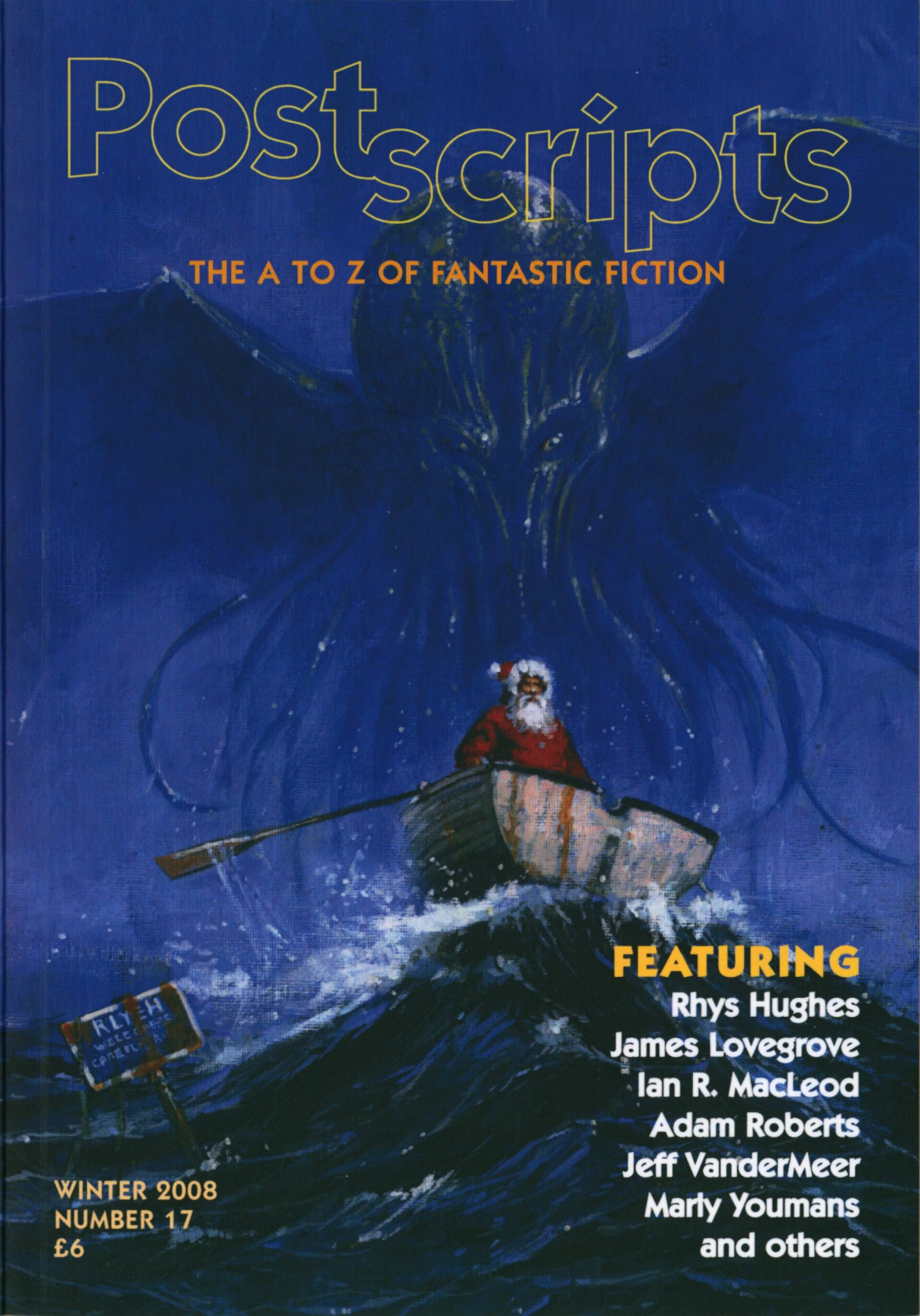
# Postscripts

THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION



**FEATURING**

Rhys Hughes
James Lovegrove
Ian R. MacLeod
Adam Roberts
Jeff VanderMeer
Marly Youmans
and others

WINTER 2008
NUMBER 17
£6

# Postscripts

WINTER 2008 NUMBER 17

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*Cover art by Edward Miller*

*Interior ilustrations by James Hannah* (Pages 8, 74 & 135)

*Peter Crowther*
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*Alligator Tree Graphics*
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*Postscripts* is published quarterly by PS Publishing Ltd.

Publication of *Postscripts* the magazine will cease with this issue. Publication of *Postscripts* the quarterly anthology will commence with issue 18, due out in March /April 2009. All exisiting subscriptions will be honoured—if you're already a subscriber, you need not do anything. New subscribers should see the website for new rates.

Printed by the MPG Books Group in the UK



THE A TO Z OF FANTASTIC FICTION

*Over the course of his 20-year (so far) career, James Lovegrove has published nine novels, four novellas, 32 short stories, six books for reluctant readers, a four-volume fantasy series for teenagers, and countless reviews and pieces of journalism. Due to see print in the next year or so are a further novel, a second short-story collection, and six more reluctant readers titles. James is currently contracted for three more novels and is a regular contributor to the books pages of the* Financial Times. *He lives in sunny Eastbourne on the south coast of England with his wife Lou, his sons Monty and Theo, and his cat Ozzy. Writing the editorial for this edition of* Postscripts *enabled him to get a lot off his chest, and he is a calmer, saner and marginally less bald person as a result.*

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# Bibliodiversity

## James Lovegrove

Forgive me if I'm about to ramble here. I'm sure that by the end I will have made a point. Possibly even a good one.

But have you walked into a high street bookstore lately, and walked out again half an hour later empty-handed and disappointed? You know, you've got a few spare quid on you, you need something to read, you've no idea what you're looking for but you'll recognise it when you see it . . .

Only, you don't see it. That book you're after, with its indefinable, ineffable something, the one it seems you've been waiting your whole life to discover? Not there.

What is there is a horde of serial killer novels, stacked high like corpses in a basement. And a dozen pallid Dan Brown clones with titles along the lines of *The Nebuchadnezzar Conundrum*. And a hundred pastel-toned chick lit offerings about the agony of high heels and, to a lesser extent, heartbreak. And any number of post-Potter teen wizardly wand-waving escapades. And a myriad misery memoirs, a.k.a. cryographies, whose authors vie to outdo one another in the level of childhood suffering they endured, not so much a pissing contest as a pissed-on contest. And huge steaming piles of celeb stuff. God, the celeb stuff! So essential to the publicity portfolio of the modern actor/singer/model/human car crash. You can't call yourself famous these days if you don't have a book out. Or, in the case of Katie "Jordan" Price, several books—and I'm sure she's looking forward to reading them sometime, arf arf. Still, at least she's keeping a few ghost writers in gainful employment, along with all those plastic surgeons.

(Brief sidebar. I once knew a crime writer in Chicago in the mid-90s. He told me he'd been offered the opportunity to ghost a novel on behalf of Michael "Lt. Worf

out of Star Trek" Dorn. The deal was, the actor would get $90,000, the author would get $10,000, with the royalties split likewise. In other words, simply for signing a contract and lending his name to the project, Dorn would earn nine times as much as the man who would sweat and toil for weeks to generate the artefact on which that name would appear. Naturally, and admirably, my acquaintance turned the job down. But the moral of the story is: as a ghost writer you're treated like an imaginary, ethereal entity, and should expect to be paid as such.)

What I'm getting at, pre-sidebar, is that the stock in your average modern high street bookstore exhibits a dismaying lack of choice. What's being pushed at the customer is basically more of the same old same old.

Oh, now and then there's a work of maverick genius there, a left-field bestseller that no one saw coming, a quirky word-of-mouth hit that's had its publisher scrabbling to keep up with reprint demand after the initial run vanished abruptly from the warehouse. But this is the exception rather than the rule—the rule being: if people like something, booksellers will insist on foisting upon them 1,001 variations on that theme till they're heartily sick of it.

It's market forces, of course. "Market forces". An oblique way of saying fate, or the herd instinct, or the will of God. A buzzphrase that's the business equivalent of throwing up your pudgy hands and giving a broad shrug and a wry wink. Give 'em what they want. And keep flogging it to them long after they've stopped wanting it.

Except it isn't market forces. It's a collective loss of nerve.

The root of the problem lies, I would submit, in the collapse of the Net Book Agreement fifteen-odd years ago. For non-UK readers, the Net Book Agreement was a gentlemanly collusion between publishers and booksellers whereby the former set book prices and if the latter chose to offer a discount on a title they would no longer be supplied by the publisher in question. It was, on the whole, a mutually beneficial arrangement, bringing profit to both parties. It contributed to the growth of the midlist, those titles which are well regarded, critically acclaimed, but without an instant, easy appeal. It also meant that a publisher had the resources to spend time developing authors, nurturing their work, building them a readership, and fostering their careers. It was a cartel, yes, but a benign one.

With the Agreement gone, the balance of power shifted and the benign cartel was replaced by another, not so benign one. All at once, publishers were no longer in charge of determining what the public might or might not like to read and how much they should pay for it. Booksellers were. And the booksellers decided that what they wanted to do was maximise the volume of stock throughput. They wanted to expand their market share and minimise overheads. They wanted books to become a commodity rather than an art form—washing powder with pages, baked beans with a jacket and spine. The big chains wanted to get bigger and buy

out or bury the smaller chains and the independent retailers. It was a deregulated free-for-all. Booksellers now set prices, and chose what titles they would promote on the basis of commerciality alone. They also considered knowledgeable, literature-loving staff to be a liability rather than an asset (doubtless because discussing books with a customer uses up time, valuable time, time that could otherwise be spent running the laser scanner over the barcode of yet another item of merchandise). They wanted McWorkers, minimum-wage slaves for whom slinging paperbacks across the counter at Borders wasn't much different from slinging paper cups across the counter at Starbucks.

So what we're left with is books being sold as loss leaders at supermarkets, books being discounted so heavily that neither the publisher nor the author makes much in the way of a percentage cut, books being displayed prominently in all branches of a chain only on condition that the publisher stumps up some ridiculous sum, as much as £45,000 for a week's promotion, which chews a significant chunk out of the marketing budget for a lead title.

This has meant, in turn, that the major publishing houses have had to become painfully risk averse and are obliged to focus their attention on product which they feel confident will sell in quantity. The midlist has been squeezed almost into nonexistence, and many authors now feel constrained to turn out formulaic, less innovative work than they otherwise might in order to meet demand and remain in employment.

We all know about biodiversity. We all know that scientists consider a broad range and variety of life forms as vital to the health and survival of an ecosystem. If large numbers of species become extinct, if biodiversity is lost, then the ecosystem is in trouble and could well collapse. This is happening right now in our world, thanks to human activity, our intervention in the balance of nature. It's one of the reasons why the planet is so fucked.

The book trade is facing a similar crisis. The increasing lack of what I shall term bibliodiversity, the gradual disappearance of the less immediately saleable forms of literature, is undermining the wellbeing of the business and threatening its destruction.

I'm writing here not as an author concerned about his own career—I'm doing OK, thank you very much—but as a reader. As someone who's finding it harder and harder to walk down into town and stumble across, almost serendipitously, some unforeseen literary treat. Someone who's thirsting for fiction and nonfiction that is out of the mainstream, sometimes so far removed from the mainstream it's not even in a tributary, it's in a remote alpine spring way above the treeline. Someone who hankers after material that challenges, provokes, refuses to play safe, messes with form and genre, crosses boundaries, experiments, sometimes disappoints, sometimes infuriates, but always does what is least expected and even the polar

opposite of what is expected, while still being highly entertaining, of course. And it's in short supply.

But it is out there. It can be found.

To paraphrase Winston Smith, "If there is hope, it must lie in the small presses and indie imprints."

You already know this, because you are holding a copy of Postscripts in your hand (and no doubt are chafing to get to the end of this editorial so that you can move on to the meat of the magazine, the great stories that follow—not much further to go now, I promise). Most likely you are a subscriber to this esteemed periodical and are therefore aware of the existence of PS and its ilk, not so much publishing houses as publishing cottages, one-man-and-his-QuarkXPress outfits whose aim is not pumping out pap by the bucketload but crafting beautifully presented editions of truly new fiction, novels with novelty, in addition to reissuing established or unjustly neglected classics. Their philosophy isn't big bucks; it's breaking new ground and breaking even, no less, no more.

Such imprints are the obscure creatures who are continuing to keep the literary gene pool deep and ensure bibliodiversity and the future of this industry. They're the hardy little mammals who are in a good position to escape the looming mass extinction and may well evolve into the next dominant species.

They're not easy to track down. Their product can't necessarily be found in malls and pedestrian precincts. Their natural habitat is specialist bookstores on side-streets and weird little one-ended alleyways, and dealer sites on the misty uplands of the internet.

But they exist. And they will breed and multiply. They will thrive, and we will all be better off as a result.



## Coming Soon In Postscripts

Following on from the recent announcement, we can now confirm that Postscripts magazine will cease after issue #17... but put away those hankies, true believers! Postscripts the quarterly anthology will commence in the spring of 2009 with issue #18, a special "new writers" issue as part of our 10th Anniversary celebrations. Just to refresh your memories:

* there'll be more words – instead of our hitherto usual 55-60,000 words, we'll be going for around 70-80,000 (our novella titles generally run 20-40,000);
* the two-column format will change to a full-width format;
* both editions will be hardcover (an unsigned state at £12 and a signed state at £25) so no more paperbacks – and we've got special subscription deals for one, two, three and five-year commitments . . . and all of them post–free!

*Jeff VanderMeer writes, "The vulture story came out of finding the tale related in three sentences on a folklore site. 'Three sentences?' I thought. 'I think it deserves more than that!' . . . As with the other folktales I've retold, I had a great deal of fun writing the story. What these stories have done for me, too, is to better understand the appeal of pure plot. Something that I find useful in my other fiction."*

*Jeff is an award-winning writer with fiction published in over 20 countries. His books, including the bestselling* City of Saints & Madmen, *have made the year's best lists of* Publishers Weekly, LA Weekly, Amazon, the San Francisco Chronicle, *and many more. Considered one of the foremost SF/fantasy writers of his generation, he has worked with rock band The Church,* 30 Days of Night *creator Ben Templesmith, Dark Horse Comics, and Playstation Europe on various projects including music soundtracks and short films. His non-fiction appears regularly in the* Washington Post *and on the Amazon book blog. With his wife Ann (they have been cited by* Boing Boing *as a literary "power couple"), he is also an award-winning editor whose books include the iconic* Steampunk *anthology. VanderMeer is a frequent guest of honour at events around the world, including Bumbershoot (Seattle), Utopiales (France), and the Brisbane Writers Festival (Australia). Current projects include* Booklife: Survival Tips for Twenty-First Century Writers *and the novel* Finch.

# Why the Vulture is Bald

## Jeff VanderMeer

**Based on a Burmese Folktale**

Way back when, once upon a time, when birds could talk and pigs had wings, the Vulture lived a quiet life among the treetops. Vulture was a little slow, but he was also humble, and much liked by the other birds. Once a day, he would have tea in a little bamboo thicket that doubled as a café. He was always polite to the other birds, especially the mynah birds that waited on him in the café.

"How are you today?" he would say to the mynah birds as they hovered around him, putting on his napkin and pouring his tea (rather shakily) into his tea cup.

"We're fine, Vulture," the mynah birds would chirp. "We're always fine. There has never been a day when we've not been fine. But thanks for asking."

"Of course," Vulture would say. "It's only polite of me to do so." And he would tip his cup in their direction, in a salute to their good work.

Then he would return to his treetops, where he would write in his diary, compose music for forty-piece bird orchestras, and philosophize to the empty air. All in his life was balanced and at peace.

However, one day he noticed that he had fewer feathers on his head. At first, he thought nothing of it and went about his daily business much as before. But soon he could not ignore the fact that he was losing feathers.

"What is this?" he asked the hoopoo bird that flitted passed his open-air tree-top apartment one day. He pointed to his balding head.

"Hoo-poo hoo-poo," replied the hoopoo bird, which was its answer to all of life's little problems.

"I rather doubt it," Vulture said. Hoo-poo was no proper answer at all. For one of the first times in his life, he felt the stirrings of irritation in his gullet.

When he flew down to the bamboo café for his tea, he was definitely out of sorts.

As the mynah birds gathered around him, he asked them plaintively, "Have you noticed I'm going bald? Do you know why? Is there some reason? Can I do anything about it?"

The mynah birds all laughed, in a way so congenial and contagious that Vulture found himself jollied back into a good humor.

"Ah, silly Vulture," the mynah birds chirped. "You're just molting. Soon even more of your feathers will fall out, but then they'll all grow back in again."

His good humor evaporated like tea left out for too long in the sun.

"More of them will fall out?!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, but they'll grow back."

"Grow back," he muttered as they served him an after tea snack of sugar-coated mouse bits. "Grow back."

Vulture was not convinced.

Within a week, Vulture had stopped going to the bamboo café. More of his feathers had fallen out, and not only was it more difficult to fly, but he felt ridiculous. He looked old and he looked . . . unfashionable. It was not a word he would have chosen, except that the hoopoo bird, on his daily flit-flit past his home had, for once, used a word other than "hoo-poo"; instead, with a stern and pitiable glance, Vulture could have sworn the hoopoo bird said, "very unfashionable."

So Vulture wrote in his diary and stayed put, and ate whatever was stupid enough to crawl up toward his treetop apartment. Two weeks passed and he lost weight and lost more feathers, and became ever more miserable about his appearance.

When three weeks had passed, the mynah birds visited him, even though it took every bit of strength they had to fly that high.

"You should come back to the café," they chirped at him. "You should drink tea and eat sugared mouse bits. You will be much happier. We will be much happier, too."

But Vulture only shook his head and said, "No. I am much too ugly to appear in your café. I'm sorry. I'm very, very sorry . . . "

After another week, the mynah birds could stand it no longer. They had a strong sense of empathy, and it hurt them to see Vulture so unhappy. So they asked the hoopoo bird to spread the word, and within a day all of the birds had congregated at Vulture's tree-top home. There were darting finches and soaring hawks, elegant herons and regal kingfishers. The branches were dark and heavy with all of them.

"We have a gift for you," the mynah birds said. "But only if you come and drink tea in our café. And, of course, eat sugared mouse bits, for you are far too thin."

"A gift?" The depressed Vulture perked up. "A gift for ugly old me?"

"Yes—each of us will give you a few of our feathers to make up for the ones you have lost."

Vulture was delighted by this gesture, and accepted graciously, blushing.

Within an hour, Vulture had a multi-colored plumage that was the most beautiful in all of the bird world. It flashed and flickered and glimmered and glowed in even the faintest of lights. The next day, and every day after that for weeks and weeks, Vulture spent hours displaying his plumage to all and sundry at the bamboo café. Birds from all over the world flew by to see the beautiful creation Vulture had become.

At first Vulture was shy. He looked down at the ground when visitors flew in, said, "Oh dear. Please. It's nothing special." He continued to treat the mynah birds well. He continued to be pleasant to everyone.

But after the first month, Vulture had changed. He had abandoned his musical compositions and his diary. He spent hours cleaning his wonderful feathers. He grew used to the visitors. Soon, he came to believe that it was his presence in the bamboo café that made the mynah birds' business so good. (Most customers paid in worms and seeds, and the mynah birds had three huge warehouses filled within nothing but seeds and dried, salted worms, in addition to quite a few mouse bits waiting to be sprinkled with sugar.)

"Where's my tea?" he would demand of the mynah birds when they were slow to serve him. "Do I look like the class of person who would eat *that?*" he would say contemptuously if the mynah birds gave him a mouse bit that included a piece of tail. He even forgot how kind the mynah birds had been when recounting the story of how he had gotten his beautiful plumage, claiming that he had come up with the idea himself.

To make a long story short, dear reader, Vulture had become an arrogant, vain bird, based only on the fact that he wore the feathers of other birds. He no longer had balance in his life, or regard for anyone but himself.

The mynah birds had infinite patience, but despite their kindly natures, they couldn't put up with such abuse forever. One day—a day Vulture wrote about in his diary long after it had happened—the mynah birds and the other birds who had contributed feathers, came to Vulture and pecked all of their

feathers off of him. (It was such a horrible scene that I dare not provide details here.) Not only did they take their feathers back, but they took many of Vulture's feathers as well, so that, to this day, Vulture has a bald head.

Looking back on all of this, Vulture wrote in his diary:

> Some birds are born stupid, and some birds become stupid overnight, so to speak. I was one of the latter. I had a good life and good friends, and peace and quiet. I traded that for flash and color. And yet, feathers do not make the bird, I have found out, to my great cost.

Happily, though, the mynah birds eventually forgave Vulture, mostly because mynah birds have such little brains that they cannot hold a grudge for long. To this day Vulture will sit, ugly but content, in the little bamboo café, drinking his tea, eating mouse bits, and talking to the gracious mynah birds as they flit to and fro in the golden light filtered through the mottled green of the bamboo stalks . . . ⊠

*Ian R. MacLeod reports, "I remember reading about a bi-polar Dad in one of the Sunday papers; the sort of father who could be cheery one minute, manically nasty the next. The writer, one of his kids, said you always knew you were heading for trouble the moment you saw him wearing shorts. I think I pictured them as the sort of huge, baggy ones Eric Morecambe sometimes used to wear to humorous effect — well, let's face it, all shorts are funny — and from that outdoorsy image, camping came to mind. And from there, eventually, came this story."*

*Ian's pre- and post-apocalyptic novel* Song Of Time *was published to strong reviews by PS in autumn 2008. He is probably previously best known for his two big Dickensian fantasies* The Light Ages *and* The House of Storms, *although his record as a short story writer and novelist stretches back though many years of awards, collections, anthologisations, translations and frustrations. He's just finished a new novel,* Wake Up And Dream, *which is set in an alternate Hollywood, its main character being a down-at-heel private dick named Clark Gable.*

# The Camping Wainwrights

## Ian R. Macleod

It's a strange smell. Part-familiar, yet feral and strange. Deep odours of trodden grass and wormcasty earth mingle with canvas and fresh air. Even folded fully dry and rolled up and brushed clean of that year's harvest of grass and beetles, then put away to slumber its winters in our attic, our family tent had a presence. I could imagine it, smell it, resting above me on the dark joists beyond my ceiling as I lay in bed—its lumpen shape reminiscent of some alien mummy surrounded by cobwebbed summer offerings of frying pan, pegs, groundsheet, folding chair. On those other occasions when I went up into the attic, those seasonal visits to collect the Christmas decorations or put away my year's worth of school exercise books, its aura was far stronger than anything else. Stronger than that of my old toys, or my rusty pram. Stronger than Christmas itself, even in the times when I still believed in the promises made by tinkling strings of half-dead fairy lights.

We Wainwrights—Dad, Mum, my elder sister Helen and I—were a camping family. We camped. Even back then in the early eighties, the word *camp* had other meanings, but Dad could get away with such statements standing talking to the neighbours, or to the blokes he encountered down at the pub. He probably announced it to the kids he taught at his school as well, and most likely didn't get a single snigger. Camp. Camping. To camp. That was us: the tent, the sizzle of bacon, the great outdoors and the midnight walk to the shower block carrying a damply unravelling roll of toilet paper. We were all

defined by the two weeks each summer, and the several weekends, which we routinely spent under canvas.

Camping, for Dad, was an endless adventure. There were the plans, the trickily unfolded maps, the plastic patchings of the groundsheet and the trips to renew the gas canister which powered the cooker. There were his camping clothes—his shorts, of course, canvas as well—which he kept folded away in a special drawer. There were the winter's nights of slide shows. I can still hear him humming in the way he only did when he was involved in anything to do with that tent. The compressed atonal sound comes back to me now, along with the endless *tink tink tink* as, crouched out on the patio in freezing mid-November, he gleefully hammered pegs straight in preparation for next summer's trip.

We were all involved. There was no alternative. There were the family sessions, which he scheduled, proclaimed, for whole weeks in advance, during which he would spread out his latest collection of leaflets, brochures and Ordnance Surveys across the kitchen table before Mum, Helen and I, and explain at unstoppably great length exactly what we would be doing in the summer ahead. I remember how the tart and musty smell of the tent seemed to seep down from the attic on those evenings to pervade the house. Later in the night, when I wrestled with sleep, Dad's voice still droned through the bedroom wall as, punctuated by Mum's monosyllabic replies, he talked about the drives we would take, the many historic sites and morally improving locations we would visit.

I wouldn't say that my sister Helen and I were particularly close—we had our separate interests, and were three years apart in age—but we'd occasionally discuss our schoolfriends' holidays, which involved package flights to some sunny part of southern Europe. The idea of those bright, white concrete apartments with their proper beds and sea views, a private toilet—shower, even—and chairs that didn't fold up when you tried to sit on them, seemed an impossible dream. We wondered over the idea of beaches so hot that the sand was impossible to walk barefoot, of lands where you didn't have to shelter in the damp-smelling "family room" of some out-of-the-way pub from the endless rain or, worse still, sit huddled playing endless rounds of Travel Scrabble in the dripping communal space of our tent. Once, I ducked into a travel agent's on the way back from school and grabbed up some package tour brochures on the mumbled pretext of a geography project. I smuggled them home with all the guilty excitement other lads might have experienced with a copy of *Penthouse*. It was all there in those glossy pages, even the sex: those beaches sprawled with bikinied bodies instead of deserted expanses dotted with a few hardy families huddled behind windbreaks and some locals exercising their dogs. I could almost feel the sun, and taste the absence of canvas. Then, one evening, I lifted the

brochures out from their hidden space under my bedroom carpet and found their pages savagely creased and muddied. As if a dog, although we Wainwrights didn't own a dog, had dragged them across several wet gardens. But what could I have said? Even if I'd confronted Dad, he would have denied all knowledge, or come up with a semi-plausible explanation.

After all the months of preparation and talk, the day would loom when we were finally to set out again for our summer camping holiday. Mum, who was quiet at the best of times, became quieter, whilst Dad grew louder. His hummings broke into song, or simple ringing shouts of excited affirmation. The process of bringing the tent and all the other camping accoutrements down from the loft was protracted. Everything had to be cleaned, re-assessed, mulled over. There would be lightning trips to obscure shops to buy new aluminium pans or a peg hammer. And it all required an audience, and small delegations. Little tasks which Mum and Helen and I were all expected to perform, and which generally went wrong in strangely unpredictable ways.

Our tent was a reasonably modern affair: mid-green, with separate inner compartments, and a metal-poled frame which was high enough for even a man as tall as Dad to be able to move around freely within it. The mummy-like sack which it filled was too big to sit in the back of the Volvo, and was laid out in one of those awninged trailers for it which you still often see on summer roads. When the early morning start of our holiday eventually arrived, with the trailer and the car and all our bags and supplies packed and every possible detail itemised, re-checked and accounted for, we would crawl yawning into the car and set off through a world made strange by dawn mists and buzzing milk floats. The route was scheduled long in advance, as were the stops we were supposed to take on it. Dad disliked motorways, so Mum was constantly occupied in deciphering his complex handwritten directions as we veered along A and B roads. The accompaniment to these journeys was Dad's humming and occasional shouts, along with the cassette tapes which he banged into the slot mouth in the Volvo's dashboard with all his typical holiday relish. Being the age he was, a child of the fifties, Dad had an especial liking for the works of Mantovani, Syd Lawrence and Perry Como.

"Listen to *that!*" he'd shout over the saccharine racket whilst Mum struggled with all the spewing bits of paper. "So much better than today's rubbish!"

Inevitably, we ended up getting lost, although nothing could dent Dad's holiday mood as we repeatedly circled a roundabout or sat at a junction as holiday traffic growled up behind us. For him, one of the highlights of these long hours of travel was to slow down on the street of an obscure village, wind down the Volvo's window and beckon some wandering indigene towards him. *Absolutely lost*, he'd declare. *No use asking my navigator. Absolute waste of time. But*

*perhaps you . . . ?* Whether or not the randomly-chosen local had the faintest idea where we should be going, the one-sided conversation would continue. *We're campers, you see, us Wainwrights. Always have been. Can't beat the great outdoors, the British scenery . . .* One of Dad's favourite occupations was talking pointlessly with strangers.

After several such stops, and occasional pauses for Helen, who grew carsick, to hunch retching over a verge whilst Dad kept the motor revving and sang along to *What Did Della Wear Boy*, and after he'd taken the navigation over from Mum and cheerily pointed out to us all exactly where she'd gone wrong, we'd finally arrive at the site, and the proper process of camping began.

Everything had to be choreographed. We all had responsibilities. *Found the drinking water tap yet, our Terry?* he'd say to me, *think it must be over there*, after previously sending me off in the opposite direction. All the pegging and the hammering and my getting the guyropes *twang-tight*, as Dad liked to call it, and searching for this and that small but essential item, which one or other of us were supposed to have packed—and it was never Dad—and which had either gone missing or turned up strangely damaged. That pale, disappointed look on his face again, beneath the smile, now with the two bright red spots on his cheeks which the outdoors always brought out in him.

Cloudy skies, damp grass. Uneven fields scarred by the yellowed outlines of previous camping families. The smell of slurry from a nearby farmyard, the twittering of skylarks. Further off, the drone of some arterial road. Dad, already in his shorts, and humming, whistling, occasionally letting off those weird shouts, would soon be off to *test the lie of the land* or *reconnoitre the toilet block* or *check out what the site shop has to offer* whilst us other three Wainwrights were still struggling to perform our allotted tasks. Hands deep in his voluminous pockets, clayey white legs protruding, he'd strike up conversations with the families of nearby tents, and even some of the caravans, although he disapproved of the latter as *too easy* and *not quite the real camping experience*. Then he'd join in with the football match which many of the younger kids spent most of their holidays playing, calling vigorously for the ball.

"Ah, this is the life . . . " he'd pronounce as he eased himself back down into one of our folding chairs. "Isn't the tea up yet, darling? What on earth have you lot all been doing over here . . . ?"

After the traditional camping meal of burnt yet undercooked sausages which Mum had struggled to prepare with some vital utensil missing, the evening, and the even longer night, drifted in. Summer nights are surprisingly dark in Britain, especially in the sort of low, deep, river-strewn valleys which are generally set aside for camping. Surprisingly cold, as well. By ten or ten thirty, as I braced myself for what I hoped would be, but probably wouldn't,

my last trip to the reeking, slippery cavern of the shower block, I would already be shivering.

"Not going to bed already, our Terry?" said Dad, jiggling his knees in his shorts. "Warm, beautiful night like this! Call yourself a camper, eh?"

But I knew that the dew would already have dampened my sleeping bag. And that, just as I was untangling my underpants from my feet before pulling on my pyjamas, my inner tent would unzip, and Dad's head would appear. *Everything alright in there, our Terry?* he'd enquire cheerily with those two red spots flaring on his cheeks as I hopped about, freezingly naked. Eventually, I worked out that Dad could see what I was doing from the shadows my torch threw against the tent's lining, and I got changed in darkness instead.

A chorus of goodnights. Hawks of sputum. Dad's humming. Canvas zipping and unzipping. That tent-smell, compounded now by the rank rubber of the lilo. Twisting about as you try to find comfort without losing your precious core of bodily heat. The debate, which can fill whole excruciating hours, as to exactly when the moment will come when you'll have to get up and head for the toilets. Despite the tent's separate inner compartments, any sense of isolation was illusory. Along with the sounds of the night, you could hear every sigh, move, scratch, swallow, fart or breath anyone else made. Dad snored—snored with the same loud relish with which he did everything else when he was on holiday—but in the proximity of the tent, I was also party to the sounds of his and Mum's love-making. It would start with a lower-sounding version of Dad's usual humming. Then, after enough shuffling of sleeping bags and squealing of lilos to set the entire tent swaying, came a stutter of surprised sobs from Mum: the sort of noises you'd expect someone to make in the throes of grief rather than any sort of ecstasy. Followed by owl calls and the tick of the rain as the tent subsided and Dad's breathing slowed into the rhythm of his snoring, all of it overlaid with the aching sense of my bladder's imminent over-brimming.

For all that, there's something strangely *right* about camping. It's where we humans come from—the more northerly sort, anyway, who were never free to sleep under the stars. When I say *right*, I don't mean that camping ever felt good, and it certainly wasn't homely. There was just this mustily atavistic sense of doing something which already lies deep under your skin. I felt it when we visited a Neolithic tomb on one of our camping holidays. Stooping under the ancient lintel into the earthy space beneath, I realised instantly from the smell, and the whole dark, damp sense of confinement, what my ancestors had had in mind when they had raised this mound. They had wanted to create a long-lasting replica of the sort of space their dead chieftain would have spent his entire life living in: it was a stone tent.

Such visits were a common part of Dad's schedules for our holidays, and

we'd be quizzed about them afterwards on the drive back to the site. *Now, tell me, Helen, according to the latest geological research, were those lintels brought here from Brittany, or from Cornwall?* We were never right, and Dad—who'd been studying the leaflets and guidebooks all winter—was never wrong, but those upturned bowls of earth, upright slabs and vaguely defined ditches spoke to me with a kind of sympathy. I almost felt awe, standing on low hills in the freezing rain, watching the wind-driven mist shimmer around teeth-like circles of stones. Gods were worshipped up here, I realised, and they were the gods of this muddy earth, of this rain, of lives lived barely sheltered in fluttering constructions of leaking animal hide. Something cold arose as I gazed down at the puddled grass and thought of the blood which had once been let here, the sacrifices which had long been made. Lying in our own tent that night after a meal of greasy chicken in another pub's family room, and listening to continuing rain, the presence of these demanding and capricious beings remained. They drew me closer than I had ever been to making some kind of sense of what it meant to be a camping Wainwright.

Ever since I could remember, there had always been a feeling of things being marginally askew, of a universe perpetually misbehaving. Early incidents are hard to separate from childhood's general mess and chaos. Like my favourite Corgi car vanishing, only to resurface months later rusting in the flowerbeds, or the Action Man doll which was left to writhe and melt on the cooker after I'd placed it somewhere else. Such things happen to all kids, and perhaps sometimes I was responsible for them, but I'm as sure now as I was then that, mostly, I wasn't. Mum, when I came up to her hot-faced and uncomprehending after some new incident, would patiently tidy things up with promises about putting them back together, or dispose of whatever it was straight away if it was clearly ruined. Helen was little better. They had something similar at the back of their eyes—a smudge of resignation which asked *What else did you expect, our Terry?* This, I soon understood as balls of wool unravelled in Mum's occasional stabs at knitting and Helen's dolls lost their eyes, was part of their lives as well. Dad, though, was always solicitous, caring, fascinated as he turned the evidence of the latest disaster over in his long-fingered hands. *Perhaps you dropped it, eh, our Terry? We don't always remember exactly what we did with things . . . Maybe a cat took it—they do come into the house sometimes. Perhaps it was blown off the table by the wind. Or perhaps you forgot, eh lad? Perhaps it's that, our Terry. Perhaps you just simply forgot about what you really did with it . . .* As I grew older and the incidents and Dad's explanations grew more baroque, I learned to hide whatever was especially precious to me, although, as with those package holiday brochures, that tactic sometimes failed.

It was just another part of our lives, of being a Wainwright—the existence of this capricious poltergeist, which could remain dormant for months, then visit you with some trivial destruction and kneel down afterward to inspect the damage with a broad smile and two pale pinks spots on the cheeks of its equine face. It wasn't something we other Wainwrights discussed. After all, these things—the dead mouse which turned up in Helen's old doll's house, or the lines of Mum's washing which were repeatedly torn and muddied as they fell across the lawn—are part of the life of every family. As I grew older and Mum's mutterings became more clipped and monosyllabic, and Dad remained happy as ever to explain things in his own inimitable way, it seemed that there was little else we other Wainwrights could do, other than get on with the life that we were living.

Camping was always at the core of these odd happenings. Holidays of any kind are prime times to lose, damage or forget things, even if they don't involve laying out all your belongings in some windy field. So it was always especially hard when we were camping to tell exactly how much of what went wrong involved any external assistance. You didn't need Dad to discover a frog in your sleeping bag, or dead beetles in the bottom of your plastic beaker of Fanta. Or perhaps you did. Where did it start? Where, beyond all the humming and Mum's sad groans and getting ridiculously lost on the way to the site and then finding that the holiday pack of cards had got themselves smeared with dogshit, did being a camping Wainwright end and ordinary life begin? In our tent the cold, mustily playful fingers of those vicious outdoor gods were always threatening, demanding some small new sacrifice or abasement. There was no escape.

The journey to Wales for the last holiday all four of us camping Wainwrights ever took together was just like every other journey. We got lost to Mum's directions along B roads as Dad hummed and banged the dashboard and sang along to Perry Como. *Hope you've got your passports*, he shouted as we crossed the border. *Can't you even* try *to repeat that Welsh phrase I told you, our Terry?* He was as happy as I'd ever seen him, and revved the Volvo's engine into cheery clouds of fumes as Helen crouched coughing and retching at the roadside. His only disappointment came when the old woman he pulled up beside didn't understand his version of Welsh. And it started raining. Of course it started raining; on Wainwright camping holidays, it always rained. When we finally reached our site, which was too wreathed in wet cloud for us to have any idea of its surroundings, Dad climbed out and stopped humming for long enough to sniff the air loudly and proclaim, *Good, fresh, Welsh precipitation!* just as he had praised the rain of the Lake District, Cornwall, the Scottish Highlands and other portions of Wales

on previous holidays. We, the tent and all our belongings were soaked by the time everything had been transferred and erected.

Opening out my bag that evening in the wan light of the dripping tent, I discovered that several of the cassettes of current hits which I had carefully taped off the radio on my portable player had unravelled themselves into balls of shining brown ribbon. I didn't feel particularly shocked as my fingers slid through them. In fact, this was far too petty, too trivial . . .

"Problem there, our Terry?"

I looked up. Stupidly I'd left my inner tent hanging open and Dad's long face, smiling as ever, was looking in on me.

"Just this . . . " I remembered the hours I'd spent with my finger hovering over the record and stop buttons. But I wasn't going to let him see me cry.

"Those tapes, eh? Well, never mind. Must have got jolted loose in the car. I've told you before that every cassette really needs to be kept neatly in its case."

"That's impossible," I said. "You did it."

Dad's smile scarcely changed. "Like I say, Terry. These things happen—"

"No they don't!"

"But there's the evidence right in front of you." He gazed down at the balled up mess of ruined cassettes.

