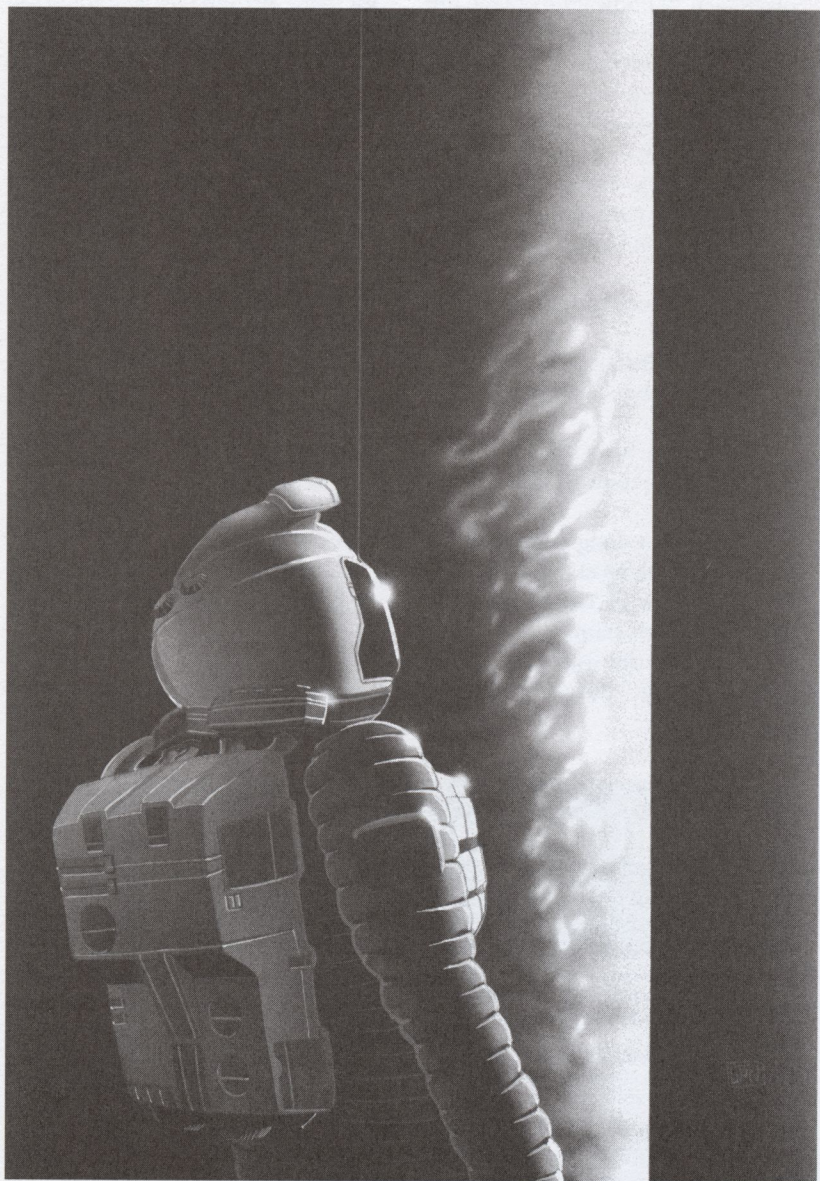
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# The Fermi Paradox

Leslie Lupien

*illustrated by Jean-Pierre Normand*

CHRIS NGUYEN SQUINTED AT THE STORY LEAD she had buttoned out of her laptop printer. “Grab them by the ass,” Doheny of Off World Features had snapped at her. How was this for an ass-grabber:

*Clavius Base, March 7, 2037.*

*Invaders from Tau Ceti? How else to explain the UFOs that keep flitting around the lunar electromagnetic catapult near Mare Serintatis?*

Dr. Lisle leaned over the high back of the lunar suborbital bus’ passenger seat. “What are you up to, Chris?”

Chris ignored the question. How in hell could she bring her readers and listeners back to reality after a lead like that without antagonizing them?

“UFOs? How trite, Chris.”

Chris gritted her teeth to stifle a flippant retort. The old girl as an investigator for the UN’s Off World Affairs Commission could make or break her on this assignment.

Dr. Lisle bent so close that tiny renovation scars showed on her fiftyish face. “And invaders from Tau Ceti? Come on.”

Chris flinched. “Journalese, Ginette.”

Dr. Lisle straightened abruptly. “Crap, Lieutenant.”

The sudden use of her former UN Peace Keepers title alarmed Chris. Had she betrayed a physical aversion for the dowdy astrophysicist by involuntary body language? She stood shoulder to shoulder with Dr. Lisle and peered at the shape squatting on the moonscape outside the window of the parked bus. “That thing does look like a ship of some kind, Ginette.”

"It sure does." Frohl Karpov, jaunty as always, emerged from the pilot's compartment. "I saw one of those things buzzing around the catapult. But never on the ground. Excited, Doctor?"

Dr. Lisle's disdain showed in the upward tilt of her head. "Interested, Mr. Karpov. Where are we?"

"Mare Tranquillitatis, close to the old Apollo 11 landing site. Don't you want to suit up and take a close look?"

Dr. Lisle barely nodded.

Karpov smiled at Chris. "Coming?"

"Well..." Chris loathed the claustrophobic pressure suit.

"It's fun out there. I'll show you." Karpov had the most reassuring smile.

"You're full of shit, Karpov," Dr. Lisle said.

Chris hesitated. She found no fun in moon walking. The close-up sight of the lifeless lunar surface repelled her. And she had not mastered the trick of moving gracefully in low gravity. But she wanted a close look at that enigmatic shape outside.

"No need to suffer," Dr. Lisle said. "I'll give you a full report on whatever we find. Besides, it's risky out there when you're not used to it."

Chris knew about the risk. A mistep or a brush against a too-sharp rock could rupture your pressure suit. Hypoxia, death from lack of oxygen, would surely follow within seconds. You might try to laugh through giddiness, though there would be no air to push the sound out beyond the vocal cords. But

hypoxia promised an almost painless end to grief and loneliness.

"It's all right..." She couldn't bring herself to use Dr. Lisle's first name in front of Karpov. "...Doctor. I need to see for myself. For the story."

Karpov kept smiling. "I'll be right there to guide you. Don't worry."

Chris smiled back. She liked Karpov. He must be thirtyish, only a little older than her, and he spoke fluent English. Attractive in a snub-nosed Slavic way. His laid-back manner suggested strength and control. He reminded her more than a little of Kevin. She pushed that thought away. It was far too soon after her husband's death to indulge herself with even a fleeting romantic fantasy.

"I'll check the suits." Karpov headed for the storage compartment.

Dr. Lisle regarded Chris bleakly. "I hope you don't phase out. It happens to people new to the moon. And..." She looked very stern. "...I hope you don't harbor a death wish. Do you?"

"No, of course not, Ginette." Flustered, Chris gestured toward the window to distract Dr. Lisle. "What do you think it is?"

"Probably an experimental shuttle that Lunar Enterprises has kept under wraps."

"Then why did it land in our path?"

"The company couldn't keep the UFO stories from leaking out. Now that we're nosing around, it may have decided to let us break the news."

"But couldn't it possibly be..."



well, something more sensational?"

"Like an extraterrestrial ship? Use your head, Chris. If the Commission had taken these sightings seriously, would it have sent one field rep? Rather, it would have contacted the UN Security Council, and an international scientific and military expedition would be here."

"Sure." Disappointment soured Chris' mouth.

"To make you feel better..." Dr. Lisle smiled. "...there's a possibility of industrial espionage."

"Oh?" *That* sounded interesting. Six nations had poured billions into the project for hurling lunar soil from the electromagnetic catapult into a mass catcher. The soil when processed would make possible the building of power stations in Earth orbit. Revelation of espionage by a competitor of Lunar Enterprises would be sensational.

"Time to suit up." Karpov appeared in his customized pressure suit. He moved with an air of self-assurance, dangling a transparent lexan helmet by a strap. "Need help with the suit, Chris?"

Chris dreaded the standard pressure suit's tricky fittings. But she fought down the temptation to let Karpov help her. Any closeness with the man might encourage him to make advances that she would not welcome. She shook her head. "No, thank you."

Fumbling with zippers and straps, Chris fretted. Doheny fired neophyte journalists who did not meet his expectations on the first assignment. She just had to come up with an interesting story. Only through success in her new, exciting

career could she shake off the apathy that had dogged her since Kevin's death.

THE CYLINDER WAS HIGH, BUT NO longer than the chassis of a two-seat moon rover. Lunar sunlight had washed out any natural color, turning it as gray as the rocks in the background. Only the funnel attached to the flared-out base added an exotic touch.