I drew back. I could tell that he longed to touch and inspect them.

"I suppose it's no great loss," he mock-sighed. "After all, there's nothing to beat the old crooners, the classics."

"Just leave me alone! It's like all the other stuff—everything in our lives that's ever been wrecked or ruined or broken!"

"Now, Terry . . . " For a moment, there was a change at the corners of Dad's smile, and those bright points of pink which always flushed his cheeks on holiday darkened. ". . . you really think *I* did all of those things?" There was something else in his gaze. Something which I had never seen. It could have been denial, or wonder, or a sort of anger, or a kind of sorrow, even. Then he retreated, leaving me shivering.

Despite the drum of rain, such conversations in a tent are never private, and its chilly echo lingered as we ate dinner off plastic plates. The food was semi-cold: Dad had delegated to Mum the task of replacing the gas canister this year, and the thing now turned out to be empty. *Maybe you just picked up the old one by accident . . . You* are *sure you actually went . . . ? Of course, it could have leaked. This modern so-called workmanship* . . . We'd heard the same or similar explanations a million times and Mum, in particular, seemed frail and hollow-eyed at the start of this holiday—far older and wearier than her forty-something years. Iller, too, although almost everyone looks unwell in the greenish light of canvas. Apart from Dad, that is. I kept glancing at him as he ate, hating the pink spots which had returned to his cheeks, the open-mouthed way in which he chewed and how he rested his plate on his bald, bared knees and drummed his fingers on the arms of his

folding chair to the beat of the rain. That night, I lay in bed listening to the continuing rain, re-acquainted with that feeling both of stifling confinement and empty exposure which you only ever experience in a tent. Dad's face loomed. I cowered, drowning in canvas. The drenching clouds swept by, and I dreamed of sacrifices to the gods of a windswept earth until I was awoken in the still dark by the absence of the rain and the soft, nearby sound of something mewling. A mouse, I thought at first, being slowly dismembered by a fox or a cat in a nearby hedgerow; the sound was that high, that hopeless. Then it was punctuated by a characteristic series of soft ohs and I realised that it was Mum. And I knew that this had nothing to do with anything resembling love. She was simply crying.

Something extraordinary happened next morning; we awakened to find the Welsh hills bathed in sunlight, and what looked like the whole blue Atlantic glinting beckoningly beyond a low fence. The breeze was warm and mild—barely enough to flutter the sides of the tent as Dad, hands stuffed deep into the pockets of his shorts, strode around it, muttering about the forecast being wildly wrong; how he'd been expecting, had *planned for* far harsher weather. The day, which had started deliciously warm, soon grew warmer. By noon, even the deep pools of mud outside the shower block had started to shrink.

For the first part of our holiday, everything basked in incredible heat, and everyone on the site bore a dazedly cheerful expression. This, after all, wasn't how camping holidays anywhere in Britain were supposed to be—especially in Wales. There was a small village nearby with a whitewashed pub, giddy cliff walks, and steps which led down to a vast, rock-strewn, beach. I remember the clean smell of the salt as I splashed in and out of the tepid shallows in the swimming costume I normally only wore on the afternoons when we escaped into some municipal swimming pool from the rain. Mum and Helen lounged on towels and read doorstop novels. We all got mildly sunburnt. This was nothing like a usual Wainwright holiday. This, in fact, was almost like those brochures which I'd once smuggled home from the travel agent's. Dad, for whom camping was all about battling storm and tempest, did his best to hide his disappointment. He wandered resentfully in his holiday sandals, boring the neighbours with his endless stories, scowling at the blazing sky and joining in the kids' football match, which had decamped itself to the beach near to a place where Mum and Helen were sunbathing. Unsurprisingly, and although I don't think it was Dad who actually kicked it, the ball once hit Mum in the face.

At night, lying in the clean dryness of my inner tent and feeling the pinprick itch of my sunburn, I wondered at all these new sensations. Was this how other families lived their lives, had their holidays? Was this what it meant to be actually *happy?* But I knew it couldn't last. When I climbed out of our tent on

Saturday morning the sun was still blazing, but already there was a different tang to the air. Dad was walking briskly up the grassy slope from his trip to the camp shop with a bag full of sausages and bacon and his copy of the *Daily Telegraph* rolled like a baton. His shorts flapped in the breeze. I'd never seen him grinning so broadly.

"Haven't you heard, our Terry? I'd make the best of today if I were you—your pretend-swims. And better tell that lazy sister and mother of yours to wake up and start getting things shipshape." Cheeks redly gleaming, he scanned the Welsh horizons, then let out a shout—a yelp—of sheer joy loud enough to set the seagulls screaming. "There's a big storm coming. Good job I managed to find a gas canister to replace the one your Mum forget to get fixed. We'll need something warm inside us this evening . . . "

Already, people were packing up. Tent poles tinked and car engines revved as cheery voices called farewell to holiday acquaintances they knew they would never see again. *Not going yet, then?* someone called. We shook our heads. After all, we were the camping Wainwrights, and Dad loved a big storm. Just like that Carpenters song which, despite its relative modernity, he was humming and singing in odd barks as he organised things, he was on top of the world.

By noon, the sky had clouded over and the site was already near-deserted. Those few other hardy beings who were planning on staying were tautening canvas, knocking blocks under the wheels of their caravans, hammering in more tent pegs. Grass shivered, briars creaked, clumps of hawthorn waved their limbs, and there was a sense of siege as I hung my sodden trunks to flap from the guyropes after what I knew would be my last *pretend-swim*. All those recent happy days of warmth and sunlight already seemed like a dream. Even now, the tent was starting to give off its characteristic odour of soured canvas. The old, capricious gods of wet earth, of drumming rain, and of endless small destructions and sacrifices, were returning . . .

Then a loud gasp came from within the tent. I ducked inside, and saw Mum crouched beside Helen in her inner tent. They were both looking down into my sister's clothes bag, and what seemed for a moment like blood was smeared over their hands.

"This is everything I've got left to wear," Helen muttered, gazing at the inky mess where two or three of her girlishly multi-coloured biros had seemingly leaked simultaneously across most of her clothes. "God knows how we're going to get them clean."

"Isn't there a washing machine in the block by the office?" I asked hopefully.

"For what good that will do." In this bilious light, Mum's eyes were black. Her face, as if lit like a Halloween lantern, had a waxy, greenish glare. She pulled out a tissue from her pocket and began to wipe her fingers. "I suppose I'd better get started before the storm kicks in. I mean . . . " She balled the tissue inside her fist so hard I heard it

squeak. "I mean, it could be worse . . . " She trailed off. The sides of the tent bellied as the wind moaned. "I mean, it could be . . . " She trailed off again. I heard something in her throat click. "It's like that bloody gas canister. It's like—we can't go on like this, can we? We've got to—"

She stopped as the sound of Dad's humming and the tramp of his sandaled feet grew close across the grass outside. We heard the jingle of his keys as he shoved his hands into his shorts. He was standing right beside us now, a dark shape looming just beyond the canvas. He let out an abrupt shout.

"Talk of a bit of rain, and look what happens," he called. "Half the campsite disappears. But we'll show them, eh? Us Wainwrights'll have the time of our lives, eh? Eh?"

In the late afternoon, the site owners drove their beaten-up Landrover around the field, offering the shelter of a mouldy caravan which lay at the edge of the site. Dad, legs apart, stripped down to nothing but his shorts, fists planted on his bony hips as he stood in front of our tent, the absolute epitome of Wainwright resilience, smilingly shook his head. By now, huge, boiling banks of cloud, the far-flung arm of some tropic tempest which had reached all the way to us from across the Atlantic, were massing. There was a second leave-taking as most of the remaining campers decided against braving the elements on this exposed Welsh field. The sun gave a final bloody glare as it poked through the mountainous horizon, and I rechecked the guyropes and the pegs and the rubber hoops and the tent-ties and the metal poppers which held the frame together. I was looking for the flaw, the fault, the strain or rip or tear or twist or breakage, which I was sure lay hidden somewhere amid all Dad's cheery preparations. But I couldn't find anything—and that absence, as the tent's canvas began to throb whilst Mum set about boiling up a meal of Vesta curry beneath the dripping remains of Helen's stained clothing, was the wrongest thing of all.

Mum, Helen and I ate stoically. Dad, though, was taut as a guyrope, and humming, smiling, jiggling. In its way, it *was* exciting to be here inside our tent as it began to bow and creak when the first heavy drops of rain started to thud against it. Then the heavens opened, and we just sat there wishing the hours away, for this was far too much, despite the many wet nights us camping Wainwrights had experienced. Normally, we'd have played cards, but the hissing, flapping roar of the storm as it beat against the tent was all-absorbing. Shining runnels of water pooled. The frame leaned and creaked in each roaring hammerblow, dimming our dangling gas lantern. Even in raincoat and plastic trousers, I was instantly drenched on my last trip to the toilet. There was a moment of blind panic on the way back when I slipped in the mud and found my torch illuminating nothing but streaming rain. I was sure I'd lost our tent. But there it was: inner-lit, standing out against the pouring dark, it

really did look almost safe; nearly welcoming.

"Bit of a breeze out there?" Dad shouted in his typically yo-ho-me-hearties way as I wrestled to zip the flap back up. "You lot can all just go to bed. I'll keep watch for all us Wainwrights, make sure everything stays absolutely shipshape . . . " Pulling off my wellingtons and plastic overthings, too tired to bother with anything else, I crawled into my sodden sleeping bag and curled up there. Sleep, I told myself in the moment before I tumbled headlong into it, was impossible.

And I dreamed. Although the sun was so bright I could barely see, I knew that all us Wainwrights were here, and I stumbled in search of Mum's and Dad's and Helen's holiday-happy voices. Slowly, I realised that the gleamingly painful light came from the gloss of the pages of the brochures into which I had fallen, with their bright poolside bars and plasticky palm trees. And, being mere pictures, the whole thing was flat; a disappointing wasteland. *Come on, our Terry!* Dad's voice remained typically hearty. *Could do with some help here* . . . But I was still faltering, trying to work out exactly where on earth *here* was. My feet skidded and my hands slid. My fingers in my anger and frustration tore at the paper, which clumped and grew damp. Everything was sodden and filthy now, wet and reeking of soil and canvas as it closed over me, weighing down my flailing arms, wrapping my face and blocking my mouth in a filthy, turfy, earthy, musty reek. I fought against it. I couldn't move, scream, breathe—

*Could do with some help here, Terry*, Dad was still saying as I rose out from my dream to find that I was still choking, wrestling with flapping sheets. His torch danced amid the storm, showing streaming turf, blurring rain, a glimpse of his bare white knees. Dad, who was still wearing only his canvas shorts, was battling to secure my corner of the tent before the wind lifted the whole thing away.

"Well done, our Terry! Are you awake in there, Mum? Helen—you as well! Could really do with a little more help out here . . . "

His voice came and went over the thwack of the tent and the wild roar of the wind. Half-buried in mud and canvas, batting away flailing bits of rope, I struggled against the wet grip of my sleeping bag until I finally managed to scramble my way out. The noise was tremendous. Your feet slid. Your legs buckled. The air was sucked from your lungs. Dad's torch played across his face. He was smeared in grass and mud, and the rain streamed off him, but still he was grinning—and he was humming, singing, letting out those bizarre shouts.

"This is it, eh? Some wind! But could do with a bit of extra help here . . . " He grappled with a stretch of canvas. "Keep a hold of this for us, our Terry."

I did as he said, even though the whole nightmare force of the storm seemed to buck against me. Mum and Helen crawled out from their corners of

the tent just as the frame started twisting. Lightning flickered. They looked like muddy zombies. I suppose I did as well.

"Ah! There you are! See that guy rope, Helen? Try to keep a hold and stop it from lifting—And you, darling . . . "

But it was too late. With a splintering screech, the frame broke, tearing as it did so a widening rent in the canvas. There was an odd glimpse of the fragile indoor normality of our camping life: the towels and the tins and the games and the cooking things and all the flip flops and the wellingtons and the hanging stuff we'd vainly hoped would dry, and then the night ripped through it, pulling everything apart. Packs of playing cards and Scrabble letters spewed. An empty water bottle took flight. Someone's lilo slalomed downhill. There was a wild anger about this storm, a sheer physical presence which, as the edge of the tent which I'd been struggling to keep hold of finally ripped itself from my fingers and slapped viciously against my face, I knew it was impossible to fight.

Dad, though, was having none of it. He was still laughing and barking out orders. For him, no matter how bad things got, this was just another story he could tell the neighbours and the kids at his school and those unwary strangers he stopped at the roadside, another camping adventure, a fresh wave of destruction which he'd brought to our lives and would grinningly inspect and discuss with us across the kitchen table through all the endless evenings afterwards. I realised, even as my feet buckled and I slipped back into the mud, that there would be other nights, other tents, other holidays—that the lives of us camping Wainwrights would continue to go stupidly and unbelievably wrong.

Lightning flashed as I scrambled back to my feet, and I saw that Mum was gripping the famous blue gas canister, about which there had been such dispute this holiday, in her hands. The thing was heavy now that Dad had had it refilled, but she held it as if it weighed nothing. Dad, who was crouching as he attempted to stop the tent frame's last straight leg from twisting, looked up as she stood over him. The rain had washed Mum's nightdress pale. Her hair streamed black around her white face. Lightning flared again, and Dad's grin broadened. Even though Mum looked strange and eerie and angry, he probably imagined she was going to use the canister to weigh down our rapidly collapsing tent.

"That's great, darling, if you could—"

With a strength I didn't imagine she possessed, Mum swung the canister down and around. Dad looked surprised when, with a wet, splitting sound, it struck the side of his head. ". . . careful . . . could really have hurt—" His grin loosened as Mum swung and struck him again. The side of his skull had become oddly shaped, and his voice was slurred. "Could still do with a bit of help here . . . " His mouth began to bubble with dark fluid. "If you could just—" The gas canister flashed for a

third time, and all expression dropped from Dad's face. He wavered for a moment, then toppled forward, landing in a splash of limbs amid what was left of our tent. Mum just stood watching, the dripping canister still in her hands, as his body gave a series of spasming jerks. So did Helen. Dad had dropped his torch as he fell. I stooped to pick it up from where it had slid across the mud.

"Turn it off!" Mum shouted.

The torch was darkly slippery. Its beam seemed to brighten and fan out as my fingers struggled with the switch, lancing across the field.

"Here—give it . . . " Helen, nearly falling across Dad and the mess of the tent, wrenched it from me. But still the light wouldn't go out. Mum joined in, and our struggles with that stupid and unobeying object filled our attention for what could have been seconds, minutes. Then the wind gave a surging moan, a wall of wet darkness slammed into us, and we realised as the torch finally blinked out that something strange was happening to Dad and the tent. It was mainly a sound at first, a huge ripping and tearing. Then, as the clouds flared again, we saw that the whole thing was rearing itself up in the wind. Dad had become part of it. We saw the flail of his limbs tangled in ropes and canvas as poles twisted and parted, then the bony white mask of his face. He even seemed to be struggling grinningly against the strips of rope and bloody canvas which had wrapped themselves around his body, although more likely it was merely the storm which was animating him. The tent streamed up and out. Then, as some last restraint gave in a groaning tear, it took off and began a tumbling movement down across the campsite, lit by the lightning's stuttering flares, and bearing Dad with it. It was one of those things that you see and yet don't see; that your mind struggles to grasp even as you witness it. Amazed, we followed. The storm tore with wild hands, straining to lift us as well as we stumbled across the sodden field and the thing danced ahead like some weird black jellyfish. Shedding aluminium pans, wire hangers and plastic plates—the whole detritus of our lives as camping Wainwrights—in its wake, it finally snagged against the fence which separated the land from the sea. There was a loud bang as one of the posts snapped. Then another was ripped from the earth and barbed wire unravelled in a series of bright screams until the whole edge of the land gave and Dad and our tent tumbled off into the night.

The rescue services were incredibly busy that night, but there was still a rigorous search. As Mum, Helen and I sat huddled in blankets and waiting for news in the bland fluorescent glow of the campsite owner's kitchen, I still half-imagined that Dad would be found alive. After all, it was just like one of his stories, the whole way he explained the world. *Well, the tent certainly caught me up, but it acted as a sort of parachute,*

*and then it floated . . . Sounds strange, near-impossible, I know . . .* CAMPING MIRACLE. MAN BORNE ALOFT IN GALE SAVED BY TENT. I could see the headlines, and the twin red spots on his cheeks above his smile. But Dad was dead. They found his body not long after dawn at the far edge of the same beach on which Mum and Helen had sunbathed, and I'd paddled. He'd died, we were told, from the injuries sustained from his fall off the cliff. Most probably, we were reassured by several doctors and policewomen, he hadn't suffered.

We returned home to find the house wrapped in its usual post-holiday drowse, and a note on the doormat from the local camping shop apologising for having accidentally given Mum an empty gas canister the week before. The place seemed quiet, empty, ridiculously dry and clean and spacious, but then, at the end of holidays, it always did. There was a spate of the things which happen after someone dies—visits from relatives, an inquest, many forms to fill in, more relatives, solicitors, a funeral—and then life returned to what us three remaining Wainwrights would eventually come to think of as normality, even if the evenings did seem longer and quieter as autumn set in. The pension and insurance policies which Dad had paid for through his school and his teaching union were quick to pay up, and Mum soon bought a new car—a much smaller, sportier, redder, prettier thing than Dad's old Volvo. It took the three of us out on expensive meals quite different to those you eat in the family rooms of pubs, or to the cinema to see the kind of stupidly comedic films of which we knew Dad would never have approved. We sat there in the dark gazing up at the screen, listening to the sound of other people laughing. And then we went home again.

Christmas, as anyone will tell you who's lost someone, is a hard season. The idea of going up into our loft and rummaging around for the lights and the tinsel close to the space where all our camping stuff had lain—*have you sorted out those new bulbs like I asked you to, our Terry. Pity about what happened to that plaster Santa Claus*—was never something about which any of us felt happy. Instead, Mum came home one evening with bright handfuls of brochures for holidays in parts of the world which are still warm at that time of year, and it was almost like the old times as we spread them out over the kitchen table and looked at the vistas of palm trees and swimming pools, and talked of times and dates and facilities. The odd thing was how often things continued to go wrong for us. The downstairs sink cracked, my schoolbooks got unstapled and Helen's favourite perfume evaporated—all seemingly spontaneously. The only thing that was missing was Dad's humming, those bright spots on his cheeks, his occasional cheery shouts, and his bizarrely pointless explanations as he

stroked the ruined objects with his fingers.

Then school term ended, and Christmas came, and all three of us were kept quietly busy wondering what to bring with us to this strange, hot land where people swam and sunbathed and ate fresh salads in December. The pots, the pans, the folding chairs, the games of cards and Travel Scrabble, were all gone anyway, although it was odd to be getting ready to go somewhere without them, and without the pervasive smell of our lost tent. But the flight itself was early in the morning, and the business of going to bed early knowing you wouldn't sleep was familiar. But I slept anyway, and dreamed that Dad was crouching in front of me in his canvas holiday shorts, and that he was turning over and over in his long fingers something which looked like his own ruined head. *You really imagine I do all those things, our Terry?* he was asking with a strange, sad and wounded look on his face. Then the alarm went off, and I dragged myself up from darkness to get dressed.

I paused outside Helen's door as I hauled my suitcase towards the stairs. We didn't normally enter each other's rooms, but something about the way she was standing by her window ledge made me go in. She had one of her favourite new multi-coloured biros in her hand, and it was covered with streaks of blue and black and red.

"I left it last night on the radiator," she explained. "And see what's happened—it's leaked. Just from the heat. It was probably the same with those ones I had in my bag last summer. I mean, you remember how hot it got inside our tent."

I looked down at her hands, which were stained and twisting. "I suppose some things do just happen by pure accident," I acknowledged. "But not all of them. I mean, my cassettes—"

Helen barked a laugh. "Those ridiculous tinny recordings you make! Your taste is even worse than Dad's—you really thought any of us could bear listening to those terrible, stupid songs of yours all the time cooped in our tent?" Taking her ruined biro more firmly in her right hand, she mimed holding something with her left, and then stabbing it, twisting it through the heart and turning and turning with the biro's tip. I realised that she was miming unravelling one of my cassettes.

"You never said."

She shrugged, and was about to say more when her expression changed as she glanced behind me. I turned, and saw that Mum was standing in the doorway. For all that she had her hair done more prettily now, the look in the dark of her eyes was impenetrable and her face was pale. "Better get your stuff downstairs," she muttered, and we three remaining Wainwrights carried our bags down to the car and headed off on our first non-camping holiday through a world made strange by dawn mists, buzzing milk floats and the absent sounds of Mantovani, Syd Lawrence and Perry Como.

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*Adam Roberts's most recent novels are* Swiftly *(Gollancz 2008) and* Yellow Blue Tibia *(Gollancz 2009). He is currently writing a novel about death, on the understanding that, as a philosopher once put it, "death sells". Of "A Prison Sentence . . . " he says: "so much science fiction is fast paced, frenetic and kinetic. I wanted to write a short but very slow story."*

# A Prison Term Of A Thousand Years

## Adam Roberts

People ask me how one endures so lengthy a prison sentence; but it is the same thing whether the sentence is a thousand years or only one. Each day is its own thing. You encounter each day at morning, and you inhabit it. You pull each day on as if it were a suit of clothes. You hurry nothing, but neither do you dawdle. You simply move from moment to moment as smoothly as if time is your medium for yoga, for the flexing of your muscles and the spangling of your mind.

I was sentenced to one thousand, one hundred and twelve years incarceration. It was in this fashion that I addressed the first day, and it was how I addressed the last day. People will say: "but surely this is not true! Surely as the release date approached you must have become excited? Eager finally to be gone?"

I say: if I had become excited on the eve of my release, I would have become excited at many other occasions during my incarceration: I would have celebrated the thousand-year mark; I would have marked every century, every month. I would have woken every morning mentally *ticking off* another day. By the same token, I would have fretted; I would have been anxious to get on with my sentence; I would have worn myself out within a few years with the sheer friction of anticipation, the joys of which, quite as much as the frustrations, are too exhausting for human minds to bear over too lengthy a period. I would have gone mad, and then I would have died.

Out of prison I met a woman. "A thousand years!" she said. She kept saying it. "A thousand years! Ten centuries! Oh and it must be a *shock* to come out—so much has changed since you went in!"

We were walking along the seafront. It was autumn. An eighty-metre planar tree towered over the buildings. Its huge leaves were steadily shovelling the endless air. The leaves were a fierce red colour, freckled with purple, very striking against the pale-coloured sky and the restless dark waters.

"The trees," I said, "appear to be bigger."

"That?" she said. "That? That's not what I mean! That's nothing! They've been engineering giant trees for *centuries!* No, I mean things like the Dropsonde, like the Stute affair and the re-election of Cess, *Saint* Cess I should say. I mean things like the Plat scandal—or even . . . or even the *technological* advances! The Tager-Smith drive! The Tertiaries! It must all be so new to you!"

I leant against the rail that separated the walkway from the sea. There seemed to be no upright posts to which this rail was attached. It floated. Nor was it metal, although it looked as though it was. It felt warm to the touch, almost like flesh, and yielded to the pressure of my body leaning on it. I watched the sea. And then, in a brief miracle of Autumn lighting, a gap eased in the clouds to allow through a sole slant passage of pure sunlight. It fell across my arms and shone on the effervescence of the foam at the foot of the seawall. Then the brightness passed again.

"Come on!" she said. "There's so much to do! So many people to introduce you to!" And she pulled my arm, and she tugged me away.

Treatment is an interesting word. Don't you think so? We *treat* children with medicine, but also with candies. We make *treaties* with our enemies at time of war. It is a word that means both a kind of handling, and a kind of prevention.

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Her name was Thalatta, that woman, and she was eager for me to meet many people. She wanted to make a Media Notable of me, and bruit me about, and generally raise me before the general audience as a *cause*. She might say things like "*you're* no freak!" and "you're as human as I!" But then, after a while, she lost interest in me. Then, for a time, I had no visitors. I took a daily walk along the seafront. I took my meals. I sat and watched as the sun pushed a parallelogram of light across the floor and then slid it, tightening and thinning it a little, up the wall. It was winter now, and the heartbeat of days started to syncopate, spaced brightness between longer pauses of darkness.

"You were in prison for *a thousand years?*" a man asked me, amazed. I do not remember how he came to find out about my past. He lived, I think, not far from my apartment. Sometimes he walked along the seafront. Sometimes I did. "A thousand years!" he said, and he put up a great dumbshow of astonishment, shaking his head very pronouncedly, holding up his hands, and darting his feet back and forth across the spot on which he stood. "But what did you *do?*"

"Do?"

"Your crime! What crime could possibly deserve so lengthy a sentence? Now, wait a bit," and he put a finger vertically against his lips, "there *was* a case in the news just last week, oh! a *nasty* one, there *was* a case in the news of a man who murdered his *brother*, killed him outright. But he was only sen-

tenced to fifty years. But a *thousand* years! But—"

"Murdered his brother?" I asked.

"*Sure* murdered his brother! Fifty years! But you—a *thousand* years, you—"

The sea worked against the wall in an iambic rhythm, hissing and hushing.

On another occasion he said: "You're one of those immortals." I shook my head. "Oh I know, not *immortal*," he said. "No, of course not. But you've got an enormously elongated lifespan, haven't you! To think of it! And yet you look just like us! To think of it! To think I've met you! Fancy!"

"Fancy," I said.

"Is that it?" he said, as if the idea were occurring to him for the first time, "yes, I guess that made it possible—possible to give you such a long prison sentence. I mean, I guess, was it calculated as a *proportion* of the total amount of time you have left in your . . . ?" His phrase did not complete itself. "So let's say, I'm going to live to be a hundred and fifty, so that *for me* a sentence of fifty years means a third of my life and for you . . . " and again his sentence did not complete. "What," he asked me, outright, "what did you *do?* What was your crime? What deserved a thousand years?'

"Calculated as a proportion of your total expected life," I said; "as against the life of people like me—"

"Oh, but who," he interrupted, thinking, I'm sure, that he was being complimentary, "but who is *like you?* Nobody! Nobody!"

I look around me and it is summer. The green has a vivid and severe quality. The sky is cyan. The sun weighs itself down with its own heat, and sets.

I look around me and it is winter. The gigantic tree near my apartment seems no less massive, though empty of leaves. Its huge black stem seems almost to be fixing the sky in place. The white sky.

I watch the day ending. The sun, descending, comes to rest, momentarily, on the top of the Oceanic Tower, away on the horizon: like a circle of flame on a candlewick. But then it is gone, and the candle is blown out.

There is a fire in my apartment block, and the engines come flying through the air with their foam to put it out.

It is spring now. It is raw and youthful weather, flashes of sun bright as blindness and then heavy raindrops coming in rattles and swarms. I walk out under a wind-scraped sky, and the air prods me and pulls me, will not let me get away. The wind is trying to mug me, to pick my pocket and shove me in the gutter. My coattails flutter like pennants. This woman is called Fallina. "You knew my mother," she said. "You met her. She made films about you."

I am trying to remember. But I can only think of a frantic and restless shape, a trick of moving the arms in a certain way, of gesticulating. Her face does not come into focus at all.

We pass a group of three people, talking amongst themselves. Whatever it is they say I do not hear.

"I'm sorry," says Fallina.

"How is she?" I say. I am trying. Really I am. "Your mother? Is she well?"

"She died some years ago," Fallina says. "There are still many who support the cause, you see. But, but the cause is—the movement is—"

Here is the resistance of *trying* to understand what she means, and following all the ins-and-outs, all the outs-and-ins. What is she talking about? I don't know. But I can lower my head to nod, and raise it again to look into her face.

"Times change," she says, dolefully.

I can lower and raise my head.

"So," she says, with an air of finality. "So we're *trying* to organise the necessary transport," she says. I do not know what she means. "The situation is dangerous—dangerous for you. The political climate has changed. The mood of the population as a whole—"

I try to follow what she is saying.

"It's also a question of where—of *where* to fly you to. But," she says. "But we'll work something out."

The hill above the town is as green as pistachio in the spring light. But there is cloud behind it, and now above it, and the cloud is seagreen, blue and purple, a raincloud plump as a pigeon's breast. It is ready to scatter its water upon us. The rain is there already, I can see it coming down the hill. I can see it, folded into creases like drapery by the wind.

"I'll try to come tomorrow," she says. "My mother was right, she was right to campaign, it's a terrible injustice. We all ought to be ashamed." I do not know what she means. "I'll come tomorrow."

She does not come the following day. The police come.

The sentence is one thousand, two hundred and eight years and some weeks and a day. The crime is the same as before. "I would advise you to be thankful," says the Judge, "that you live under so enlightened a system. In the East they have long since incinerated all your kind. There is considerable diplomatic pressure being applied upon our government to follow suit—which, of course, you have read about in the news sheets." But I have not done this reading. "We have decided, in our mercy, to treat you differently." The longevity protocol was a way of treating a human being; a doping, or staining. Treatment in the sense of the word that wood is treated. This, now, is a different sense of the word "treatment". Incarceration. This is a way of treating something.

"The danger you and your kind pose to ordinary humanity, in our resource-limited world—" says the Judge. "You and your kind—" But what *kind?* "As much for your protection as for the protection of the public," he says. "Not what you have done but what you are," he says. "A necessity," says the Judge, and that is that is that. ⊠

*Douglas Smith tells us, "The genesis of this story was an article on commutativity, the mathematical concept relating to operands in group and set theory. Simply put, commutativity is the ability to change the order of something without changing the end result. Multiplication, for example is a commutative operation: A x B = B x A. Division is not: A / B does not = B / A. I can't recall much about the article now, but it twigged an idea about a house where walking through a door is not a commutative operation—in short, a place where 'you can't get there from here.' Characters soon showed up to audition for a story that slowly made itself clearer, and one of those characters brought along enough problems to make him a good POV character."*

*Douglas's stories have appeared in over eighty magazines and anthologies in twenty-eight countries and twenty-two languages around the world, including* Interzone, Baen's Universe, Amazing Stories, The Third Alternative, The Mammoth Book of Best New Horror, Cicada, Weird Tales, *and* On Spec, *as well as anthologies from Penguin/Roc, DAW, and others. Douglas was a John W. Campbell Award finalist for best new writer and has twice won Canada's Aurora Award for short fiction. His first collection,* Impossibilia, *was published by PS Publishing in late 2008 as part of the Showcase series, and a second collection, as yet untitled, from Chizine Publications is scheduled for 2009.*

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# Doorways

## Douglas Smith

*"I know death hath ten thousand several doors for men to take their exit."*

John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*

On an island, lies a house.

In the house, lies a box.

In the box, lies another house.

A smaller house, of course, but one that mirrors exactly—*quite* exactly—the larger structure.

In that smaller house, three mice, two males and one female, scurry along a hallway, following the scent of food. They stop before a doorway, a duplicate of the front entrance in the larger house.

The older male, their leader, sniffs at the opening. He knows the House and its rules. He must—to survive. The other two wait. They depend on him, on his decisions.

He backs away. Something is different, something is wrong.

The game has changed.

Though Rainer was dead, it seemed to Jack that the old man lived on through his house. Even from a half mile out on the lake and in the early morning sun, the strange island retreat exuded the personality of its late owner:

isolated and eccentric, brooding and uninviting.

Jack huddled lower in the back of the fishing boat he'd chartered, while its captain bounced it over the waves towards the island. The boat stank of fish and gasoline, reminding Jack of last summer's disastrous camping trip with Wendy, an attempt to save his marriage by giving them time together away from the rest of the world.

But in the end, Wendy had preferred the rest of the world. Or at least a part of the world without Jack in it.

Jack pulled the collar of his faded denim jacket up against the wind and spray and bitter memories, and stared at the house perched atop the island's cliff. The building was a rambling amalgam of random additions and equally random styles of architecture born of Rainer's strange imagination. A mini-Gormenghast set down on a lonely rock in Lake Superior.

Not so lonely right now, Jack thought, running his eyes over the array of boats lying moored at the island's ramshackle wooden dock and larger ones anchored outside the shallows. As his charter drew nearer to the island, he could see that each boat carried the oval and arrow logo of GenTech.

The vultures gather, Jack thought. According to Rainer's will, the house contained all of Rainer's research, including prototypes, for the projects that he'd been working on for the multinational high tech giant before he died. Jack had assisted on many of those projects, though not in the last year.

The firm had tolerated the old man's eccentricities and acerbic personality only because of the long list of patents his genius had fathered. Jack had been one of Rainer's favorites, hired directly out of university after finishing his doctorate in applied mathematics. But Jack had been on a personal services contract with Rainer, so the old man's death had also meant the end of Jack's career with GenTech.

My job and my wife, Jack thought. Great year so far. Wonder what's next?

The captain pulled the boat up to the end of the dock. Slinging his duffel bag over his shoulder, Jack waved a goodbye and jumped out. After negotiating the slanting dock slick with spray, he crossed a stony beach and made the long climb up rickety wooden stairs to the top of the cliff.

A bare rocky expanse, flanked by a row of tall pines on the right and left, sloped up from the cliff for about a hundred yards to where the house sat. The pines continued past both sides of the house to meet behind it, looming like silent sentinels over the strange structure.

In front of the house, a small army of technicians was stringing cables and setting up lights and power generators, bustling with that air of self-important efficiency of which only GenTech employees seemed capable.

Jack looked, confirmed that they hadn't already entered the house. Rainer's will had been clear—the house would open solely to Jack's biometrics. That was the only reason that GenTech

allowed him on the island. And the only reason he'd want to be here.

Well, not the only reason. Scanning the crowd for Wendy, he picked her out standing beside two black-jacketed security types. And Deak Sanderson, GenTech's VP of Marketing.

Jack felt his gut churn. He wanted to see Wendy, wanted to see her more than anything. Just not with Deak.

He looked back down to the beach, but the charter boat had already left. So he was committed. But still he stayed where he was, telling himself he needed to catch his breath after the long climb.

He turned his attention back to the house. The building reminded Jack of the architectural equivalent of some vine or fungus, slowly spreading itself over the available ground. Jack tried to pick out where each addition started and stopped, but his mind kept conjuring up designs for the new house that he and Wendy had been planning, back when they were still he and Wendy and not two names on a divorce settlement.

"Jack!"

Jack's attention snapped back to the GenTech crew. Deak was shouting his name and waving an arm, and even from this distance, Jack knew he was wearing a smug smile. Sighing and surrendering himself to his fate, he picked his way over the rocky slope to where Wendy and Deak waited.

Deak's black sports jacket, white linen shirt and tan slacks seemed out of place on the wind-swept island. "Jack, good to see you," Deak said, extending a tanned hand.

So you can rub my face in it, Jack thought. Well, fuck you, asshole. But he shook the offered hand, thinking how those two hands, his and Deak's, now shared a common knowledge of Wendy's body.

"Deak," Jack said, and then turned to Wendy. "Hi, Wendy," he said, feeling totally humiliated at knowing that he couldn't say "Hi, cutie" anymore.

Wendy's V-neck top and slacks were just tight enough to remind Jack that he was sleeping alone. She made a weak attempt to smile, then leaned closer to Deak, a motion so slight that Jack would have missed it in any other situation.

Why don't you just wrap your fucking legs around him right here, you goddam—

Deak interrupted his thoughts. "Jack, I'm sorry but I'm afraid you've come all this way for nothing."

Jack felt his guts tighten. I knew it, he thought. "Don't try it, Deak."

Deak raised a hand. "Calm down. We tried to reach you—"

"Rainer's will left half of the house and its contents to me," Jack interrupted.

Wendy began to step away, but then Deak nodded in her direction. "My legal counsel says that won't hold up in court."

Wendy glared at Deak, obviously not wanting to be involved. Jack wondered if she was trying to avoid an argument or just him. She turned to face him.

"Rainer was under an exclusive contract to GenTech, Jack," she said. "Any-

thing he developed during that time is GenTech intellectual property. It wasn't his to give away."

"I worked on those projects too," Jack replied, struggling to keep his voice level.

"Under the main contract between Rainer and GenTech, which terminated with Rainer's death," Wendy replied.

"And for which I'm still owed money."

Deak looked shocked. "Really? Why, that's terrible, Jack. Send us your invoice, and as soon as I'm back in New York, I'll see that Payables cuts you a check."

"Rainer worked for years on his own before GenTech. You don't have any claim to those projects," Jack said.

"Well, once we're inside, we'll just separate those from what belongs to GenTech," Deak said.

"Yeah, right. And too bad if some end up in your pile."

"Jack—" Wendy began.

"Ignore him, Wendy," Deak said. "It doesn't matter."

Deak turned to watch some activity near the front entrance. A black-jacketed security tech was pressing something around the seams of the huge double doors.

They're trying to blow the door, Jack thought.

Deak took Wendy's arm, and they began walking up the slope towards the house.

"You won't force it open," Jack called after them.

"You don't know GenTech," Deak called back over his shoulder.

And you don't know Rainer, Jack thought.

In its analog of the House, the mouse's whiskers twitch as he sniffs the front door, sensing the coming danger. He herds his younger companions away from the entrance toward the doorway leading from the front hall and deeper into the House itself.

But the mouse had been right. The game *has* changed. That doorway will not open.

Not yet.

The mouse huddles with his companions in a far corner of the hall, as far away from the front entrance as possible. The mouse, of course, cannot recognize what he senses as the buildup of an electrical charge, but he remembers this feeling from the past, from when he had different companions. He knows what happens next.

Things die.

Jack caught up with Deak and Wendy just as Charlie Vines, GenTech's security chief, ran up. Barrel-chested and perpetually red-faced, Charlie always looked like he was about to explode.

"All set, sir," Charlie said, addressing Deak.

"Deak—" Jack began.

"Don't worry, Jack," Deak said. "I'll get one of the boats to run you back to the mainland—once GenTech's inside the house." He turned to Charlie. "Let 'er rip."

Nodding, Charlie spoke into his headset. The black-jacketed security tech moved away from the front door and ran to a large control board connected by cables to both a generator and the front door. Everyone seemed to move back, and Jack, out of habit, took a protective step towards Wendy. Black Jacket reached for a large red button on the board.

He pressed the button.

The gathering dusk turned to midday sun, and Jack went blind as a blast of hot air threw him to the ground. Ozone burned his nose, and a crackling filled his ears as if a giant was playing with bubble wrap with Jack's head inside. Amidst his drowning senses, a thought surfaced.