Karpov's voice sounded testy in Chris' earphones. "You gonna be all right now?"

"Yes." Chris fought down tears of frustration. Karpov had kept saying over and over during the walk from the bus: *Lean forward. Keep your center of gravity over your feet.* But she had floundered, and would have fallen flat on her back once if he had not held her.

"Stay here then. I'll check it out," Karpov said and covered the distance to the cylinder in several high, sharp leaps.

Dr. Lisle whispered from beside Chris. "Showing off. I think he knows what he will find."

Karpov reached out a gloved hand. A gap appeared as if by magic in the cylinder's seamless side, and he plunged through.

Dr. Lisle turned to face Chris and grimaced behind her face plate. Another whisper in Chris' earphones. "I hope you weren't taken in by him. He gets nasty if he's crossed or thwarted. Some of the women at Clavius Base hate him."

Karpov reappeared and waved them forward.

"Come along." Dr. Lisle held out a gloved hand and moved off with

a motion as smooth as Karpov's. Chris took the hand, bouncing on tiptoe and trying to use her ankles as Karpov had taught her. This time she did better and reached the cylinder without a stumble.

Karpov's voice sounded loud in her earphones: "Nobody, no air, no controls, nothing. Weird."

Chris stepped through the gap behind Dr. Lisle and confronted a bare, black wall.

What she saw seconds later stopped her abruptly. Blobs and strings of pale blue and white light pulsed, danced, divided and reformed along the wall. Karpov and Dr. Lisle had disappeared inside deep shadows at the front of the cylinder. She heard their voices, raised as if in argument, in her earphones.

A great blob of very bright white light formed on the wall beside Chris' shoulder and began to pulsate, faster and faster. She closed her eyes, but could not shut out the light. Her earphones went dead. She sank on quivering knees and tried to scream for help, but only saliva trickled out of her mouth.

Visions, each sharp as the image in the optical sight of an assault rifle, formed in Chris' mind. Toddler Chris, drooling mouth, flat chest and pink navel. Five-year-old Chris at First Communion, all in white, eyes wide and hands clasped in a pretense of piety. The kaleidoscope continued with incredible speed—scenes of adolescence, university, officers training school.

*Stop!* Chris' lips fluttered, but could not eject the word.

The kaleidoscope stopped for a single vision. A man, face averted,

lay on a hospital bed. Bandages swathed his head and the exposed parts of his body. Chris knew the man was dying.

*This one?* The subliminal question, tenuous as smoke, drifted into Chris' mind. She nodded and began speaking in her mind to the man on the bed. *Kevin. It's me. I love you.* The man murmured, *Chris, no. Don't look.* She understood. Peace Keepers Captain Kevin White did not want her to see what the microwave generator used by the Kafir terrorists had done to his once-handsome face. But she would see it later when he brushed off the sheet in his sleep. There now...

Chris began to cry. Her mouth worked impotently, but in her mind she screamed. *Not this one.*

The man on the bed vanished. Another subliminal message: *Forgive us. We will show no more*

Adrenaline rushed into Chris' legs as if a block had broken. She tottered to her feet. But when she opened her eyes an afterimage of one side of Kevin's ruined face filled her face plate. She screamed aloud and clawed at the fastenings of her helmet. Loud voices suddenly filled her earphones. "What the hell's the matter with her?" That was Karpov.

Then "No, Chris. No, my dear." Dr. Lisle, her voice soft as a dimly-remembered mother's. Firm but gentle fingers detached hers from the helmet.

"Why did you bring her anyway?" Karpov sounded furious. "I kept trying to cheer her up or get her to react like a normal woman. No use."



Dr. Lisle laughed, not pleasantly. "You in a snit because she didn't swoon over you?"

"Hell, no. I tried to teach her how to moonwalk, but she acted like a zombie. And now she throws a fit. Didn't the Peace Keepers throw her out?"

"No. She resigned with citations for efficiency. That's why I brought her. But she's hurting. Her husband was a Peace Keepers Officer who was burned to death by the Kafirs a few months ago. Dare I hope you're sensitive enough to understand that?"

"You take care of her then," Karpov said and disappeared.

Chris wanted only to lie down and go to sleep. But the arm fastened around her waist and the voice in her earphones wouldn't let her. "Snap out of it! Move your feet... There you go. On your toes."

Chris' feet obeyed, but her mind seemed determined to close down. The insistent voice in her earphones, sometimes sharp, sometimes soothing, prodded her on through what seemed an eternity of painful motion. When the motion stopped, a hand lifted off her helmet. She yielded to a sudden urge to scream; then her mind did close down.

THE VOICES STARTED, STRIDENT with anger.

"We have six hours to live, lady. Listen, damn you!"

"No, Karpov. Go out and check the engines."

"There's nothing wrong with the fucking engines."

"Find out!"

Chris lay on a blanket on the

floor of the suborbital bus watching Karpov and Dr. Lisle yell at each other. She raised herself on her elbows. "What's the matter?"

Karpov, sullen-faced, did not look at Chris. "Tell her," he snapped at Dr. Lisle.

Dr. Lisle turned and reached down a hand. "Coming around? I had to shoot a little nepenthe into you when you started raving about lights and voices."

"Tell her," Karpov repeated.

Dr. Lisle held both Chris' hands to help her up on uncertain legs. "He says the bus' engines won't start and the radio is dead. He also says we have only about six hours left on the bus' life support system."

"Oh?" Chris shook her head to dispel the lingering effects of the nepenthe. "Well, won't Clavius Base—"

"Clavius Base won't do a damn thing without a Mayday. That thing out there has a lock on our engines and radio. Don't ask me how. I can break it with a blaster." His eyes glittered when he stabbed a finger at Dr. Lisle. "But she threatens to file charges against me if I do."

"I'll charge you with insubordination and willful destruction of UN property," Dr. Lisle told him. "That craft is under UN protection now. It's a drone without guts. It couldn't do anything to this bus."

Karpov turned to Chris at last. "I know the engines on this bus. There's nothing wrong with them. Talk to your girlfriend."

Dr. Lisle slapped Karpov across the face. "Bastard! You're out of control. Apologize to her."

Karpov's face turned a furious red, and he held up balled fists.

Chris had learned to detest Karpov. But he was the pilot, and their lives depended on him. “Forget the apology, Frohl. I believe you about the engines. But check them anyway. It can’t hurt. If they’re okay, we’ll talk some more.”

“Yeah?” Karpov locked eyes with Chris while he appeared to weigh what she had said. Then he smirked. “Okay. But then I’m going to do things my way. And I expect you to back me up at Clavius Base.”

After Karpov stomped off, Chris said, “Maybe he’s right, Ginette. Something’s alive in that...ship.”

Dr. Lisle looked thoughtful. “You are sure, aren’t you? But what?”

“A presence with a mind. It was curious, I think, not hostile.” Dr. Lisle’s quizzical smile irritated her. “Don’t you believe me?”

“Your perceptions, yes.” The smile faded. “But Karpov and I saw no lights, heard no voices. And even if you did, through some extrasensory perception—and I’ll grant the possibility—I don’t believe they could have come from an ET.”

“Why not?”

“Because of the Fermi Paradox... Oh, your blank look tells me you never heard of it.” Dr. Lisle glanced out the window. “Karpov’s just starting on the fore engines. So I’ll educate you. The story’s a hundred years old, probably apocryphal. A physicist named Enrico Fermi blurted out at a dinner party, ‘Where are they?’ When asked what he meant, he said, ‘The extraterrestrials.’”

Chris was in no mood for an expostulation. “Ginette—”

“Listen, please. It’s important for

you as a journalist. Fermi’s point was that if extraterrestrials existed and could reach the earth, they would have already done so. Today, after a century of futile searching for even an ET radio signal, almost all reputable scientists accept Fermi’s argument. Sorry to disappoint.”

Chris seethed. She *knew*, just *knew*, that she had communicated with a being with more than human powers.

“Now you’re upset, Chris. Drink some vivadium while I play with the radio.”

Chris’ hand shook as she pumped vivadium from a wall dispenser into a plastic cup. But a few gulps of the potent drug steadied her. She barely turned when Karpov entered. He had his helmet off and looked grim.

“Fore and aft engines okay.” Karpov’s voice, hoarse with suppressed anger, sounded from the pilot’s compartment. “Directional engines okay. Satisfied, Doctor? Now I’m going after that thing with a blaster.”

“No,” Dr. Lisle said. “Let’s take another look at the craft.”

“Get out of my way.”