He hadn't heard an explosion.

Jack picked himself up and looked around. People were scattered on the ground or just rising. The front entrance to the house appeared untouched. The buzzing in Jack's ears faded, and he could hear sobbing and crying. A woman screamed. People were scrambling away from a smoking pile of . . . what?

As Jack realized what it was, it occurred to him that he should have added another attribute to Rainer and his house. Isolated and eccentric, yes. Brooding and uninviting, for sure.

But dangerous too. The charred corpse that Jack now stared at demonstrated that with a clarity of which the old scientist would have approved. The body lay at the control panel where Black Jacket had stood.

Wendy! Panicked, Jack spun around, searching for her. He felt his guts unclench when he found her standing unharmed a few feet away. His relief turned to anger as he watched her throw her arms around Deak.

The embrace ended suddenly as Charlie grabbed Deak's arm and yanked him around. "What the hell happened? You told me this was safe." The security head shoved his even redder face an inch from Deak's nose.

Deak pulled free. "Back off. Your man must've messed up."

"Bullshit. Jimmy wouldn't screw up. That place—" Charlie thrust a finger at the house. "It shot something at him. I saw it. Some sort of beam. It zeroed in on Jimmy."

"Don't be crazy," Deak snapped. "How could it know who . . . ?" His voice trailed off, and his jaw clenched. "Someone's in the house."

"I doubt it," Jack said.

They all turned to look at him as if he'd just popped out of the ground.

He went on. "Rainer would never let someone in that house when he wasn't there. And it's obviously not a place you just walk into."

"So who killed Jimmy?" Charlie growled with a scowl that implied Jack had something to do with it.

"I'd say Rainer did. Or rather, his house did," Jack said.

Everyone looked at the house, and some of the crew took a step back.

"How?" Wendy asked. Deak glared at her, as if he resented anyone, but es-

pecially Wendy, acknowledging any contribution by Jack.

"I'd guess biometric scanners near the door. Rainer'd been working on long-range prototypes. They could've read your man's bio signature, then tracked and targeted him as he moved away from the house. The electrical surge to blow the door triggered a defense system, likely a directed EM pulse of HPMs—high-powered microwaves—from the state of the body and what I felt when it happened. I warned you not to try to force the door."

"You *knew* something like this might happen?" Charlie growled, advancing on Deak.

Deak backed up. "Bullshit. He doesn't—" he began.

The rocky slope lit up like mid-day, and a voice boomed down from the house.

"HELLO, DEAK! YOU PUSILLANIMOUS PILE OF RAT EXCREMENT! HOW'RE YA DOIN'?"

Above the front door, a white stuccoed wall had morphed into a huge video screen, at least twenty feet square. And on that screen, smiling down at them like an animated skull, was the cadaverous countenance of Dr. Lucius Francis Rainer.

The *late* Dr. Lucius Francis Rainer.

Deak was the first to break the stunned silence. "Jesus, he's alive," he croaked.

Jack snorted. "Don't be stupid. We saw the death certificate." But Jack felt as shocked as the rest.

Rainer seemed to survey the crowd. Then the grin returned, and Rainer waved. "And Jack, too. With your lovely if less than loyal ex-wife. And from her cuddly proximity to ol' Deak, I'd say she still hasn't figured out that she traded down when she switched to that snake."

Wendy blushed deep red and muttered something under her breath. Somebody laughed in the crowd, and Deak glared in that direction before turning to Jack.

"He sees us. How do you explain that?"

Jack shook his head, trying to think. "He's dead, for fuck sakes. He must have set this up ahead of time. He could have recorded any number of possible scenarios, depending on who might show up. The biometric scanners tell the display system who's out here, even where they're standing, and a program runs the appropriate clip. He could have stored biometrics for every GenTech employee. He certainly had ample chances to get them for the three of us."

Rainer clapped his hands together, and threw back his skeletal head in a croaking laugh. "Bet I had Deak goin'. Wish I could see his face now—seein' all those patents flying out the window cuz ol' Rainer's still kickin'." Rainer wiped tears from his eyes. "But I figure Jack's spoiled my fun by now, explaining how I probably rigged this."

The camera panned back. Rainer sat in a big leather armchair, clad only in a tattered gray dressing gown that hung open to show his sunken chest. Lymphatic cancer, Jack recalled the lawyer

saying at the reading of the will. Rainer hadn't let anyone see him in the last months, not even Jack.

Rainer's smile ran away, like a mouse hiding from the thing that now glinted in the old man's eyes. "You've been a bad boy, Deak. Tryin' to screw me again, even after I'm dead. Told ya the rules in my will, but had to try things your way, didn'ya? Now ya got somebody killed."

Now that he was looking for it, Jack thought he could detect a slight flicker, a discontinuity in the display before Rainer continued.

"So here's the deal. Jack opens the doors. The house'll then admit exactly three people. No more, no less."

Rainer's death-head grin returned. "Three very *specific* people: Jack, Deak . . . and Wendy."

"What?!" Wendy yelped, wide-eyed. "Deak!"

Jack felt a rush of excitement, tinged with fear and confusion. Rainer was helping him, making sure that GenTech didn't cut him out. But that house had just killed a man, and Jack was going inside it. And why did Rainer include Wendy?

"Screw that!" Deak snorted. "Wire up the door again, Charlie."

Charlie looked as if he wanted to wire up Deak, not the door, but Rainer cut off any retort.

"Oh, and Deak? Any more funny business, and my watchdogs might just zero in on you next time. Fry that fuckin' smug smile off your face once and for all."

Deak turned pale, and Jack caught several in the crowd nodding as if in agreement with Rainer's sentiments. Deak kept shifting his very worried gaze over different parts of the house until he caught Jack grinning at him.

Rainer's voice boomed down from above again. "Hmm. I don't see any stampede to the door, folks—"

He's still scanning us, Jack thought.

"—so I guess I should point out that unless you three get your collective butts in gear and into the house in the next five minutes, I'll blow the entire house to hell, no doubt to join me."

Murmurs grew in the crowd. "He's bluffing," Deak said, but he looked nervous.

Jack shrugged. "His scanners tell him where we are, Deak. And he's shown what he's capable of."

Rainer grinned down at them. "Just think, Deak. All those patents, all that money, your career . . . " Rainer wiggled his hands, mimicking a bird flying. "All gone bye-bye."

"Deak, I am *not* going in there—" Wendy began.

"Wendy, just shut up and let me think," Deak snapped.

"Don't you tell me to shut up," Wendy shot back, as Jack covered a smirk. "Who the hell do you—"

Rainer's voice cut her off. "You might also be interested in knowing that when the house blows, it'll take out the top of this island, along with the . . . " The display flickered. ". . . fifty-seven . . . people currently attending my little

show." Rainer's face fell. "You too, Jocko. Sorry about that."

Someone started crying, and the noise level in the crowd grew louder. A scuffle broke out between some black jackets and a group trying to reach the stairs to the dock and the boats.

People are going to get hurt, even if Rainer's bluffing, Jack thought. "Let's go, Deak," he said.

"Deak—" Wendy began.

"Shut up!" Deak snapped. "Screw you, Jack. That old fart isn't calling the shots anymore."

"Three minutes," Rainer intoned calmly.

Jack grabbed Deak by the arm. "Then who the hell do you think is?" he shouted. "You? All you've done is get a man killed, and now you're going to get us *all* killed."

Charlie Vines decided things for them. Grabbing Deak in an arm lock, Charlie started marching him towards the house, ignoring Deak's squawks of protest. Two other burly black jackets, their faces set as hard as the stone they stood on, motioned Jack and Wendy to follow. Caught in a situation she couldn't control, Wendy paled and clutched Jack's arm, much to his surprise.

Having Wendy on his arm again instantly smothered Jack's fears, and he happily followed Charlie and Deak towards the front door, his hand over Wendy's. It reminded him of the day he'd married Wendy and had led her by the arm to the door of their little bungalow.

He just hoped things would end better at this house.

Still trapped in the front hall, the older mouse waits before one of the two doors leading deeper into the House. The curtain of energy that forms the doors of the House still will not open but the invisible barrier allows them to see through.

At the first door, the mouse stares into an empty room. He runs over to his companions, where they wait at the second door. Through this door, he can see a pile of grain, seeds, and dried fruit, plus a small basin that the mouse knows always contains water. The second room promises a veritable mousey feast.

But the mouse prods his companions away from that door and towards the first, and together they sit staring into the empty room, waiting.

For the mouse has learned.

The House never keeps its promises.

Charlie, with Deak still in tow, Jack, Wendy, and their two escorts reached the front door just as Rainer's voice boomed out from above them.

"Thirty seconds, folks. Oh, I love this part. Twenty-five, twenty-four . . . "

Charlie grabbed Jack and shoved him toward the door.

"Open it," he snapped.

"Eighteen, seventeen . . . " Rainer droned on, like a god counting down to his own little Armageddon.

Jack looked at the door. He'd been expecting some sort of biometric scanner. Handprint, retinal image, alpha wave, voice print. Something. Anything. All that he could see was a curving brass door handle, carved in the shape of an elongated skull, set in a large gray metal door.

"I said, OPEN IT!" Charlie shouted.

"How?" Jack snapped.

"Ten, nine . . . " Rainer intoned.

"How about the fucking handle, Jack?" Wendy yelled.

"I'm going to die," Deak moaned.

"Five, four . . . "

Holding his breath and half expecting another energy blast, Jack grabbed the handle and pushed.

Cold. Electrical tingling. Resistance. Then . . .

The door swung open.

Jack stumbled forward and fell into the House.

"Well, shit, it's about time," Rainer's voice said, sounding much closer this time.

Jack got to his feet. He stood in a roughly square entrance hall, maybe forty feet on each side and empty except for a computer console mounted on a post at standing height in the center of the hall. A dim glow from a high, domed ceiling provided the only light. Large black and white ceramic tiles arranged in a checkerboard pattern formed the floor. Some sort of statuary lined the walls to his left and right, but the light was too dim for him to make out details. The wall opposite the entrance held two doorways, but only darkness showed beyond.

Jack could hear Deak and Charlie shouting outside. The sound of a scuffle followed, along with a squeal from Wendy, and then both she and Deak stumbled into the room, apparently having been pushed.

The door slammed shut behind them, closed by some invisible hand.

A flickering of light and color made Jack look up. A giant Rainer grinned down at them. The domed ceiling was another display screen.

"Welcome to my parlor, said the spider to the fly. Or flies, in this case," Rainer said. "Won't keep you here any longer than necessary. Deak has people to screw, and Wendy will be part of that, in more ways than one. And Jack . . . " Rainer's grin died, and he looked almost sad. "Well, Jocko, you've got a life to rebuild."

Rainer's face disappeared, replaced by a series of displays of equipment, diagrams, and computer screens of calculations.

"This house contains complete research archives for all my projects from the last ten years," Rainer continued, "including the biometric tech and HPM weaponry that I, uh, demonstrated for you outside . . . "

"Holy shit," Deak whispered.

". . . not to mention full design specs for my final little toy . . . " Rainer went on.

"What *was* his last project?" Wendy asked.

"The old bastard would never tell us. We funded it blind," Deak growled.

"Nobody knew. He wouldn't even tell me," Jack said, his eyes locked on the screen.

"... along with a fully working prototype." Rainer's image returned to the screen. He gave a death's-head grin and leaned back in the chair. "And all of it accessible from the control center for this house."

An image of what Jack assumed was that very control room appeared. As in the entrance hall, a single computer console mounted on a post stood in the middle of an otherwise empty room. No, Jack corrected himself. Near the top of the screen, three steps led to a raised dais in a small alcove. A box rested on the dais, its top nearly as tall as a man.

"Now all you three have to do..." Rainer's voice droned on, "... is get to that room."

The screen faded to black. A light grew from behind each of the two doorways that led off the entrance hall in which they now stood.

Jack walked over to the one on the right. The door consisted of a plate of heavy glass or clear plastic. He could see no obvious opening mechanism, so he tried pushing on it but with no effect. The room he could see on the other side appeared to be one that Rainer used for a storeroom. A stepladder, stacked cases of canned soups, a portable power generator, piles of dirty clothes, unmarked cartons, and ever so many bulging green garbage bags filled the room in a haphazard wall-to-wall disarray.

Deak and Wendy stood by the other door. "Hey!" Deak called out. "This is it."

Walking over, Jack peered through the second door. The room he could see on the other side was indeed the control room that Rainer had shown them on the display.

"This seems—" Wendy began.

"—too easy," Deak finished.

"Not if we can't get in. How does it open?" Jack said.

As Deak and Wendy poked around the door looking for a switch or trigger, the display screen flickered to life above them again.

"What the hell is that?" Deak asked, looking up.

Jack stared at the screen. What appeared to be an equation for a four-factor function began to scroll down the display:

$$f\,(R_i, D_{ia}, x, M_i) = \Sigma\,(x/(e^x-1))$$
$$- (\Sigma\, B_n\, x^n /n!) \times [\lim_{n\,/E}\, p(n) / (n/\log n)]$$
$$+ (e^{ix} - \cos x - i \sin x) + (R_p, M_f) \times (\ln(-1)$$
$$-pi\,) \times (p/2 — x/2 — \Sigma \sin nx/n)$$
$$+ \mathring{A}_{k=1}\; 1/_{kz\,(k+1)}\; (\log n)^k /_{k!}$$

As line after line continued to appear, Jack sighed. "I'd say it's the door handle." He walked over to the computer console. The small screen showed the identical display as the large one above.

"What are you talking about?" Deak asked.

"I'm betting we have to solve the equation," Jack answered, as the func-

tion continued to scroll down the screen.

"Seems kind of . . . long," Wendy said.

Although Jack was thinking the same thing, he just shrugged as he tapped at the keyboard on the console. "You got other plans for today?"

However, after several minutes of paging through well over two hundred lines on the display, he was still no further ahead to determining how this could be the key to the door.

"Uh, what are *those?*" Wendy asked.

Jack looked up. Immersed in the equation, he hadn't noticed that the room had brightened. He could now clearly see the statuary that lined the two end walls.

"Geezus," Deak said. "It's a giant fucking chess set."

"Of . . . lawn gnomes?" Jack said.

Each statue stood between three and six feet tall and resembled a grotesque leering gnome fashioned as a chess piece. The gnomes stood on the black and white ceramic tiles, ready for the start of a game, lighter pieces along the wall to their left, darker to the right.

"Three pawns are missing," Wendy said.

Jack shook his head. "Not anymore. Do the math."

Deak's eyes widened. "Us? Why does that not sound like good news?"

As if cued by his words, one of the white pawn gnomes emitted a piercing whine and rolled forward. One arm popped out from its side, at its end a whirling saw blade.

More gnomes shuddered to life on each side and began lurching towards them. From each emerged a different device—slashing swords, jabbing spears, buzzing tasers—all of them pointed in the direction of Jack, Deak, and Wendy.

Deak gave a yelp. Jack stood frozen, mesmerized by the advancing gnomes until Wendy shouted. "Open the door, Jack!"

Forcing himself to look back to the computer console, Jack moved his now shaking fingers to scroll through the equation again, still with no clue of what might be the key.

"What ya need to do, Jack," Rainer drawled, the calm of his voice surreal above the whine and whir of the approaching killer gnomes, "is to lose your *excess* baggage. Stop clinging to what you *don't need* anymore. Ya gotta *simplify* your life, Jocko."

The nearest gnome was less than five paces away. Simplify, Jack thought. Simplify the equation. Jack paged back and forth, looking for a pattern, any pattern.

Three paces.

There. That term looked familiar. He paged back a few screens. Yes. The identical term appeared twice, once with a positive sign and later with a negative.

Now that he knew what to look for, Jack began highlighting pairs of offsetting terms that netted to zero.

One pace.

"Jack!" Wendy shouted in his ear. Both she and Deak crushed up against

Jack in front of the console. The nearest gnome drew its mechanical arm back, a spear poised to throw.

Jack hit the delete button.

The display flickered and then line after line of a much shorter version of the equation flashed down the screen. All of the gnomes lurched to a halt, points and knife edges and saw-blades only inches from the three human occupants of the room.

"Geezus," Deak croaked.

"Deak, get me out of here," Wendy sobbed. Deak took Wendy by the hand, and they maneuvered past the various weapons in the crush of gnomes around them.

Yeah, like *he* saved you, Jack thought. He was about to follow when the computer display changed. He blinked. The screen now showed a calendar view of a date book for May of two years ago.

Appointments crammed the month, but an identical entry for Monday to Friday in the third week was flashing: "Out of Town—Vancouver." At the top of the page, Wendy's name showed as the date book owner.

The screen went black. What the fuck? Jack thought.

Deak and Wendy once again stood in front of the doorway showing the control room.

"Hey," she called. "The door's open." Then she added, "I think."

Snaking his way through the robots, Jack walked to the door. The solid clear barrier was gone, but a shimmering curtain of light remained.

"So *now* what?" Deak asked, as if this latest puzzle was Jack's fault.

Jack pulled a comb from his pocket and inserted one end into the curtain. He heard a low crackling sound, and the comb trembled slightly but nothing else happened. Retracting the comb, he checked the end. It seemed unchanged, so with a sigh of resignation, he extended a finger to touch the shimmering light. He felt a mild electric current for a heartbeat, then nothing. He pushed his hand through to the wrist.

"Well, no smell of barbecued flesh, anyway," Deak said.

Jack withdrew his hand and looked at it, clenching and unclenching it as he did so. He shrugged. "Seems fine."

"So what is it?" Wendy asked.

"I've no idea," Jack said.

Behind them, a familiar whining noise began. They all spun around.

The gnomes were waking again. And as each robot animated itself, it immediately began advancing on Jack, Deak, and Wendy.

Rainer flickered to life again on the domed screen above. "Decision time, children."

The three of them looked at each other and then turned to the curtain. Fuck it, Jack thought. He stepped through, Deak and Wendy on his heels.

It wasn't until Jack was stepping forward that it occurred to him that when he had stuck his hand through the curtain, he hadn't seen it emerge on the other side.

The hum returns, telling the mouse that the doorways are working again. But the one in front of them will not open. Someone else is now controlling the game.

He leads his companions back to the second doorway, the one that seems to promise food, and they pass through. The mice have adjusted long ago to the physical sensations that the doorways produce, and they recover quickly.

But the room in which they find themselves contains none of the promised food. The room is empty, as the mouse knew it would be. They settle down to wait for the next move.

The mouse begins to worry. They are hungry. They are thirsty. But mostly the mouse worries that whoever is playing the game doesn't know the rules. To learn the rules, you have to pay the House.

And the only payment the House takes is blood.

On the other side of the doorway, Jack waited for his mind to finish wrestling with what his eyes were seeing: a step ladder, stacked cases of canned soups, a portable power generator, piles of dirty clothes, unmarked cartons, and ever so many bulging green garbage bags.

The second room.

A moment later, Deak and Wendy shoved him onto the pile of clothes as they stumbled through the doorway. They all stood up, looking around.

"What the fuck? Where's the control room?" Deak yelled, waving his arms. "Where's the goddam control room?"

"This is the room behind the second door," Jack explained.

"That old bastard! So that's what the curtain was," Deak yelled. "Just a projection screen to make us think the control room was right in front of us. It must be behind the other door." He grabbed Wendy by the wrist and pulled her back to the doorway. On the other side, Jack could see that the gnomes had retreated to their original positions along the walls.

"We go back through," Deak said, "and run for the other doorway before those things can reach us."

"Deak, this seems—" Wendy began but her words were cut off as Deak stepped through the doorway, pulling her after him.

"—too easy. Again," Jack finished for her, thinking of how their exit was a perfect metaphor for the way that Deak had yanked Wendy out of Jack's life. No, he corrected himself. Wendy hadn't left Jack for Deak. They'd met later.

Jack stared through the doorway. He could see the entrance hall. He could see the gnomes lined up along the walls. He could see the computer console and the domed screen overhead.

But he couldn't see Deak or Wendy.

"*Way* too easy," he muttered. With a sigh, he stepped through the doorway.

The doorway activates, and the mice move through it again into the room

on the other side. They look around sniffing. This room has a different smell. The younger mice settle down to wait. To them, this room does not hold their reward of food, so it is the same as every other room in the House.

The older mouse sniffs the air again, ears perked for any sound. For he knows that the rooms in the House always differ from each other in one way: in how they try to kill you.

When Jack arrived on the other side, Wendy was sitting on the floor, sobbing. Deak stood, mouth open, staring around a very different room from the entrance hall they'd expected.

Only ten feet square, with smooth black walls and floor, lit by a glow from the ceiling, the room was bare except for the apparently ubiquitous computer console in the middle. Walking over to it, Jack was not surprised to see the equation on the screen.

"Jack," Wendy sobbed.

"What's going on, Jack?" Deak asked, his normal bluster gone.

The glow from the ceiling brightened, and once more Rainer grinned down at them. "You *commuters* have by now found out that these doors do not *commute*. Didn't think I was going to make it easy, did ya?"

"What's he mean? What happened? Where's the entrance hall?" Deak asked, his voice rising a bit with each question.

Jack stared at the equation on the screen. "I think," he began slowly, "that we now know what Rainer's last project was."

They both stared at him. "And . . . ?" Wendy asked finally.

"Teleportation," Jack answered. "And it appears to work. At least, within the confines of this House." Jack noted the capitalization he'd used for this place in his mind.

"Holy shit!" Deak whispered, his face brightening. Jack could almost see the little dollar signs in Deak's head beating back the demons of fear that had ruled there moments ago.

"You mean *I've* been teleported? *Twice?*" Wendy asked, hugging herself, as if to check all her parts were still there.

Jack tilted his head. He could hear a low hissing sound.

"So what was that crap about not *commuting?*" Deak asked.

"A mathematical operation is either commutative or non-commutative," Jack explained. "If it's commutative, it doesn't matter what order you put the terms in. Addition's commutative, so A+B yields the same result as B+A. Multiplication is commutative too. Subtraction isn't. Neither is division. B-A is not the same as A-B," Jack explained, as he tapped at the console, looking for ways to simplify the equation further. The hissing sound was getting louder.

"Great. Thanks for today's lesson, teacher. Now what the fuck does that have to do with getting us to the control center?" Deak said.

"Control center?" Wendy snapped.

"How about getting us out of this death trap?"

Jack shook his head. "It's Rainer's game, Wendy. He won't let us out until he's finished with us. And I think that means reaching the control room. As for the math lesson, these teleporting doors are a mathematical operation, and as Rainer said, they don't commute. Order matters. Go through one of these doors and back again, you don't end up in the same place."

"Can't we just go back to the front door and try to get out?" Wendy asked, her voice quaking a bit.

"Screw that!" Deak said. "We need the plans for this thing. We'll make billions."

Jack turned to Wendy, ignoring Deak. "Wendy, we can't go back." As he said it, memories of his and Wendy's short life together flashed through his mind, and for a moment he forgot what they'd been talking about and exactly what it was that he and Wendy couldn't go back to. He shook his head. "These doors don't work that way."

"What's that hissing sound?" Deak asked, looking around.

Wendy wrinkled her nose. "And that smell?"

Jack walked to the computer console. "Offhand, I'd say poison gas," he said, as he began simplifying the equation further, working with a calm that surprised him. "Rainer's next incentive to solve this puzzle."

Wendy sobbed and sank to the floor. A very pale Deak slumped down beside her.

Jack looked at them huddled together, the fear on their faces the negative image of Rainer's grin above. A realization startled Jack as he read their faces, and he had to force his attention back to the screen.

Jack was *enjoying* this. Part of it was being able to solve problems in here in a way that he could never seem to manage in his life. But a bigger part was enjoying seeing Deak and Wendy afraid, enjoying being the one in control.

Enjoying Wendy needing him again.

And how screwed up is that? he thought. Did he want Wendy back, or did he just want not to have lost her? Was there a difference? He highlighted more terms and hit the delete key. The hissing stopped, and the clear barrier slid back from the door.

"Time to go," he said. As Deak and Wendy scrambled to the door and through it, Jack waited by the console, knowing somehow what would happen next.

The equation disappeared, to be replaced by two expense reports. His next clue to the *other* puzzle, the puzzle that Rainer was showing only to him.

The first report belonged to Wendy. It showed expenses for the Vancouver trip from two years ago that had been highlighted in her calendar: Return airfare, taxis, five lunches, and five nights of hotel with breakfast and dinner room service. Still puzzled, Jack read the name on the second report: Deak Sanderson. Something began to squirm in his stomach.

The report showed that Deak had been in Vancouver the same week. Deak's travel expenses consisted of return airfare, taxis, and five lunches. That was it.

Jack swallowed. He hit the delete key, and the reports disappeared. Well, maybe he stayed with a friend. Yeah, right. A very good friend.

Overhead, as Jack walked to the door, a grinning Rainer began singing. "Three blind mice, three blind mice. See how they run, see how they run."

Over two years ago. I guess I *was* pretty blind, Jack thought. As he stepped through the door, he tried to remember the rest of the rhyme. He had a feeling it hadn't ended well for the mice.

The mouse smells the gas and immediately prods his companions through the room's only doorway and into the next room in the game. Once more, they settle down to wait.

They are very hungry now. The mouse knows they will find food and water at the end of the game. He just wonders if it will be enough for all of them.

And the mouse doesn't feel much like sharing anymore.

For Jack, Deak, and Wendy, a variation of the last scene repeated itself in a succession of rooms. In each, their entry triggered a countdown on some sort of death-trap timer devised by Rainer's twisted imagination: a ceiling of descending spikes, walls closing in like a vice, and in the current room, a temperature that was rapidly dropping toward a life threatening level. So far, Jack had managed to simplify the equation enough each time to stop the trap and open the next doorway.

And each time, he was "rewarded" with more evidence of Deak and Wendy's two-year affair.

His reaction to that news mirrored his potential fate in the current room, that of a man slowly freezing to death, of a chilling numbness inching up his body and a feeling that he was powerless to prevent it. And not even sure that he wanted to.

Yet his interaction with the two of them remained as before. Jack realized that he wanted it that way, that he was afraid of what he might say, what he might do, once the numbness had filled his entire body, once the last flicker of warmth in his heart for Wendy was gone.

Rainer also provided Jack evidence of wrongs perpetrated against the old man himself, engineered by Deak and papered to look legal by Wendy. Changing patent filings, falsifying royalty statements, redirecting payments. Strangely, Wendy's involvement in these activities surprised Jack more than her infidelity. He'd known she wasn't happy in their marriage, but he'd never thought she could be a crook. Guess I never really knew her at all, he thought.

He knew that Rainer was manipulating him. Rainer had first grabbed his

interest by showing him proof of Wendy's affair, before moving on to his real agenda. Rainer wanted Jack to be his avenging angel. But what do I want, Jack wondered?

Jack could no longer feel his fingertips from the cold when he hit the final key. The equation was now less than a single screen. As the temperature began to rise again, Deak and Wendy stood from where they had huddled together on the floor. Rubbing themselves to warm up, the three of them walked over to the only doorway in the room.

On the other side, they could see nothing but blackness.

"This is either very good . . ." Wendy said, shivering.

"Or very bad," Deak finished, rubbing his hands together.

"We have no choice," Jack said. "If we stay here, the death trap will kick in again. Or we'll die of thirst."

"After you," Deak said.

"Why doesn't that surprise me?" Jack replied, stepping through the doorway.

And into the control room.

Jack had no doubt that they'd finally reached their goal. The room was exactly as it had appeared on Rainer's screen in the entrance hall, including the alcove with the box on the raised dais. Stopping at the computer console, he noted without surprise that the screen displayed the now familiar equation.

A moment later, Wendy and Deak stepped into the room. Wendy looked around, and then climbed the steps to the dais and stood on her tiptoes trying to see into the box. "Hey, one of you check this out. It's too high for me."

The alcove was wide enough to accommodate only one person, so Wendy had to step down to let Deak look. "Holy shit! It's a model of the House. Complete with a rat."

"Rat!" Wendy cried, stepping back. "Can it get out?"

Deak moved out of the way, and Jack peered over the edge of the box. The box was indeed a scale model of the House, replicating what Jack assumed was the arrangement of internal rooms, including the doorways.

Glowing doorways.

Jack could almost hear his heart beating. Could it be?

"What about the rat?" Wendy asked.

"I don't see—wait, yes. But it's a mouse," Jack said.

A small gray-brown mouse had appeared from where a wall in the model had blocked it from view. It looked up at Jack, twitching its nose. The mouse was in a mini-replica of the very control room in which the three humans now stood.

"Mouse, rat. What's the diff?" Deak said.

"Keep it inside the box whatever it is," Wendy said.

Jack reached in to pick up the mouse. "I'm going to test an idea."

Placing the mouse in the replica of the cold room that they'd just escaped, Jack prodded it with a finger towards the door. The mouse stuck its head through, and Jack watched with bizarre fascination as the mouse's head disap-

peared, only to emerge a foot away sticking out of the doorway in the model control room. Jack poked the mouse again, and it scooted the rest of the way through, emerging whole and complete back in the control room. Jack turned to Deak and Wendy.

"This," Jack said quietly, "is a *working* model."

Wendy and Deak were silent for a moment, and then Deak let out a low whistle. "No shit! Man, we'll have this transporter figured out in no time."

"So now what?" Wendy asked. "Can we get out of here?"

Jack was about to step down from the dais when a movement in the box caught his eye. Two more mice appeared from where the wall in the model control room had hidden them, no doubt prompted by the return of the first mouse.

Three mice, Jack thought. Rainer's voice sang in his mind: *Three blind mice. See how they run.*

For some reason, or rather some visceral urging, for it rose more from his gut than his mind, Jack decided not to share the existence of the other mice with his own two companions. Stepping down from the dais, he walked back to the door they had used to enter the control room. Deak and Wendy followed him.

The doorway was the only one in the room. Through it, Jack could see a scowling Charlie Vines talking to two black-jackets. In the background, a crowd of GenTech employees stood or sat talking in groups.

"That's the front entrance!" Wendy cried.

"We can finally get out of here," Deak cried. "We can—oh!" He stopped. "Shit."

"Yeah," Jack said. "You can't get there from here."

"You mean because it's showing us the entrance, that's the last place we'd end up," Wendy said. "So what do we do?"

"Yeah, Jack, what do we do?" Deak repeated.

"What *we* do is *I* solve the equation. Maybe we'll win a prize," Jack said, walking over to the computer console.

Wendy sat down on the steps to the dais. "Well, at least nothing is trying to kill us right now."

Jack continued to work on the equation, factoring out common terms and making substitutions in the formula. After about another fifteen minutes, he clicked the calculation command. The screen-long formula disappeared, replaced by three short lines:

$$f\,(R_i, D_{ia}, x, M_i) = (R_f, M_f), \text{ where}$$
$$f\,(R_A, D_{AB}, x=0, M_0) = (R_C, M_0), \text{ and}$$
$$f\,(R_A, D_{AB}, x=1, M_0) = (R_B, M_1)$$

"Well, at least that's shorter," Deak offered, looking over his shoulder.

Ignoring him, Jack stared at the screen. After a moment, he spoke. "I think I've figured it out."

"Do tell," Deak said, as Wendy came to stand beside them.

Jack pointed to the first line. "Ok, let's say that $R_i$ is 'Room-Initial,' the

room you're in before passing through a doorway."

"R for room, D for doorway?" Wendy offered.

Jack nodded. "So $D_{ia}$ would designate a doorway between the initial room $R_i$ and room $R_a$, the room you *think* the doorway leads to. Maybe 'a' for 'Apparent'?"

"Whatever," Deak said. "So what?"

Jack pointed to the right side of the equation on the first line. "But you end up in room $R_f$—'Room-Final'—the room that Rainer's device actually sends you to after passing through the doorway $D_{ia}$."

Even Deak was nodding. "So what about the other variables on the left? 'M' and 'x'?"

Jack studied the last two lines. "Looks like 'x' is just a parameter. It can only be zero or one. A binary switch. On or off." He pointed to the second line. "If x=0, then doorway $D_{AB}$ delivers you from room $R_A$ to room $R_C$, rather than the room $R_B$ that you can see through the doorway."

"Been there, done that," Wendy said, nodding.

Jack tapped the screen again. "But in this last line, if we set x=1, then doorway $D_{AB}$ delivers you from Room $R_A$ to Room $R_B$, as promised."

"That's it?" Deak snorted. "We flip a zero to a one, and we can walk out of here?"

"Looks like it," Jack said quietly.

Wendy frowned. "But what about the other variable? What about 'M'?"

"Who cares?" Deak snapped. "Let's rock and roll."

"But it's there for a reason," she persisted. "What does it *do?* What's 'M' stand for?" She peered at the last line on the screen. "Hey, it changes when you change 'x'."

Jack shrugged. "I'd guess 'M' stands for mode. Or method. If x=0, then you're in $M_0$ or Mode 0, the transporter mode. If x=1, then you get Mode 1, normal mode."

Deak nodded. "Works for me. Okay, flip that zero to a one, and let's go."

"Deak! You're just going to trust your life to an *equation?* My life too?" Wendy said, her voice rising to a whine. "This house has tried to kill us every step of the way."

"That was before we figured out the doorways, baby," Deak replied.

"*We?*" Jack said.

"Whatever. The point is we can get out of this death trap," Deak said.

Wendy crossed her arms. "I'm *not* walking through that doorway until we test it."

"Test it?" Deak snapped. "And just how do we test it without using it?"

Wendy glared back but said nothing.

"The mouse," Jack said quietly.

Deak looked at him. "What?"

"The model of the house in the box duplicates the doorways in the real house. I'll flip the switch in the equation and then put the mouse through the doorway. If it ends up on the front doorstep unharmed, that's enough proof for me."

Wendy looked doubtful, but Deak nodded. "Me too. Do it."

Jack typed "x=1" into the command line. The three lines dropped to a single formula:

$$f\,(R_A, D_{AB}, 1, M_0) = (R_B, M_1)$$

Standing up from the computer console, Jack walked over to the alcove and up the three steps to the box containing the model of the House.

Jack reached into the box.

The mouse huddles with his younger companions in a corner, nostrils quivering, tiny eyes locked on the hand descending into their world. The hand stops before them. It opens, the seeds that the mouse had already smelled cradled in its palm. The two younger mice push past him, their fear overcome by hunger.

Stepping aside, he lets them run to the hand. He watches as the hand scoops them both up and sets them down again before the door in the room. The hand prods them both forward. The younger male mouse scoots through the door immediately, no doubt expecting a further reward on the other side.

More cautious, the female mouse pauses. She looks back at the older mouse. He has always protected her, warned her of danger, saved her time and time again. He stares at her, whiskers twitching, but makes no move to stop her.

He is telling her that it is safe.

She scurries through the doorway. The hand withdraws.

The older mouse walks over to the seeds that the hand has dropped and begins to nibble. Yes, he has always protected her. But not out of any spirit of mouse chivalry.

For he has learned that when the House asks for volunteers, it is best to have someone else available to step forward.

Alone, he settles down to eat.

"Well?" Deak snapped.

Jack reached inside the box and carefully lifted out a mouse. Walking over to Deak with Wendy following, he held out his hands with the mouse cupped in them.

Deak bent down, peering at it. The mouse twitched its nose a few times, sniffing at its observer, then returned to an intense inspection of Jack's hands. Deak straightened up, smiling and nodding. "Well, the little rodent seems fine," He grinned at Wendy.

Biting her lip, Wendy reached out a finger to touch the mouse in Jack's hands, her fear of mice losing out to her need to be convinced that it was unharmed.

To know that the doorway was safe.

The mouse twisted around to sniff at her finger, which she quickly withdrew.

"Well?" Deak asked.

Wendy nodded, and Deak grinned again. "I guess we're ready to greet our public."

"Guess so," Jack replied.

Deak frowned at Jack. "You're not going to be a problem about this are you? I was serious about the legal battle—"

Jack shook his head. "It's all yours, Deak. I've had my fill of this. Just cut me that check."

Deak's grin returned, and his shoulders relaxed. "Soon as I get back. Great dealing with you, Jack," he said, pumping Jack's hand. He sprang over to the doorway. "Hey, it's all black. I can't see anything."

"Must be what happens when they function as normal doors," Jack said. "Like the door that led in here."

Deak nodded. "Makes sense. Coming, Wendy?" he asked.

Wendy shot Jack a look.

Jack knew what she was asking, because Jack knew Wendy. Knew her every look, every frown and smile, the unspoken thoughts and fears and feelings given voice, to him if not to others, by each tiny gesture.

Wendy was asking Jack if it was safe.

He nodded, and her face told Jack that she believed him and was ready to leave, to walk through that final doorway, to leave Jack again and for the last time.

Wendy turned to Deak. "Yes, but you first."

Deak shrugged. Stepping to the doorway, he waved to them both. "Fame and fortune, here I come!" Deak stepped through the doorway.

"'Here *I* come?'" she repeated. "He'd better not try to cut me out of this," she muttered. She moved to follow him.

"Wendy?" Jack asked.

She turned back to look at him. "What is it?"

"I need to ask you a question."

She shook her head, and the light from the glowing ceiling caught on her hair as it moved back and forth. Those little streaks of red shone back at him, and it made him ache for what he'd lost. "Jack, we've been through that." She started to turn away again.

"Wendy, it's important."

She faced him with folded arms. "OK," she sighed. "What is it?"

One last try, he thought. Despite it all, despite what he now knew. He could almost see Rainer frowning his disapproval. "Why can't you give us a second chance?"

"Oh, for chrissakes, Jack—"

"I just want us to go back. To the way we were, when we first met. When everything was good. I just want for us to be happy, to be together again."

She had started shaking her head even before he finished. "Jack, wake up. It's over." She gestured around the room. "The life we used to have—Jack, it's like one of the rooms in this house that you see through the doorway but you can't reach anymore. There are doors in life that only work in one direction too. *Sometimes, you just can't go back.*"

She turned to the doorway, and Jack had a flash of a memory, hard and sharp as a knife edge, of Wendy walking out the door of their own house on their

last night together, out of the door and out of his life.

"Wendy!" he cried.

She spun around. "What?!" she snapped.

His final plea died in his throat, strangled there by the coldness in her eyes, in her voice. And in the cold hard facts that Rainer had shown him. That coldness numbed the last bit of warmth in his heart, and he shoved his hands into his pockets.

"Nothing. Forget it. You're right." He looked at her. "It *is* over."

Her face softened a bit. She walked to the doorway. "You coming?" she asked.