Chris cast an anxious glance toward the pilot’s compartment. Karpov’s face told her he couldn’t be stopped. And there was a living, thinking creature out there. It was not hostile, and she didn’t want it destroyed. It was her story. Besides, if it was as powerful as Karpov thought, it might snuff him out to save itself. Then where would she and Dr. Lisle be?

Dr. Lisle clung to an arm of



Karpov's pressure suit. "Try the radio once more. Please."

"All right, if you'll let go."

Chris poured a half cup of vivadium and downed it in one swallow. Her veins on fire, she ran into the storage compartment and pulled her pressure suit down from the rack.

"Not even static!" Karpov yelled.

Chris slipped into the pressure suit. Without sealing herself in, she grabbed the helmet and moved as fast as she dared toward the inner airlock. Before buttoning it open, she heard Dr. Lisle and Karpov begin another shouting match. One inside, she started on the straps and zippers.

CHRIS HALTED WITHIN A FEW STRIDES of the cylinder. She knew that if she moved closer a hatch would open. But the misgivings she had fought down during the slow but successful walk from the bus could no longer be denied. She understood nothing about the presence inside the cylinder. What if it were deceitful and sly, luring her into captivity or death?

"Chris, stay out of that craft." Dr. Lisle's voice sounded faintly in the earphones. It must be coming from the bus. She turned to see a suited figure skimming across the moon-scape. Karpov's strong voice assailed her. "Open the hatch!"

Chris took a long breath, leapt forward and landed on her knees. A flicker of an eyelid later, a gap opened in the side of the cylinder. Subliminal fear bubbled up to paralyze her.

*Something alien, vastly powerful,*

maybe vastly dangerous, awaited her through the open hatch.

"Now get out of my way. I'm going to blast it." Karpov sounded closer.

"No, Frohl, you can't!" Futile words, she realized. Her teeth began to chatter to match the pounding of her heart as she rubbed her legs to coax resilience into them.

A bright spot flared on the wall opposite the open hatch and diffused in seconds into a glowing band softer than moonlight on an Earth landscape. Words sifted into Chris' mind. *Do not be afraid. Enter.*

Chris lunged forward, lost balance and went down on her knees just inside the hatch. The soft glow swooped down to envelop her like a protective shroud. *We will not harm you.*

She formed a soundless answer: *You will kill us by holding our ship. Please let us go.*

Almost immediately the response came: *We understand.*

"Get your ass out of there!"

Chris glanced over her shoulder. Karpov loomed so close that she could see the glint of the metal oxygen purge system actuator under his throat. She worked tongue and lips frantically. *My companion is mad with fear. He wants to destroy you. Do you understand?*

The answer came at once, soft and sad as a sigh. *Yes.*

The hard surface under Chris' knees moved, gained speed, and slipped away. She pawed the air and dropped.

"Where...where'd it go?" Karpov asked.

Chris stared down at her hands.

They were thrust into a surface of flat sand.

CHRIS TURNED AWAY FROM DR. Lisle to stare through the suborbital bus' window at the moonscape drifting underneath. "I told you my story three times," she said wearily. "That's the one I'll file."

Dr. Lisle shifted her tall, big-boned body closer along the seat. "No, you won't. I'll withdraw your accreditation."

"Damn you! Get away from me!" When Dr. Lisle's face whitened, Chris said, "I'm sorry, Ginette. But I'll get my story out—somehow."

Dr. Lisle backed away and waved her hands as if they held a flag of truce. "File your story. But you need my help."

"Why did you hound me so?"

"To make sure of the details. To find out how much sand you have."


"Damn devious."

"You should talk. Play up to the old girl. I know what you've heard. Libelous, by the way. But I'm fascinated by you as an empath. I believe, and I'll put my reputation on the line, that an alien intelligence did contact you."

"How about the Fermi paradox?"

"Disembodied minds. Not from our universe. That's why they leave no trace. Know about the Everett parallel-universe theory, Chris? No? Then I'll educate you."

Chris erased the thought of a shower and glass of wine at Clavius Base to listen. Dr. Lisle explained how one school of physicists, to which she belonged, believed in a hyperspace underlying our three-dimensional space in which parallel universes might touch.

Chris began rethinking the lead to her story. \*

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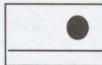
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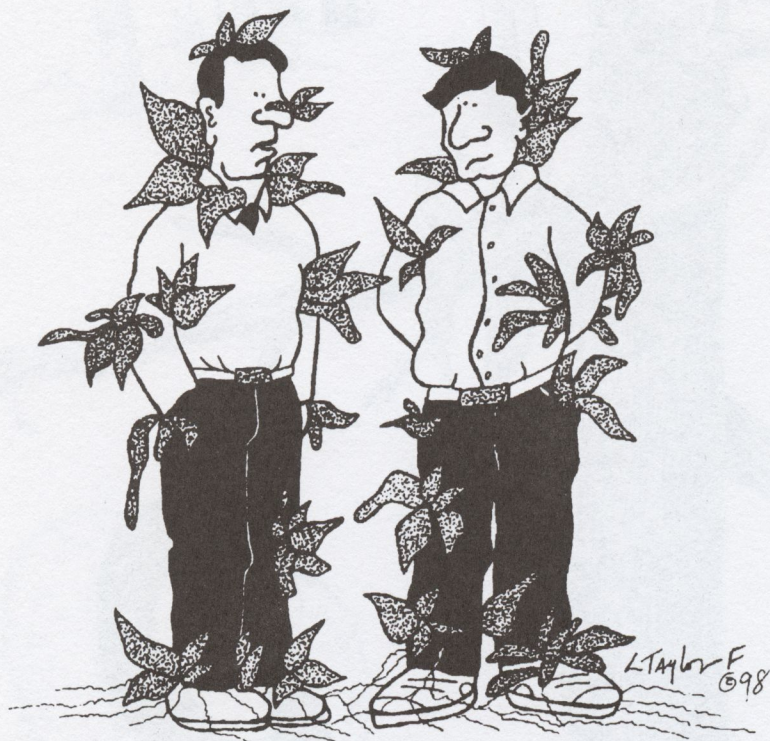
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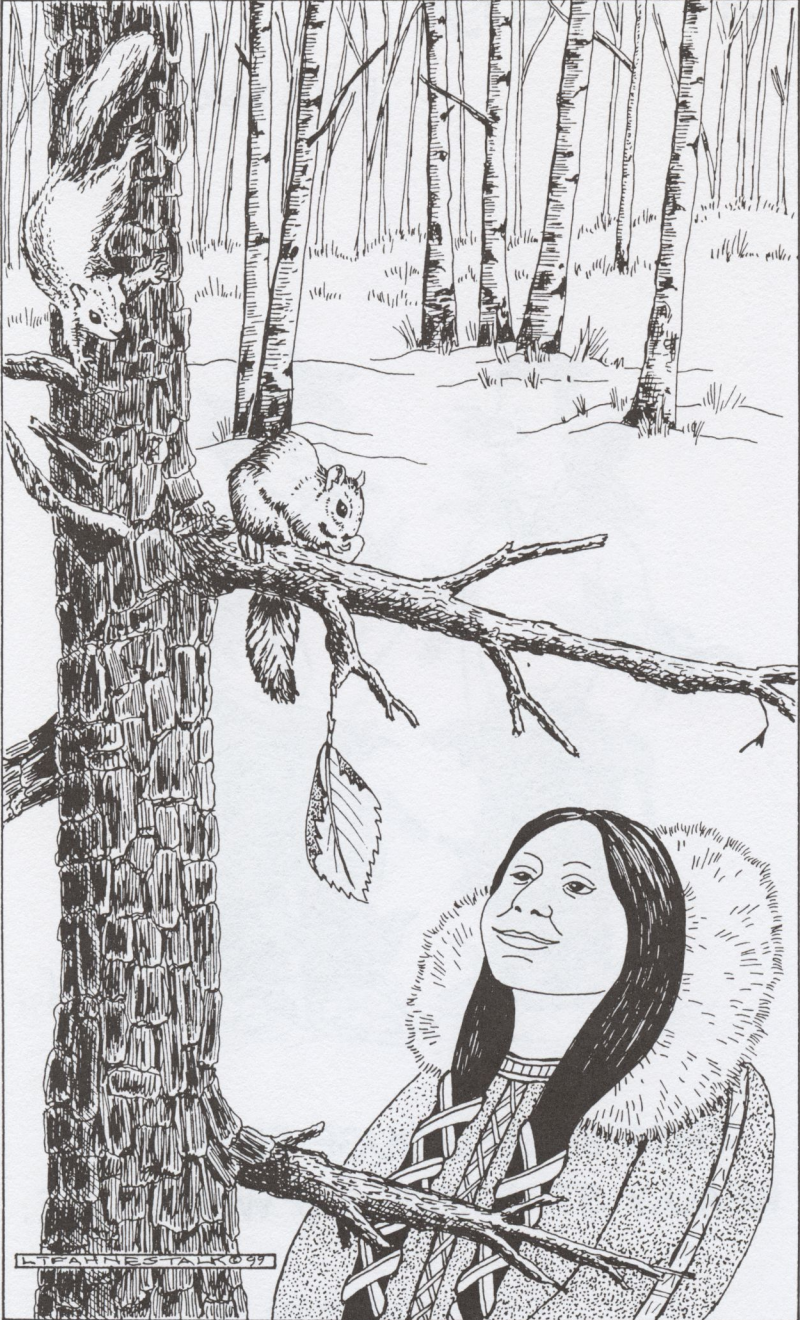


# ON the edge

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk



**THIS GREENHOUSE EFFECT IS  
REALLY STARTING TO WORRY ME.**





# No-Name in the Long Winter

Mary Soon Lee

*illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk*

**T**HE LONGER THE WINTER LASTED, THE LESS welcome No-Name found herself. At first people muttered under their breath as she hurried past, “It’s her fault,” or “Bad luck begets bad luck.” No-Name would hunch her shoulders further under the thick hood of her coat, and try to look as though she hadn’t overheard.

Gradually the mutters turned to curses. As the complaints grew louder, an unsettling feeling lodged in No-Name’s chest, as though a storm were building inside her.

From the time that she was old enough to talk, No-Name had known that she didn’t deserve a name. Her birth had torn her mother’s body, and when her mother died, her father killed himself. All because No-Name had been too greedy, hurrying to be born. Every night before she slept, No-Name prayed for forgiveness.

But how could No-Name have caused as big a thing as winter? That made no sense. When the other children stopped playing with her, refusing even the offer of piggyback rides, the strange feeling in No-Name’s chest grew fiercer. Instead of hunching her shoulders and watching the others play out of the corner of her eye, No-Name lifted up her head and walked away. She walked straight and tall, never flinching when the boys pelted her back with snowballs.

And as she walked straighter, No-Name spotted a second world she’d

never paid attention to before. Squirrels raced above her along a network of frost-coated branches. Rustlings in the hedgerow announced mice or chipmunks. Tiny birds chirped arrogantly, their feathers fluffed out to extraordinary proportions.

No-Name had never wondered how the wild animals survived the winter. Now she watched the squirrels fight over an acorn, the birds scrabbling for one wrinkled berry. Even the trees looked sad, their bare twigs encased in a sheen of ice. At night, No-Name added a prayer that the wild animals would find enough food.

The days lengthened, but the frost continued unbroken. The morning after the equinox, No-Name went to Quick Fingers' house. She lifted the old woman out of bed, heating water so that Quick Fingers could wash without catching cold. Usually Quick Fingers kept up a constant stream of chatter, but that morning the old woman sat in silence while No-Name helped her into her clothes.

"Are you ill, Elder?" No-Name asked as she put some oatmeal on to cook. She'd been coming to help Quick Fingers every day for the last three years. The old woman had a sharp tongue toward the other adults, but she never turned that sharpness against No-Name.

"No, child." Quick Fingers picked at a loose thread in her shawl. "The last of the scouts returned yesterday evening. There's no sign of spring anywhere." As Quick Fingers pulled at the loose thread, a hole unraveled in her shawl, larger and larger. "I think you should leave the village."

For a moment, No-Name thought she must have misheard, but Quick Fingers continued, "People are frightened and looking for someone to blame. The other elders are halfway to believing you're a witch. You won't be safe here much longer."

No-Name's hand shook as she stirred the oatmeal. She stirred more vigorously, hoping Quick Fingers wouldn't notice. No-Name's thoughts fluttered this way and that like a bird that wouldn't settle. How could she leave? Where would she go? Witches were evil, but they were also clever. No-Name wasn't clever, so she couldn't be a witch, could she? Could you be a witch without knowing it?

Quick Fingers took a folded sheet of paper out of her pocket. "You remember visiting my sister in Amberstock last summer?"

No-Name nodded, not trusting her voice. They had been to Quick Fingers' sister's once a month until Quick Fingers slipped in the autumn and hurt her leg.

"I've written a letter to my sister. If you take it to her, I think she'll let you stay with her awhile. Come here, child."

When No-Name came over, Quick Fingers pressed the piece of paper into No-Name's hand.

"It wasn't your fault," said Quick Fingers. The old woman reached forward and hugged No-Name tightly as if she didn't want to let go. "It wasn't your fault your mother died, child."

And that was the strangest thing that happened that day. No-Name kept turning the words over and



over in her mind, but they didn't fit. No-Name knew she was too greedy and impatient. Before the village started rationing food, she had the fattest cheeks. She loved eating anything sweet. People said that even before No-Name learned to walk, she kept asking when the next meal would be. How could it not be No-Name's fault if she had ripped at her mother in her hurry to find food?

At the end of the day, after the last of her chores, No-Name crept through the shadowy dark into her stall at the end of the barn. She didn't need any light to find the pile of her treasures, wedged behind a jutting plank. Surrounded by the warm animal smell, the soft chomping of the donkey, the familiar bulk of the cows off to one side, No-Name went through her collection.

A broken shoelace from one of her father's boots. A handkerchief Quick Fingers had given her. Last and best of all, her mother's sewing kit: a small needle, a large needle, and eight spools of thread. No-Name had never used the sewing kit, wanting to preserve her only keepsake of her mother. One by one, No-Name added her treasures to the bundle of things to take away with her.

Then she wrapped one arm around the bundle, wriggled herself into a comfortable position in the hay, and fell asleep before she finished saying her prayers.

QUICK FINGERS HAD TOLD NO-Name to set off as early as possible, without telling anyone else. So when No-Name woke just before sunrise the next morning, she

delayed only to refill the water trough for the animals.

No-Name tramped along the low ridge at the start of the footpath to Amberstock. Once she looked back at the village. In the moonlight, the houses seemed like small black creatures squatting on the ground. A solitary lantern flickered faintly from a window.

Slowly the sky lightened. Birds called out warnings as No-Name approached. Bits of sunlight caught on snow and frost, burning with rainbow colors. No-Name's breath puffed out white in front of her.

The footpath dipped down into a forest. Carefully No-Name watched for the markings, the V-shaped notches carved into the tree trunks just above the height of her head. Without their leaves, the trees looked lonely and cold. No-Name whistled to let the trees know they had company, but they still looked sad.

Towards noon, snow clouds rolled in from the east. As the first flakes floated down, No-Name hurried along as fast as she could. Maybe she could reach the next village before the worst of the storm. She went so quickly, she forgot to watch for the notches marking the way. When she paused to catch her breath, she could barely see three paces in front of her.

She ran from one tree to another, searching for marks, but didn't find any. The snow dragged at her boots and weighed heavy on her clothes. She tried to make out her footprints so that she could turn back, but she had crossed this way and that in her confusion, and she didn't know which tracks to follow.

A branch snagged her boot, and No-Name fell face down in the snow. In front of her loomed a huge tree with a crack down its side. Something moved within the crack.

No-Name inched forward. A squirrel and two chipmunks chittered at her from a large hollow in the tree. "I'm sorry," said No-Name as she squeezed herself into the hollow. "Please excuse me."

The chipmunks and the squirrel backed away, but stayed inside the shelter of the hollow. No-Name squirmed until no branches dug into her back. Undoing her bundle, she took out the loaf of bread and took a big bite. The animals started nervously at every movement No-Name made as she chewed. Both chipmunks looked bedraggled, and the squirrel's tail drooped as if he was too worn out to hold it upright. No-Name lifted the loaf for another bite, stopped, and instead tore the loaf into quarters. Solemnly she pushed one piece toward each of the animals, keeping the last quarter for herself.

The animals hesitated for a moment before plunging teeth-first into the feast.

Outside, the snow flakes fell so close together that No-Name could not see the nearest other tree.

"Thank you for offering me shelter," said No-Name, patting the tree trunk. Quick Fingers had always taught No-Name to be polite. No-Name wasn't quite sure if trees ever deliberately helped people, but the tree had caught her foot so that she saw the hollow. That was the closest to a present she'd ever been given by anyone other than Quick

Fingers.

No-Name wanted to give the tree a present in return, but in her greed she had already eaten her quarter of the bread. The chipmunks and the squirrel were still busy nibbling, but she didn't want to take away their food.