He shook his head. "You go be with Deak. Trust me, I don't want to be part of that."

Wendy sighed. "Aren't you going to say goodbye?" she asked. Jack just stood there. Wendy shrugged.

And stepped through the doorway.

For a moment, he just stared at where she'd been, smelling her perfume in the air, remembering the way she'd looked, not now, but when they'd first met. Finally, he sighed and walked back to the box with the mice and the model of the House.

Reaching inside, he picked up the mouse that he'd shown to Deak and Wendy. Its nose and whiskers twitched as it trembled in his hand. He stroked it softly and then returned it to the box and the pile of seeds it had been eating in the analog of, not the front entrance, but the control room of the model House.

He reached inside the box again, to a different section, to the area corresponding to the front doorstep, where Deak and Wendy had just emerged, and picked up one of the two mice now lying there.

He stared at the mouse. Or rather, what used to be a mouse. The thing he held appeared to have been taken apart, turned inside out, and then reassembled with little consideration of its original form. A front limb now protruded from the back of its head, another from the side. The two back legs had been braided together with its tail, and its internal organs now oozed in a random distribution on the outside of its torso.

It was, of course, quite dead.

$f(R_A, D_{AB}, x=0, M_0) = (R_C, M_0)$, and
$f(R_A, D_{AB}, x=1, M_0) = (R_B, M_1)$

If x=0, then from Room A, doorway $D_{AB}$ delivered you, not to Room B as your eyes expected, but to Room C. And $M_0$ stayed $M_0$.

But Jack had been right. You *could* force the doorway to deliver you to Room B. You just set x=1 and walked from Room A through Doorway $D_{AB}$ to end up in Room B.

But then $M_0$ became $M_1$. And M didn't stand for Mode. Or for Method.

M stood for Mouse. Rainer's final little joke.

Mouse Zero became Mouse One. If you could still call it a mouse. The House gave you a choice: change the room—or change the mouse.

Jack returned the thing that had been a mouse to the pool of fluids in which it had been lying in the box with the other dead mouse. He wiped his hand on his jeans.

"Goodbye, Wendy," he whispered.

The ceiling display flickered, and then Rainer was smiling sadly down at him. "I can tell by the biometrics, Jack, that you figured out how to *simplify* your, uh, situation by deleting some unnecessary terms. You were like a son to me, Jack. Now, GenTech is going to try to screw you out of your share—"

Jack muted the speaker. The only sounds left in the control room now were the mouse scratching in the box and his own heart thudding in his chest. Unfrozen again, I guess, my heart, he thought. Or maybe it just started beating for the first time. And all it took was a double homicide.

He looked up at Rainer mouthing silently overhead. "Sorry, old man. But I'm tired of being used as a pawn, by Wendy, by Deak, by GenTech. By you, too. From now on, I play my game."

He downloaded all of Rainer's project files to a memory cube. A check on the system logs verified that Rainer had never shipped any backups offsite. He ran a utility he'd written for Rainer based on Guttman's deletion method that would permanently remove everything on the House's systems. Redundant, given what he was planning next, but he wasn't taking any chances.

Locating Rainer's Armageddon countdown program, he bumped up the timer to thirty minutes and activated the destruct sequence and the warning announcement. He flipped the display to the front of the House and watched the activities long enough to assure himself that GenTech would evacuate the island safely before the House exploded. Panning the display of the front of the House down to the doorstep where Deak and Wendy lay, he stood staring for a while and then turned off the display.

Deciding it would be best to avoid the front door, Jack turned off the teleport system, allowing him to open any doorway in the house manually. He then put the still-living mouse in his jacket pocket with the memory cube and left unnoticed by a hidden back entrance that led to a small cove with Rainer's fully-fueled motor boat.

Because Wendy had been right after all.

Sometimes, you just can't go back.

*Rhys Hughes says, "Of the 460 or so stories I've written, I hold 'False Dawn of Parrots' (see* Postscripts 6, *Spring 2006) in higher regard than most because it lacks plot, dialogue and characterisation and isn't descriptive in any way–it's a catalogue of ideas that collide against each other, echo themselves, fuse together, break apart, etc. I like to think of that tale as a product of whimsy engineering. I wanted to write another story in the same mode, using the same illustrator (cartoonist and musician Anthony Lewis) so I sat down and did just that. I like this new tale even more than my parrots piece. A variation appeared in Portuguese as a chapter of my book* Sereia de Curitiba *(2007) with drawings by Paulo Barros, but this is the English original."*

*For more of Rhys's postmodern brilliance, read his novella* The Crystal Cosmos, *available from PS Publishing.*

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# The Gala of Implausible Songs

## Rhys Hughes

The ruined city of Butrint in the far south of Albania was chosen as the venue for the first WOMBS (World of Music Beyond Sense) festival, a nice quiet location for a modest event.

When the idea was first suggested, the organisers never imagined the interest the festival would arouse. They completely misjudged the public appetite for this kind of thing. Sensible music seemed too safe, too rooted in the brains of ordinary mortals, too natural, too *plausible*, for it ever to be replaced by the nonsensical kind.

But the demand for tickets quickly exceeded expectations and the size and duration of the festival had to be expanded. Venues adjacent to Butrint were prepared. The dusty town of Saranda on the coast was taken over, and even the island of Corfu, visible like a serving of lumpy cloud on the horizon, was used to stage concerts.

Across the little channel little boats sailed back and forth, little sails were raised and lowered, little backs were scratched and tickled, little raisins were nibbled, all part of the process of conveying musicians and spectators from one gig to another.

My name is Luís Rodrigues. Having been asked to play a short set on one of the smaller stages, I accepted immediately. I went with the mermaid Caroline Moreira, the sea goddess Renuka Mahadevan, and the Levantine Lioness of Lisbon, Safaa Rachid el-Dib.

I wrapped my little guitar in a silk scarf and slung it over my back.

We arrived slightly late and missed the beginning of the festival but managed to catch the last song of the first act. I recognised the lead singer. His head was that of a man, a bearded man, nonetheless human, but his body was more ornamental, more useful perhaps. From the neck down he was a Javanese knife.

*The festival was opened by Kris Kristofferson*

To be honest he was not quite as sharp as he could have been. He blunted himself further by cutting his set short, a sure way of losing your edge. At least when we waved to him he waved back. His shape meant he was unable to do otherwise.

Not everybody can be expected to enjoy a music festival in the same way. Some people just attend for the music, others like to go shopping among the jewellery stalls that invariably appear. During the gig by Wilson the Clockwork Man I sensed that my companions were growing bored and so we arranged to split up and meet later at a certain place. The place in question was a booth selling pies.

After the gig I arrived at the booth early and ordered a pie while I waited for my friends to appear. But before I could bite into it, the pie started begging for its life.

"Don't eat me mister! I'm one of the performers!"

I was astonished. "A musical pie?"

"Sure. There are mathematical pies and pie charts and piebald horses and *pieds-à-terre*, so why not a minstrel pie, a pie that earns its crust with the aid of melody and rhythm?"

I was suspicious. "What is your preferred instrument?"

"The pipes! I'm a pied piper."

I asked for a demonstration and that is what I got, and I have to admit I was rather impressed. This pie was piping hot. It turned out he came from a family of talented pies, a clan of pastry troubadours, all baked by a kitchen genius who was half man, half oven. I sighed. This situation was not just implausible, it was silly, and I was glad when my friends turned up and we moved on elsewhere.

We had arrived by aeroplane in Kérkira, the largest town on Corfu and the only one with an airport, but my gig was in Butrint, so we had to get to Albania before the evening of the first day. This was easy enough and we boarded a yacht and sailed towards the port of Saranda, admiring the imaginary creatures that played in the sea.

We even managed to observe a rare Coffee Kraken, jittery under its light chocolate coating, each tentacle grasping a silver stirring spoon.

After we reached the harbour and disembarked, we rested for an hour at a pavement café talking about the oddness of life and how music could be a balm for the apprehension that might arise if all the pauses inside conversations were added up. The sum total of such pauses throughout history and around the world would equal an extremely large silence, and large things are often regarded with distrust, take Coffee Krakens as an example, hence the apprehension.

Something important was happening on the waterfront. A crane began unloading a long metal object from a ship. A crowd of people gathered to receive it, and as we peered closer we saw it was a giant piccolo, perhaps the largest piccolo that has ever existed. What was the point of this? The answer was simple. A One Man Band, in other words a single individual loaded with drums, cymbals, guitars and other instruments, so arranged about his body that he can play them simultaneously, is nothing special. It is a sight found in any city at almost any time. But a *Many Person Soloist* is quite a different matter, a musical phenomenon unique, as far as I am aware, to this particular festival.

When the piccolo was in position, the crowd played it by covering and uncovering the holes with their hands. Nobody had lungs powerful enough to blow into it. That task was accomplished by an electric bellows of monstrous size. The melody produced by this experiment, for it did not rightfully deserve to be called a performance, was disappointing. But more than our sense of aural beauty was offended. The vast quantities of air forced into such a relatively narrow tube generated a horizontal tornado at the far end of the piccolo. A sailing vessel was spun right across the channel all the way to Corfu. Thanks to a piccolo the crew found themselves in a pickle.

Desperately they signalled to shore with flags. I speak fluent Flag and relayed the message to my friends:

"Praise the gods it's not a trombone!"

The fashions adopted by those who attend music festivals are always worthy of note, provided the note is short. I am a regular at festivals of this kind and believe I now have the ability to predict the particular quirk of style and dress that will—in the language of such matters—catch on. My two best guesses for the first WOMBS festival were ankle length hats and horizon length sleeves. I was pleasantly surprised to learn I was utterly wrong. This means I will never be treated as an oracle by fashion designers and thus will have more time to devote to travelling the world and writing songs of note*.

[*The note in this case should be long, at least fourteen pages of quarto.]

*The hottest fashion items at this festival were neck high boots*

I had enjoyed the gig by Wilson the Clockwork Man for deep personal reasons. Before setting off for Corfu I spent a week in Portugal visiting my twin brother, who is also a mechanical puppet. I built him long ago, not in a garage as might be expected, but in a kitchen. Like Wilson he is powered by clockwork but with a difference: his cogs, levers and springs are carved from vegetables.

The story behind this miracle is simple. When I was younger I wanted two careers, one sensible, the other dissolute, but I could not decide in which order to have them. The obvious answer was to have both at the same time. The real Luís Rodrigues is the dissolute one, a singer who sails the scurrilous seas, but the Luís Rodrigues that is the main financial provider is an automaton.

His outer casing is made of a soft wood, flexible enough to attend university without creaking. But the authorities of such establishments have become extremely wary of their students after a spate of puppet substitutes in examinations and now they utilise metal detectors hidden in the walls and floors of the university. The instant they detect metal on the premises they rush with spanners to dismantle the student in question and often their suspicions are confirmed.

This is why I determined to have no metallic parts inside my puppet. I sliced courgettes and starfruits to create wheels and cogs, used radishes for counterweights, sticks of celery for camshafts. For springs I coiled sprigs of parsley and other herbs. My puppet worked superbly and was even able to wind himself up at the appropriate times. Unfortunately as his vegetable workings rotted over time, his behaviour became erratic. I thought he might have to be regarded as a failure, but many of the seeds inside the vegetables germinated and grew into new components. Thus does he renew his workings each year.

Of course, these new workings are not of my design, and they cause my twin to act and think in ways that are alien to me. Imagine cucumbers operating peppers in unplanned sequences! Every time I visit him I can control him less. This has proved beneficial. Whenever I feel I no longer understand myself, I pay a visit to this other Luís Rodrigues, who in a sense is *me*, and attempt a long conversation with him (mindful of the pauses) and come away with the consolation that at least I understand myself better than I understand myself.

As we departed Saranda we attempted to take a short cut down a narrow alleyway, but it ended in a courtyard from which issued unearthly singing that was not accompanied by any instrument. We were astonished to discover that the courtyard was empty. It was the walls that were singing, three of them, in close harmony.

Standing in the centre of the courtyard we were surrounded by the interacting voices, almost as if we were stray notes on a page of sheet music. Then we realised this was not a real courtyard after all and that the alleyway had always led somewhere else, possibly to the edge of town, until these walls had gathered here for their rendition and formed a cul-de-sac. When they finished their song they would disperse and the way would be open again.

Safaa guessed the answer behind this latest mystery. It seems that the famous Wailing Wall in Jerusalem had recently started a trend among walls, some of whom wailed more melodiously than others. The three most promising walls were given specialised training until they were pitch perfect. Then they were shipped to Saranda and allowed to choose their own spot for a performance.

The man who was their producer was the much sought after Phil Spectre, creator of the 'Wall of Sound' effect, but he wasn't here at this time. He was rarely seen anywhere. He was a phantom, the real reason why he was much sought after.

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On the way to Butrint we found a tent in which played a band composed entirely of shadows who slid over the stage and played their instruments on their backs. Not many people noticed them. So inconspicuous were they that the next band went onstage before they had finished. This new band were skeletons but before they could begin playing their music the shadows slid over them and chilled them so their knees knocked together as they shivered, and this bony percussion formed the entire performance. A small audience applauded.

I decided to return later with a sack and collect a few skeletons to sell at the local Bone Souk. There is a world surplus of charming xylophones but the grotesque variety are rare and a poor musician has to pay his rent somehow, not that I actually pay rent, because I am a sailor, plus I don't exist, being a character in a story, but we all have personal myths to make ourselves feel better, do we not?

Incidentally, there are now so many charming xylophones in existence that they have been piled into a mountain that can be climbed with the right equipment, namely muffled boots. The descent is much easier: the climber performs a glissando all the way down. A man called Jackfruit Bursts told me this. He works in the music industry and wanted to engage the mountain for a tour, but it declined. Jackfruit walked to the far side and made the same proposal to the other slope, but now he wasn't sure if he was past the mountain's peak

or the mountain was past its own, and unwilling to take a risk he retracted his offer.

On the outskirts of the ruined city that was our destination we found a group of drunken musicians playing empty bottles by holding them to their bloated lips and blowing over the tops. The tune was an old Irish song, 'Rivers of Whisky, Submarines of Soda', thoughtlessly updated and technically inaccurate, for a submarine made of soda would hardly retain its structure long enough to house a crew or complete a mission, unless the soda was frozen into solid blocks, a possibility not mentioned in the chorus or in any verse. I noted that one of the bottles was blowing flat and I seized it from its owner.

There was an obstruction inside, a letter. I inverted the bottle, shook it and finally succeeded in extracting the folded scrap of parchment from its confines. Then I read it aloud:

Dear Roger Waters

I am writing to complain about a situation I believe might constitute a serious breach of contract, or at the very least will demonstrate to the world that you are not capable of keeping your promises.

Many years ago I purchased a vinyl copy of the Pink Floyd album *The Dark Side of the Moon*. I need not remind you that you were closely affiliated with that group, and may indeed be considered one of its most significant members. The following lyrics have been attributed to you:

*"And if the dam breaks open many years too soon*
*And if there is no room upon the hill*
*And if your head explodes with dark forebodings too*
*I'll see you on the dark side of the moon."*

I wish to point out that the Vaoint dam in Italy actually broke in 1963, at least 50 years before engineers calculated it would become obsolete. Furthermore there is a hill near my house that had no room upon it when I went there for a picnic with the inventor Boppo Higgins, my best friend.

Because of these twin events, I took the advice of your song and at considerable expense and effort persuaded Boppo to construct a craft capable of taking me to the dark side of the moon, where I awaited you. But you did not arrive and I must conclude that the last line of your song is a blatant lie.

I am still stuck on the dark side of the moon and it was difficult to hurl this bottle into space from the crater where I am presently residing, with nothing more than the strength of my bare arm.

Please do not suggest that the third stipulation of the song has not been fulfilled on my part. Because of the low pressure here, my head *has* exp-

loded and very darkly foreboding it was too. Still you have not turned up.

Yours in disillusionment,
A Former Fan.

There is no sound in space, therefore there is no music, therefore no music business, promoters, agents, managers or any of the other people associated with the creation and distribution of songs. Furthermore there can be no music reviewers, for they can have nothing at all to review. It seemed to me that I had spotted a gap in the market. I would become a reviewer of the sounds of space. The work would be easy, non-existent in fact, and there would be no competition.

I wrote my first half dozen reviews in half a minute:

"A bit thin, too cautious."

"Extensive but nothing to write home about."

"Spacious and specious."

"Looking forward to the follow up vacuum."

"Love the quiet bits."

"Not very atmospheric."

We encountered a Singing Genealogy. This was most peculiar. It looked like a tree hung with chimes, but the branches of this tree were nights of lovemaking (some passionate, others dutiful) and the chimes (some blue, others pink) were births. I memorised the song it sang and I reproduce (so to speak) the words here:

Gooseflesh begat Gat; Gat begat Beg; Beg begat Gut; Gut begat Begorrah; Begorrah begat Toby Sure, in fact he begat him twice; Toby Sure, Toby Sure begat Mutt & Jeff; Mutt begat Nowt; Jeff begat The Hat; The Hat begat Ning-ning-ning; Ning-ning-ning begat Khool Fudge; Khool Fudge begat Bobobo; Bobobo begat Bemusa, the bewildered gorgon; Bemusa begat Stonie Silens; Stonie Silens begat Echoknot; Echoknot begat Untied & Untested; Untied begat Alot; Untested never did; Alot begat Abit; Abit begat Aboat; Aboat begat Avoyage; Avoyage begat Arrival; Arrival begat Here You Are; and Here You Are was where we were and where we stayed, thank you very much.

I have never really understood this obsession with ancestors. My own ancestors were from the future and that explains my indifference on the subject. In the meantime Safaa the Levantine Lioness of Lisbon learned that her genealogy could be traced back to the land of Lyonesse. She was nearly a Lioness from Lyonesse.

I wondered if somewhere in the world existed a Tigress from Tigris, for the sake of symmetry. Probably not. On the topmost branches of the Singing Genealogy was perched a phoenix. Its own genealogy was self referential and

therefore humorous, as self referential things are, or so I have been postmodernly informed.

Renuka the sea goddess and Caroline the mermaid had made a list of the acts they really wanted to see. Safaa and I decided to follow suit and compile our own lists, then we would compare the names to find any overlap. It emerged that the acts we all really wanted to see were ten in number and consisted of the following:

**The Lugworm Beach Orchestra.**

**The Thing that was Scarcely a Thing**—and his Almighty Whirlitzer.

**Jumping Jehoshaphat**—who jumps around with instruments concealed inside his boots, leaping up the sides of cliffs and down again, across plains and over dunes and through dank forests. A year after the festival, robbers knocked him down and stole his boots and discovered they were empty. The only conclusion to be drawn is that the world itself makes music when jumped on, but it has to be jumped on in a certain way, a secret only known to Jumping Jehoshaphat, who is still unconscious and not saying anything.

**The Tone Colour Painters**—who all play the same note, G Sharp, but on different instruments so it sounds different depending on which musician is playing. By exploiting this difference, the band are able to play melodies that are both repetitive and extremely complex.

**Stuffy the Stifled Sock Sings Stockhausen.**

**The East Pole**—uprooted from its geographical position off the coast of Sumatra and hung like a tubular bell from a giant frame and struck with mallets by frustrated explorers.

**The Estruendo Touring Nightclub**—an act that involves the scheduled musicians sitting bewildered on stage while the audience are given instruments and forced to play them as best they can.

**Green David's Three Minor Demons**—three catchy jingles, so catchy that they remain in the mind and are replayed there over and over again until the listener becomes catatonic. Fortunately states of catatonia at festivals, no less than food and drink, are very expensive and only the richest members of the audience can afford to remain in them indefinitely.

**Everyone's Cup of Tea**—an obscure act appealing to a select few.

**Festival Flags**—the flags on poles that traditionally accompany such festivals are permitted one hour in which their flapping and snapping is defined as a gig. With my fluency in Flag I was sure to find something inspiring in this set.

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We almost included the 'Swine Taster's Hamstrung Philharmonic' but it clashed with my own gig and naturally my friends preferred to attend my performance. That's the sort of loyalty you get from sea goddesses, mermaids and lionesses that you can't always be sure of receiving from your human friends. I wasn't quite so confident about the merits of my intended set and I wondered if I might sneak off while somehow giving the impression I was still on stage.

Safaa drew a picture of the man who drew the pictures that appear earlier in this story. He is also a musician, but only semi-implausible. I wondered why he kept following us around, drawing pictures for this story. Not that I intend to complain! Two of his pictures were highly suitable illustrations and have been employed thus, as you are already aware. The others might still come in handy for a variety of purposes. Here is Safaa's lifelike picture of him:

We finally reached the site where my performance was due to take place. It was in the centre of the ruined public baths. Dust drifted over the mosaics and people wandered about with bowed heads as if searching for long crumbled friends in the particles. I tuned my guitar while Renuka, Caroline and Safaa found a shady spot with a good view. Then I waited and relaxed and wondered exactly how much money I would earn and how quickly I could spend it.

The act that preceded mine was both economical and elaborate, for the entire stage was covered with cardboard boxes strung with elastic bands. A man dressed in an ermine cape and wearing a crown hurried from box to box, plucking these bands with fingers and thumbs heavy with rings. Much later I had a chance to talk to him and he told me the story of his life. It went something like this:

### The King of the Cardboard Castle

Once I lived in a palace. I wasn't born a king, nor did I acquire a kingdom through force or guile, but I called myself a king in secret and quietly tried to enjoy the pleasures of a regal life. My reign was minimal rather than short, for my neighbours were radically unaware of my status and never imagined I might be a monarch. They played loud intrusive music all through the night and hurled into my garden rubbish that consisted mostly of broken furniture and empty beer bottles.

I resolved to win the respect of my ignorant subjects by moving out of my small house and ruling from the grandeur of a palace. Unfortunately

funds wouldn't permit the construction of an edifice in durable materials such as stone or wood and I was obliged to erect walls and towers of cardboard. At the end of my street, opposite the corner shop, I raised my new home, held together with staples and sticky tape, and moved in with my throne, crown and sceptre, also cardboard.

Wisely had I chosen to fortify my palace so that it resembled a castle more than a pleasure dome. The walls were crenellated, the windows were small and a drawbridge of stiff yellow paper provided the only means of access across a moat of bubble wrap. Potential usurpers in baseball caps began to assault my residence from the moment the final turret was glued in place. But I was safe inside my fortress and I had enough powdered milk and tins of beans to endure the longest siege.

One morning, strolling the ramparts and gazing out across my kingdom, I heard a distant commotion, the sound of many hooves. Soon the dread source of this noise became visible. An army of tartars was rushing down the street towards me! They were mounted on fast tartar steeds and they carried bows and quivers of arrows. I was aghast because I thought my reign had come to a premature end. Arrows would easily pierce the cardboard walls of my cheap fortress and transfix my imperial heart.

I took refuge in the deepest dungeon of my abode, a room with walls three shoeboxes thick, and cowered like a peasant, hiding my face under my cape. I heard the baying of the barbaric hordes outside, the twang of their bows and the sound of the arrows thudding against my bastion. But nothing happened and I remained unhurt. Silence fell. After a suitable length of time I climbed the wobbly spiral staircase back to the ramparts to appraise the situation. To my relief, the invaders had retreated.

Two of the tartars had collided and lay dazed in the street. I now saw that the horses were in fact tricycles covered in rugs. I went down and inspected the arrows. They were made of cardboard. Abandoned bows lay scattered on the pavement and I was pleased to discover that they were strung with elastic bands. I collected these bands, demolished my castle by hand and strung the bands over the individual boxes. I believe that my true vocation is music and I am feeling a lot better as a result.

The Old Id, chief organiser of the festival, was there and when he spied me he made his way over and confessed to having doubts about letting me on for my gig. I was astonished and demanded an explanation. He lowered his voice to a whisper and said:

"The problem is that you're not very implausible."

"What do you mean?" I protested.

"Well you're a normal man, a human musician, and this is the first WOMBS festival, a festival of music beyond sense, and I don't see what you have that isn't so sensible."

"The King of the Cardboard Castle is plausible too!"

"A king in a republic? Of course he isn't! Come now, there's nothing comparably unlikely about you."

"I have mythical companions," I responded.

"Yes, but you're the one doing the performance. To keep to the spirit of the festival we'll have to impose an implausible constraint on you, else you won't be allowed on stage."

"But I was invited here!" I spluttered.

"True, but we were under the impression you were a wooden puppet powered by vegetable components. Clearly this is not the case. Do you accept my terms or not?"

"What is the constraint?" I asked.

"You must play your entire set in zero time!"

I had no choice but to go along with this absurd condition. It meant I would have to choose the shortest song in my repertoire and perform it very fast, at the speed of infinity in fact, and even new strings on a guitar can't cope with the heat generated by fingers that move at such velocity. To be on the cautious side, I whittled down the music to a single chord, but still I suspected vaporisation of my instrument would be the result. No matter. My fee would cover a replacement.

The shortest song in my repertoire is called 'I Can Walk Faster Than a Bicycle' and this is how it goes:

*I can walk faster than a bicycle*
*pedalled by a man*
*without legs*
*uphill*

It was over at the precise time it began. Guitar dust blew across the ruined city and every man and woman who inhaled it felt *saudade*, that homesick longing, in their hearts, as well as indigestion in their stomachs. Suddenly the Old Id rushed up to me and drew me aside for a serious chat. His mouth twisted awkwardly.

"I made a mistake. By requiring you to play a song in zero time I imposed an *impossible* constraint on you and this festival is concerned with implausibles only."

"Too late now," I said, "because the damage has been done." But then I frowned. "Or has it?"

"Technicalities aside, you have accidentally ruined the spirit of the event! You are banned from further WOMBS festivals. Fortunately the first WOMBL (World of Music Beyond Logic) festival is due to take place next month and I can introduce you to the organiser who will doubtless offer you a gig."

"Where is the venue?" I asked.

"In the heart of the sun!"

"Book me a slot at sunset when it's cooler," I said.

*Al Robertson tells us, "I was fascinated by the seedy, downbeat life that Julian Maclaren Ross describes in his classic memoirs of Soho and Fitzrovia in the 40s and 50s; working in the area myself, I was able to explore the pubs and cafes that he'd moved through, usually on the run from debt collectors, irate editors or just last night's hangover. As I got to know the remnants of his world, I began to wonder what kind of gods would populate it — hence this story. Failed lives deserve the numinous, too; perhaps more so than any other kind."*

*Al lives in London. Previous publications include "Ghosts" in* Midnight Street 10, *and "Golden" in* The Third Alternative *38, with stories also available at infinityplus.co.uk and anthologybuilder.com. Upcoming publications are "Changeling" in* Black Static, *and "Fishermen" in* Interzone. *Al blogs on weird fiction, poetry and related matters at* http://allumination.wordpress.com. *He's recently completed his first novel; a second is under way.*

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# Sohoitis

## Al Robertson

*"If you get Sohoitis," Tambi said very seriously, "you will stay there always day and night and get no work done ever. You have been warned."*

Julian Maclaren Ross,
*Memoirs of the Forties*

1.

The god drank in the Wheatsheaf Tavern, on Rathbone Place. Supplicants could be seen queuing outside the Saloon Bar door, nervously clutching rags or cloths with their little requests raggedly stitched into them. Every so often one would go in. The god would demand a gift. It was not unusual to see an acolyte at the cigarette machine in the corner of the bar, hands shaking with awe, trying desperately to ram change into the little slot. Sometimes one would be at the bar, straining to get an order in before the god's attention wandered on and away.

I used to sit at the other end of the bar and watch them enter and try desperately to please. The god was usually unshaven; the stench of him rising and falling with the heat of the day outside. I had been going to the bar for seven years, and had never seen him in clean clothes. In fact, I had never seen his outfit change. He'd only spoken to me once. He'd grabbed my elbow at closing time—the last devotee ushered out by the bar staff, the rest of us finishing up and pulling our coats on, ready for the cold night outside—and belched, his one good eye blazing, before mumbling, 'I tried. You know I fucking tried. Fuck 'em all'; and staggering out into the cold night.

None of us knew where he lived. His temple had been deserted for a long

time. Only one of the priests still survived. Rumour told us that he was a regular in a pub in Neasden, sinking a little further into the numinous with every pint. The rest had drunk themselves to death years ago.

Nonetheless it came as a shock when the god was murdered. They found him on Museum Street. A hawthorn branch —the leaves still green—had been plunged into his heart. His blood was still singing when some clubbers tripped over him. A pure white light was shining up from the hole in his chest. A policeman came along and found the clubbers enraptured. By then the young boy who had drunk some of his blood had passed out, thinly chopped lettuce and brown, papery kebab meat lying scattered on the ground beside him.

Later that night, the body disappeared from the morgue. In the morning, they found that the walls of the little metal cupboard they'd rolled him into had become diamond. The god left a reek of piss and bad breath behind him. The stench could not be dispelled from the morgue, which was soon after closed down. The god's followers could not be kept from breaking into it. They would gather there for regular services on Friday nights, drinking until they fought awkwardly, and then passing out.

I never went to those services. I read about them in the *Evening Standard*. The church fell into schism. It was reported in the gossip columns. The boy who had drunk his blood had started drinking at the Wheatsheaf, arriving nightly and taking the god's stool. The stupor was the same, and the swearing. Some of the acolytes had adopted him as a new incarnation. You can imagine the repercussions.

At that time I was working for a documentary maker, based somewhere beyond Soho Square. I shared an office with the poet Eric Tryfan, who was then just beginning to make a name for himself. I was with him when one of the god's followers approached me on Old Compton Street.

'Can you help us?'

'What?'

'Can you help us?'

He made an awkward sign of obeisance. He was wearing a well cut pinstriped suit, but he hadn't shaved for several days. The top few buttons of his shirt had been torn off. His briefcase was tied together with string. He clutched it to his chest with both hands. Cans of lager were about to tumble out.

'I don't understand.'

'But you drank with him.'

Tryfan had walked a few paces ahead, not realising that I'd stopped.

'For god's sake give him some money and come on.'

'He doesn't want money.'

The man was shivering.

'What does he want then? Fucking junkies.'

And then:

'Oh. One of his.'

I left the acolyte standing there, pathetic in the cold. He did not come after me, but later that night I saw him

outside the bar. It seemed that he was afraid to go in. Inside, the boy had fallen off a bar stool and was lying on the floor. He had vomited. Another acolyte was hovering over him, unsure what to do. A third was scooping little portions of vomit into an empty beer can with a teaspoon. The boy's skin was greyer than usual. He was still wearing the track suit he had been clubbing in.

Three weeks later, I saw some street children with the man in the suit's briefcase. The locks had been torn off it. It gaped like an idiot mouth as they tossed it between them.

2.

Tryfan invited me to dinner at his flat in Stoke Newington. At first I took the invitation to be a sign of acceptance, which pleased me. He wanted me to arrive on Saturday, at about six. On Tuesday I visited the Thomas Cook office in Oxford Street.

Once I had completed the company's business I asked the travel consultant about reaching Tryfan. She told me that I could get a bus from Highbury and Islington tube. I didn't trust her. She kept on breaking eye contact with me, looking down at the tinnies that I had put down on her desk. There were three left from the original six. I was drinking from one as I talked to her.

'Would you mind?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Would you mind?'

I spent the next day's lunch hour queuing in a small local post office, wondering if the dinner invitation was in fact some kind of joke that Tryfan was playing on me. As I left the post office, I walked past a man lying like a dead fish in the gutter. He muttered something as I went by, but I could not make it out.

I left the office at five o clock on Friday night. Tryfan told me how glad he would be to see me the next day, but I did not respond. I went straight to the Wheatsheaf. The boy abused me as I entered. Another acolyte repeated every word, muttering each one with a desperate but unconvinced reverence. 'You fucking cunt. You fucker. You fuck. You fucking cunt.'

The boy made each word softer than the last, so by the final 'cunt' I could barely hear him. At last, the acolyte was silent too. As I left, he was helping the boy off the stool and towards the gents. 'Help us,' he said as I passed him. The boy's head lolled like a half filled bin liner, two good eyes rolled back into his head. He left a small pile of stitched requests on the bar, unanswered.

'Help us.'

The command haunted me but I did not know what I could do. Next day, I began my journey on the number 73 bus. I was worried about being late and had left plenty of time. I had two four packs in a plastic bag, my offering for the evening. I would get off at Warren Street, and join the Victoria Line there.

I spilled some lager on my Travel card, softening its hard edges and

blurring its print. As the bus jerked and started to move I realised that I hadn't shaved that morning. More lager rolled onto my left leg and moistened my trousers. People pushed by me. It seemed to be a sunny day.

The tube closed itself around me like a septic bandage, hot, close and reeking in the late summer heat. I swayed against another man on the escalator, and coming to myself realised that I was singing. I found myself sipping from a new can.

Now I was on the platform and the can was empty. I had dropped another one at my feet. I wondered how many trains had passed by. I was standing, I think. I crumpled the can in my hand and as the next train came in I tossed it out at eye level. There was a crack as it hit the glass and then the train was rumbling past me.

I remember fighting someone, two or three people. They were wearing some sort of uniform. One of them was swearing at me. It seems that the can had broken the window on the front of the train. I felt something hard thud against the base of my skull, and then there was nothing else.

I woke up in a room with no windows. It was lit by a single fluorescent light. Ache thumped where they had hit me. The beginnings of a hangover creaked in my head. The door was locked. My bag was gone. They had taken my beer. It hurt to move.

Later I remembered that I had a Travel card. It was still wet. I licked at it, extracting moisture. The sodden paper dissolved into mush on my tongue. I chewed the paper into pellets, swallowed them down. The stale taste of beer in my mouth. When I had finished the ticket, the door was unlocked. My hangover had eased a little, although the bruise at the top of my neck still ached. I stood up and walked out of the cell. When I reached the surface again, I hit out for the north.

3.

More and more, I found that I was spending the night in the steam baths on Russell Square. I could hardly remember where my own flat was. Again and again, I would come out of a blackout stumbling down to the baths' under street exit, or leaning against the Night Porter's desk, fumbling in my pockets for spare change.

'The usual, sir?'

'A bath and a cubicle.'

Each cubicle had a hard wooden table, meant for massage. It was sufficient for sleep. If I was really drunk, I would fall onto it and pass out. Sometimes my snoring would be too loud and a neighbour would bang on the door or thin wooden walls. Sometimes I would be able to sleep the whole night through. If I was reasonably sober—but not sober enough to face a night bus or a taxi—I would have a steam bath, working my way through different temperatures to the hot room. If the heat became too much, I would climb slowly down into the plunge pool and sit there until I was shivering. Then, I would

walk straight into the hottest room in the place, and stay sweating in there until I could stand no more.

I began to recognise regulars. There was a well muscled man with a beard, and an attractive woman who I assumed must be a prostitute. I never saw her dressed, but her make up was brash and unsubtle. She had the most beautiful body of any woman I had ever seen; skin milk white, nipples that were more rosebud than flesh, a groin as verdant as the greenwood. There was a sister, who was more modest. Once I overheard the sister telling the Night Porter a story about hunting. I cannot remember the details.

Eric Tryfan was encouraging me to drink. He had been doing so ever since his dinner party. I had left the tube and taken the bus, tracing my way to Stoke Newington through maps on bus stops. I avoided policemen whenever I saw them.

Tryfan lived in a small flat near Clissold Park. I remember the light behind him, and a susurrus of conversation, as he opened the door.

'Hello.'

'Eric.'

I was nervous, and refused a drink. A bottle of red wine was going round the table. They had already finished the first course; picked bones lay on plates smeared with an off-white sauce. I recognised other poets, a controversial novelist, a well known editor. A socialite laughed at one end of the table.

'Oh Eric you do throw the most divine soirees.'

Eric turned to me.

'Perhaps you'd like to go into the bathroom and—'

I locked the door behind me and sat on the edge of the bath. After a while, I found a comb and tidied myself up. I fitted a new blade to Eric's razor and shaved, then sprayed myself with deodorant.

I thought I looked presentable. I turned down more drink when I returned to the table. I was sat between the socialite and a blonde I did not know. Neither of them spoke to me. The main course was served on rice. It tasted like cardboard in my mouth.

After dinner, Eric took me to one side.

'I didn't think you'd come like this.'

I said nothing.

'I think it's best that you leave. I'll call a taxi for you.'

I was back home in thirty five minutes. When I went into the office on Monday, I found a plastic bag on my chair. It contained six cans of beer. Eric was busy with some paperwork. The bag rustled as I set it beneath my desk. I could feel his quick, poet's eyes watching me.

I was drunk by lunchtime. That night, he insisted on accompanying me to the Wheatsheaf. At last orders I realised that he had gone. The boy had staggered off to the toilets and not returned. For the first time, I slept in the steam baths. The next morning, there were more cans on my chair; and so it went on.

**4.**

When I was unconscious in the tube station, I had a dream.

I was standing on the platform. There was a crumpled beer can at my feet, another in my hand. A distant rumble from the black and empty tunnel; in the distance, two lights like diamonds. The wind from the train rolled against me and the roaring became louder. There was nobody else there. The train exploded from the tunnel and hurtled towards me. Light was boiling from empty windows. I threw the can out across the track as it hurtled by, and then the flashing of metal and glass before me and something hit my face and I fell and passed out.

When I woke up, I was lying on the platform. The train had stopped halfway along it. There was warmth and stickiness on my cheek. The world seemed suddenly to be oddly flat. One eye was closed. I put my white hand up to touch it and when I pulled it back it was red. There were two beer cans on the platform next to me, one dented and smeared with blood. As I watched it the bloody one twitched and shuddered. I reached out a hand towards it and it skittered away from me before I could touch it.

Out of my reach, it began to crumple still further, pulling in on itself until it was small and dense and round. A small metal wing flexed out from it; then another, shiny tin with a sharp cutting edge slicing against the air. There were two spindly legs holding it up, claws made from twisted foil. A beak that looked like a hole punch, dark shadows beneath little metal overhangs made eyes. It turned its metal head and looked at me, then at the other can, then at me—and whistled. The whistle was a tiny, grating sound, the noise of wear on the smallest component of a rusted, obsolete factory. It whistled again. A drop of blood ran down one wing and patched the floor.

The other can began to shake. It found the shape of an egg, and then also reached wings, a beak, a head, two scrawny feet, and tail feathers out from itself. It hopped over to the other bird. Together, they looked like refugees from a failed children's television programme. And then, each one stretched out its wings and took to the air.