A pile of yellow leaves lined the bottom of the hollow. No-Name picked one up. Papery to the touch, the leaf had thin, deep-red veins that stood out against the yellow. The tree must have looked beautiful with such fine leaves.

On impulse, No-Name took out the yellow spool of thread from her mother's sewing kit, broke off a short piece of thread, and tied the leaf to a branch jutting out to her left.

The leaf turned slowly, as if stretching to show off its colors.

No-Name clapped her hands in delight. "Thank you again."

She closed her eyes and quickly drifted toward sleep, but something rustled at her feet. She opened one eye reluctantly. The pair of chipmunks ran out of the pile of leaves as she stirred.

Of course, thought No-Name, still half asleep. If the tree liked having one leaf back, how much it would like having more. She took out the yellow thread again, and picked up another leaf. Carefully she attached the leaf to the branch. One by one, she bound the leaves to the tree. Each time the yellow spool of thread looked a little emptier, and a quiet sadness seeped into No-Name. But the tree had sheltered her, and she did not begrudge it the gift. Besides, she still had the seven other spools of thread un-



touched.

When she fell asleep the second time, the yellow thread had run out. But every twig, every jutting knob in the hollow was covered in yellow leaves, dancing and stretching in the cold air.

THE AIR IN NO-NAME'S DREAMS smelled odd, a sweetness there that No-Name had almost forgotten. She wrinkled her nose, trying to work out what it could be, rising toward wakefulness. She opened one eye.

A curtain of tightly wrapped green buds waved above her, surmounted by pale cream blossoms.

No-Name rubbed her eyes hard, but the vision remained. She poked her head out of the hollow. Thin grass blades poked through a layer of snow. Above her the tree swayed gently, its branches a crush of cream blossoms.

A squirrel stared down at her for a second, then disappeared in a scurry of feet and tail.

No-Name clambered out of the tree, clutching her bundle of belongings. A few paces ahead, the rest of the forest lay blanketed in snow. Branches sagged downward, buried in a thick coat of snow.

Confused, No-Name took a few steps forward. The further she went from the tree with the hollow, the colder the air grew.

A miniature snow-shower cascaded around her. Glancing up, she spotted a sparrow perched on a branch, something red clutched in its beak. The redness fell down toward her: an oval leaf. It settled silently onto the snow.

No-Name stared at the leaf for a long time. Her hand crept to her bundle, then away again. All her mother's yellow thread was already gone. She didn't want to lose the red thread too.

She glanced up. The sparrow perched above her. She saw it shivering despite its puffed-out feathers. If the winter continued, even the forest couldn't shelter all the birds and animals.

No-Name took out the spool of red thread, stooped down and lifted the leaf.

IN THE YEARS AFTERWARD, THE forest where No-Name sheltered during the blizzard was renamed the Thousand-Color Wood. Even in winter, snow never fell there, and a tapestry of orange, gold, and red leaves carpeted the forest floor. The year of the Long Winter, and every year thereafter, spring came to the Thousand-Color Wood before the surrounding countryside, and spread out from there like ripples from a pebble tossed into a pond.

As for No-Name, she grew up a tall, graceful woman, just a little plumper than average. Over the years, she traveled widely and had many splendid adventures. Once a thief stole the pouch No-Name wore about her neck as she slept, thinking that such a famous adventurer must surely keep treasure there. But all the thief found inside was a broken shoelace, a handkerchief, and a sewing kit with eight empty spools. He threw down the pouch in disgust, and No-Name found it safely the next morning. ❁





# Just for the Beautiful

Marlene Wurfel

*illustrated by Jeff Doten*

**T**HOSE PEOPLE LOOKED SO MUCH LIKE US. IT was impossible not to read a romantic, ill-fated ancestry along the lines of their backs and up the sweep of their brows. We didn't send them back. They arrived in one of our own salvaged ships. It was too old to trace in the archives, but there could be no doubt. Our ships always return home.

There were a little more than a thousand of them. They spoke a different language, but we knew what they wanted. To be sure, once a people have putrefied their own waters and poisoned their own atmospheres, they arrive in spewing ships, seeking refuge.

Our planet is beautiful. I say this without bias. It is beautiful because it is healthy, and we will keep it so. We understand balance. We understand wholeness. We know our limits and do not overstep them. It has not been an easy road for us; the archives are full of our sufferings. Others could learn from us. They choose to copy themselves until their Mothers can no longer sustain them. Peoples ugly and alien; they could learn from us. Instead, they seek refuge. We turn them away.

But those people, an influx of a thousand, seemed a manageable thing. They looked so much like us, and worse, their children just like ours. How could we refuse them? We could not, of course, give them their own common. This would be a disturbance. But placing one amongst every fifth common, this is a manageable thing. When s/he arrived, Oak and Grass-hopper were retired in our common. An unexpected thing, but manageable. And how could they complain about an end to their labors?

The breeders were not as fortunate. A newcomer in any common requires that one birth be cancelled. We cannot allow our population to grow beyond its boundaries. This is how we keep our planet healthy, wholesome. We seek balance, always. It is only right that we choose the least perfect breeders for reassignment. This requires a reorganization of all the couples. We must match the least perfect with the most perfect. Thistle and Bear are reassigned. They are angry and disappointed. But they try not to act out their feelings. They try to welcome the newcomer, to act in a commonly manner.

S/he is a disturbance. A stone cast in a lake. The ripples travel away from the center, diminish as they get larger, until the lake turns to glass. Nature seeks balance. We name hir Stone.

We reorganize the work assignments. Stone is in hir prime. S/he is vigorous and strong. Pine dries the berries and chops the wood. Sand works in the cooking tent and tends the electrical wiring. Moth cuts the herbs and runs the messages. So on, and so forth, we ripple and smooth. I am Stone's partner in the medicine groves. It has been my seventh-day job for many years. Stone becomes my apprentice.

It does not take long to realize what is wrong with Stone. S/he will not turn himself into a man. Work shifts are deranged wherever s/he is assigned men's work. Even in the lumber house, s/he remains a woman. Messages are run in. All the changed commons are upset. We assumed s/he was female to re-

main supplicant to the members of hir new Common. But word arrives that there are male newcomers who also refuse the change. In Fjord Common, a man tried to diaper a baby. In Foothills Common, a woman tried to light a fire.

We form a government to discuss it. Even here, beside the drummer, s/he remains female in a circle of men. We do not know if s/he won't change or if s/he can't change.

S/he cannot speak our language. Barley suggests we demonstrate for hir. This is simple. We concentrate. I think of the soft. I think of the round. I feel my penis retreat into my body. It hardens and expands into thick and undulating walls of muscle. I feel my womb open up inside me, and my testicles shrink and bloom into ovaries. A twinge as my fallopian tubes form and travel away from my uterus.

I open my eyes. We laugh to find ourselves a government of women. But Stone is aghast. Hir eyes are wide and terrified. Hir hands are flung and flattened behind hir, as if s/he intends to scuttle away backwards, out of the circle, like a crab. Because we are women, we comfort hir. We smooth down hir hair and massage hir knotted back. Duck leads hir out of the circle and towards the dining hall. S/he will not be comforted.

We make the change so that we may continue our government. We understand now, that s/he is incapable of the change. This is a disturbance. This will require much deliberation. We cannot force another in the common to remain a male for the rest of hir life. This



would balance out Stone's femaleness, and would seem to be the simplest solution, but to what end? We would have two unbalanced individuals instead of just one. And who would volunteer to spend the rest of hir life as a man?

If we reassign Stone exclusively to women's work, we can stagger the balancing through many. This is what we decide. Sunflower mends the clothes and drives the lumber. Walking Stick feeds the infants and fuels the train. Fox runs the butter and turns the compost. So on, and so forth, we ripple and smooth.

My work in the medicine grove is deranged. With Stone as my apprentice, I must remain male throughout the entire workday. I cannot do the watering, which I will miss. I cannot do the drying or the clerking. S/he needs to be taught so much. And how can I teach hir female tasks without showing?

S/he is an irritation, a disturbance. S/he does not know the limits of hir body. S/he lifts a heavy basket of nuts without regard to hir femaleness. S/he touches the pruning sheers. S/he touches the hoe.

Teaching hir words: spring and fall, sun and moon, solstice, balance. S/he asks me for a word I do not know.

"You excitement. You make beautiful. All of us. We move for the fun! We eat so much, then we move for the fun and make the beautiful noise all the night!"

S/he is unbalanced. I do not want to love hir so much, but s/he makes me laugh when I am least prepared. Hir eyes grow large and intense at

things s/he has not seen before.