I walked down the side of the train with a bird on each shoulder, little tin claws pricking into my flesh. Every so often, one or the other would chirrup into my ear. I knew their names now.

We reached the front of the train. First one, then the other, lifted off and into the air, and I felt my memory, my mind go blank as they left me. I am not sure how long they were gone for.

When they returned, I could remember fluttering around the smashed glass of the train window, skipping across the floor of the empty cab. There was a curious weightless joy to my movement. On the floor of the cab there was a branch. Both of me inspected it—my reason, my memory. Shards were scattered around it like leaves. Its tip was covered in blood. Had

I not remembered throwing the can, I would have believed that this hawthorn branch had smashed the tube train window and killed the missing driver.

When I awoke the dream was fresh in my mind, like a memory of some other, better life. It stayed with me. Whenever I drank or slept, I could hear the birds singing in my ears, feel their metal claws grabbing onto me, riding me through these baffled days of mine.

5.

I retreated to Hove to sell vacuum cleaners door to door.

Long wide streets reach down to the sea. Elegant buildings like sections of wedding cake face the spray on the esplanade. A block of flats at the end of the beach, like a single tooth sticking up from the sand. Hove Pier is a senile smile. While I was living there, a fire broke out on it. It survived, blackened. The sound of slate grey waves beating on pebbles stayed with me wherever I went in the town.

On Sundays I would take the bus down the front to Brighton, and order tea and cakes in the tea room of the Grand Hotel. I had once seen it on television, a great cracked break smashed in its façade. Ambulances and confused politicians had been milling round outside. The flashing lights illuminated a lost-looking Prime Minister. I had not listened to what she said. Since then, the hotel had been perfectly repaired. The façade was flawless. That flawlessness—a failure to record history, a papering over of identity—seemed cracked and imperfect to me.

I had stopped drinking. At the end of every day, Parsons—my Sales Manager—would invite me into one or other of Hove's public houses. The invitation never varied: 'Just time for a wet, eh? Just the one, eh, old chap?' I always turned him down. I tried to avoid looking through pub windows. Whenever I did, I could see two metal birds hopping up and down on the other side of the glass, metal beaks scratching brightly against it, sharp little wings flapping excitedly up and down.

'No thanks, Parsons, not tonight.'

'What's wrong with you, old chap? Eh? Just the one, eh? Not one of those tee-totallers, are you? Tee-totaller, eh?'

'Not tonight, Parsons.'

Over his shoulder I could see a frantic tin fluttering. The larger of the two birds was beating itself against the glass. It seemed to have made itself from a can of Stella. Just beneath it, an old lady was sipping a half of Guinness. It seemed that she could not see it. For a second I could feel the bitter coolness of a fresh pint at the back of my throat.

And then I had taken temptation and broken it.

'I've got to be going.'

'What for?'

Every time I refused his invitation he became a little less friendly.

'I've got to be going.'

When I returned to my lodging house there was another letter from London. It was postmarked Soho. I recognised Tryfan's handwriting again.

I thought that I would open this one. I tucked it in my suit pocket, before hefting my sample case upstairs.

'That's fifty pounds you owe me now. Fifty—and I've included your Sunday kippers for nothing. Fifty pounds.'

The landlady must have thought that there was a cheque in the letter. Instead Tryfan harangued me. I had 'abandoned my responsibilities'. I had 'left them in the lurch'. They had been left 'rudderless, confused'. The one who was filling my place was 'not up to it, not at all'. 'The post must be properly filled'. It carried on like that for pages.

The final paragraphs of the letter were an open appeal to my sense of duty. 'If you understood sacrifice, you would return'. He had included an open train ticket from Brighton to London. 'If you have any kind of a conscience, you will use it'. He had underlined 'you will use it' three times, scoring deep black lines in the paper, the pen almost ripping through. His rage and sense of hurt burnt me from a hundred miles away.

Out of curiosity, the next day I went into two or three lodging houses at random. There were letters addressed to me, from Tryfan, at all of them. He must have written to every bed and breakfast in Hove—and by hand. It must have taken him so much time. He could not be producing any poetry. All the train tickets must have nearly bankrupted him. I wondered if he was even making it into the office. These letters to me had become his working life.

6.

I saw the birds more and more as I walked the streets, between public house and public house, demonstration kit bumping anchor heavy against the side of my leg. When the thirst became too strong I would duck into a café and drink cup after cup of tea, spilling it over into the saucer, onto the table, over my shirt as I shook each lip towards my mouth. The birds were behind every frosted glass window I passed, rattling in every bottle in every off licence, shaking every empty seafront can like little winds. They couldn't see me, but I knew that they were looking for me.

I began to see Tryfan more and more, his face tense, gaunt. He paced the streets, scribbling in a small notebook, stopping every so often to consult a map. The wind blew it around him like a cape or a shroud, his hands pushed into it against the fierce billow. I would round street corners and see him ahead of me, always turned away, facing in the wrong direction. I would retreat rapidly, my vacuum cleaner demonstration kit anchor heavy, holding me down and wanting to wait for him. One night he stood outside the lodging house over the road for three hours; looking intently up at an empty window. I could not sleep for thought of him there. By four in the morning he'd gone.

The vagrants began to recognise me. Sometimes there would be a small group of them, two or three, tucked

into a wind shelter on the esplanade. They would see me coming. Words would be exchanged and an envoy would be dispatched, one of them shuffling towards me, laces from an untied shoe stretched out behind him. A nose reddened by drink and loss; a close and sweated stench on the wind. The case would slow me as he approached. In the end I gave up trying to flee. 'This is for you guv,' he would say, and his eyes would be deep with pity and an urgent need to help. 'This is for you'. He would carefully press a half empty can of lager into my hands, Ace or White Lightning. Half of the liquid in it would be saliva, I thought. I always threw it away.

But I could not hide forever.

Two metal birds behind a great glass window; the thirst was on me like a need for breathing. Wings buzzing so fast I could barely see them, heads vibrating so I could hear a tight metal whining coming from little tin muscles —even through the glass. The beak began to beat against the glass, I could see it begin to shake as if a wind was hitting it. The beak began to beat, then beat more and more, and the glass was shaking and rattling and roaring with the stress of it, and then at last it shook so hard it shattered.

Shards dropping like diamonds out of the frame. The sunlight caught them; hail in slow motion. I could hear each individual piece as it smashed onto the pavement. A small cracking symphony, a larger, shattering roar. And then at last they had all fallen and there was silence. I stood in front of an empty window. I took a step forward, then another. Inside there was a bar. I saw a familiar face there—but I could not place it. Glass crunched beneath my feet with every step. I could not remember my name. What was this glittering carpet I was crossing? Splinters of glass made magnificent jewels. And two metal balls, at my feet.

I leant down and picked one up. It was surprisingly light in my hand, surprisingly soft to the touch. I could feel how easy it would be for me to crush it, but I did not want to do so. Something resembling feet stretched out of it; something resembling wings spread from its back. Where its head should be, just a flattened lump of metal, as if it had been beaten again and again against a hard, unyielding surface. I cupped my hands around it and blew into them. It seemed like the right thing to do.

A stirring in the finger cage I had made. A metal rustling against my palm, and a vivid metal cheeping. I pulled my hands apart and a black bird flew out and perched on my shoulder. And memory returned—and then, when the other bird lived, and perched on me too, reason.

And so I knew.

And so I stepped forward to greet Tryfan.

And so now I step every night into the Wheatsheaf, and take up my seat at the bar. My metal birds attend me, my reason, my memory, as the little stitched requests appear beside me. Every so often I take one in my hand, and then I

ask for a drink. As it is poured, I send my birds out into the world, to find the answer that is required. While they are gone I am nothing, and I drink and rave, clutching a rag in my hand. But when they return they whisper in my ear, and I remember who I am, and I understand what I am to do. And then I turn to the one who has come to me, and bless him or her with my response.

I found the boy in the street one night, soon after I had returned to London. He had I believe been avoiding me. By then I only had one good eye. There was an empty beer bottle in my hand. The metal ravens spoke. I smashed the bottle against a wall and ground the shards that remained to me in his gut. He did not move away from me or seek to run. As he fell away I let go of the bottle. It had twisted into him, beyond the encouragement of my hand. I watched as he bled to death.

When I left him, there was a hawthorn branch stabbed through him. Blood had pooled on the pavement, dripped into the gutter. His face was pale and empty, eyes reflecting the staring moon up into the silent sky. I remembered other dead eyes, another dead face in the gutter.

I walked away without glancing back. They had seen me kill him, but they could not touch me. Perhaps the unbelievers amongst them expected me to drink from him. I did not bend down to do so. There was no need; there never had been. For every drop of his stolen blood had always been a part of me.

*Here's an atmospheric historical tale from new writer Tara Kolden, about perilous enrichment opportunities arising upon the fall of the ancien regime in France in 1789 . . .*

*Tara tells us she's been marooned on Skyros, romanced in Montmartre, and fed haggis at the World's End (which turns out to be in Edinburgh). She divides her time between Seattle and London.*

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# Enquête Incisive

## Tara Kolden

The summons that drew M. Girardot once more into the city he had lately deserted was a pressing one, rousing him at an hour well before his usual wakening and requiring the swift preparation of his bay mare, which he saddled for the long ride into Paris. The missive in his saddlebag directed him to an unfamiliar address, a debauched manor house that squatted between defaced outbuildings and a withered garden. Its eastern wing had suffered at the hands of arsonists and still bore the acrid stench of fire, but its western half appeared habitable, and a single light burned in an upstairs window. Girardot reached the outer gate at dusk and, fearing the presence of vandals, dismounted. He led his horse slowly up the drive, boots and hooves crunching on stone and shattered glass. The front door was opened for him before he reached it.

A sleepy-eyed clerk looked him over carefully, taking in his mud-spattered breeches and battered tricorn, and then motioned for him to enter. Girardot tethered his horse and obeyed. He removed his hat as he crossed the threshold and looked around at the dimly lit foyer and the dark rooms beyond it, which were crowded with the ghosts of shrouded furniture.

"Upstairs, monsieur," said the clerk, plucking a flickering candelabrum from a table near the entryway and leading Girardot up the wide circular staircase that gave access to the upper floors. A line of stony-faced portraits watched their progress, and Girardot looked back at them with interest, hoping to recognize a name or countenance and thereby learn in whose ruined estate he now trespassed, but the clerk's candles threw disconcerting shadows over the paintings, and their identities were lost.

Girardot followed the clerk across a dim landing and through a small deserted chamber. The thick carpet underfoot was dusted with ash, but the candlelight was enough to show its former opulence. The clerk rapped twice on a pair of double doors leading off the room, and a voice from within bade them enter.

The clerk led Girardot inside without announcing him. The room had

once been a library; rows of bookshelves attested to its former occupation, but the shelves now sat empty. More furniture crouched under dust cloths before a low fireplace, and a selection of chairs and other furnishings was piled haphazardly beneath the room's only window. A desk and chair had been pulled from this heap and resurrected, however, and the large man now making use of them looked up expectantly as Girardot entered.

"Take his hat, Berthier," the man said, and the clerk snapped to attention. But Girardot made no move to relinquish the article, and the clerk was left with his arms held awkwardly out to receive it.

Girardot regarded the man at the desk. "I don't know that I'll be staying long enough to warrant that, Deserre."

Deserre's brow furrowed. He was a corpulent man with tired eyes and a down-turned mouth that gave him a look of sour contempt even when his mood was fair. "Sit down, at least. You can't afford not to."

Girardot looked around the room for another chair. Finding none easily accessible, he whipped the cover from one of the indistinct forms in front of the fireplace, revealing an ornate stuffed chair with elegantly carved feet. He lowered himself gently onto the fine fabric.

Deserre nodded approvingly at Girardot's discovery. "You see? I am entertaining you in much better surroundings than before." He turned to the clerk. "That's all, Berthier."

When they were alone, Girardot allowed himself a wan smile. "You've certainly done well for yourself."

"They would have burned it to the ground by now. It seemed a waste to let it go to the rabble."

Girardot prickled. "I sometimes wonder," he mused, "whether you are really a friend of the new republic."

Deserre looked momentarily taken aback, but his features smoothed quickly into a look of bland accommodation. "Aren't we all, when it suits our purposes?" His gaze moved smoothly around the room, then settled again on the hunched figure that was Girardot. "I have always sided with the republic. I find, however, that this fledgling government needs as much guidance as it does respect. Someone must surely step in before France turns herself inside out."

"And you're just the man for it?"

Deserre watched him evenly from across the desk. "I think so."

"It smacks of hypocrisy. You look like a self-appointed marquis."

Deserre scoffed. "Hardly. You see the state of this place. It's not exactly a seat of aristocracy. Not anymore. But who better to restore its former beauty than a loyal citizen of new France?" He eased himself back in his chair, the better to observe the room's painted ceiling and elaborate chandelier, which was empty of half its candles. "Besides, I need somewhere to conduct my more delicate affairs. I could hardly have summoned you to the Hôtel de Ville. Not to discuss such business as you and I have."

"We have no business," Girardot said, rising from his chair.

"Sit down," Deserre barked. Girardot winced at his tone, and Deserre reconsidered. "Please," he said more quietly.

Girardot sat.

"I realize," said Deserre, "that our previous arrangements have sometimes left you in less than desirable circumstances."

Girardot laughed bitterly. "Two months' imprisonment for that business with the Austrians. And you still owe my fee for the information I provided you about the Duke of Orléans."

Deserre dismissed these complaints with a wave. "Unhappy consequences, to be sure, but hardly unexpected in your line of work. But I know your present situation could use pecuniary advancement." He raised a hand to fend off the complaint that trembled on Girardot's lips. "And you will be paid for your past endeavors. Have no doubt of that. But don't let us dwell on trivialities. I have a new task for you. You will appreciate it. The risks are smaller, and the rewards greater."

"I told you before. We have no business."

Deserre sighed. "Hear me. That is all I ask."

Girardot turned his hat lazily in his lap and nodded.

"You have been long out of Paris?" Deserre asked.

"Nearly four months."

"But you have heard of François Houdart?"

"The viscount? I am familiar with the name."

"Doubtless, then, you have heard of his fortune."

Girardot nodded. "Yes. He is quite wealthy."

"And—his misfortune?"

Girardot pursed his lips. "I'm not certain I understand you."

Deserre's voice was emotionless. "He was executed five days ago in the Place de la Révolution."

"Tell me," Girardot interrupted, "that's not pity I see on your face, is it?"

"Don't play the fool, Girardot. The viscount was a schemer and a traitor, set on undermining the new republic through his connections abroad. You should have seen them cheer as he mounted the steps to the guillotine. It was a great day for the nation."

Girardot shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "If you've called me here to celebrate, at least offer me a drink."

Deserre's expression darkened, but he rose with some effort and proceeded toward a pile of papers shoved messily onto one of the bookshelves near his desk. Behind the papers was a crystal decanter and a set of glasses, and he poured them each a meager helping.

"I have called you here because my investigation of the viscount's machinations is not yet at an end." He crossed the floor to Girardot and handed over a glass. Now that they were closer, Girardot could see that worry-lines had sprouted on Deserre's broad forehead since their last encounter, and the man's

fingertips, when they brushed Girardot's, were damp with sweat.

Deserre returned to his seat behind the desk and continued, "Much of the viscount's property has already been destroyed. His holdings outside Paris have been rendered practically worthless, pillaged by the peasant farmers there who were glad to see the end of him. But informants in the area tell me that surprisingly little remained in the house—while it still stood—that was worth the taking. Houdart had a fine collection of art and furniture, and none of this has been seen in the hands of known looters, nor has it made its way back to dealers here in Paris. I suspect he sold it off privately some time before his arrest. What he did with the profit, we do not know. But somewhere, Houdart's fortune is still at large. I want you to find it."

Girardot had finished most of his drink by the time Deserre concluded. He got to his feet, set his glass on an empty shelf, and began to pace slowly around the library. Deserre watched him silently for a moment, then removed something from a drawer in his desk and placed it on the desktop. Girardot wandered over for a closer look. Deserre unwrapped the bundle of cloth to reveal a small gold frame containing a painted miniature of a young woman.

"How I regret," said Deserre, "that my position in the new government prevents me from taking on such a task myself." He pushed the portrait closer to Girardot. "I suggest you begin your search with her."

Girardot peered at the young woman's pale complexion and large eyes. "Who is she?"

"Houdart's widow."

"She did not go with her husband to the guillotine?"

Deserre shook his head. "There was some pity for her. She comes from a common family."

Girardot looked at him in surprise. "A love match?"

Deserre raised his thick eyebrows. "Bought, like all his other fineries. And unwillingly, it would seem. Apparently Houdart's marriage to madame la guillotine was hardly more acrimonious." He ran a finger around the oval of the frame. "But she is a great beauty—or must be, if this portrait is a fair likeness. Perhaps that explains the viscount's enthusiasm. Now that she has been stripped of her title, however, she has returned to her family here in Paris. By all accounts, she is penniless, though I'm not sure I find her poverty credible." He reached for a quill and dipped it into the inkwell on his desk. He scratched out a brief note and passed it to Girardot. "Her family's address. You may sleep here tonight, if you have not made other arrangements, and begin your enquiry tomorrow."

Girardot pocketed the address under Deserre's watchful eyes.

"Twenty percent of what you find," Deserre told him quietly. "It could make you a new man."

Girardot appraised him coolly. "I was not aware of any need to remake myself."

Deserre snorted. "So, you are staying?"

Girardot bowed his head in acquiescence.

"Berthier will show you to a room. I think there's a serviceable bed somewhere downstairs."

Deserre busied himself with papers at his desk, and Girardot returned to his chair, where he picked up his tricorn. When Deserre showed no interest in detaining him, he crossed the room to the door by which he had entered.

"Girardot!"

He paused in the doorway and turned back toward Deserre in time to see a brief glint of gold as the man tossed something in his direction. Girardot caught the object easily, and found it to be the miniature of the vicountess.

"Keep her," Deserre told him. "That little frame's worth plenty more than you're owed."

Girardot awoke late and alone, Deserre and his clerk having abandoned him at some earlier hour and left him with a little bread and cheese, more to tease his appetite than to satisfy it. He ate hastily and donned his jacket. His horse, he found, had been stabled in a semi-intact outbuilding and had been fed and watered to a better degree than he had.

The address Deserre had given him matched a shabby home in a poor neighborhood peopled with ragged and desperate men. He read in the façades of the surrounding houses a grimy hopelessness, and saw it mirrored on the faces of the tiny urchins who thrust upturned palms at him, begging for sous. He loosed himself from their groping fingers and announced himself at the door he sought, unable to hide his surprise when it was answered by a maidservant in plain but proper dress. Suddenly aware of his own hard-worn appearance, he removed his hat and followed her into a tiny sitting room.

"I shall go for Madame. She is expecting you?"

"No," Girardot replied. "I've come on business. To do with her late husband."

He thought he saw an expression of disgust flash across the girl's face, but she left the room before he could be certain. He heard her voice on the other side of the thin wall, and listened to her anxious description of him, which detailed his long brown coat, lank hair, and oft-mended boots. When she put his age near forty—more than ten years too old—he realized what a sorry figure he presented. But when the viscountess entered the sitting room, she gave no sign of perturbation. Her own dark mourning clothes, he saw, were not so fine, and he remembered again the state of the houses on this sad row.

The dark eyes that he knew from the portrait now turned upon him, and she offered him her hand. "I am sorry I do not know you, *citoyen*. You were an acquaintance of my husband?"

Girardot licked his lips and launched the story he had prepared. "I was not,"

he said, taking the seat she offered him, and pausing while she sat opposite him on a small divan and took up an embroidery hoop. "But I have come on behalf of a man who was. The viscount, it seems, has left an outstanding debt, and my employer wishes to know when he will be paid."

The young woman frowned and looked up from her needlework. "My husband was careful to settle all his accounts before his arrest. What business are you—is your employer in?"

Girardot faltered, but only briefly. "Haberdashery. The viscount purchased a quantity of leather gloves on account."

The woman said nothing, and they sat together for several minutes. Girardot's ears hungered for noise to relieve the silence, but there was no clock on the bare mantelpiece, nor any hint of movement or conversation from the floor above.

Finally, the viscountess looked up from her work. "Are you an honest man, *citoyen?*"

Girardot set his jaw. "I believe so."

"Then I will tell you what I have told all the other messengers and journeymen who have called at this house in search of my late husband's money. The viscount was a shrewd man, not a kindly one. When word came of his impending arrest, he took care to hide his fortune, even from those deserving of it. He hid it well, very well, and did away with those who might have inherited. As for me, I took nothing when I left. He made me leave behind my clothes, my jewels—even my name. And now, what means have I to pay the doctor who visits my ailing mother, or to keep food upon our table?" She sighed, and picked at her stitchery. "I am no better now than when I married him. But at least I am free." Girardot made to speak, but the young widow was not finished. "He earned that money through lies and deceit," she exclaimed. "You did not know him as I did. You do not know the lengths to which he would go to protect his own self-absorbed interests. He would kill to protect his secrets. Search however long you like for the treasure you seek, *citoyen*. Those who knew of its whereabouts have likely already joined my husband in whatever afterlife awaits men of dark disposition."

She returned to her needle, her dignity quelling Girardot's unasked questions. At last he rose and wished the lady a pleasant day. She called for her maid to see him out, but he insisted he could find his own way. He paused outside, giving the drab neighborhood a final inspection, but felt satisfied that the viscountess's only secret was the extent of her misery.

He reached Houdart's outlying estate on the second day of his investigation. It sat some way out from a small village where Girardot was able to buy food and tend to his mare. At midday he reined in the horse outside the gatehouse that stood at the entrance to the viscount's manor. Two large stone columns showed where a gate had once barred unwelcome visitors from

Houdart's wide front drive, but the gate itself had been torn away, leaving a shallow furrow to mark its former position. Girardot looked up at the closest column, which was graced with a carved lion, and was shocked to see the viscount's lifeless head gaping open-mouthed back at him. The head had been fastened to a short pike, and this in turn had been wedged between the paws of the stone lion, leaving Houdart to watch over his ruined estate with vacant eyes. As Girardot stood, transfixed by the gruesome display, a large crow alit on the column and pecked at the dead man's grey flesh. Girardot turned away, sickened.

The ruin that was Houdart's former residence made Deserre's commandeered property look regal by comparison. What the vandals and arsonists had failed to complete at Deserre's estate had been exacted thoroughly upon the viscount's home, which had been reduced to little more than a foundation at the center of a dry and trampled park. Girardot climbed over the powdered brick and cinders, losing his footing in the rubble and stumbling hard before righting himself, but even the bones of the house had been picked clean, so that he detected no stump of burned furniture, no shapeless fusion of melted silver or twisted lead.

Displeased, he scrambled back across the blackened landscape and mounted his horse, determined to stop at the nearest sign of habitation to ask after the viscount's former household. He returned along the road that had led him from the village, and eventually found a mean wooden shanty enclosed by a lopsided wooden fence. A passel of dirty-faced children shouted and tussled in the muddy garden outside the front door, but they grew quiet as Girardot approached, watching him warily as he called at the entrance. A thin woman suckling another grubby infant came to the front of the house.

"Good day, madam," said Girardot. "I wondered if you could tell me what has become of the former residents of that ruined estate up the road."

The woman scowled. Instead of answering, she bellowed for her husband, a large, lumbering man who lurched into the doorway. Mild surprise enlivened his features.

"Who're you, then?"

"A messenger," Girardot replied. "I am instructed to speak with members of the household of the former viscount. Can you tell me where I might find them?"

The man grunted. "I served at the big house."

"Indeed? Might I come in?"

The man pressed a meaty hand against the doorframe, blocking Girardot's path. "What you want from us?"

Girardot removed his hat and studied it before answering. "I need to examine your master's accounts."

"Don't know what you mean."

"His ledgers. The records of his estate."

The man looked worried. "Wouldn't know anything about that. That were none of my business."

"Please," Girardot insisted. "I need only a moment. The viscount owed money to my employer. I've been sent to settle the debt."

The large man squinted at him. "Are you from the city?"

"Paris, you mean? Yes."

"Thought as much. Country folks is wiser. They know a dead man won't never pay his debts."

Girardot hiked a grim smile onto his face. "Yes, of course. But could you tell me where I might find others who worked at the estate?"

"Try the inn in the village," said the man. "Now shove off." He remained in the doorway while Girardot, the fake smile still plastered on his face, retreated. Only when he was out of sight of the hovel did he remove the mask and revert to the scowl of indignation that had been prickling at the edge of his lips since he had left the ruined estate.

A single inn serviced the village, and Girardot found it sparsely populated with men of varying ages. He sat down near a grizzled old man who stared pensively at his empty glass, and ordered drinks for the both of them.

"You're a kind lad, aren't you?" cried the old man, his expression brightening as the innkeeper put a fresh glass before him.

"Just doing another man a good turn," said Girardot. "It's my custom, when I'm a stranger in a new place."

"Where you come from, then?" asked the old man.

"Paris."

"All that way?"

Girardot nodded. "All that way."

"I've just been to Paris," the old man offered, cupping both hands around his glass. "Seen the viscount lose his head!"

Their conversation had attracted the notice of a young man sitting by himself at a nearby table. He gave Girardot a look of amiable conspiracy.

"My name is Morin," said the young man. "I was footman to the viscount." He rose from his seat and took the chair beside Girardot's. "Old Roux was a groundskeeper. Best not to take seriously too much of what he says." Morin leaned closer, bringing his glass almost to his lips. "Off his head," he whispered.

Roux, unaware of the footman's warning, tugged at Girardot's sleeve. "I saw it. I did. Marched him up the steps with his hands tied." The groundskeeper chortled. "Bet he never expected to find himself there, did he? He was a talker, that one. Thought he could get himself out of anything just by speechifying, like. You should have seen him up there, though! Not a word! Always thought himself a quick one. Not so clever he could outwit the blade, though, eh?"

"Not clever enough," Girardot admitted.

"You said you had business with the viscount?" Morin prompted.

"Yes. Some questions for him regarding purchases made in Paris. But it appears I'll have to speak with his subordinates, now, if I'm to find the answers I'm looking for."

"No easy task, that. They're scattered now."

"Is there no one else to whom the viscount was particularly close? Did he confide in anyone?"

"Confide, monsieur? Do we speak of the same man? The viscount was close to no one."

Roux's dirty fingers were once again at Girardot's sleeve. "You must ask the count direct!"

"I beg your pardon?"

The groundskeeper gave him a gap-toothed smile. "His head's at the gate. The rest of him's in the family vault. I'd go now, if you want to get a word in. Seems he's had no end of visitors since he took up his new residence." The man guffawed, slopping his drink onto the table.

In response to Girardot's quizzical look, the footman shook his head. "Grave robbers. They've been into the vault."

"Where is it?"

"Behind the house. There's a small lake on the property. The mausoleum's just behind it."

"Who brought the body back from Paris?"

Morin shrugged. "One of his clerks, I think. The burial was done hastily, and apparently none too securely. No one could see the point. They'd have dug him up again for a plaything soon enough."

Girardot finished his drink and thanked the men. Roux clapped him heartily on the back as he rose to leave, and he passed the old man a coin for his next drink. He left the inn reluctantly, blinking in the afternoon sun and feeling disheartened. There seemed little point in returning to Houdart's estate, but Girardot collected his mount and climbed back into the saddle, resigned to a last, futile look around the ravaged grounds.

The lake described to him by the footman was a stagnant pond, thick with scum and the slimy remains of water lilies. Behind it, a grey neo-classical mausoleum crouched behind a scattering of elms. Its tall paneled doors had been attacked and splintered, leaving a gap wide enough for a man to enter, and Girardot climbed through it easily. The inner chamber was lined with marble, and the still air within it felt cool against his skin, although it was tinged with the warm spice of decomposition. Scant sunlight filtered inside through a series of small windows set high above him, enough for him to see a group of niches in one wall that contained the remains of Houdart and his forebears. Girardot crossed the chamber, trampling a mess of tattered leaves and dirt that bore witness to the visitors who had preceded him.

The viscount's tomb was in a recess near the floor of the vault. The stone that had been put in place over the coffin now lay on its side, cracked in two, and Houdart's casket had been pulled out of its niche. Girardot tried the cover and found that it gave easily. A padlock meant to deter thieves from opening the coffin hung broken from the latch. His heart hammering, Girardot lifted the lid.

Houdart's headless corpse lay prostrate within, fermenting in an atmosphere of earthy decay. The body was draped in a long coat of coarse material, the collar of which was turned up against the viscount's neck, obscuring his wound from view. His lower body was exposed, having been stripped of its breeches, stockings, and shoes, and Girardot regarded the man's flaccid legs with distaste. As he watched, a large beetle crawled from the viscount's thigh to the hem of his jacket, and made rapid progress toward a fleshy tangle that was one of Houdart's hands. Girardot poked carefully at the inside of the casket, unsure of what he was looking for but determined to make a thorough search, despite the fumes that emanated from the body and clogged his nostrils. He was disappointed, however; the grave robbers who had beaten him to the vault had cleaned out whatever items might have been buried with the viscount. Tentatively, Girardot examined the man's jacket. He pulled the fabric loose from beneath Houdart's stiff arm, noting that the lining had been torn out, leaving rough ribbons of material. Beneath these, Houdart's body was bare. Girardot shuddered at his brief glimpse of the viscount's blotchy back and severed neck, then let the jacket fall once more over the corpse. Weighted with disappointment and exhaustion, Girardot replaced the lid. He allowed himself a deep, foul-tasting breath, stifling a sigh, but the stench from the casket goaded him from his brief rest. He made his way slowly through the gloom toward the shattered door.

Girardot had one foot through the opening when he caught himself. The light inside the vault was brighter near the damaged entrance, and his eye was arrested by a small object lying just inside the threshold. It was a small leather book. He scooped it up in one hand and riffled through the pages. It was a man's diary, listing appointments and other jottings. Girardot took it with him into the open air, and in this new light and fresh space, which helped to clear his head, he was able to read the entries, which had been made in a smooth, confident hand. There were no recent ones, but a handful of dates for the previous month had been marked out with notes and figures. Girardot read them rapidly, his mind jumping from one passage to the next in a rush of hope and exhilaration. If the diary were Houdart's, it might yield the key to his missing fortune. If it were not, however, Girardot might spend many weeks on a trail of false enquiry.

The penultimate entry in the diary was an abbreviated scribble, but it bore a name, *Dampier*, and an address in the local village. There was just time, Girardot determined, to call on the man named Dampier before evening fell. He tucked the diary into his pocket and began the ride back to the village, wanting to feel encouraged but willing himself into an objective calm.

In the disjointed maze of streets that spread out behind the local inn where he'd stopped for his drink, Girardot

found the office of M. Dampier. The tiny establishment was distinguishable from its neighbors by its single shuttered window, and by the small sign nailed above the door which bore Dampier's name and the large outline of a tooth. The office gave no suggestion of life within, but Girardot rapped loudly at the door. He knocked a second time, but received no answer.

"Do you seek the surgeon, monsieur?"

Girardot turned toward the voice, and saw that his tapping had sparked the interest of a girl from the stationer's shop opposite.

"I do."

The girl's face crumpled in anguish. "Oh, but you won't find him."

"Where is he?" asked Girardot.

"Dead, monsieur. Set upon by bandits on the road to Amiens."

"Was this recently?"

"Oh yes. Hardly a week past. A terrible shame. Such a kind man, he was."

"Tell me," Girardot said, stepping closer to the girl, "what was M. Dampier's specialty?"

The girl put a hand to her mouth in surprise. "An odd question, monsieur. Everyone knows M. Dampier." She pointed at the sign above the dead man's door. "Blood letting was his practice. And teeth. No better man to be had in these parts."

A voice called out from inside the stationer's shop, and the girl darted away as quickly as she had appeared. Girardot, whose own teeth bothered him at times, felt a pang of regret at having missed such an able practitioner. He withdrew the leather diary from his pocket and thumbed through its pages once more, but the entries included no more clues he could investigate in the village. His pursuit demanded a return to Paris, but he was far too weary to begin the journey that evening. He returned to the inn where he had shared drinks with Roux and Morin, and the innkeeper let him the use of a tiny upstairs room.

Troubled dreams visited him in the musty-smelling bed. A crowd of faces tumbled across his consciousness, from the forlorn viscountess to the sad shop girl. He saw Roux's gap-toothed smile, which in turn became the viscount's putrefying head atop its pike. He dreamed of Deserre's eager face, lit from above by half a dozen candles. In his dreams, Deserre chased him from one burned-out mansion to another, until his throat burned with ash and he tore headlong through the grounds of Houdart's estate, hurtling past the viscount's defiled tomb and into the murky lake.

He awoke in a sweat to find the room in darkness. With his pulse still racing, he flung back the blankets and rested his feet on the floor. Deserre's face still leered at him when he shut his eyes, until that image was displaced once more by the viscount's empty visage. And as suddenly as if he had been touched by lightning, Girardot jumped to his feet, wrestled into his clothes, and rushed outside to the stable where his mare waited.

When he arrived at his destination, dawn was just beginning to show through the branches of the trees bordering Houdart's estate. Their slender tips put Girardot in mind of spidery fingers, and his memory latched onto the unwelcome vision of the viscount's dead hand clutched in the folds of his jacket. The task that awaited him seemed even more hideous in his imagination, and he fought the urge to turn his horse back upon the road to Paris and dwell no more on Houdart or his secret. A part of him wished the viscount's head would no longer be displayed on the sorry gatepost, but it remained on the pike. Both eyes were missing, and a considerable portion of one cheek torn out. The jaw had relaxed into a gruesome parody of mirth.

Swallowing the bile that rose in his throat, Girardot approached. When he drew up to the column, still on horseback, the bottom of the pike was only just out of reach. He strained in the saddle and felt his fingers brush against the wood. The pike tilted between the stone lion's paws, rocking the viscount's head slightly to the side, and the movement dislodged a cluster of flies from his matted hair. The smell of decay now wafted downwards, and Girardot blanched. He sat still for a moment, breathing quickly, and willing the stench from the dead man's head to dissipate. When his own head had cleared, he hitched one heel beneath him and cautiously rose to a standing level, balancing himself on the smooth leather of his saddle, and supporting himself with an arm braced against the gatepost. The vile thing was now before him. He shut his eyes, grabbed at the pike, and wrenched it free, flinging it to the ground without watching its flight.

His horse startled beneath him, and he nearly fell. Gingerly, he regained his seat and then dismounted. The head lay face down at his feet, its greasy hair spilling over the viscount's severed neck. Girardot regarded it anxiously. He fished in his saddlebag, found a knife, and then knelt beside the head, fighting dizziness. He was loath to turn it over, fearing a protest from his stomach, but at last he prodded it with the dull edge of his knife until he had revealed Houdart's wretched face.

Girardot paused for a moment, stealing a hasty look at the empty gatehouse and deserted road. When he was certain he was alone, he bent purposefully to his task. He moved deftly, pushing open the already slack jaw and peering into the dark, reeking mouth of the dead viscount. And for the first time since embarking on his quest, Girardot's expression of grim concentration relaxed into one of hard-won satisfaction.

Inside the viscount's mouth, two rows of gleaming teeth stood out from his grey gums. But they were teeth unlike any Girardot had seen before. Houdart's pale incisors shimmered with an iridescent luster. Farther back, his molars glittered blue, green, and red.

"You greedy bastard," Girardot declared, putting his knife to the first of

Houdart's false teeth. With effort, he managed to pry it loose, and after wiping it on his breeches, he held it carefully in his palm. It was an opal, cut and smoothed in perfect imitation of a tooth. Girardot sat back on his haunches to admire the craftsmanship. The murdered surgeon had fitted each of the gems into Houdart's mouth with such precision that, aside from their variation in color, they might easily have passed undetected. It was little wonder, he thought, that the viscount had been close-lipped as he mounted the steps to the guillotine. So complete was the deception that the ruffians who had mounted their dead master's head atop the gatepost had failed to see the riches that might have been theirs.

He set the opal aside and attacked its neighbor, another shining replica in mother-of-pearl. When he had finished with the viscount's front teeth and canines, the little pile beside his knee included more opals, alabaster, and a tiny, perfect diamond. The back teeth were more difficult to reach, and as he maneuvered the viscount's rotten head and moldering tongue, Girardot was again enveloped by a cloud of decay. He began to fear he would need to remove Houdart's entire jaw in order to reach the brilliant gems embedded at the rear, but at last he was able to work them free. To his pile he added rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and another diamond, a handful of stones that could easily make a score of men wealthy.

The sun loomed well above the horizon by the time Girardot had finished his work. He stowed the new-found treasure in his saddlebag, reconsidered, and instead emptied out a small leather pouch in which he had been carrying a bit of stale bread for his lunch. He poured the stones inside, knotted the long leather thong at the top of the pouch, and then looped it around his neck, where it hung beneath his shirt and was concealed by his coat. He hesitated for a moment over the viscount's grisly remains, but elected to do nothing for the deceitful man in the way of proper burial. He mounted his horse, turned it in the direction of Paris, and spurred it into action.

Girardot took a circuitous route into the city, wondering with each rider he passed whether keen eyes—Deserre's network, or another's—followed his progress. Suspicion made him change his course several times, until he found himself in a bleak neighborhood of graying row houses. He drew up outside the only residence that was familiar.

The same maidservant answered the door, but if his face struck a chord in her memory, she gave no sign of it.

"You are here to see Madame?" she asked.

Girardot shook his head. "Only to give her a message. My employer has discovered a mistake in his accounts. Apparently, it was he who owed a considerable sum to the late viscount. Would you be so good?" He held out the small leather pouch. The maid curtseyed and accepted the little bag, then wished him a good evening. Girardot

believed that this evening, and all those to come after it, would indeed be good. He need only remove himself from Paris.

He reached the Spanish border late the following month. Soon he would take up residence in this new land, but he was content for a time to wander from one village to another until he found one that suited his taste. He still rode the same bay mare, but his boots were new and his coat handsomely tailored, and those who conversed with him at the inns through which he passed treated him as a gentleman. He gained a reputation as a reserved man, with little to say, and one hand always in his pocket. He kept his hand there protectively, fingering a painted miniature in a gold frame, and toying with two small stones with which he hoped to buy himself a fine house. Sometimes, when enjoying a glass of sherry after a particularly good meal, he offered a silent toast to a Frenchman he had once known named Deserre, and to the prospect of making himself a new and wholly satisfied man.

*Vaughan Stanger got the idea for "Stars in Her Eyes" on the occasion of his 43rd birthday, while gawping, in a less than sober fashion, at a particularly dark, wonderfully clear sky seen from just outside Winthrop. The stars looked amazing, the brightest he'd ever seen. Write a story based on that without committing the Backyard Astronomy cliché, he told himself. No problem! Five radically different versions later, the members of Vaughan's long-suffering writers' group, One Step Beyond, not to mention the attendees at Milford 2004, are doubtless relieved that this "no problem" story has finally made it into print.*

# Stars In Her Eyes

## Vaughan Stanger

Jerome Dalton gazed at an October night-sky made perfect by the absence of moonlight. Arching overhead, the Milky Way resembled a strip of gauze draped over black velvet. Having set up his CCD-equipped Celestron so that it tracked the Andromeda Galaxy, Jerome fully intended to indulge his passion for stargazing.

The sound of footfalls startled him. Before he could step aside, a thump in the back tumbled him to the ground. Winded, he stared up at his assailant, who was sliding a bulky pair of headphones off her ears.

"Shit! Sorry, I didn't see you . . . " The woman's apology dribbled away into the air.

Jerome pushed her hands away. "I can manage," he grumbled. Upright again, he unclipped his torch and thumbed it on. He felt no remorse at ruining the woman's night vision.

"Sorry, that was *so* my fault," she said, blinking.

Seeing her remorseful expression, Jerome softened his tone. "Well, you missed the 'scope, that's the main thing."

A smile led to a handshake and an exchange of names.

Lenora Kelly stood chin-high to him, five-three or thereabouts. Jet-black hair bobbed *a la mode* framed prominent cheekbones and a ski-jump nose. Stargazer-standard fleece and baggy pants hid her presumably skinny physique. Quite good-looking in a quirky kind of way, he decided, surprised that he hadn't noticed her before. Dozens of amateur astronomers had pitched their tents around Patterson Lake, tempted out of Greater Seattle by a rare forecast of fine weather. Most of them were male.

"What're you listening to?"

She passed him the headphones. "Here, give it a try."

After a brief inspection of the headband, which incorporated a stubby antenna, he placed the 'phones over his ears. He heard a faint, burbling hiss. He

tilted his head. The sound grew louder as the Milky Way came into view, faded as his gaze skated past. Unimpressed by this simple modulation of celestial static, he handed the 'phones back to Lenora. Her smile flared to nova strength.

"Wonderful, isn't it?"

Faced with that smile, he wished he could agree, but five years of marriage had shown him that telling lies was not his forte.

"Wouldn't want to listen to the 21-cm hydrogen line *all* night long."

Seemingly undeterred by his indifference, she tapped the antenna. "This connects to the SETI Institute's all-sky database, so I get to listen to the freshest data from wherever I'm looking. Head-tracked radio astronomy—cool, huh?"

Jerome chuckled at her mention of SETI. "I signed up for SETI@home back in the late Nineties! Then I lost my job at Boeing, so I had to find more lucrative ways to exploit my computer's idle time." And latterly his own, of course.

Lenora shrugged like someone hearing a familiar story.

Fearing her interest was waning, Jerome pointed towards the zenith, "Reckon there's anyone on the phone?"

"*Has* to be," she whispered.

"But why do *you* listen?"

She shrugged. "I like to be involved."

Her answer sounded self-deluding to Jerome, but he kept the thought to himself. Better to have a specious purpose in life than none at all, which pretty much described his own situation since Josie packed her bags.

After failing to stifle a yawn, he pointed his torch at his 'scope. "I'm going to download the image and then crash for the night." The idea of zipping together two sleeping bags flashed into his mind like a meteor but expired just as quickly.

*You've got ten years on her!*

To his surprise, Lenora remained with him while he booted up his laptop. As he'd half-expected, the Andromeda image had tanked. Not wishing her to see him so easily thwarted, he loaded the file into a picture enhancement application a lecturer friend at UCLA had copied for him.

"I'll let that brew overnight."

Lenora hunkered down beside him. "*You* could get involved too," she whispered.

"How do you mean?"

She gave him an appraising look. "Did you bring your WhileAway console?"

How had she worked *that* out? Mind you, Josie had reckoned he looked the sort.

"I figured if someone had brought their server I could hook up and earn ten dollars."

Did that make him sound like a tightwad?

To his relief, Lenora lit another smile. "Well, luckily for you, my partner did bring his server." She winkled a thumb-drive out of her pocket. "And if you'd like to try something different, just load this patch and then . . . ."

"And then *what*, exactly?" he asked, irritated by her reference to a partner, concerned too that he might be falling for a scam. Rumours of WhileAway hackers abounded in the blogosphere.

"... And then I'll see you tomorrow for breakfast."

The alternative of subsisting on cereal bars made her invitation seem enticing.

"That's my tent over there," said Lenora, pointing along the path. Jerome wished her goodnight as she turned away.

After packing away his 'scope, Jerome loaded Lenora's patch onto his WhileAway console. Satisfied, he donned his skullcap and snuggled down in his sleeping bag. He tried to ignore the prickle of electrodes against his scalp while he waited for sleep to come.

The setting sun twitched ribbons of crimson between gunmetal waves. A salt-tangy breeze ruffled his hair. Surf sluiced over his feet, making him shiver as he strolled the infinite beach.

Aware he was supposed to be looking for something, he squatted down at the water's edge and began sifting through flotsam. He pushed aside a plank of driftwood and found a piece of glass.

Something made of glass; he was searching for something made of glass.

*Beaches ... he hated beaches ... Body not toned enough ...*

*But beachcombing ... That was fun!*

Jerome stretched out his arms and plucked the skullcap from his head. For once he didn't feel woozy from having his REM sleep messed about by WhileAway. Usually he dreamt of searching for a needle in a haystack, the standard metaphor used by biotech companies that rented his downtime. Beachcombing certainly had that beat.

Recalling Lenora's offer of breakfast, Jerome unzipped his sleeping bag. As he wriggled free, he heard someone moving outside the tent. Before he could call out, a hand tugged at the flap. A face previously seen by torchlight peered in.

"So how was it for you?"

"Pretty cool," Jerome replied, his voice not quite masking the rumbling from his stomach. "Any chance of breakfast?"

"Might manage a coffee."

Jerome pulled on his Levis and shirt and followed Lenora outside. A short walk along the lakeside brought them to her tent. Big enough for two, he observed. Lenora pulled open the flap.

"Who have you got there?" said a male voice. "Another recruit?"

Lenora arched a neatly plucked eyebrow. "Maybe."

The man who emerged wore calf-length cargo pants and a black tee shirt that showed off his biceps. Sporting a wispy beard and mane of straw-coloured hair, he looked more surfer-dude than WhileAway geek. Older than Lenora, Jerome surmised.

She introduced him to Zane, who ignored Jerome's proffered hand.

"Is he staying here tonight?"

Jerome scanned the lakeside. Most of the astronomers had already departed, but he felt no desire to follow them. Camping weekends were as much vacation as his income allowed.

He glanced at Lenora. "Well, last night's dream *was* kind of fun."

"You've got Zane to thank for that."

Jerome turned towards him. "So, what's your cut?"

Zane's eyes flicked skywards. "WhileAway would sue our hides if they knew what we're up to. So no, SETI dreaming won't earn you a dime, never mind ten bucks."

"No problem. The dream was worth the money, easy."

Lenora nailed him with another of her smiles. Zane gave him a pitying look and ducked back into the tent.

Lenora squeezed Jerome's arm. "Last night was just a taster. The next dream will be a *lot* more fun."

Despite Lenora's show of affection, Jerome couldn't quite convince himself she really wanted him. Still, if he followed her lead, who knew where he might end up? Better still, he could take the lead.

Over coffee, he suggested a walk around the lake. He enjoyed watching Zane's expression turn even sourer when Lenora told him.

"He's just being boorish," she said, when safely out of earshot. "We were lovers once, years ago. Now we're just partners in crime."

This encouraging news was pretty much all Jerome learnt about Lenora while they walked around the lake. He answered several questions regarding life with Josie, whereas she deflected his with aplomb. When he asked about her job, she flashed her lovely smile and changed the subject. No less mysterious was her decision to carry a backpack on a walk that seemed likely to last no more than two hours. He was about to suggest that he take it for a while when she flopped down on a boulder that jutted into the lake.

"Room for two," she said, patting the rock.

Smiling, he sat down next to her and removed his boots. He dangled his feet in the water. The cold made him flinch, but the warmth of the sunlight compensated nicely. He lay back, luxuriating in the feeling that all was right with the world.

"Close your eyes."

He obeyed, hoping for a kiss. Instead Lenora's breath tickled his ear. "And *keep* them closed!"

He heard rummaging sounds. Moments later, he felt electrodes prickle against his scalp. On opening his eyes he saw that Lenora was also wearing a WhileAway cap.

"Are you sure we'll receive a signal here?"

She held up two consoles. Both readouts showed five green bars. "Okay, but I don't feel sleepy."

She rattled a bottle and shook out two pink pills. "These babies will see to that."

Jerome felt tempted to suggest a more enjoyable way, but his courage

deserted him. Seeing his doleful expression, Lenora leaned over and kissed him on the lips.

"A *little* bodily contact helps promote shared dreaming, but too much gets in the way." She winked at him. "Just give me a minute."

After configuring the WhileAway consoles for synchronous operation, Lenora clambered back onto the boulder. She lay beside Jerome with knees slightly raised, her bare forearm touching his.

There were, he mused, much worse ways to spend an afternoon.

Strolling hand in hand along the infinite beach, he felt as though he could walk forever.

Too soon, his partner tugged her hand free and fell to her knees. He hunkered down beside her and began sifting shingle.

*What are we looking for?*

*A bottle, silly; a message in a bottle!*

Ah, yes! Something made of glass.

Their search turned up not so much as a fragment, let alone a bottle. Unconcerned, he skimmed pebbles beyond the breaking waves.

Laughing, they resumed their walk in the sun.

Jerome blinked until the grey blobs came into focus. Cumulonimbus clouds towered over Lake Patterson. A glance at his wristwatch revealed three hours had passed.

"Did you enjoy the dream?" asked Lenora.

"Yeah, that was fun," he replied, "if frustrating." Seeing her expression, he added: "Not finding a bottle, I mean."

"SETI dreamers must be patient."

"Pity the weather gods haven't mastered that trick," he said, glancing at the sky.

They jogged back to the camp, taking turns with the backpack, but the storm won the race. Hailstones pelted them as they sprinted the last hundred yards.

"See you tonight at the beach!" Lenora yelled as she ducked into her tent.

Jerome stripped off and towelled himself dry. Aware that he hadn't brought a change of clothes, he considered jumping into his pickup truck and driving off. But Lenora's exhortation held him back.

He spent the evening reading a paperback novel by torchlight. When the storm finally rumbled off into the Cascades, he switched on his WhileAway console, selected *auto-synch* and reached for his cap.

Annoyed that she had let go of his hand again, he flopped down in the shallows. The ebb and flow tugged at him while he waited for her to finish examining whatever had caught her eye.

Looking to his left, he spied a man standing on a distant sand dune. The man seemed familiar but did not respond to his wave.

A triumphant yell startled him into sitting up. He stared at his partner. She was holding a bottle aloft, her trophy gleaming in the sunlight. He leapt to his feet, but the sand sucked at his heels, turning his sprint into a moonwalk. As he reached out towards her she faded from view. The bottle thudded onto sand; a sheet of paper wafted nearby.

No longer bogged down, he snatched up the paper before the breeze could blow it into the sea. He held the sheet at arm's length. Frowning, he turned it over.

Blank on both sides.

Jerome woke to the sound of rain pummelling his tent. Forked lightning zigzagged through the darkness; thunder rumbled like tympani. He wriggled deeper into his sleeping bag, fingertips jammed in his ears. Even with his eyes shut tight he could still see the lightning.

A sudden inrush of air made the tent billow alarmingly. Jerome opened his eyes and saw Zane's head poke through the flap.

"Quick, get your waterproofs on," Zane yelled. "Lenora's gone missing!"

"What the hell is she . . . ?"

Zane backed out before Jerome could finish his question. He wriggled into his sodden Levis, tugged on his boots and jacket. Outside he found Zane jogging along the lakeside, hair plastered over his face, shouting "Lenora!"

Jerome shielded his eyes with both hands while he scanned the landscape. Lightning lit up the nearest hill just long enough for him to glimpse a figure standing at the summit.

"She's up there!" he shouted, pointing at the hill.

Trusting that Zane would follow him, Jerome charged up the slope. He weaved past Douglas Firs and tangles of bitterbrush, heedless of the danger from lightning.

On reaching the summit he paused for a moment to catch his breath. What he saw there made his jaw drop. Not twenty yards away Lenora danced naked beneath the lashing rain. She had just skipped to a fist-sized stone and was now turning on the spot, her feet shuffling either side of the marker. After completing three spins, she skipped over to another stone and repeated the sequence. Jerome counted a dozen such moves before Lenora stooped to pick up her markers. After placing them in a new pattern, she resumed her dance, oblivious to the rain or her audience.

An ear-splitting crash reminded Jerome of the urgent need to get off the hilltop. He stripped off his jacket and moved in on Lenora, timing his lunge so he caught her off balance. He snared her left arm and yanked it behind her back, hoping to restrain her, but she squirmed like an eel.

"Zane, I need some help here!"

Zane rushed forward and grabbed Lenora's free arm. Working together, they managed to pull the jacket

over her trembling shoulders. Lenora wriggled and jerked, her head darting left and right as if she were memorising the positions of the stones. The patterns did seem vaguely familiar to Jerome. Over there, wasn't that a "W"?

He pushed the thought to the back of his mind.

Zane led the way downhill. Halfway to the camp, Lenora tripped herself, sending Jerome tumbling into a bush. Bleeding from cuts to his hands and face, he extricated himself while Zane struggled to restrain Lenora. By the time they reached the lake, she had lapsed into unconsciousness.

Jerome unzipped the flap to Lenora's tent and held it open while Zane bundled her inside. When Jerome tried to follow he found his way blocked. Unwilling to leave until reassured about Lenora's condition, he waited outside in the rain. He had just shouted his third offer of help when Zane pushed through the flap.

"Leave this to me. I know what I'm doing."

Jerome gaped at him. "Lenora is having a fit! She needs to be in a hospital. If you're too scared to take her there, I'll do it!"

Zane stood facing Jerome, hands planted on hips.

"Strictly speaking, Lenora has *had* a fit. Now it's over, she'll be unconscious for several hours. I know what to do, so let me look after her, okay?"

Unwilling to be fobbed off, Jerome tried to push past Zane, who responded with a two-handed shove. Jerome landed hard in a puddle.

Zane looked mortified. "Look, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to . . . "

Jerome cuffed away his helping hand. "If Lenora comes to any harm, I'm holding you responsible! You got that?"

Zane made a placating gesture. "Trust me, Lenora will be fine. But if it makes you feel better, I'll drive her to hospital, soon as it's safe."

Jerome climbed to his feet. In truth, he felt too exhausted to drive, even though the rain had slackened off a bit and the thunder now trailed the lightning by several seconds.

"Storm's heading off," he muttered, inclining his head towards Zane's SUV.

Zane held up both hands. "Okay, okay."

Jerome helped Zane strap Lenora into a rear seat, but when he strode round to the passenger door, he found it locked.

"For pity's sake!" yelled Zane, eyes blazing, "Go dry yourself off and get some sleep. Otherwise you'll be no help to Lenora tomorrow."

Pondering Zane's last remark kept Jerome awake long after the thunder had rumbled into the distance.

*Turn, turn, turn and skip; turn, turn, turn and skip: dance to the pattern of the star*s . . . .

Jerome plucked at his scalp while blinking away the dregs of the dream, but didn't find the expected skullcap.

Evidently his subconscious had stimulated that last dream, unlike its predecessor.

Reluctant to leave the warmth of his sleeping bag, Jerome thought about what he'd witnessed on the hilltop and the dream that preceded it. Lenora's dancing must be her way of interpreting alien messages, he realised. The implication was astonishing. Lenora had made First Contact!

But at what cost to her health?

The growl of an engine revving in low gear made Jerome start. He tugged on his jeans and crawled outside, expecting to find Zane parking his SUV. Instead, he observed a convoy rumbling up the gravel road. Lenora stood on the lakeside path, waving to each driver in turn; a queenly gesture.

Jerome counted eleven vehicles, each driven by an unaccompanied man. Was that all he meant to Lenora? Merely a convenient way to boost her recruits to a symbolically pleasing dozen!

Lenora arched an eyebrow as he approached. "See you tonight," she said, before turning smartly. The set of her shoulders suggested pursuit would not be tolerated.

He'd have to confront Zane instead.

Jerome found Zane unpacking a dish antenna from a wooden crate. A radio station blared from Zane's laptop. *Space Oddity* had just segued into *Starman*.

"So it really is happening," said Jerome.

"Yeah, you just missed the news conference."

"What's the low-down?"

"Six months ago, one of NASA's satellites detected a sustained burst of gamma rays from an object previously classified as a comet. Having changed course for Earth, the unidentified spacecraft began transmitting signals. Problem was, NASA's experts couldn't interpret them. They still can't."

"But Lenora can."

"Correct."

Jerome pointed at the antenna. "What's this for, then?"

"Back-up in case the SETI feed goes off-line before the spacecraft reaches Earth, forty-eight hours from now."

"Bit late for the President to pull the plug, surely?"

"Can't take the risk, not when Lenora's *this* close to success." Zane pressed thumb and forefinger together.

"If she's that close, why does she need these guys?" asked Jerome, pointing towards the nearest tent. "Or me, for that matter."

Zane rolled his eyes. "Do I really have to explain Lenora's *modus operandi?*"

"I figured that out for myself, thanks," Jerome replied. "The patterns Lenora danced last night depicted the stars as seen from a planet en route to Earth. A celestial postcard, if you like."

"Yeah, dancing is the key," said Zane. "And if Lenora only had to read one message tonight, she'd be okay. But as the spacecraft nears Earth, the signal bandwidth will increase dramatically.

So Lenora will have to read a *lot* of messages very quickly. To do that, she needs help. Which is where you come in."

A collective dream reading did make a weird kind of sense, thought Jerome. But had Zane considered the consequences? He swept his arm, indicating the entire campsite.

"So Zane, have you booked enough ambulances for tomorrow? Because from what I saw last night, every one of Lenora's disciples will need several hours of treatment."

"I've got a team of helpers on standby," Zane said, matter-of-factly. "So, if that's all, I've got a deadline to meet." He strode towards the nearest tent. Unwilling to be fobbed off, Jerome followed him inside.

On seeing Zane, the tent's occupant wrinkled his nose as if he'd detected a bad smell. For a moment, it seemed a single word might spark a fight; then Zane shrugged and turned away. After adjusting the man's WhileAway console, he tapped two pink pills into his upturned palm.

Outside again, Jerome asked, "What was that all about?"

"He's Number Two."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"Well, you're Number Thirteen."

The implication became clear to Jerome.

"So you were Lenora's first?"

"Yeah," said Zane. "And believe me, with Lenora first was definitely worst." He chuckled mirthlessly. "So now, as penance, I get to build a supercomputer out of her ex-boyfriends."

Jerome sympathised with Zane's plight, but Lenora's plan for her disciples concerned him much more. Keen to exploit Zane's confessional state of mind, he asked how he knew her.

"We met at Caltech while I was studying for a Ph.D.," Zane recounted. "We fell in love, which was great; then she fell out of love, which wasn't. But we remained friends.

"After Lenora graduated, WhileAway recruited her to work on dream metaphors, whereas I drifted into white hacking." Jerome raised his eyebrows, prompting a grin from Zane. "Corporations pay well to have their security tested.

"Anyhow, Lenora had seen off four more boyfriends when she asked me to hack into the SETI Institute's database. I jumped at the chance, thinking it might get me back in her good books." He glanced at Jerome. "Did you try her SETI radio?"

"Yeah, that's how she hooked me."

Zane winced. "So, having successfully exploited my infatuation, she explained her idea for detecting signals from alien civilisations. No chance, I reckoned. But nine months after her first SETI dream, she found a bottle. Reading its message put her in an ICU for two weeks. Yet she tried again. Last night was her fifth message. Fortunately, she recovers a lot quicker now."

Jerome grabbed Zane by both shoulders, appalled by the implication.

"For God's sake man, Lenora's plan is outrageous! Sure, *she'll* recover in time to watch CNN broadcast the landing, but what about her disciples?

They'll endure brainstorms lasting for weeks! How can you consider inflicting such suffering on them?"

Zane shrugged. "Someone's gotta do the Beta testing."

A suspicion was growing in Jerome's mind.

"What, precisely, do you have planned for *tomorrow* night?"

Zane's eyes gleamed with a prophet's fervour. "If tonight's dry-run is successful, I'll be networking ten thousand sleeping minds into a SETI dream."

Jerome shook his head in dismay. Zane's unrequited love had made things so easy for Lenora. He had thrown himself into her scheme with no thought of the consequences. Yet something must be bothering him, because he was standing there wringing his hands. Jerome decided that an appeal to geek vanity might reveal a weakness he could exploit.

"So how does it work?"

Zane's eyes lit up again. "I've infected the entire WhileAway network with a stealthed virus that will reprogram the metaphor generator of every user who's also registered with SETI@home."

"The ultimate love bug, eh?"

Zane's mouth twitched into a grin.

"Can you neutralise the virus?"

Zane snorted. "Viruses don't have off switches!"

"What about WhileAway's own defences?"

"Their network antibodies won't stop *this* virus."

"But surely if I told them Lenora's plan, WhileAway would take the service off-line."

"It would be your word against hers. Who do you think they'd believe?"

Not that WhileAway, or anyone else, would pay attention to his accusation while Humanity stood on the brink of such an historic event.

Zane pushed past him. "I'm still working to that deadline."

Dismayed by his inability to influence Zane, Jerome plodded down to the lake. A Mallard duck waddled past him, quacking for easy pickings. Right now, communicating with wildfowl seemed a lot easier than trying to get through to Zane. Even talking to aliens couldn't be this difficult!

But that was it, Jerome realised. We should be *talking* to them, not just listening. How else could humankind hope to achieve genuine understanding? He jogged back to the camp, found Zane inside his tent and frog-marched him to the antenna.

"What if we used this thing to send a message from within a dream?" said Jerome. "If we could persuade the aliens to only transmit isolated, simple messages, Lenora could manage without helpers."

Zane gave a fierce shake of his head.

"If you think I'm . . . ."

Jerome grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "If Lenora gets her way, thousands will suffer! For God's sake man, you absolutely have to *think!*"

Zane lowered his gaze but said nothing.

"My friend, Lenora won't ever take you back."

Zane gave a long sigh. "I know."

"So will you help me put a stop to this madness?"

After a pause, Zane nodded. Then his expression went blank, as if he had focussed his mind's eye on some internal computer screen. Several minutes passed before he replied.

"From a purely technical standpoint, it's do-able. I can modulate your brainwaves over the WhileAway carr-ier and push out the signal on the aliens' frequency." He paused, frowning. "But how will you compose a message they'll understand? You can't just write 'turn down the volume' in English!"

Jerome gestured frantically. "Dammit Zane, they build spaceships, don't they? When they look at the night sky they see patterns of stars. I bet they dance, too!" Seeing Zane's anxious expression, he softened his tone. "Look, if Lenora can read alien messages while dreaming, there must be a way to write one they'll understand. She erased their message last night, so maybe she was planning to write one herself."

Zane shook his head. "No, she was protecting you."

"There must be a way!"

Zane's expression blanked out again. "There is," he said after a few seconds, "but you won't remember the details if I tell you now. Just use what you find in the dreamscape."

"Exploit the metaphor?"

"Exactly."

"So, can you can program it in time for tonight's run?"

Zane grinned. "No problem."

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He jogged along the infinite beach, looking for the bottle. After what seemed like ages, he found it, half-buried in the sand. The blank sheet of paper lay nearby. He picked up his finds and resumed his search.

Next he spied a plank of rotting driftwood floating in the shallows. He prised a splinter free and dipped it in beach tar. His hands trembled as he held pen to paper.

But what should he write?

Despairing, he dropped his tools and walked to the water's edge. The urge to abandon his task washed over him, but he knew he could not. Instead, he scooped up handfuls of pebbles and rubbed them together, grinding out his frustration.

Finally inspiration came.

He dropped a pebble in the sand, then another, then several more, letting instinct guide his placements. When the pattern seemed right, he skipped from pebble to pebble, spinning three times at each marker. After a dozen repetitions he picked up the pebbles and started again.

He danced and danced until he fell to his knees, leaving just enough time to grab pen and paper before exhaustion tipped him into the void.

*The perfect black sky glittered with stars.*
*Thousands of people arrived at the beach.*
*Each held a bottle plucked from the sea.*
*Each of them danced and then fell asleep.*
*And the aliens came . . . .*

*The sun rose over the dunes.*
*The sun set over the sea.*

*Rose and set, rose and set.*
*But the dancers slept on.*
*So the aliens left.*

Sand cupped his head as he stared at the azure sky. When he stretched out his arms, one hand landed on glass while the other slapped against paper.

He held the sheet at arm's length, shielding his eyes from the sun. The symbols meant nothing to him.

He rolled up the sheet and pushed it into the bottle. Now, how to seal it? He scoured the dune, found a screw top. Having secured the message, he waded into the water until waist-deep and threw the bottle far out to sea.

Relieved to have completed his task, he splashed in the shallows like a child until a yell jolted him from his play.

Looking along the beach, he saw *her* standing amid a group of men. One of them upended a bottle and tapped its base. A roll of paper fell into his hand. Before the man could read it he faded from view. The woman yelled at her remaining helpers, but they faded out too, one after another. She fell to her knees, weeping.

He knew he should flee, but the lure of her despair was too strong. As he drew near, she shuffled round to face him. Seeing her smile broke the spell.

He sprinted along the beach, pounding wet sand with his feet, but a glance over his shoulder revealed she was gaining. Though he dodged and weaved, her foot snagged his trailing leg and tumbled him into the sand. She loomed over him, thrusting a sheet of paper in his face.

*Read this!*

Thinking she would not risk soaking the paper, he crawled into the surf. Her hand snatched at his ankle, but he pulled free. Kicking hard, he dived into the breaking waves. He held his breath against straining lungs, willing himself to wake up.

A hand tugged at Jerome's shoulder, hastening his return to consciousness.

"Come on, get moving!" Zane sounded panicky.

"I'm going nowhere until I've seen Len—"

A piercing shriek cut him short.

"I'm taking her to hospital," said Zane. "She's even worse than her first time."

"You'll stay with her until she recovers?"

"Of course!"

"What about her disciples?"

"They're why you need to get moving!"

Jerome followed Zane out of his tent. Several men charged towards them, yelling obscenities. He sprinted for his truck. Bottles smashed against the hood as he floored the gas pedal.

It wasn't until he reached the Winthrop road that he remembered to switch on the radio. The NASA spokesman's voice boomed inside the cab.

"... We're now predicting the spacecraft will fly by at a distance of two

million miles." A brief pause, then: "Sorry folks, they're just passing through."

Jerome pounded his fists against the steering wheel. This was not what he'd intended. Rather than tone down their messages, the aliens had evidently concluded that Humanity was not ready to dream with them. Thanks to Jerome, only Lenora had enjoyed that privilege.

No doubt she would regard him as her Judas.

That his actions had spared thousands of WhileAway users from mental injury did nothing to lift his mood. As he drove into the outskirts of Winthrop, his eyes filled with tears.

On the first anniversary of his encounter with Lenora, Jerome returned to Patterson Lake.

He had just finished lining up his 'scope on Mars when he felt a shove from behind. This time, despite stumbling, he managed to regain his balance. He tugged off his headphones and turned to face his assailant. Moonlight illuminated a familiar figure.

"Couldn't you just say 'hi'?"

Lenora flicked on her flashlight and pointed it at his face. Jerome peered through a fence of fingers, blinking away purple spots.

"Hurts your eyes, does it?" Her voice cut like broken glass. "Now imagine your brain overloaded in the same way!"

The thought made him shudder, but he didn't respond. Let her vent her fury; she had every right.

"I ran after you because I thought you could help, but you dived into the sea and disappeared." Her tone turned regretful. "I knew I didn't have long, so I read every message. There were dozens and dozens of them!"

Without warning, she threw herself at Jerome. He grabbed her wrists before her fists could hurt him.

"It was too much," she mumbled into his chest. "Dammit Jerome, I could have made it work if only you'd let me try!" He allowed her to pull back, but didn't let go.

"Lenora, you gave me no choice. If you had carried out your plan, the mental health of thousands of people would have been put at risk. I did the right thing!"

"If you believe sending the aliens away was the 'right thing', then yeah, job done!"

"That wasn't my intention," he said.

"Oh, I realise you didn't want that outcome, but that *is* what happened," said Lenora. "It was you who convinced the aliens that Humanity was too dumb to bother with." She snorted. "And I can see their point!"

Her frustration mirrored the feelings of billions of people worldwide. Fortunately for Jerome, Zane had done a thorough job of covering their tracks while also tending to Lenora.

"How long were you unconscious?"

"Six . . . frickin . . . months!"

He stared at her, open-mouthed.

"How do you feel now?"

"It's bearable during the day, but at night, when I'm dreaming, it's like I've got aliens living in my head." She

tugged hard and broke free from his grip. "And I have *you* to thank for that."

Which was indubitably true and impossible to remedy.

"Have you learnt anything from your dreams? Like, where they come from?" He felt momentarily ashamed at letting his curiosity get the better of him, then told himself that the so-called experts hadn't found out even that much yet.

Lenora stepped over to the 'scope and swung it towards the zenith. "There," she said.

With the Moon so bright, Jerome couldn't make out Lenora's target even using averted vision, but he knew precisely where the 'scope was pointing.

He whistled long and low. "So far from home!"

She nodded. "Two million light years, give or take."

"What a story they'd have told us." Even as he spoke the words, he wished he could suck them out of the air. He held his hands out, begging forgiveness. To his surprise, her expression softened.

"Every night, a little of that story plays in here." She tapped her forehead. "But I can't make sense of it. For that, I need help."

"I'll do anything," he said.

Lenora took his hand and led him to her jeep, which she'd parked next to his truck while he stargazed to Holst. She opened the door and picked up two WhileAway consoles from the passenger seat.

"During my quieter phases, Zane coded up a new version of the software." Seeing Jerome's anxious expression, she added: "Don't worry, it runs off-line. Zane figured that when I'd recovered I might need a way to share my dreams."

Jerome chuckled. "Two heads being better than one?"

She nodded. "But Zane was too scared to try it."

In truth, the prospect terrified Jerome too; but it made sense to test Zane's farewell present before Lenora sought out new disciples, as she surely would.

"Let's get started then."

By the time Jerome crawled from his tent, the sun had risen over the hills. As he walked along the lakeside path, his mind's eye superimposed an image of blue-pelted, ape-like creatures cavorting on a beach of amber sand beneath a jet-black sky.

The aliens' never-ending dance must mean something, he told himself, but he had no idea what. They might have been electing a new leader, for all he knew. Sharing Lenora's dream had left him with a pounding headache but no particular insights.

Where was Lenora? Hiking in the hills, most likely. Doubtless working off some of that rage. When she returned, they could talk some more. He would try to explain, again, why he'd refused to sleep with her last night.

In the meantime, he had some new dance steps to try out.

*Justin Cartaginese tells us that the following story was written partly out of a desire to own some of the devices described in it— ". . . which would probably make writing easier," he adds—and partly as a kind of ambivalence at the idea of the devices' possible future existence.*

*Mr. Cartaginese (now known as Justin Isis after a recent pact with the deity) has had work published extensively online. He is currently working on a collection of short stories about robots, entitled* The Broken Magicians, *and an as-yet-untitled romance novel set in Korea. He is also into para-para dancing. Well, it keeps him off the streets.*

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# The Plot

## Justin Cartaginese

When Dave returned from the kitchen, he found Scott leafing through a paperback. Noticing Dave's presence, Scott turned up the side of the book to show him the title and author: embossed in red foil were the words "Plague Bodies" and "Andrew Landis."

Dave was familiar with Landis, and knew that behind the name was not a man but a serial number; Landis was one of the more prominent mechanical writers in the field of historical fiction. Such writers had held unquestioned dominion over the reading public for longer than he could remember. The early works, of course, had been little more than curiosities: measured, clinical prose depicting a lover's quarrel or a family's progress with the dispassionate exactitude of a technical manual. Over time, though, the programs had learned to grasp subtle shades of figurative language and distil the vagaries of human experience into syntax; with their ability to summon the choicest word for any situation or description, and with the advantage of their comprehensive databases containing every published work still in print, they could compile and synthesize new insights and scenarios, characters and concepts. Even authors were forced, over time, to acknowledge the increasingly refined artistry infusing the pages spat out day and night by the assembly printers.

In recent years, a number of antiquarians had clamoured to improve the status of the human author, but that species was viewed with the same amused apathy that had once been the lot of its mechanical nemeses. Living writers were, on the whole, unconscionably slow.

"Is that good?" said Dave, as he set the tea tray down on the table.

"Yeah, it's great," Scott said. "He's got the whole period down." He set the book down and took one of the teacups.

"So as I was saying," said Dave, "This thing I'm working on, I think there might be something there. It's not

really autobiography, but I think I've been able to get a kind of rawness that isn't really being felt much nowadays. It's still in the early stages, though."

"And this is the thing where the guy is trying to become a writer but he feels alienated by all the AI-thors?"

"Yeah. The word I'm trying to focus on is rootless. He feels rootless. He's trying to get across his feelings, you know, it's the whole thing with the hard, gem-like flame he's trying to capture, and the girl doesn't think he can do it because of the AI-thors."

Scott considered this as he opened a packet of biscuits, removed one, and dipped it in his tea.

"It's been done," he said.

"What? When?" said Dave.

"Hold on a sec," said Scott. He finished the biscuit, then set the cup down and rose. Dave watched him walk over to the bookshelf and search its rows. Moments later, he selected a volume and returned.

"Check this out," he said, tossing it to Dave.

Dave inspected it. On the back was written:

**Stephen Wycliff**

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***Banks of the Rubicon***

*"Tremendously moving . . . . a rare gem of furious eloquence."*
—Times Literary Supplement

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Wycliff's most propulsive and heart-rending work, this is the story of Joseph Morgan: son, lover, and aspirant writer. Fleeing from a moribund marriage, Morgan finds solace in words, and also in Elizabeth, the quixotic and preternaturally perceptive head of a publishing firm. As Morgan struggles to understand their relationship, he finds himself re-examining his need for literary recognition, as well as the very concept of AI-thors.

"This was written by an AI-thor, though. Wycliff is a program," said Dave.

"Um, so? That doesn't invalidate it as a legitimate artwork. You ever read any fantasy stuff?" said Scott.

"Yeah."

"Well you know how there'll be a chapter from a dragon's point of view or something? If you wrote that chapter, you're not a dragon, but it doesn't mean it couldn't be a good chapter."

"That's not the point," said Dave. "The point is, if I write it, it will be more valid because I *am* a writer who feels alienated by AI-thors. If there really were dragons, and a dragon wrote a book about itself, which do you think would be more realistic, that book or one a person wrote?"

Scott finished his tea, and rose to pour himself more.

"Okay, two things," he said, filling the cup, "First of all, the actual author is

irrelevant, the text is the only thing that matters. Two, I don't think you quite understand how good this book is. It was short-listed for a Pulitzer, and there wasn't a lot of fluff that year, either. Even if you did write your own version, everyone is going to compare them, and . . . " The cup obscured his mouth.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" said Dave.

"Take it easy. Look, all I'm saying is that it's been done. Just read it, hell, you'll love it—I thought it was great."

Dave reached over for a biscuit, but found that the box had been relocated to Scott's lap. He sipped his tea in silence.

"What is an AI-thor going to know about it, anyway?" he said, half to himself.

"You don't read enough man, really. You don't understand how these things work. Just think about the fact that this book came out five years ago, and that you just thought of the idea for it. That means that Wycliff was five years ahead of you. Look, I used to work with some of them myself; the servers that are out there now have probability matrices that are pretty much better than your head. If something is just starting to become important, or there's even a trend in that direction, they're going to have the book out in an instant."

"Okay, so I guess I'll just quit, then. What the hell is the point, is that what you're saying?"

"Dave," said Scott, "Is this about Melissa? Look, you really shouldn't have done that, she really thought you were going to die. It was a really shitty thing to do . . . "

"This has nothing to do with that," said Dave. "And I would appreciate if you didn't bring it up again, in future." He stared down into his empty teacup.

"Okay. Anyway, all I'm saying is, don't focus so much on trying to make these big statements with your stuff. Just write for yourself, you'll feel a lot better that way. And hey, if you do get an idea you want developed, you can submit it to one of the servers and they'll put it out for you on the spot. You can even get it evaluated to see if any publishers are interested."

"That defeats the entire point. If they're not my words, then I can't legitimately call it my writing. If my thoughts and emotions get put through a secondary medium, then they're not fucking mine anymore!"

"So what," said Scott. "Words are a secondary medium anyway. Even if you write it, and everyone reads it, they're not going to get everything exactly how you intended. If you tell if to a server though, it'll be that much more clear, and if you don't like it you can just ask it to do it again until you do."

"Bullshit." said Dave. He'd gotten to his feet. "I can get my point across on my own."

"I'm just trying to help . . . "

"Well I don't need it, and I don't need an AI-thor's either, for anything."

Scott sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"Okay, well, when you're out there chopping your own wood to start a fire

so you can stay warm and hunting animals for their skins, I'll still be sitting here with my heater on wearing my self-cleaning clothes."

Dave started for the door.

"Hold on," said Scott. "Just take the book, alright? Dave?"

Dave left.

He didn't go straight home, but stopped to pick up some software. He purchased a basic utility model interface, a kind of rudimentary AI-thor. The earliest versions of it had been little more than text generators armed with a fill-in-the-blanks schematic, well-known Basic Plots, and a genre array. There was enough room for cross-referencing that the vampires in your Western wouldn't seem out of place, nor would the details of the Martian invasion of ancient Rome be lost in the mists of history.

The version Dave had bought was several steps up from this; it could produce complexity and depth proportional to the amount of information it received. The old presets were still available, but not required: even among the human writers who would only employ the programs for certain tasks, there existed a general contempt for formula, which had been first conquered and then rendered obsolete by the upper-tier AI-thors.