Hir body is beautiful. Hir shoulders are round and strong. When s/he lifts some small thing, hir hand swoops down like a bird and hir body follows through without pause. Hir tone changes from masculine to feminine without respect to hir body.

S/he will say, "Pass me that shovel; I will move the dirt." But hir breasts will remain defiant and obstretrive through hir tunic. S/he is an oddity. S/he is Stone.

Hir sexuality bulges and blazes. S/he seems to be always ready to mate. Hir hips swing provocatively. S/he makes suggestions with hir eyes, with hir brown and graceful neck. But there is something worse about hir. S/he has a smell. A woman scent that catches me off guard when I don't know s/he's near. I want to report hir to the council. I want to suggest having hir scent glands removed. But I don't. This is my first transgression.

It is before the third harvest when I pleasure hir for the first time. Our day's work is done and we trifle with small tasks to pass the hours. I add sand to the potted cactuses. S/he weaves a circle from willow branches.

"Why?" I ask.

S/he shrugs. S/he cannot find the word.

"Because of the beautiful," s/he says. "Just for the beautiful."

"No," I say. "This is not commonly." I take the branches and straighten them. I bind them with twine and place them in the kindling box. S/he grows sullen and angry. We have been prepared for this kind of behavior. Messages

have been run in. In Eucalyptus Common, a man formed a fish shape out of clay and then painted it with many colors when it hardened. In Small Creek Common, a woman picked wild flowers, without medicine, and put them into a container of water in the dining tent.

"You do not like me," Stone says.

"I do," I say.

"Show me," s/he says. "Show me how you like me."

I want to tell hir to wait for the leisure hours, but I cannot resist. I let a woman instruct me while I am in male form. This is my second transgression. And then I lose count. I reach out to feel the length of hir smooth arm. I pull hir towards me and kiss hir neck and hir face. When I caress hir woman parts, hir scent grows stronger. I cannot stop what I do.

In my sexual pleasure classes as a youth, I excelled. And besides, Stone's body is easy to pleasure. S/he writhes and makes strange sounds. I do not coach hir to behave more womanly. I bring hir to several climaxes, but s/he is never sated.

"Enter me," s/he says. I ignore hir instruction, yet s/he persists.

"We are not breeders," I tell hir.

"We may not." Again, s/he grows sullen and angry. I cannot tolerate hir behavior. I leave hir lying naked and pouting like a child in the medicine groves. I sneak off to my sleeping quarters and do not emerge until the dinner hour.

I ask for a transfer from the groves. I am told in the government that it must wait until the seventh harvest. I do not want to create a

disturbance, but I am bothered by Stone.

I pleasure hir many times during our work hours. I am disturbed by my actions, but find it impossible to alter them. It is uncommonly. It is unbalanced. This is what the scent of Stone does to me.

During a graft, I slip and cut my forearm with the sharp blade. Stone places hir mouth on the fresh wound until it stops bleeding.

"It will make a scar like the moon," s/he says.

Indeed, the laceration is a perfect crescent. S/he grabs the grafting knife, which s/he is forbidden to handle, and quickly makes an identical mark on hir own arm. S/he squeals, stupidly, as if surprised that hir own action would cause pain.

I am shocked and confused.

"Why?" I demand. "Why would you do such an inane thing?"

"Now we are same," s/he says.

"Why should we be the same?" I ask.

"Because we are..." s/he searches for the right words, "Because we are the most brothers," s/he says. "Because we are the beautiful heat for each other."

I am ashamed to admit that this is the truth. It is uncommonly. We are not breeders. We are commoners and must behave in a common fashion. We must love each other in equal measures. Fraternity. Solidarity. This "beautiful heat" is wrong. It is unbalanced.

We have an argument. It is irrational and deranged.

"It's not fair," I tell h/er, "It's unbalanced. Why should I always be the man for you? You get so many



orgasms. You get all the pleasure, and for me it's just work." I say this, though I know it's not true. I enjoy pleasuring Stone. S/he laughs at me.

"Why did you not before say this?" S/he kisses my thigh, and I know I should stop hir. S/he is touching me like a man, and I am lying on my back. S/he reaches with one hand to pinch my nipple between two fingers and indelicately slides hir mouth around my penis. It is horrible and perverse but I cannot stop hir. I try to change into a wo/man but it is impossible with my penis so hard and swollen.

"Stop," I think. I am angry. I want to strike hir. I want to push hir away.

"Stop!"

S/he looks up at me in surprise. Then s/he narrows hir eyes and laughs at me again. I am incensed. I am angry.

S/he slides hir hips on top of mine and holds my arms splayed on either side of me. Before I can guess what s/he will do next, s/he takes me inside hir and behaves in a fashion more unwomanly than I could ever have imagined. I am paralyzed with pleasure despite myself. Despite the common. I ejaculate inside hir. I have never done this before. I am not a breeder; neither is Stone.

I hate myself. I am unfit for the common, and s/he has made me so. I must bide my time until we are transferred to separate work assignments. Two weeks now, until the seventh harvest, and I fortify myself by thinking hateful thoughts of Stone. Even so, I cannot save myself from moments of tenderness.

Hir laughter, the swing of hir shining black hair against hir smooth brown back; these things fuel the "beautiful heat" in me. I love Stone like a breeder. I love hir more than anyone in the common. I know it is wrong, but I cannot help thinking of hir when my tasks become redundant. I catch hir scent when s/he is near. Before I fall asleep at night, I imagine Stone behaving...like s/he behaved before, and I hate myself.

I seek balance, but fail. When I am a man, I behave more manishly than is appropriate. I try to compensate for my transgressions. I command the wo/men with unusual aggression. This behavior does not go unnoticed; it is brought up in government. I do not deny it, but I do not explain my motivations. I tell no one what I have done.

When we are in the medicine groves, I turn myself into a woman whenever Stone comes near me. It is not appropriate, but it is better than what I let happen before.

"Is this how you want it?" S/he teases me. S/he behaves like a man. "Who will do the pleasuring now?"

S/he reaches between my legs and s/he grabs at my mound. S/he presses hir breasts against my turned back and seethes hir hot breath in my ear. I strike hir, another transgression. I am deranged.

After the harvest, Stone is assigned work in the cotton looms. I am assigned the furnace, and the making of the children's tunics. I think I will be able to right my unbalance. I think I will be able to put everything behind me, but it becomes worse.

In the winter, Stone's stomach swells. S/he is unashamed. When the government demands an explanation s/he is surprised at our ignorance.

"I will have a baby," s/he says. "A spring baby," as if this is the most harmless and mundane information s/he could ever offer.

"Stone," mutters Bear. "We should have named hir Boulder." Nobody laughs; this is precisely what we do. Boulder is blissfully unaware. S/he thinks hir new name is in reference to hir growing belly. S/he is stupid. We invent a new word for hir—lunatic.

Boulder does not hesitate to identify me as the sire of hir child. I would have had to admit it; I could not withhold this information from the common. But still, hir easy betrayal hurts me.

The Common is shocked and angry. Persons hesitate to touch me, to look me in the eye. This is not our way. We do not ostracize each other like a pack of idiot wolves. But my common is unable to forgive me. They are unable to treat me as we are all accustomed to treating each other. I have breached every common trust.

Messages are run in. All the commons are in an uproar over unscheduled matings. It is understood that the newcomers excrete powerful sex hormones. They are like dogs. They have no respect for the common ways.

I am the first to agree that they should be exiled. They are a disturbance. They have made us unbalanced, unwholesome, uncommon. With hir far away, I am sure my tor-

ment will end. The common will smooth over. They may forget, forgive my transgressions.

With Boulder gone, I will be able to put hir from my mind. I will fall asleep without thinking of hir scent, of the shine and curve of hir hips, of Stone.

The ship they arrived in is reworked to accommodate their exile. A man from Fjord Common is trained to command it. It is stocked with provisions we all work harder to provide. They are instructed to leave on the solstice, a good day to mark the end of an era of disturbance, to welcome balance back into our lives.

On this day, I am milking the cows. It is my third-day job. I try not to think about hir, I try to think of nothing at all. I pull down a bucket from the line and find something unusual inside. It is a jade carving of Stone holding a baby to hir breast. It is perfect and smooth. A note is tied to it with a blade of grass.

"Just for the beautiful," it says.

I do not know how s/he makes me do things that I do not want to do, but I abandon my workstation and run towards the launch.

S/he is sitting on the bottom stair, making circles across hir round belly with the flat of hir hand. I stop and I stare. The sun casts a long shadow of Stone across the concrete of the launch pad. The smooth tissue of hir crescent scar catches the light and twinkles at me like a tiny moon. S/he looks up and hir eyes brighten.

"Willow!" s/he says. "I knew you would come with." S/he throws hir



arms around me and kisses my forehead. I am shaken to realize how long it has been since anyone has touched me at all. I have grown used to being an outcast. I want to weep for the pleasure of hir arms around me.

S/he takes my hand and leads me into the ship. The door seals and closes behind us. My bowels tighten and I feel my body hum with tension. I am unbalanced, lunatic. The newcomers are naked and smiling. Hands and lips press against my face, my arms, and my back.

"You are welcome," they say. "You are a beautiful brother."

When the ship takes off, they begin to holler and stamp their feet. An old woman makes a sound unlike anything I have ever heard with hir throat. This is their language, I think, and then they all join in.

Their voices play like children. Some are high, some are low, and it is all beautiful. I understand now, what Stone meant by "the beautiful noise."

They move in strange ways. Random patterns. They swoop and they circle. They reach for nothing at all. Stone puts hir arms around me and squeezes.

"I will take care of you," s/he says. But how can s/he? I am not a child, and s/he is forever a woman. S/he speaks nonsense, but somehow, I know it is the truth.

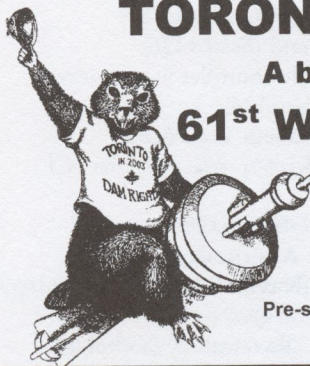
Stone takes the carving s/he gave me from my hands and ties it to a piece of leather. S/he places it around my neck. The jade is cool and smooth against my chest.

I do not ask hir why. I know the reason for hir actions. Stone does this just for the beautiful. ♣

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## Congratulations to the 1999 Aurora Award Winners!

Winners are listed first, in bold type

### **Best Long-Form Work in English (1997-98)**

**Darwinia, Robert Charles Wilson (Tor, Jun/98)**

*Someplace To Be Flying*, Charles de Lint (Tor, Feb/98)

*Flesh and Gold*, Phyllis Gotlieb (Tor, Feb/98)

*Sailing To Sarantium*, Guy Gavriel Kay (Viking, Sept/98)

*Dracul: An Eternal Love Story*, Nancy Kilpatrick (Lucard Publishing, Oct/98)

Factoring Humanity, Robert J. Sawyer (Tor, June/98)

### **Best Long-Form Work in French (1997-98)**

**Corps-machines et rêves d'anges, Alain Bergeron (Vents d'Ouest, 97)**

*Un fantôme d'amour*, René Beaulieu (Ashem, 97)

*Les Voyageurs de la nuit*, René Beaulieu (Éditions de l'A Venir, 97)

*Coeur de fer*, Joël Champetier (Orion, 97)

*Samiva de Frée*, Francine Pelletier (Alire, 98)

*Secrets*, Esther Rochon (Alire, 98)

### **Best Short-Form Work in English (1998)**

**"Hockey's Night in Canada," Edo van Belkom (Arrowdreams)**

"Blind Date," David Chato (*On Spec* Fall/98)

"Craphound," Cory Doctorow (*SF Age* Mar/98)

"Sunny Fields," David Shotgyn, (*Parsec* Spring/98)

"New Year's Eve," Douglas Smith (*Interzone* Feb/98)

### **Best Short-Form Work in French (1998)**

**«La Demoiselle sous la lune», Guy Sirois (Fantasy, Fleuve Noir)**

«Uriel et Kornilla», Alain Bergeron (*Solaris* 127)

«Nocturne», Frédéric Durand (*Solaris* 126)

«Les Corbeaux immortels rêvent-ils de contrôler le monde?»,

Hugues Morin (*Solaris* 124)

«Aurélié sous les étoiles», Élisabeth Vonarburg

(*Un lac, un fjord: paysages imaginaires, paysages réels: rencontres*, JCL)

### **Best Work in English (Other) (1998)**

**Arrowdreams: An Anthology of Alternative Canadas,**

**Mark Shainblum & John Dupuis, eds. (Nuage Editions) (anthology)**

"Ask Mr. Science," Al Betz (*On Spec*) (column)

*Divine Realms*, Susan MacGregor, ed. (Ravenstone) (anthology)

*Northern Dreamers*, Edo van Belkom (Quarry Press) (non-fiction book)

*On Spec*, Jena Snyder, general ed. (Copper Pig Writers' Society) (magazine)

*Parsec*, Chris Krejlggaard, ed. (Parsec Publishing Co) (magazine)

*TransVersions*, Sally McBride & Dale L. Sproule, eds.

(Island Specialty Reports) (magazine)



**Aurora winners,  
continued...**

**Meilleur ouvrage en français (Autre) (1998)**

«L'entreprise de Frankenstein», John Dupuis (*Solaris* 126)

Jean-Louis Trudel, critiques (*Solaris* 124-127)

«Celle qui venait d'ailleurs: Francis Stevens», Guy Sirois (*Solaris* 125)  
*imagine...*, Jean-Marc Gouanvic, réd. (*Les Imaginoïdes*)

«L'Oiseau de Feu: Quelques opinions et considérations sur  
L'Oiseau de Feu de Jacques Brossard après la lecture

du quatrième volume de la série»,

René Beaulieu (*Solaris* 126)

«Providence et Québec: à une lune de distance»,

Esther Rochon (*Solaris* 125)

*Solaris*, Hugues Morin, réd. (Les Compagnons à temps perdu)

**Artistic Achievement**

**Jean-Pierre Normand, Montreal, QC**

James Beveridge, Edmonton, AB

Janet L. Hetherington, Ottawa, ON

D.L. Sproule, Toronto, ON

Larry Stewart, Ottawa, ON

Ronn Sutton, Ottawa, ON

**Fan Achievement (Fanzine)**

**Warp, Lynda Pelley, ed. (MonSFFA) (clubzine)**

*Northern Fusion*, Carol Weekes, ed. (AEM Publishing) (magazine)

*Opuntia*, Dale Speirs, ed. (fanzine)

*OSFS Statement*, M. B. Wadsworth, ed. (Ottawa SF Society) (clubzine)

*Sol Rising*, (Friends of the Merrill Collection) (newsletter)

**Fan Achievement (Organizational)**

**Ann Methe (Con\*cept 98, Chair)**

Chris Chartier (Warp 9 and British Television Fanclub of Quebec)

Stephen Christian (Toronto Trek 12, Chair)

Andrew Gurudata (Toronto Trek 12, Programming)

Cindy Huckle (Primedia 98)

**Fan Achievement (Other)**

**Janet L. Hetherington (Co-curator, 60 Years of Superman  
exhibit at Nepean Museum)**

The Fed-Ex Files: "Moxie" (MonSFFA) (video)

Lloyd Penney (fan writing)

*The Return of X the Unknown*, Aaron Yorgason, ed. (anthology)

Larry Stewart (entertainer)

## ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

## AUTHORS

ROBERT H. BEER ("Waking Day") lives and writes in Fergus, Ontario with a very understanding wife and two little distractions, plus a cat who shows what life *can* be like, if you only believe. Robert has become something of a fixture in the small press in recent years, with over a dozen stories in various publications such as *Eternity Online*, *Jackhammer*, *Escape*, *Spaceways Weekly* and *Tales of the Unanticipated*. One of his stories also appeared in the anthology *North of Infinity*, but this is his first professional-rate sale. You can visit his web site at: <<http://www.mirror.org/robert.beer>>.

CANDAS JANE DORSEY ("How Many Angels Can Dance"), author of *Black Wine* and *Machine Sex and other stories*, is a full-time writer, editor and publisher. Most recently, she edited *Tesseract's* with John Clute, completed and delivered a new novel, *A Paradigm of Earth*, and will have a book of mainstream and slipstream stories published by NeWest Press in spring 2000.

TANYA HUFF ("Now Entering the Ring") lives and writes in rural Ontario sharing not quite enough space with her partner, five cats, and an unintentional chihuahua. After sixteen fantasy novels, her next book, *Valor's Choice*, is a space opera and will be out in April 2000 from DAW.

DOUGLAS IVISON ("Smashing Windows") is currently completing his PhD in English Literature at the Université de Montréal, and is also editing an upcoming volume of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography on Canadian Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers*. He has previously published short fiction and poetry in a few small literary magazines, including the *Carleton Arts Review*, as well as a number of academic articles and book reviews.