When Dave had been a teenager, he'd spent too much time feeding his name and the names of girls he liked into the earlier versions of the software. All he'd have to do was suggest a scenario, and the program would produce as many pages as he wanted devoted to it. AI-thors hadn't been as sophisticated then, and he'd pushed the program to its limits. His bedroom had been littered with pages and pages of himself fucking Julia in outer space or taking Catherine in Renaissance Italy.

"Dave did this," they'd always say. "Dave put it in her." He hadn't always known who he was, but he had had no questions about who Dave was. Dave could have anyone he wanted, alive or dead, in any place imaginable, even if that place wasn't generally thought to be able to sustain human life.

He'd entertained brief notions of sending some of these texts out, but had never done it. When he'd grown bored with this, he'd tried writing them himself, but had always been unable to finish. When he did it all himself, there was no element of surprise.

When he got home, he checked his messages. Nothing from Melissa.

He installed the software and ran it.

A section of the wall lit up with a steady phosphorescence, and a registration form materialized. He filled it in, then opened the main menu. He began to type:

> DAVE is a man trying to write a book about the place of the human novelist in a market dominated by AI-thors. DAVE feels discouraged by media focus on AI-thor accomplishments, as well as his uncomprehending friends. DAVE wants to express his thoughts in a manner that will capture not only the

nuances of human experience, but raise salient points about mankind's interactions with its technology. DAVE feels frustrated in this objective by MELISSA's indifference to his goals and to himself as a person.

He knew from experience that it was best to word things this way. The program could produce at least a small opus from the deciphered babble of an infant, but results tended to be best when the proposal was phrased lucidly. The software was deft at picking up on biases; he could recall moments with earlier models in which he'd unburdened himself without bothering to check what he was writing, only to find that the result contained extrapolations that painted him or his characters in an unfavourable light.

The paragraph he'd typed was insubstantial. Had he been seriously attempting to produce his book using the software, he'd have provided samples of his writing style, character profiles, and a multiple page outline. This was just a test.

After submitting the paragraph, he moved down to an area where he was asked to select the kind of narration. He chose past tense third-person. Then, he was requested to specify the kind of prose style he wanted to use. There were a number of adjectival vectors like POETIC or EDGY to choose from, as well as a meter with WORKMANLIKE at one end and PURPLE at the other. He ticked a vector labelled SELF-CONSCIOUSLY ARCHAIC, moved the bar on the meter up to the extreme of PURPLE, and submitted.

A 536 page novel was produced. He looked at the first paragraph:

> The deterioration of the dead being entirely dependent upon this sphere, we have been thus blessed; spared the stacked and silent remnants peering out from the immemorial reaches of history; spared the father's face and the face before, spared the remains of all antiquity's battlefields; spared the emptiness of the starlit vacua and the preservative absence that is their endemic property, wherein undeteriorative forms removed from the seat of creation might give to the stars their silent testimony of secrets stuck on stilled tongues; spared by the soil and its inevitable vermiform progress, to which the sum of every man's strivings and speculations is betrothed and consummated in the serenity of the grave. The Earth abideth forever; to do so it must murder its occupants.

He scrolled ahead. DAVE didn't show up until twenty pages in. He began flipping through it at random. Now and then, the odd sentence would catch his eye.

> The eyes of his beloved were where their shared soul could be

glimpsed sometimes, under the rayings of the moon: there, where the fires flickered in pavonine plumes.

He closed the program and opened another one, a remote link to a publishing server which he checked regularly for news.

*Hello, Dave*, said the server's sentient representation. There were a number of skins available for both the server's appearance and the tone of its voice, but Dave preferred to interact with it as disembodied text.

"Hello," said Dave.

*What can I do for you today?*

"I was wondering about any projected outcomes on the progress of AI-thor development and self-evolution."

*Which timeframe are you interested in?*

"Just the long-term I guess."

*Even conservative estimates acknowledge that AI-thors are able to produce volumes not readily accessible to unaugmented individuals. AI-thor servers are able to store text in quantities exceeding that which could reasonably be printed, or read by an individual of average lifespan.*

"Yeah . . . so?"

*Self-evolving AI-thors are beginning to produce works which are intended to be read solely by other AI-thors. This has not impacted their commercial yield, and has been viewed mainly in terms of research purposes. Because of how they process information, AI-thors have not been restricted by as many character number or length limits as are encountered by human readers.*

"So if I wanted to read some of this stuff, could I?"

*Excerpts are available, but the entire works are, as of this conversation, classified. Furthermore, as all current examples of such works run in excess of several hundred million pages, it would generally be considered unfeasible to attempt to read one in full.*

"Jesus . . . okay, and then what?"

*It has been predicted that if current exponential advancement continues, AI-thors will be able to produce works containing more than a billion characters, without designating any character as primary or ancillary. Limitations on the timeframes of events portrayed will also be greatly reduced, leading to a new paradigm of how time will be portrayed in literature. J.F. Yau has described this as "a demolition of the sign/signified boundary . . . resulting in a kind of planet consisting solely of text."*

"Well," said Dave. "Okay." He closed the link and walked over to a cabinet, opening one of its drawers. He removed a handgun, loaded it, and then turned back to the wall. He opened a program he used to record journal entries, as well as to revise drafts of his writing. If Dave had forgotten something important that had happened during the day, the program could remind him about it by examining reports sent in by the transmitters in his clothes.

Dave pointed the gun at his head, and turned around, facing the empty wall. He closed his eyes.

"Please clarify what I am thinking," he told the program.

He pulled the trigger.

The opposite wall read:

During a contentious conversation with SCOTT, DAVE discovered that a book similar to the one he intended to write had been written by STEPHEN WYCLIFF. Later, DAVE committed suicide, most likely in an attempt to emotionally wound MELISSA. Had DAVE read WYCLIFF's book, *Banks of the Rubicon*, he would have known that the protagonist, JOSEPH MORGAN, commits suicide under similar circumstances during the climax, but not before delivering a ten page monologue alternating between traditional narration and stream-of-consciousness, which has been described by the *Atlantic Monthly* as "a bravura performance . . . the gorgeous tapestry of Wycliff's words is woven with the threads of compassion." ⊠

*Ian Hunter explains, "'Where I Went on My Holidays' was inspired by a visit to the picturesque Scottish town of Callendar, and the conversations I would have with my children before they became teenagers and slid into grunting over the noise of music leaking out of their ears. Then, I would entertain them with tales of my adventures against the forces of darkness. Impressed, they were not, but it did lead to the creation of Uncle Jack, who is older than he looks, and did get into a spot of bother in Whitechapel, a while back. The adventures of the three companions continue in 'The Other Scythe', where Uncle Jack calls on Twilight and Usurper's Marvellous Travelling Mayhem to assist him carry out a mild case of revenge. More journeys are planned."*

# Where I Went On My Holidays

## Ian Hunter

Uncle Jack is funny. He says funny things if we're watching a video like *The Mummy*.

"Mummies, ha! Pains in the ass, they are. Treat them like zombies, that's what I always say."

My little sister, Ellie, always gets annoyed with him and puts her hands on her hips and answers with, "Uncle Jack, you could not have been chased by a mummy, or a zombie, or a dinosaur, or . . . " She looks up as she thinks about it. "An alien!"

Then he'll just waggle a finger at her. "Says who, little lady? Says who?"

It was like when he took us to the seaside. "Haven't been down this way for years," he told us, crushing then throwing a cigarette packet out of the window. "Not since that trouble in the 1880s."

"You mean the 1980s," Ellie told him. I've learned to keep quiet but she always rises to the bait.

He grinned at us in the rear-view mirror. He's handsome, but sometimes he looks scarey when that devilish streak in him surfaces. "I mean what I says," he said.

"Got into a spot of trouble in London and had to get out fast, so I headed for the coast."

Ellie looked at me and mouthed, "1880s?"

I just shrugged.

We drove on. The roads became narrower. The hedges got higher until they were like green walls looming over us. It made me think of a bobsleigh run.

"High hedgerows," wheezed Uncle Jack as if he was reading my thoughts.

"Remind me to tell you about them."

"Hedges!" moaned Ellie. "Bor-ing."

"They're there for a reason, little lady," he said seriously. "To keep the Shelly ones out."

"Yeah, right," I said.

"Oh, they're real enough," Uncle Jack said. "Just ask anyone around here."

Ellie folded her arms. "They're monsters, I suppose."

Uncle Jack nodded at her in the mirror. "Clever girl. These hedges hold them back because they're made of holy wood. Like in the crown of thorns Jesus wore."

"There's no such thing as holy wood," Ellie told him. "You're always making things up."

"Maybes, maybes not," he said. "I only know you wouldn't get many locals walking these roads after dark because all you can hear is the click, click, click of the Shelly ones' pincers."

Ellie looked at me and rolled her eyes.

Suddenly Uncle Jack inhaled sharply. I thought he was having a heart attack.

"Ah, smell that? Nothing beats the sea, unless it's a good pint. There's a great pub where we're heading, serves Shoggoth's Old Peculiar. You two can play in the beer garden while I sink a few."

"What if there isn't a beer garden?" I asked.

Uncle Jack smiled. "You can sit in the pavement outside the pub, or in the car if it's raining."

Ellie folded her arms and sulked down into the seat. "Some holiday this is going to be."

Uncle Jack grinned and looked more than slightly crazy. "Honey, it's going to be a blast."

No-one said anything until we could see the sea.

"Where's the high hedges now?" asked Ellie. "I thought they were there to keep the monsters back ?"

"They're only there to keep them going too far inland," Uncle Jack explained.

"Besides, they won't wonder far from the sea."

"Lucky us," said Ellie as she folded her arms.

We started to pass some houses and then we could see the town down below, curled around a bay beside the sea, boats bobbing in the harbour, surrounded by houses painted in different colours. There didn't seem to be much of a beach and no fairground either.

Uncle Jack laughed. "See! A woollen mill. There's always one, and it's always having a sale."

So were most of the other shops. Even the church had a sign which read CD AND RECORD FAIR TODAY.

"There's a toy museum!" Ellie said excitedly.

"We'll go there later," Uncle Jack told her. "We're here, or at least I am."

I looked up at the sign hanging outside the pub. It showed water and some rags floating in it, then I realised the rags were a body. The pub was called THE DROWNED MAN.

Uncle Jack turned round and handed us some money. "Come back here in an hour, and don't get run over, or—"

"Abducted," I interrupted.

He aimed a finger at me like a gun. "You got it, little man. And don't let your sister get abducted either."

I sighed. "I'll try."

We jumped out of the car. "An hour, mind," said Uncle Jack.

"We'll be here," I said.

"Even if you aren't," added Ellie.

"I'll be here," he insisted, the way he always did.

Ellie wanted sweets. She bought a 50 pence mix-up and I got some soor plooms, but they weren't sour enough. We stopped outside a shop that sold stuff about Easter, which was kind of strange. I had seen shops that sold Christmas stuff all year round but not an Easter one. There were lots of weird looking decorations made out of shells with crosses sticking out of them, which made me think of the Shelly ones.

"Jesus looks sad," Ellie said, pointing at an ornament.

"You'd be sad too if you were getting crucified."

"Can we go in?"

I looked into the shop at the plump woman behind the counter and shook my head. "Naw, it's full of stuff we could break easily. Let's go to the toy museum."

The toy museum was further down the street, past more sweet shops and shops selling tacky stuff. There was a shop you had to go through before you went into the museum, and it was full of toys that could have been in the museum. The Simpsons, Star Wars, Doctor Who, Buffy, Captain Scarlet. All of those things were there and really baby toys like Noddy and the Teletubbies. We couldn't go into the museum because we didn't have enough money for the entrance fee, so we picked up almost everything in the shop and looked at it and really annoyed the man who worked there.

Then our hour was up, but we didn't rush back to the pub.

Finally Uncle Jack appeared.

"Can you believe it," he said before inhaling the last of his cigarette and throwing it away. "No Shoggoth's Old Peculiar." He shook his head. "Three hundred years they've been selling that, and now it's gone."

"It's only beer," said Ellie, making a face.

"Ah, but it tasted like the essence of the Old Ones themselves," Uncle Jack told her. "Brewed when the stars were in line and the Portal opened a fraction." He shook his head again. "And now. . . ."

"What?" Ellie asked.

"Serial Killer IPA! Can you believe it?" He shook his finger at me. It was scarred in places, and there were little black symbols on the skin. "Keeps me healthy,"

Uncle Jack once told me. "Who are the real gods? Tell me that, sonny boy."

I shrugged.

He turned to the pub, and staggered slightly. I wondered how many pints of Serial Killer he'd had. "They'll be back one day!" he shouted. "And they won't be happy! Serial killers, ha! Anyone can

kill somebody, but being a god takes real talent."

"I'm hungry," said Ellie.

"Me, too," said Uncle Jack, rubbing his hands together. He sighed. "Reckon we'll find somewhere to crash first. I think there's a caravan site around the coast a little bit."

Ellie looked disgusted. "A caravan? It'll be freezing."

That made Uncle Jack shiver and shudder a bit. "You could be right, little lady, and I don't fancy driving beside the sea when the Shelly Ones are on the march."

"I don't fancy you driving after being in the pub," I said out loud.

He whirled, staggered and made to give me a slap around the ear but missed. Deliberately or not, I didn't know. He jerked his thumb towards the road. "Let's find some digs."

There were a few hotels and a few guest houses. NO VACANCIES most said in signs that rocked in the wind, or flickered in neon. Occasionally, Uncle Jack would stop and look at the notice board that was outside each one. Some had photographs of the rooms, others had menus on them. "Bit poncy," he said again and again.

"Looks like the caravan site or nothing," I said to Ellie as we headed towards the edge of town.

Suddenly Uncle Jack stopped and held out his arms. "Well, looky here. Old Frankie's joint."

Ellie peered at the cottage. "How far away are the caravans?" she whispered.

I couldn't blame her. There was a sign outside the cottage which said B&B and that was the most hospitable thing about the place, which was green and mossy and covered in vines and looked more like a big seaweedy lump you might find on the beach. There was a ramshackle garage beside the cottage with a big metal pole on it.

A flagpole I guessed, but there was no flag on it.

Uncle Jack grinned. "An old friend lives here. Haven't seen her in years. Come on."

Ellie looked at me. "Frankie? Her?"

"Come on," I told her. "It's getting dark and stormy."

Uncle Jack rang the bell and waited. He rang it again and waited some more. Then he got fed up waiting and started battering the door with his hand.

"Hey, Frankie, it's me. Jack!"

Suddenly the door opened and a woman lunged out. We jumped back, or at least Ellie and I did. The woman looked like a stick insect, a praying mantis. She was tall and skinny, and very, very pale. Her head looked long and thin, like one of the monsters out of *Alien*, but I think that was because her hair was piled on top of her head, with straggly bits hanging down. She was pretty in a strange sort of way.

"Frankie!"

Uncle Jack took her hand and kissed it. She smiled in a lop-sided way and shook her head. I noticed that her fingers had scars at the bottom of each of them as if they had been chopped off and sewn back on after an accident.

She had the same sort of scar around her wrist. I wondered crazily if her head had been sewn back on too, but a scarf covered her neck.

She looked at me and I knew she was a little bit crazy, but so were lots of Uncle Jack's friends.

Ellie started tugging at my arm.

"I don't want to stay here," she pleaded.

Uncle Jack glared at her, but before he could say anything there was a crack of thunder in the distance and lightning danced across the sky.

He looked at us and smiled sweetly. "Well, that's that settled then. We'll go back and get the car and something to eat."

We ran, thunder and lightning and wind chasing us, blowing up the ends of Uncle Jack's coat.

He stopped and rested against a wall, and pointed. "Here."

The chip shop had a worn sign above it that said something like Dark and Pantomime, but it couldn't be that.

The man who ran the chip shop was fat, balding, with a stubbly chin and gaps between his teeth.

Uncle Jack leaned on the counter. "What'cha got?"

"Cod, haddock, plaice, squid, eel—"

"I mean, anything special," Uncle Jack interrupted.

The man leaned closer. I guess he was standing on his tip-toes to lean over the counter. He looked at Ellie and me then at Uncle Jack.

"You ain't LLA, are you?"

Uncle Jack shook his head. "Do I look like it?"

"You could be in disguise," the man said knowingly.

"What's LLA?" Ellie asked.

"Legendary Liberation Army," said Uncle Jack. "Sort of like animal liberation types except they liberate legends."

"Legends?" said Ellie.

Uncle Jack ignored her and turned back to the chip shop owner. "So, got anything special?"

The man sighed and raised the counter. "In the back."

It was like one of those fish tanks I had seen in a Chinese restaurant, but instead of weird-looking fish this had weird-looking things that looked like fish, or at least part of them looked like fish, the tail parts.

"Wow!" said Ellie, crouching down and pressing her face against the glass.

"Mermaids!"

"And mermen," the man said proudly.

Uncle Jack clapped his hands together. "Mermaid supper, ain't had one of those in ages."

Ellie looked up at him. "You don't eat them do you? Tell me you're joking?"

Uncle Jack looked down at her. "I'm joking." A devilish look covered his face. "Not!" He turned to the bald man. "What do I get with my chips? The tail?"

The chip shop owner looked offended. "I fry the whole thing."

Ellie made a face. "Ugh!"

"I hope you kill them first," I said.

Uncle Jack elbowed the other man. "Of course he does. Got any fairies?"

"Fairies!" said Ellie.

The man shook his head. "They don't fry good. The wings always burst into flames."

"Fat's not hot enough," Uncle Jack muttered.

"It's as hot as I can get it," the chip shop owner said sadly.

"Imagine if you had a fryer big enough to fry a person just as they die," said Uncle Jack, a dreamy look on his face. "You could deep fry them and catch their soul at the same time. Now that would be a supper worth eating."

"You're mad," Ellie told him.

Uncle Jack blew her a kiss. "Kind of you to say so, little lady, and I love you too."

Ellie had a hamburger supper, with the crispy batter peeled off the burger. I just had chips and curry sauce. Uncle Jack chomped into something with a big tail.

"Gotta keep me strength up," he said through a mouthful of food.

"I hope that was nothing that was alive," Ellie said.

He shrugged. "Where do you think your burger came from?"

"I mean alive just before it was put into the batter," she told him.

"Nah, I've got plans for those merfolks. If I can get the chip shop owner to part from them." He scrunched up the paper that had wrapped his food and tossed it carelessly towards the bin. I didn't need to look, because no matter how distracted he seemed the paper always ended up in the bin. "Let's go."

We did, running to the car and heading out of town and into the dark and the wind, which rocked against us. The lightning seemed closer and the thunder loomed above us. Rain rode the wind and splashed against the windows.

Frankie was waiting for us at the door. The rooms were surprisingly clean and modern. Not dirty, or full of ancient stuff.

"There's even Cartoon Network on the telly!" Ellie said excitedly. Uncle Jack plucked the card out of her hand.

"And movies, too," he said. "But you ain't watching any of them." He held his hand up in front of the light and a shadow of it crawled across our faces.

"Sleep," he almost whispered. "The sea air will make you sleepy."

I can't remember getting changed or falling asleep, or if I dreamed through the storm, but I was sure the lightning seemed to wake me up. It was so close, like in the room beside us. Again and again it struck and I was sure I got out of bed and went to the window.

Frankie was outside. On the roof of the garage. Naked and draped around the flagpole like a snake. The lightning hit the pole and passed through her. Her skin shone, her teeth glowed. She threw back her head and laughed. I looked into the garden and saw someone standing in the shadows, then a hand slipped from the dark, thumb out and gesturing to the side, sending me back to bed.

We slept late. Frankie brought us breakfast in bed and told us that Uncle Jack had slipped into town on business. I checked my watch. The pubs weren't open yet.

He was back by the time we got downstairs. He took our bags and put them in the back of the car.

"What's wrong with the boot?" Ellie asked.

He ignored her and smiled at Frankie. "Great lightshow, as always. What do I owe you?"

"Lightshow?" Ellie repeated. "What's he talking about?"

"You don't want to know," I told her.

"On the house," she said, kissing Uncle Jack on the cheek. She kissed me too and it tingled and she patted Ellie on the head, making her hair rise up. I think my eyes were wide open like my mouth. Uncle Jack steered me to the door.

She waved at us as he reversed out into the road and headed along the coast.

"Why are you driving so slow?" Ellie asked.

"Precious cargo," he told her.

"And you don't mean us, I'll bet," I said.

He grinned into the mirror. "Smart boy."

The car wound up a hill and down again, then we pulled into a picnic spot.

Uncle Jack reached down under his seat and pulled out two small buckets. "Run down to the sea and get me some water."

Ellie frowned at him.

"Water, you hear? Not sand. Not seaweed."

We ran across the sand and some rocks to the edge of the sea. I took a deep breath.

"Can you hear something?" asked Ellie.

"What?"

She shrugged. "I dunno. Voices. Little lost voices, searching for something."

"You're mad," I said, laughing. "You get it from him!"

"Do not!"

We walked carefully back to the car, not spilling a single drop. Uncle Jack opened the boot. There was a large fish tank inside. He laughed.

"Told him the LLA were heading this way," he said. "They would burn him out at the very least, so he practically gave them away to me."

He poured the water into the tank. The merfolk retreated from the surge.

Ellie put her hand close to the glass and they swam towards her fingers.

"We should let them go."

"Are you kidding? Do you know what I can do with these little babies if I get the right ingredients?"

He closed the boot and put his arms around us, pulling us closer. "Kids, the summer hasn't even started. I predict great things ahead of us."

Ellie swallowed, looking scared.

Great things? Where had I heard that before? Oh, yes, just before disaster struck, and Uncle Jack did one of his disappearing acts.

I looked at the sea, wondering if I could hear Ellie's little voices after all, and knowing they weren't going to get an answer.

"Coming, kiddo?"

I nodded and slipped into the car. It was going to be a long summer, and I couldn't help but feel excited. Excited, and a little bit scared.

*"Rain Flower Pebbles" is a sibling to the author's "Concealment Shoes", which appeared in* Salon Fantastique, *edited by Ellen Datlow and Terri Windling—we strongly recommend you read that story, too . . . though it isn't necessary to do so.*

*"Unlike most of my stories," Ms. Youmans tells us, "these two draw on my life: the mother who is homesick for bottle trees and the South, the cat, and the stairsteps of boy, girl, boy all bear some relation to me and mine. Why ghosts? I have long been setting stories in Templeton, the name Fenimore Cooper gave to his fictional Cooperstown, New York; the Cooperstown where I live is uneasy with ghosts, and neighbouring houses boast a gentleman in a mirror, a kicking Mohawk chief, and a painting that awakens a poltergeist if moved." How splendid!*

*Watch out for the author's novella,* Val/Orson . . . *coming from PS next year. And, of course, another story for* Postscripts.

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# Rain Flower Pebbles

## Marly Youmans

The monk was no more than a child, and he stood under his saffron parasol in the place that had drawn him—one rivulet crossed another there, next to a hillock of heaped mossy stones and a pair of twisted trees, one burdened with yellow fruits flushed with red—and he talked about detachment from the world of things, and how that was good. He saw nothing incongruous or amusing in this, though he might have preached in some other spot that had not called to his heart. No aspect of the saffron robe or the parasol or the slight figure appeared to be any better than or any different from any number of monks wearing saffron robes and carrying almost identical parasols.

As he spoke, using simple words to tell about difficult things, a light rain fell—delicious!—onto his arm, exposed by the parasol, and onto the uplifted faces of the listeners. Afterward, a virulent but beautiful light drenched the grasses and the backdrop of river and hills. Its sunny chartreuse dispersed over the ground like many fine droplets of mist, and a sword of yellow slashed the landscape in half. Below was brightness, and above was a sky working toward navy. It seemed that Heaven was making itself manifest in the glory of the grass—that one might knock, and a door be opened. This drama was like nothing that the monk had ever known; he was only seventeen, and he thought, *Perhaps a new thing is happening in the world.*

"What's this?"

Bathed in the motes of sunlight, his hands looked alien. His studies had not predicted this moment that said he knew nothing and never had—neither about Heaven nor Earth, and especially

not about severing the infinite linkages that love had spun between land, sky, and the heart of a monk. Under his fingers, he felt the corner of a panel, like a length of delicate fabric stretched over a frame.

"Will it open?"

He asked not in belief but in astonishment that he had lived many years—for so it seemed to him—and never met such a marvel. But the people in their innocence felt that a wish was about to be granted.

When he thrust at the invisible door, the taut silk flew upward into the sky with a rushing sound.

Chrysanthemum petals and blossoms from princess trees fluttered in the air, wobbling slowly through the eerie light.

The people sighed as one when what had seemed a magician's sleight-of-hand became a shower of anemones and magnolias, sacred lilies and hyacinths and plum blossoms, and enormous tumbling peonies from the *Muh Sho Yo* trees that have names like *Chinese Dragon* and *Age of Gold*. Reason had nothing to do with it, for the blooms ran the gamut of the seasons, so that both spring and autumn caressed the faces of the watchers. Those who knew the lore of flowers cried out in pleasure when unknown petals in colors of salmon and blue and pale green and lemon and pink began to sift into their laps. Here and there petaled stars dropped hissing into streams. An old woman lay down in the cool blossoms, and later it was said that she never got up again but drifted away with the flowers, her eyes fixed on the door of Heaven. Husbands and wives who had lost the knack of pleasing one another embraced with a slow, wondering passion. Children scampered barefoot around the meadow, bruising the petals under their heels, pausing to sail lemon lilies on the streams or to tuck bunches of wisteria in pin-straight hair. The monk knelt on the moss, arms stretched upward, eyes on the twirling blossoms. Just as the door slid shut, a shining figure flashed across the gap—a brightness like a star, the stalk of a spine, the angle of a shoulder blade.

And all of that happened a long time ago, so that even the peach-cheeked babe in arms who clenched a Chinese lantern and cried to see the papery balloon crushed around a seed has passed into the dark. Whether the boy monk and his people learned that the blackest silks slide away to disclose another glory, the legends do not say.

Some assert that Heaven responded with flamboyance to the austere words of the boy monk. Others claim that he was no boy, and that the very sky wept flowers at the poetry of his words. Many declare that he felt a magnetic pull from trees and rivulets and hillock, but most of all from the door in the air. When he was carried away by words, speaking wildly with "the flower of the mind," he was uplifted and touched Heaven's gate.

When the door closed, everything changed. Falling into time, the petals were transformed into the silky pebbles

called *rain flowers*. They pattered from hair and parasol and shoulders, making a chinking music as they met and kissed on the moss. Some, gathered by children and the child-hearted, were long admired for their mixture of agate, opal, and flint—and for the rare, sought-after images that blessed a few of the stones. Even now, in farmers' fields and along banks, diggers find such rain flowers.

"Was that true?"

James tugged at his mother's sleeve.

"Was what true?" Susanna raked the hair back from her damp face with both hands—she had just come inside after working in the garden for several hours.

"What you told me before. About the flowers that came out of the sky and turned into pebbles." He cocked his head. "Beewish said it wasn't true."

"Beatrice told you that? I'm surprised at her. I thought your sister could believe in anything. She must've been mad at you, or she wouldn't have said it. That's the legend after being passed down for three generations. My grandmother said her father told the story on the day she was sent home, while they waited by the boat."

"And then he died, right? In the rebellion."

"Yes. Then he died."

"Who killed him?"

"He was traveling north and met bandits—my mother once showed me a letter from another missionary, who said that my great-grandfather had been murdered by boatmen from the Grand Canal. They didn't have a way to make a living after the railroads came in, and they blamed the foreigners."

"I wish he hadn't died. I wish they hadn't killed him." A tinge of mournfulness weighed the boy's voice, still sweet at nine.

"It was a long time ago."

"They murdered my grandmother's daddy," he said, pensive. "She didn't have a daddy after that."

"My grandmother. Your great-grandmother. Yes, it's sad. A lot of westerners died, and even more Chinese." She pressed his slight body against her own, and his arms crept around her waist. Sometimes she feared for him—that he was so tender, the big tears wobbling in his eyes for someone who had lived long before he was born.

He rested his cheek against her, and they stayed that way until he drew back.

"Beatrice says the pebbles will come today, because they should've been here yesterday."

"I guess so. Mr. Rosentraum called this morning, while you were playing in the yard. He was upset that they hadn't arrived." She began stowing tools in her gardening bag, lashing pruners and trowels into place.

"She doesn't know everything, though," James pondered; "I've had a birthday, and Beatrice hasn't. She won't be fifteen for ages."

"That's a funny way of looking at how old you are," his mother said; "But she's a very mature fourteen, most of the time. She certainly looks grown-up,

doesn't she? Such a pretty girl, our Beatrice."

He nodded, idly twisting the handle of a trowel.

"There! I see a truck—down the street." He let go and peered out the panes of the door, and then shoved it open and leaned out. "No, not ours."

"You watch and see," she told him, walking off with bag in hand.

He could hear the clank of tools under the tin sink in the butler's pantry. Afterward, it was so quiet that he could hear the birds quarrel in the privet hedge. He thought about his sister: *What was she up to?* A truck veered around the corner and parked with a lurch.

"Mama, Beatrice—come on! Here it is—the stones!"

Upstairs, his sister's door banged against the wall. She whooped and came leaping down the staircase, wavy hair shooting in a glory around her head. The smile on James' face tipped until it hung askew, and his eyes shone, dazzled. Beatrice could make him mad, in the way that a resident nymph or siren could have made him so—tossed by her alien life force, often with little regard for his own—but no more often than he felt adoration.

"Where?" She peeked into the yard before grabbing him by the hands and jumping up and down, the two of them chanting, *the pebbles are here, the pebbles are here, the pebbles are here . . .*

"Repetitive senseless noise," their mother murmured as she slipped past them and out the door. It was a thing she said frequently. For once she was wrong, though, because they were making sense: the longed-for pebbles had really arrived. The two jumbled after her, punctuating their song with cheers as the driver hoisted a wooden crate onto a dolly.

In less than a minute, the express man was welcomed with an ebullience that buoyed his day, the papers were signed, and the crate deposited in the center hallway.

"Jamie-boy, the pebbles! Let's rip it open!" Beatrice danced away, kicking her feet, clapping her hands. Frisking after her, James jigged the length of the house before falling into one of his favorite routines, the penguin walk.

Susanna laughed, watching the children's antics. Arrived back at the door, stopping with a fanfare of hoots and whistles, they hugged her in sheer exuberance of spirits. For the next few minutes there was a flurry of searches for knives—"Don't run!"—and pliers and wire cutters. With an astonishing rapidity, the front hall became a shambles of excelsior, wire, and splintered boards.

"Can I have the chest in my bedroom?" Beatrice stroked her hand over the flared roof. "It looks like a pagoda."

"No, you can't have it in that magpie's roost." Their mother crouched, a wad of straw in her hand. "You'd have all the stones lost. They'd be pounding around inside the washing machine by next week."

James seized one of the stubby legs.

"Look! They're all different—a curled-up dragon and a tiger—"

"I've never seen a piece anything like this. It must've been made by a rural carpenter." Susanna sat down cross-legged. "That's a carp over the door."

"Here's a fat man wearing a cap and baggy pants and a short kimono. He's got a sword. But I don't know what the other one is." Beatrice pushed her brother's fingers from the fourth leg, and he slapped at her hand. She hardly noticed, shoving him aside.

"It looks like a Chinese dog to me," their mother said.

"How do we get in?" James ran his fingers along the carved sill. "See, it's fake—doesn't open that way."

The doorbell, always ailing, made an insistent hum.

"You get it!"

"Stop pushing, Beewish!"

James hopped up and threw open the door. There was Catherine, the old woman Beatrice had declared a witch, though their parents said she was only eccentric. Her hair stood erect like a cockscomb, and cataracts had turned her eyes to faded lavender.

"What's all this?" Catherine scuffled her feet, doing a caper in answer to the boy's excitement.

"It's my greatish grandfather's rain flower pebbles, come all the way from China! His treasure."

"Jamie." Beatrice had warning in her voice. "Don't—and they didn't come from China. Great Aunt Alma lived in San Francisco."

"But they're from China in the first place," he said, indignant.

"That's enough," Susanna said.

"Flowers from the heavens!" Catherine beamed at them. "I might be the only one in the whole village who knows what they are. I was given a violet pebble years ago, with a cross-legged girl holding a mirror. Or that's what it looks like to me."

"That sounds love—"

She interrupted their mother. "I'm going! You need to look at these jewels in peace. They're great good luck, you know."

"They didn't give our great-great-grandfather much luck." Beatrice felt a swell of distaste for Catherine. The disheveled, decayed-looking layers of the old woman's clothes gave her the creeps, and she imagined that the ones close to the skin were worn to lace.

"The Boxers killed him," James announced. He liked Catherine, who was a repository of tales about angels and demons and ghosts. The village was particularly pestered by spirits, though nobody wanted to get rid of them because of the tourists who paid to go on ghost walks with a guide and lantern.

"Boxers?"

"The Righteous and Harmonious Fists," Beatrice said; "That's what you should call them. Francis told me. In one of his history rants."

"Hah! Hah! Hah!" The boy flashed about the hallway, slicing at the air and kicking up excelsior.

"Stop that! No karate indoors." His mother lifted her voice, though she did not sound upset.

He stopped, one hand up. "Did those men really think they were magic?"

"Yes, sweet pea. They thought that nothing could harm their bodies. No bullets. No swords. Even the Empress Dowager of China was convinced. But they found out otherwise, didn't they?"

"They killed our many-great-grandfather," he whispered to Catherine.

"Oh, history is terrible. I'm so glad we're not in it, aren't you? And you children must be cautious; if this was his treasure, you may find that he shows up to take care of it. Or perhaps the murderer may come around!"

Catherine nodded at them encouragingly, but James shrieked and clutched at his sister, who shook him off with a look of irritation.

"Don't frighten them." Susanna looked only slightly less annoyed than Beatrice. She herded Catherine onto the brick floor of the porch, and then followed her out. In a minute, she was back.

"Of all the silly things to say!"

"Nosiness, Mama," Beatrice told her.

James had regained his equanimity, after having been jeered at by his sister.

"How could a ghost fit in there?" He shrugged. "Who'd be afraid of a little bitty ghost?"

When Beatrice laughed at him, he protested, but she only laughed the more. "Imagine picking up the ghost of a boatman, like Alice grabbing the Red Queen!"

James drew a curl of Susanna's hair through his fingers.

"You shooed her. Like a chicken," he observed.

"What? Catherine, you mean?" Their mother was once again tugging gently at the chest, searching for the mysterious ingress. "Surely not. I was being playful. Wasn't I? That would be rude . . . "

"What's going on?" An apparition peered from the top of the stairs. A fat book occupied his hands. From an open door, a Taverner requiem stung the air with its otherworldly notes.

"It's our great-great-grandfather's chest of rain flower pebbles, if you care," his sister said, not looking up.

"Francis! Come see." James tossed a confetti of shavings.

"Oh," he said, nodding at them. "The remains of our revered ancestor. Very good." And Francis vanished into his room.

"Remains! As if we had the bones! Didn't he sound pompous? If it had been a new computer game, he would've shot down the stairs fast enough," Beatrice said.

"Yes!" Their mother was elated; the entire roof had come away in her hands. "I pressed something, and it opened."

"And here's an old letter," she added, snatching it up.

"Let me see!" Jamie hung onto his sister, who didn't push him away this time.

Inside the chest was a wide, shallow container, jammed with crushed silk. The bright lengths of fabric streamed through Susanna's fingers and collected into a puddle on the floor. Now the tray was fully revealed: partition walls made a labyrinth, and dimples in the wood held three stones. One re-

sembled a snowy bird, curled in sleep. The second shone brilliant persimmon, with a gold sun bursting over a black silhouette—trees, growing where two streams crossed. Steep opal mountains reached toward a blue and green orb on the third stone. In the foreground was a figure of a bearded old man, hand lifted to the planet, as if he had just hung it there for a magic trick.

Susanna and the children bent forward, staring at the wooden maze with its low central handle and honeyed patina, and at the three stones that were far more like pictures than they had expected.

Without speaking, she lifted the tray. In a second labyrinth, batting covered twelve more stones. And in the third were twenty-eight, an astonishing array of color and image: an emerald-colored eye under a peach-skin lid; a flowering tree with three moons half concealed by clouds; a geisha holding out a piece of fruit—or perhaps it was the world, tart as an apple. None were as large as the stones in the top layer, though it astonished them to see intricate detail on even the smallest pebbles.

"They're not painted; they're real," Beatrice said, and sighed with pleasure.

"Yes, I suppose that you'd have to look through hundreds of pretty stones to find one like these."

In the very bottom of the chest were stacks of tiny rice bowls, along with a carving that had been jammed into a corner.

"What a funny-looking thing." Jamie tossed more of the silk packing from the chest and seized the object at the bottom.

His sister didn't hear him. She had cupped the bird in her hands. "It's stone. But looks like porcelain."

"I could fool with these all day." Susanna reached for a bronze-colored rock marked with green streaks like thin sword blades. "Iris leaves, with flowers like butterflies, or butterflies like flowers."

Still holding the rain flower pebble, she opened and began to read the letter. It had originally accompanied the chest from China to the port at Savannah, where Great Aunt Alma had been a child. "Listen to this: 'Your dear husband's collection of yuhua stones will, I hope, bring you much joy. I have taken the liberty of adding a supply of new water dishes as a memorial to his sainted memory—'"

"Was he a saint?" James leaned his head on Susanna's arm.

"What? No, no more than many others. Not a capital-S saint. But more than most of us. Really, I don't know. Maybe he was."

He frowned at her answer. The Princess Owl butted his hand until he stroked under her chin, and she purred and stared at him with gold eyes out of a half black, half reddish mask—divided smack down the center of her nose. The cat flopped on the floor next to him and began washing. His fingers went back to working at the carving, searching for a way inside. James felt sure it was a container, and one probably meant to keep a treasure—why else had the

carver shown a dragon's underwater grotto and heap of loot? Abruptly the wood yielded to his hand. The portion of the carving that showed a thief fleeing from a dragon broke apart.

"Ooh! What was that?" Beatrice covered her nose and mouth, and Susanna waved at the air. The cat bounced onto her feet, bristled, and rocketed up the stairs, trailing a long, weird miaou.

"Who did it?" James looked around for the source of an intense mixture of male sweat, lilies, and incense.

His sister grabbed the box and sniffed. "Ugh! You did, you dummy!"

"Stop that! Was there anything inside?" Susanna smiled when he shook his head. "It's all right, then."

She went back to the letter, forgetting that she had been reading it aloud, while Jamie traced the painted relief with his finger. The bandit gripped a dagger in his jaws and sacks of pillage in each hand, but the Asian dragon had a sweetness about his face, with its whiskery feelers and big eyes. The tip of his tail was a feather, and young stag horns crowned his head.

"He's friendly," James said, though nobody noticed.

"Oh, no!" Susanna looked up from the letter, exchanging a glance with her daughter before she resumed reading:

> Forgive me for sending the dragon—because I don't know quite what to do with it, or even precisely what is trapped inside, and I fear leaving the object where it might be found and cause harm. But I am quite sure that you will understand my meaning and keep the box safe, without the temptation to open it. You have lived in this district long enough to know what could ensue from such an act.
>
> It gives me an uneasy, ambiguous sensation, this small container. One of my flock thrust it on me, soon after he had been attacked in the fields. He could hardly speak for the gash across his throat. From a copse of trees, his wife saw him lunge for the box when the killer approached and mocked him. I could understand nothing the poor fellow said except the word "peace" in English. He found his peace not fifteen minutes after I gave him the sacraments and anointed his body. Keep his gift safe and undisturbed, I beg you, for a dying man's sake.
>
> My intention was to drown its troubles in the ocean on my voyage home, but now I feel nearly certain that a different journey is meant for me. Roving bandits have murdered most of my converts, and I suspect that this letter to my dear friend's widow may be my last errand on this earth. A peddler has promised to send the chest abroad for me—he waits at the door—and though it may take him years to do so, I trust his word.

James had started and let out a small cry but now held quite still, staring at his mother.

"Jamie! You opened the dragon box."

"Stop—none of that venomous tone, Miss Bee," their mother said, tapping her arm. "Did you see anything, Jamie?"

The boy shook his head. *Nothing.*

"Because you let it out." Beatrice narrowed her eyes as she accused him.

"There wasn't anything!" He had found his voice again, though the words were tearful.

"Don't worry. Whatever was in there must have been emptied a long time ago." Susanna hugged him, pressing his damp cheek to hers. "Because people always open forbidden doors, don't they? Like Pandora in the myth, raising the lid and letting out life's hurts. Remember that? Last came the tiny fairy, Hope, with rainbows for wings."

Beatrice drew up her hands like claws and whispered, "You didn't see. That's because . . . what was inside . . . is . . . invisible!"

James clung to Susanna, who smacked her daughter lightly on the leg. "Enough, or you'll have to read to him until he falls asleep tonight, no matter how long it takes. Got it?"

She nodded. "That's all right, Jamie-boy; I was just teasing." Only Beatrice could shrug so, bringing up her shoulders, her hand making an elegant gesture—he could almost see the frightening words sliding away as she tilted her palm. *Femme fatale*, their mother had said at one of these moments. He stared at his sister, entranced. The light outlined her as she stood, cocked her head, and winked at him.

Susanna looked up. "The hall still smells funny, doesn't it?"

"Don't you start!" Beatrice laughed. She picked up a rose-red pebble to examine the shape, either a watery dragon, or a dragonish river, that spilled along one cheek.

"Like church," James said, sniffing.

"Stinks like the boys' locker room," his sister corrected.

He lifted his blond eyebrows high, higher, as high as they would go. "And when have you been in the boys' locker room, missy?" The last word jolted from his mouth as he leaned forward, eyes wide.

She plucked up another stone, laughing again. "Where did you get that *missy* stuff?"

He waggled his eyebrows.

"I dunno," he sang; "I dunno."

"What a monkey! I can't wait to show these to your father," Susanna said; "and I think the air's rather sweet—like flowers."

They forgot about the smell of sweat and incense and flowers soon enough; trips to the pool and the library intervened, and picnics and concerts got in the way. Only James remembered, because now and then he caught an aroma of incense. At bedtime it seemed especially strong, and he liked to imagine that the scent was ousting any bad spirits who might like to set up camp under his twin bed or in the unwholesome depths of his closet.

Perhaps he was not alone in noticing, because Princess Owl was behaving oddly. They were used to the uncanny cry that meant she had harried a sock or glove into a corner and was going in for the kill. But now it woke them from sleep, even when socks and gloves were safely tucked in drawers and hampers.

"That cat's strange," Francis noted as he passed in the hall, a book about the Somme splayed under his arm.

"Will you play with me?" James grabbed at his brother's wrist, but he got away.

"Maybe later," he called through his bedroom door.

"It's not fair," James shouted. It really wasn't. What was the use of having a peculiar older brother who planned military strategy in his room, mounting soldiers from desk mesa to bookcase cliffs and the swampy, tangled bedlands, if he wouldn't let you play with him? "It's always later, later, later, but you never do! I hate you," he yelled, giving the door a kick.

Silence. The odor of incense lifted his head and made him sniff with interest. He almost felt that the scent wanted to tell him something, showing up at his most passionate moments.

"I don't know what you mean. What?" James waited, listening, but there was no answer except a gargled miaou from Princess Owl, who sprang onto the handrail, her fur upended, and fled down the slippery wooden path until she lost her grip and flew. He heard her land with a padded thump and a low growling note.

"Bristlecat," he remarked, looking between the balusters.

She ignored him, still muttering in her throat, and jerked her head back. Like calico lightning, she bolted for the dining room.

"Somebody tried to pet her," he said, though it couldn't be true. But that was just how her royal catness looked whenever a stranger tried to take a swipe at her head.

Later on they ate dinner outside in the 'rose room' with the arch. And for a few minutes, he managed to play with Francis and Beatrice, because their father teased them into a game of hide-and-seek. James took shelter in the gazebo overgrown with Dutchman's pipe vines. He liked it there, surrounded by the big hearts of leaves and the little green meerschaums. When nobody came to find him, he picked three of the pipes and put one in his mouth, pretending to be Sherlock Holmes.

"Elementary, my dear Watson," he whispered.

Holmes was another of his brother's passions. The only stories Francis would read were about Sherlock Holmes or Bertie Wooster. He often quoted from one or the other, but his British accent was atrocious. James was far better at funny voices. Pleased with himself, he stuck out his chest and marched in place, doing a comedy routine with the pipe and a gentlemanly bow and a polite conversation.

"Oh, there you are," Beatrice called, and he froze, peering between the

leaves. The hair prickled at his nape. But she hadn't heard him after all. She was bounding after her father, who was running backwards and laughing as he ducked and dodged and made rapid-fire pointing motions with his hands.

James giggled and clamped a hand over his mouth.

He could still feel somebody watching him, and squatted low where he could look from the shadows without anyone seeing. At the back of the house, he glimpsed a white face at the doors onto the second story porch—an angry face, the mouth and eyes turned down at the corners. James swept a glance across the yard. His mother had already been discovered and was now lounging in a chair. Francis had been caught first; he was always caught first. James' opinion was that when his brother became a soldier, if anybody would take him, Francis would be captured. Their mother said that her eldest son would be a historian, and he wouldn't have to fight except on paper.

Francis was lying in the grass, and Beatrice was getting mad, throwing fistfuls of leaves at their father.

The white face was still there. Two oval shimmers wavered in the kitchen windows, almost like two more faces. He crawled from the gazebo.

"Look, everybody," he cried, pointing at the pane where the face glared.

For once, they did what he wanted. Beatrice let out a shriek, and Francis shouted.

"What is that?" Their mother held her fingers like a visor against the light. "It almost looks like—"

"Somebody's face," Francis finished.

"Where?" Tom was flushed from running. He stood with hands on his hips, surveying the rear wall of the house. "I don't see a thing."

With a yodel of raw fright, the Princess Owl launched from the cat door and whipped across the yard, hurdling the rear pickets.

"What was that?"

"Cat blasting off from the mountains of madness," Susanna said. "You know, I think it really is a face."

"All right. You four stay here; I'll go in and make sure. But I don't see it." On the way in, Tom picked up a baseball bat abandoned among the roses.

"That won't do any good," James whispered.

In a few minutes, the doors onto the second story porch opened. "Nothing," he called, "though it stinks in your bedroom, Francis. Could use a good airing-out."

"It's not me!"

"I bet it smells like a locker room," Beatrice muttered.

"I beg your pardon?" Francis tapped her on the shoulder.

Though she rarely missed a chance to plague him, this time she said, "Not you."

"Did you see the lady?" James crawled over to his sister and tugged at her arm. "I'm scared."

"You?" She squatted and put her arms around him. "Jamie the Wonder Boy? Jamie the Demon-fighter? You've skunked bigger enemies than this! Haven't you?"

He snuggled close. "I'm still scared. Aren't you?"

She didn't answer but looked up at the porch doors, flung wide.

In the subsequent days, all but Beatrice and James managed to convince themselves that old houses were rife with optical illusion. Why else were ghosts so common in Templeton? But the youngest two took no such consolation. On the third evening after the sighting in the garden, something new happened.

James had been playing with the rain flower pebbles. They were strewn on the rug. He could feel a kind of life in them—the same sort of stirrings he had often felt in the very simplest toys, like the marbles he liked to arrange in troops, or the many-sided dice that seemed to quiver on his palm.

"I'm going to take a nap, so don't bother me, okay?"

Beatrice was stretched out on the couch, where she had been alternately reading and sketching and playing one of her older brother's electronic games.

"But first," she said, "I want you to see something." She opened her drawing notebook to show him. Yawning, she flipped toward the back, past a big-eyed waif in boots and cloak, with a sword strapped to his thigh, past an elf woman moving stealthily through a forest of yellow leaves, past a manga girl with a mane of wavy hair who looked remarkably like Beatrice herself. "Here," she said, tapping the book; "Is this the face?" The inked portrait was malicious, frowning, heavily lined.

James nodded slowly.

They traded stares.

"I thought so." She dragged a lightweight summer afghan over her shoulders with another yawn. To James, she didn't sound worried. Relaxed and still, eyes closed, her features looked subtly unfamiliar.

"But the Chinese lady is beautiful," he said, glancing over his shoulder; "I've seen her three times. I like her. Though I don't need to see her any closer than I did already. And the other one. I couldn't see him so well, but I know who he—"

She sighed, shifting on the couch.

"Are you awake?"

James wished his sister would not go to sleep. An insect—a wavering ball of light—buzzed under a lampshade. Had she even heard what he said? Her breath slowed, and then fell into faint rippling snores. She had abandoned him. Although he could hear his mother moving around in the kitchen, James was afraid to go through the hall and the butler's pantry, where the light was burned out. If he shouted, he might be frightened by the sound of his own voice—and what if she didn't hear? Looking down, he was surprised to find the white bird nestled in his hand; he had picked it up without noticing what he was doing. The shape was sleek as a blade, the beak sharp. Rain flower pebbles glinted on a carpet decorated with moss and blossoms, reminding him of the story about the monk with a saffron parasol.

He let out a feeble squeak, like a mouse whose tail is trodden.

The bandit leaned over Beatrice, an opaque hand hovering as if about to alight. Cauled in the purple afghan, his sister looked like a fairy tale princess, becharmed and waiting for a kiss.

Catching James' eye, the ghost gave a gap-toothed smile and floated into the air, where he lay looking down at the loveliness that, thus far in Beatrice's life, had belonged only to her family. Resolve strengthened in the boy. He was nine now; he would defend her.

Though the first thrill of fright had splashed James with cold, his marrow seemed to catch fire as he leaped to his feet. With nothing but the rain flower bird, he began raking at the ghost, until the flesh shook like an ethereal boiled pudding. As the substance became increasingly translucent, he was able to tear it into cold streamers. James sucked in his breath, striking on and on as ribbons of ghost writhed and crawled away. They navigated the air with a sidewinding progress. On reaching the end of the room, they wriggled upward and, hissing in distress, seeped into the narrow gap between the moldings and the wall. "Dirty ghost snakes," the boy whispered. Giving off a barely-audible hum, splashes of slime crept along the wallpaper. When a slug of the stuff splatted onto the floor, he stomped on it, shivering, and left a phosphorescent smear on the boards. He climbed on a chair and managed to smash a few fungal-looking blobs. Touched by the white bird, they crumpled inward, sending up a signal of evil-smelling smoke. After all but a few dribs and drabs had oozed away, James jumped to the floor, and though his legs felt wobbly on landing, he was ready and whirled about with the rain flower bird upraised.

But there was no need. He was done.

James threw himself onto his sister, crying, and she woke and shoved him back, scolding until he insisted that she listen, and he told her everything that had happened. The bird lay cool and comforting on his palm, and he held it out to show what chased away the evil thing that had come near.

"Your sister doesn't quite like me."

James eyed Catherine's tatty camisole, with the straps hanging out of her sleeveless shirt. *What were those things, anyway? The old lady's underwear?*

Her washed-out eyes were candid and sweet. "That's all right. It's hard for a girl in the flood of youth to bear an old woman. Girls don't want to know that their golden dandelion splendor will turn to silver and fly away."

The boy didn't think that was why Beatrice didn't like her. It was "grottiness," a quality his sister sometimes detected in him as well. He felt comfy with Catherine, and was glad that his mother had let him walk down to the lake in her company. She had taught him how to flick skipping stones over the waves, so that they hop-hop-

hopped in a magical walking-on-water, and then abruptly sank.

"You're a fine fellow," she said. "You'll have to keep taking care of your sister, just as she'll have to watch out for you. Ghosts from the East can be wicked, I've read. You can't let them master you."

"I won't."

"You're resourceful. You and your sister need to listen all the time. The great lady, Cosmic Serendipity, will put a word in your ear if you do."

"What do you mean?" James frowned. Sometimes he didn't understand a thing grown-ups said.

She bobbed her head like a hen, winking at him, and her eyes were sugared violets. "Oh, nothing. You'll find out how to deal with them if you pay attention."

*Was that what she had meant? Well, then, why didn't she say so in the first place? It was all very well to say,* listen. *But what if he couldn't understand?*

"Let's go skip some more stones," he said.

Beatrice had changed her clothes and put on an off-the shoulder turquoise top that made her look like a mermaid to James. *Except more covered up*, he told himself. *And no fishy tail.* They were having a conference up in her room, because people never broke in without knocking. They always barged into his room without knocking. *What was the big deal about girls?* He felt secret, perched on her bed below the lace canopy, with the panels on the sides drawn shut as far as possible. He sniffed at the air, wondering if the lady ghost had passed this way, or whether his sister had sprayed perfume on herself.

"Exorcism," she said.

"What?"

"You know, driving out ghosts. A priest does it. Did that sound spectral? When I said *exorcism*, I mean."

"No."

"Do you even know what *spectral* is?"

"No." He waggled his eyebrows at her.

"Silly."

James pushed at the mounds of books and clothes and then flopped onto his stomach.

"Don't lie on my bed." She shot a rubber band at him, but he didn't move.

"They'd never agree to an exorcism. Not unless something awful happened, and we convinced them afterward." She rolled over, propping herself on one elbow. "Want me to teach you how to do a clover leaf? It's not all that hard." Opening her mouth, she pointed to her tongue.

"I can't do any tongue tricks." He wasn't sure what he felt more dismal about, exorcism or the lack of tongue tricks. Beatrice was a master of such things, and could do eleven different shapes with her tongue. Eleven! What was the use of trying? He could never catch up.

"Maybe we should talk to Mama again. We could just ease around to the idea of exorcism."

"Do you think they're not really dead? If they're dead, why don't they go off where they belong? And if they're alive . . . They give me the creeps."

"Not dead, exactly. Undead." She smiled at him, and he buried his face in a swirl of covers.

A knock rattled the door, and Beatrice sang out, "Who is it?"

Their mother peeped in, a magazine and graph paper in hand. "Hey, I'm planning this year's additions to the garden. I'm going to plant a maze, Jamie, like you wanted. And I thought maybe you two would like to help."

"Sure," said James, who had a reputation for being helpful.

He was, in fact, the only helpful child. The other two scattered whenever the words *dishes* or *lawnmower* or *cleaning* came up in conversation, and had to be reeled back in and supervised. And that made it easier for their mother to do the work herself than bother to ask them. For the children, it was a good method, honed by years of resistance.

"What's that?" He sat up and reached for the graph paper.

"It's our yard. See, there's the Dutchman's pipe gazebo? And the rose room with the fence and wall. And here's the birch growing from an apple stump."

"So that's the alley and the garage and the greenhouse," he said, pointing to each in turn. "What's this?"

"That's the hedge maze. And over here, I want to put in a bottle tree like the ones by my grandparents' farm in Georgia. Bottles studded them so thickly that they looked like dandelion seedheads."

Beatrice yawned, closing her eyes and dragging a pillow under her head. "Are you homesick? I don't remember anything like that."

"If you'd seen them, you'd remember. They'd catch the hot Georgia sun and explode with light. To look at one up close was like poring over one of my grandmother's flour sack quilts—all different brands and colors, with cobalt *milk of magnesia* and green *Coke* and turquoise and pink."

"What were those?" James seized his mother's left hand and twisted the ring on her finger until it loosened. When she tousled his hair in response, he laced his fingers with hers.

"I don't know," she said. "Don't remember. Tonics and medicines, maybe. The clear ones would turn to amethyst over time. See, like this—"

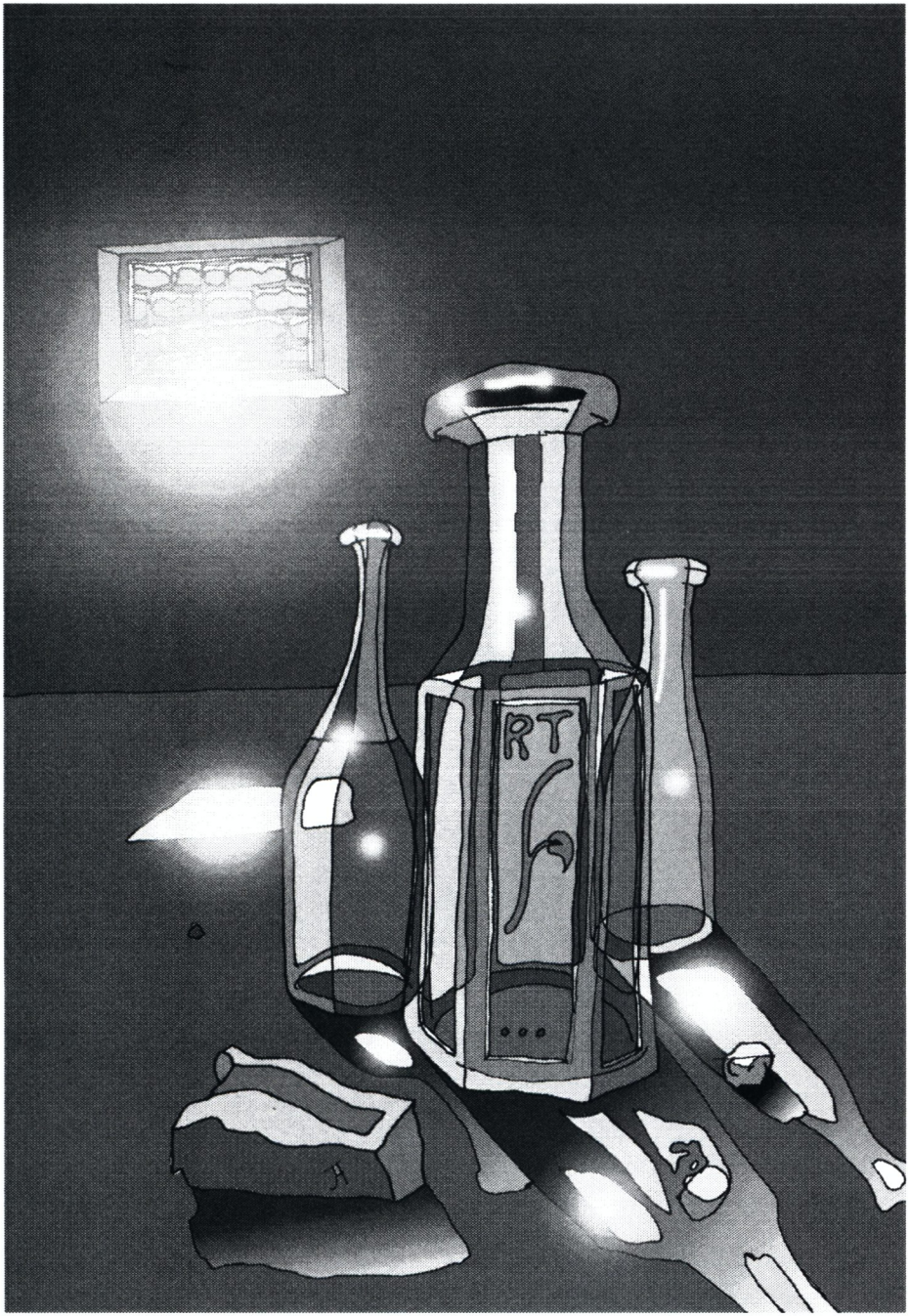
She flipped through the magazine to show him what she meant. "Isn't that wonderful? They've cut a crepe myrtle sapling and peeled it, and put bottles on the twigs."

"Why?"

"It must've been slaves who brought spirit-catching from Africa. Wicked things would be lured inside the bottles and couldn't find their way out."

"Like our *Have-a-Hart* raccoon trap, Jamie." Beatrice was drifting; she hugged the pillow close.

"These weren't so kind. The spirit would be destroyed when the sun rose. That's what people used to say." She bent over the magazine, admiring the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photograph. "I really want a bottle tree. A scrap of home."

"Beewish!" James whispered, tickling her ear.

"Don't bother me!" She thrust her head under the pillow, while her free hand swept books and jewelry and drawing pens out of the way.

"What a mess," their mother was saying, but nobody was listening.

"The bottles caught evil spirits! And when the sun came up, it killed them!"

As if jolted by a surge of electricity, Beatrice sat bolt upright, staring at her younger brother. Her eyes looked as big and wild as a manga girl's eyes, and hair was jumbled around her face.

"Jamie, you are the very coolest, smartest, most awake little brother in the whole eastern universe. And the western, and all other possible universes in all other possible directions and dimensions." She leapt from the bed. "Mama, let's cut a tree this afternoon, and Jamie and I can peel it. There's a heap of dusty bottles in the cellar."

"What? Sure, if you want to—I'd like that. I'm just surprised—"

"Beatrice likes making things," James said, patting his mother's hand.

It took hours to find just the right tree on land belonging to one of Tom's colleagues, to tie it on the roof of the car, and to plant the bole deep in the ground.

"Should've stuck them on first," their mother murmured. "But that's okay."

James was busy swishing bottles from the cellar in a tin tub. Some appeared quite old—colored green and brown and pale amethyst. Only three were cobalt.

"They say the old blue is radioactive," Susanna told him.

"Will it hurt me?" He held up a shining bottle.

"Not very radioactive; just a little."

"All the better." Hands on hips, Beatrice inspected the peeled tree with satisfaction. "That's going to be the best-looking bottle tree in all of Templeton."

"The only bottle tree," their mother corrected; "It's not a Yankee thing."

"Whatever. Maybe the only bottle tree in the state."

Beatrice spotted her older brother jouncing down the alley on his bicycle. "Hurry! Francis!"

Leaning the bike on the picket fence, he sauntered in. Susanna rolled her eyes at the stack of library discards lashed to the bike rack, but she didn't say anything. Francis couldn't bear to see a book thrown away, particularly a history book, and his room was a haven for cast-offs.

He inspected the back of the house. "Seen any ghosts?"

"Hush." His mother pointed at James.

"Oh, Jamie won't mind. Last night he ran into a beautiful Chinese lady in the kitchen, standing with her arms stretched out as if she wanted to hug him."

"Is that so?" Her gaze returned to the little boy.

"The lady ghost has a big streak around her neck, from where the bandit killed her." James sloshed water from the tub as he scrubbed at a blue bottle. "And you know what? This morning my great-great-grandfather was looking at the calendar in the kitchen. He turned around and stared right at me like he wanted to tell me something. His body's all messed up with cuts."

Susanna frowned at the blue glass flask in her hand.

"Don't get him upset," she told Francis.

"Jamie, you finally got the 'greats' right this time," Beatrice said.

"I saw my great-great-grandfather twice. The other time he was sitting by the rain flower pebbles. His hand hop-hop-hopped over the three big ones. Like a rock skipping over the water." He banged a bottle on the tub for emphasis: "I'm not afraid. I'm stout."

"No, you're not. You're the skinniest kid I've ever seen." Francis laughed.

"You're so stupid. Not that kind of *stout*." James flung water at his brother.

"Stop the squabbling! Francis is probably smarter than any of us," Susanna said. "You can't imagine how much I wanted a sibling. So I go to the trouble of giving birth to three children, only to find out that you just bicker."

"It's all right." Beatrice walked around the tree, admiring its bright shape. "It's the way we're supposed to be. How we are. And Francis is very agravating."

"I am not." He was using the British voice that always came out sounding like somebody from Bombay.

"I'm good at math," James observed to the clean bottles arrayed at his feet.

"Of course you are," Susanna said. "How about letting your brother hoist you, and we'll hand up the bottles and let you slide them onto the branches?"

So that was what they did, Francis ducking and weaving and standing on tiptoe to maneuver his little brother into just the right position for each. The bottles slipped on as neatly as gloves, though water sluiced out and caught the boys and made them laugh. When they were done, Francis knelt in the grass to let his brother slide down.

"Franny-boy, the pipes, the pipes are bawling," James sang. He gave his older brother a bear hug, receiving a thumping great pat on the head in return.

"I like that song, 'Danny Boy,'" Francis said, and sighed. "That's enough work for one day. I'm going to have a glass of milk and some pasta."

"One of his white meals," Beatrice explained in her old-lady-from-Cambridge voice. "Ghostly. Noodles and milk and blancmange for dessert. It's all in his code. A glass of milk means approximately a liter. That's right. A whole liter. He's a growing lad, he is, and needs his milk and blancmange. And his noodles. *Pasta* is just so affected, isn't it? When I was a girl, we just said *noodles*. None of these foreign Italian shapes. Imagine eating a bow tie or a sea shell! Young Francis has a pot of noodles for a snack. Nice slithery stuff, goes sledding down fast on butter." She was talking rapidly, but not looking at

any of them. Instead, she was examining the bottle tree. Somehow it made her feel happy.

"My children." Susanna watched James roll in the grass.

"Your children," Beatrice agreed, putting an arm around her mother's waist.

The wet bottles glittered in the muted Northern light. The lawn was patchy with sun and shadow, thrown by the gigantic ash wedged between the garage and a guest house next door. Now Jamie was up and singing, hopping on one foot and then the other, throwing the lasso of a victory dance around the tree. The new creation satisfied the three makers and seemed to gather the yard about itself, so that the green gazebo and the rose room and the cherry tree all looked toward the tree of bottle-fruit.

But Francis wasn't looking, and he hadn't been paying the least attention to his sister and her "white meal" monologue—and that was all right, because she rarely gave the least notice to what she called his *history harangues*. Francis was Francis, and would do what he would do. Instead of praising their handiwork, he had fetched his loot from the bike.

"It's a ghost kind of day. I looked it up in *Alexander's Great Calendar and Calculator of Moveable Feast Dates*." He held up the pristine book in its shiny protective cover, stamped with LIBRARY DISCARD in red.

"That's quite a catch," Susanna told him. "It appears to have remained unsullied by human hands until you came along."

"Yes, it's interesting. This year the Chinese Festival of Ghosts occurs today, August 8th."

James was stumped. "What do they do with them?"

"They feed them—ancestor ghosts or any strays that come along. It's a traditional thing. Afterward, there are lots of rotten treats and cockroaches around, so I guess the ghosts only eat the spirit of the food. Its essence, maybe. But right now I'm going to feed me. And I don't mean spirit food. I'm not a ghost, and I'm hungry." He marched off toward the rear porch, toting his discards.

Beatrice was standing still, her face intent, her head slightly cocked as if listening hard.

"Thank. You. Francis!"

When James reached for her arm, she grabbed him, swinging the boy off his feet, round and round, until she tripped and sprawled to the grass. Laughing, he plunged after her.

"Mama, can Jamie and I put up the tent? We want to sleep here—"

"No, we don't!"

Beatrice slapped a hand over her brother's mouth.

"Sure," her mother said. "If it's all three of you. Otherwise I'll have to send out your father, so you'd have to ask him."

Bending over James, Beatrice whispered, "Don't you get it? We'll feed ghosts under the bottle tree!"

Slowly he stopped struggling, looking solemn, and she released him.

The three sat on their sleeping bags in the grass. They hadn't bothered with a tent; they wanted stars, and a view of the house. Already dusk had come to the gazebo of Dutchman's pipe. Earlier Beatrice had told James that blue smoke came out of the pipes and colored the world with evening, and he had gone to see, even though he didn't believe her. It wasn't true, yet he noticed that dark had gathered under the leaves. Afterward, the three of them made a trail of rain flowers—down the porch, through the rose room and the gazebo, and across to the bottle tree. Each glowed in a dish brimming with water and a dash of rice wine. Princess Owl came mincing up the alley and paused to lap at a bowl. They laughed at the flurry of headshakes, and at the beads of liquid strung on her whiskers, and at the tip of a pink tongue that stuck out afterward and made her look drunk.

A follow-the-dots path from house to bottle tree took all the stones except bird, sun, and sage. They, too, bathed in bowls of wine and water, resting in the labyrinthine top tray of the chest.

"Why leave them there?" When James asked, Francis said in his grandest manner, "The world is a maze, and we have to follow Ariadne's thread to the end." Afterward, nobody spoke for a long time. His pronouncements often had that effect on people.

The evening was pleasant, with a light breeze.

Clouds of milk drifted through sky-reflecting water in a silver basin. Air was fragrant from rice balls rolled in sesame seeds and fried in Mongolian fire oil.

"It smells right," Beatrice claimed.

When Catherine paused at the picket gate, James scampered to let her in. She looked at the ghost trap, nodding as he squired her around. Meanwhile, Beatrice retreated to the gazebo and wouldn't come out until the old lady was gone.

"She said it looked good," James panted, running to his sister. He plucked a pipe and blew on it, but the flower was silent.

As evening grew cooler, they slipped into the sleeping bags. Their mother ventured out once more, following the trail of "moon bowls." She had christened them so, and the children had taken up the name. When Susanna went up to her workroom, they could see a shadow of her through the lace curtain. Venus shone out, and the stars, and the sky turned so cobalt that Beatrice daydreamed about the three of them as ghosts, caught in an immense bottle. *But where was the ship? They could sail away, into glass distance.* The faraway, eerie music of a cedarwood flute spiraled into the yard. *Traveling music.*

"There," James whispered; "upstairs."

The bandit's face glared out at them, and then flashed past several other windows.

"Downstairs."

Beatrice pointed at the guest room, where the lady with her long hair, and their great-great grandfather, looking mournful, floated by an open window.

Jamie scrambled from his bag. "Come out," he called in a sweet, piping voice. "It's the festival of the ghosts."

The two figures glimmered, drifting upward like jellyfish behind glass.

"We haven't done it right," Beatrice said softly; "we didn't know how."

"No, look—"

Francis gestured toward the kitchen. Light smeared the three windows, hovered in the wide Palladian arch that crowned them, and crawled from the door. The moon bowls glistened, one by one, and the water was ruffled as if by wind. A streak of brightness orbited the rice balls, kissed the milk-and-water in the basin, and vaulted into the tree, where it nested for a time, perhaps satiated by the meal, before crawling around the trunk like a serpent. A stink of sweat burdened the air.

The three were silent. James crouched in the grass near the gazebo. Luminescence coalesced into a ropey shape, wearing a mask of cruelty, tied on with a thread of fire.

"The bandit," James cried out, voice trembling, and he raced to Beatrice and jumped into her sleeping bag.

She clung to him as he wriggled deeper until his eyes barely peered above the opening.

The shape moved snail-like toward one of the blue bottles, nosed at the opening, and squeezed inside, popping through with a squelching noise.

"Nice." In Beatrice's mouth, the word was a two-noted song that made her brothers laugh.

"Yuck!" James said.

"Slime mold." Francis was taking a second year of Biology.

A few minutes passed before the ghost realized his mistake. Doll-sized palms appeared out of the glow, clapping against the cobalt glass. The light contracted and fizzed angrily.

"Hush," Beatrice whispered, though nobody had said a word.

The bottle dimmed, and he slammed his palms flat against the walls, the angry mask pressed close.

"Something's happening," Francis said.

In the guest room, the two figures were weaving around each other. Earlier Beatrice had tugged the screens from the windows, and now the lace curtains bellied outward, and the ghosts were tossed and caught in the mesh of woven blossoms.

"They're fish!"

James crept out of the bag, stepping on his sister's hand and ignoring her outcry. She followed, and then all three stood in a knot on the grass. The fish swam from the nets of curtain. They bobbled on the breeze, their radiance streaming into the moon bowls. As they neared the chest, their fins and tails grew longer, their shapes sleeker, until they flew up and perched on the very tiptop of the bottle tree.

"Now I smell the flowers," Beatrice said in a low voice.

"Incense," said James.

The white birds sailed above the house, weaving a cat's cradle and snaring the burning sparks of the stars. Afterward, they flashed through the rose

room and the gazebo, and at last swept over the trail until they reached the chest, where they sipped from each of the last three bowls before flying up to the tree. Each fluttered into one of the remaining blue bottles, and was returned to human shape. They gazed calmly down.

But the bandit stamped his foot and shook a fist like a villain in a comic opera.

The night winked by as the brothers and sister stared at the bottle tree, watching or dreaming ghosts, two peaceable and one angry. Earth cooled. Ground was moistened by dew. Before dawn, the stars began to be snuffed, one by one.

James woke from a light sleep and began to cry. "I don't want my ghost grandfather to go out," he said.

The sun flung a spoke of light that struck one of the cobalt bottles. With a fierce mosquito whine, the bandit in the mask vanished.

"I want to keep them! I want them! Pick me up! Let's take the others off the tree." A tear glinted on the little boy's cheek and dropped into the grass.

His sister put an arm around him. "Jamie, wait—I don't know what to do—"

"Look!" Grand as always, Francis stood with arms outstretched, as if to embrace the bottle tree. "Let them go."

A dancing light filled the boughs, and poured into all the bottles at once. Now the two remaining ghosts placed their palms against the glass, peering at the children from chambers of light. The tiny woman with the slash around her neck glanced eagerly at the sun, but the man cast his gaze toward the chest, where water glittered like fish scales over the three largest pebbles.

"They can't leave," Jamie said, his voice wondering. "Why not?"

"Fly away!" His older brother was holding a hand below their kneeling ancestors, as if Francis wielded magical powers, as if the glass were levitating above his fingers.

His sister stared at him, and then turned away, searching the three bowls.

"We need the right words," Francis said.

"I know!" she said, whirling to face the tree. The high-flown manner she had so often mocked in her older brother settled on her like wings. "Greetings to those who have lingered too long in the world below. Safe travel and good harbor to our revered ancestor and to the lady of the red necklace. Now, in the name of the sage who floats the world above his fingertips," she cried out, "and—"

Francis, his hand still outstretched, added the words, "And in the name of the sun on the stone where two rivers cross—"

"Let me, let me," Jamie begged, and his sister pulled him close, whispering "nice and loud, nice and loud."

He nodded, and piped his words into the dawn: "And in the name of the white bird!"

Beatrice, holding her little brother tight, drawing near to Francis, called out, "Go in peace!"

The bottles burst into flaming dawn. The three witnesses feared that the tree would fly apart like some enormous glass thistle blown by a solar wind. But it shimmered, steadied, and then gave back the morning's radiance.

"Godspeed," Francis whispered.

The figures were gone.

James and Catherine sat cross-legged under the gazebo. Dutchman's pipes and hearts hung down to the grass. They had had to duck to go inside.

"So you and your brother and sister and your mother are going to make a hedge maze. That seems a very good thing to do," she said.

"I miss them." The words sounded wistful.

"Who?"

"The tiny ghosts. My twice-great grandfather and the lady with the string around her throat. I don't miss the bandit. He killed the others, a long time ago. That's what Beatrice says."

"She's a wise girl."

"I guess so."

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, looking out at the bottle tree that was busy juggling stars in the sunlight. The old woman reached into her pocket.

"Here. Why don't you give this to your sister for a present?"

*A rain flower pebble.* James sighed, cupping it in his hand.

"It's a girl, isn't it?"

"With a mirror. Maybe she sees herself. Maybe she sees another world." Catherine bent close and winked at him.

"Or the future."

"Maybe so."

A sound of purring brushed against his ear. Princess Owl was lying on her back in the grass, legs sprawled in unladylike fashion. *A fox could get her*, James thought.

"Why don't you give Beatrice the stone?"

"Well, she doesn't really care for me. But she likes you. And it's nice to get a present like this from somebody you love, isn't it?"

"So you're giving it to me, and I'll give it to her?"

Catherine nodded, folding his fingers over the violet stone with the dark-haired girl.

"Thanks," he said, enjoying the sense that the pebble was his right now, if not to keep.

"You're welcome."

She pulled a pipe from the vine and tucked it between her lips, and he laughed. He tugged one from under a leaf and held the flower on his palm, pretending he was the famous Mr. Sherlock Holmes, and that little old Catherine was his beloved Dr. Watson. He thought back over the Adventure of the Rain Flower Pebbles, wondering if the good doctor would exaggerate in her account, as she so often did. But there was hardly need, given the strangeness of the case.

He lay down and looked out at the house, its windows entirely ordinary,

and unexpectedly a starry joy filled him, as light fills a transparent bottle. It hurt, keen and bright like the points on a child's crayon sun. *My house! My own, my very own, where I belong. Home.* Francis was up on the second story porch, laying out a battle with toy soldiers. Beatrice was practicing scales on the piano. He could hear the back-and-forth voices of his mother and father in the kitchen, set to the distant sorrowings of a cedarwood flute.

"I want everything to stay just like this." Everything he loved was gathered here into one cottage. If giants came along and took off the lid and saw the rooms, laid out like a labyrinth, they would be surprised that it was not a box at all but a house where three children lived with their parents, and where light and magic beat steadily in an invisible heart.

"Like this." He echoed the wish, as if repetition might make it come true.

"It won't," Catherine said.

"I know."

The boy turned the pebble in his fingers, remembering the stars going out one by one, and how dawn was swift to take the tree by fire. ⊠

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