MARY SOON LEE ("No-Name in the Long Winter") grew up in London, but now lives in Pittsburgh, where she runs a writers' group called the Pittsburgh Wordwrights. She has had 45 stories published, including work in *F&SF*, *Amazing Stories*, *Interzone*, and *The Year's Best SF #4*. Her first child, William Chye Lee-Moore, was born on April 22, 1999.

LESLIE LUPIEN ("The Fermi Paradox") A transplant from Los Angeles, Les lives happily in Montréal with his Québécois wife. This is his second appearance in *On Spec* ("Queen's Move," Winter 1998). He has a story scheduled to appear in the next issue of *Terra Incognita*.

DERRYL MURPHY (Photos: "ConSpec '99") lives with his wife and two boys in Edmonton. His fiction has appeared in *On Spec* and *On Spec: The First Five Years*, two of the *Tesseract's* books, *Prairie Fire*, *TransVersions*, *Arrowdreams*, *Time Machines*, *Photo Life*, *Northern Suns*, and *Realms of Fantasy*. He is also the current Canadian Regional Director for SFWA, the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.

JOE MURPHY ("The Fireweed Eldorado") lives with his wife, Veleta; their three dogs, Lovecraft, Dickens, and Lafferty; and their two cats, Plato, and Kafka, in Fairbanks Alaska. A member of SF&FWA, HWA, and also a graduate of Clarion West '95, he says, "Fantasy of all kinds, as well as science fiction and horror have always been a big part of my life." You can find his work in: *A Horror A Day: 365 Scary Stories*, *Cthulhu's Heirs*, *Demon Sex*,



100 *Crafty Cat Crimes* (anthologies); *Aberrations, Bardic Runes, Bloodsongs, Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine, Midnight Zoo, Mystic Fiction* (3), *Plot, Scavenger's Newsletter, Shadow Sword, Silver Web, Sirius Visions, Space and Time, Symphonie's Gifts, Talebones, Transversions* (print magazines); *E-scape, Gothic Net, Papyrus, Outside, Spaceways Weekly, Storisiende Verlag, Through Darkling Glass* (E-zines). Twelve of his previously published stories can be found at Alexandria Digital Literature ([www.alexlit.com](http://www.alexlit.com)).

SHERRY D. RAMSEY ("The Halfhigh Vexation") is a former lawyer who, after five years of legal practice, decided that the problems of her characters were more interesting (and easier to solve) than those of her clients. She has an ongoing love affair with reading and writing science fiction and fantasy, and lives in Cape Breton, N.S., with her husband and five-year-old daughter. Her work has appeared in *Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine*, online, and is scheduled to appear in an upcoming anthology.

LINDA SMITH ("Pilgrims at the Well") grew up in Calgary, where she obtained a B.A. from the University of Calgary. Since then, she has received a Library Science degree from the University of Alberta and an M.A. from the Center for the Study of Children's Literature at Simmons College, Boston. She now lives in Grande Prairie, where she works as a children's librarian. While she enjoys reading and writing many genres, her special love is fantasy. So far, she has published six short stories and two novels, *Wind Shifter* and *Sea Change*, the first two books in a fantasy trilogy for young people.

RANDY SCHROEDER ("The Skeleton Crows") lives at the top of a high hill in Calgary, with his pet crow, also named Randy. He was once fifth runner-up for the Martian equivalent of the Nebula (the crow, not the author).

EDWARD WILLETT ("ConSpec '99") is the author of three young adult science fiction and fantasy novels, most recently *Andy Nebula: Interstellar Rock Star* (Roussan Publishers, Montreal). His short fiction has appeared in *TransVersions* and *On Spec*, among other magazines. He's also the author of several computer books and children's science books. Ed and his wife, Margaret Anne, live in Regina, where Ed also writes a weekly science column for the *Leader Post* and the CBC and performs regularly in local musicals and plays. You can visit Ed on-line at <[www3.sk.sympatico.ca/ewillett](http://www3.sk.sympatico.ca/ewillett)>.

MARLENE WURFEL ("Just for the Beautiful") is a playwright, comedienne, and freelance writer from Alberta. She has written and performed for television, at the Edmonton Fringe festival, and her work appears in various consumer magazines including *Z*. She won the Marie Barton Award for Short Fiction and has graduated from the University of Alberta. She cannot do a hundred push-ups, but she can do some. Marlene loves Brent and they are getting hitched in the summer of 2000.

#### ARTISTS

JEAN-PIERRE NORMAND (Cover and "The Fermi Paradox") Please see page 7.

JAMES BEVERIDGE ("Smashing Windows" and "The Fireweed Eldorado") is still creating aesthetic turmoil whenever he is given the opportunity. He perpetrates this with ink, paint (hand & airbrush) and pixel. As well, he has been building cut-scene backgrounds for Prelusion's new game. Please see his website: <<http://members.home.net/jimbeveridge>> or contact him at <ICQ:7069051>.

JEFF DOTEN (“Just for the Beautiful”) is an artist who specializes in science fiction and fantasy illustration. His main concern as an artist is to create images that have an emotional resonance for the viewer. Past clients include Story Book Theatre, Edge Publishing, the Royal Tyrrell Museum of Paleontology, *On Spec*, and private commissions. His work has been featured in a number of galleries and conventions including the WorldCon and the Society for Vertebrate Paleontologists Art Show. Jeff Doten’s Illustration Studio <<http://www.cadvision.com/dotenj/studio.htm>>

LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK (“How Many Angels Can Dance,” and “No-Name in the Long Winter”) has been illustrating and cartooning professionally for almost 20 years. Her artwork has appeared in numerous publications across North America and she is a two-time recipient of the Aurora Award for Artistic Achievement. Lynne lives in Coquitlam, BC with her husband, the lovely and talented Steve Fahnestalk. You can reach her at <[lynnef@graphic-designer.com](mailto:lynnef@graphic-designer.com)>.

ADRIAN KLEINBERGEN (“The Halfhigh Vexation” and “Pilgrims at the Well”) was born in 1961 in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. He has been described as a self-styled Renaissance man (no relation to Java man). Besides drawing and painting, he has added sculpture, caricature, writing, costuming, jewelry-making and computer-art to his repertoire of superhuman skills. Adrian has always felt the need to make art, whether it was for fun, profit or both. He ran his own comic publishing company and was the primary artist and columnist for the internationally-acclaimed magic magazine, *The Servante*. He has constructed prototype models for a local model-manufacturing company and specializes in 3-D illustration. He also does artwork on commission, draws and inks comics professionally and is a cosmically cool guy. (Handsome, too.) Check out <<http://www.geocities.com/~devon7/Adrian>> to see more of his stuff.

RON LIGHTBURN (“Waking Day”) has: illustrated 5 picture books, won 4 national illustration awards; exhibited in 3 New York Society of Illustrators gallery shows; illustrated 2 covers for the Tesseract anthology series; illustrated 1 cover for *Heavy Metal* magazine; flown in 0 space shuttle missions. Ron has spent the past summer watering his new lawn in Nova Scotia.

You won’t believe how PETER MACDOUGALL (“The Skeleton Crows”) gets his illustrations done when he is on the road! Lets just say it requires doing the illustration in traditional media, faxing it to Vancouver, getting it e-mailed back to him, and finally touching it up by computer before e-mailing it to *On Spec*. But, hey, it works! Isn’t technology amazing? He is looking forward to the time when he won’t have to be quite so ingenious. His wife is impressed and his kids would be too if they had a clue. Look at some of his other work at his web site: <<http://home.istar.ca/~pem/>>.

RONN SUTTON (“Now Entering the Ring”) is currently pencilling his seventeenth assignment on *Elvira, Mistress of the Dark* for American company Claypool Comics. He resides in Ottawa with writer/artist Janet L. Hetherington and recently did a number of color and b&w illustrations for the December/January issue of *Saturday Night* magazine. ♣



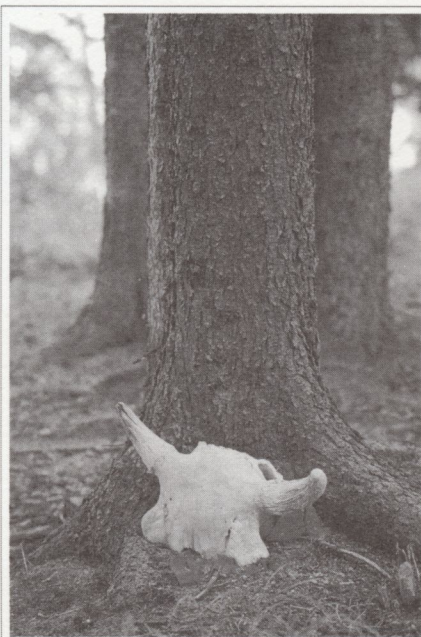
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