TABLE OF CONTENTS
Issue 90, November 2017

FROM THE EDITOR
Editorial: November 2017

SCIENCE FICTION
The Mutable Borders of Love
Leslie What

A Vortal In Midtown
Ashok K. Banker

Alice & Bob
Philip Raines and Harvey Welles

Cake Baby (A Kango and Sharon Adventure)
Charlie Jane Anders

FANTASY
The Faerie Tree
Kathleen Kayembe

The Day the Wizards Came
Rachel Swirsky

A Wound Like an Unplowed Field
Max Wynne

The Commission of The Philosophical Alembic
Jonathan L. Howard
NOVELLA
Tracking Song
Gene Wolfe

EXCERPTS
Molly Tanzer | Creatures of Will and Temper
Molly Tanzer

NONFICTION
Book Reviews: November 2017
LaShawn M. Wanak

Movie Review: Blade Runner 2049
Carrie Vaughn

Interview: Molly Tanzer
Wendy N. Wagner

AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS
Kathleen Kayembe
Ashok K. Banker
Max Wynne
Charlie Jane Anders

MISCELLANY
Coming Attractions
Stay Connected
Subscriptions and Ebooks
About the Lightspeed Team
Also Edited by John Joseph Adams
FROM THE EDITOR
Welcome to issue ninety of Lightspeed!

For science fiction, we’ve got original shorts by Ashok K. Banker (“A Vortal in Midtown”) and Charlie Jane Anders (“Cake Baby”), along with SF reprints by Leslie What (“The Mutable Borders of Love”) and Philip Raines and Harvey Welles (“Alice and Bob”)

We’ve also got original fantasy by Kathleen Kayembe (“The Faerie Tree”) and Max Wynne (“A Wound Like an Unplowed Field”), and fantasy reprints by Rachel Swirsky (“The Day the Wizards Came”) and Jonathan L. Howard (“The Commission of The Philosophical Alembic”).

All that fiction, and of course we also have our usual assortment of author spotlights, along with our book and media review columns.

Our interview this month is with novelist Molly Tanzer—plus, if you’re an ebook reader, you can check out an excerpt of her new novel, Creatures of Will and Temper. Also for our ebook readers, we have our ebook-exclusive reprint of Gene Wolfe’s novella “Tracking Song.”

This month, we’re publishing Molly Tanzer’s Creatures of Will and Temper—a Victorian-era urban fantasy inspired by The Picture of Dorian Gray, in which an épée-fencing enthusiast and her younger sister are drawn into a secret and dangerous London underworld of pleasure-seeking demons and bloodthirsty diabolists, with only her skill with a blade standing between them and certain death. You can read an excerpt of the book in this very issue! But first, here are some lovely things people have said about the book:

- “Tanzer mixes Oscar Wilde’s The Portrait of Dorian Gray with queer romance and demonology in this subtle, beautiful Victorian-era fantasy novel. [...] The perfectly depicted relationship between the sister [protagonists] takes center stage in a complex (though never overplayed) web of art, swordplay, romance, and, much to the sisters’ surprise, actual demons. Gorgeously portrayed three-dimensional characters and sensual prose propel this smoothly entertaining story to an emotionally affecting end.” —Publishers Weekly (starred review)
• “An artful, witty, Oscar Wilde pastiche with the heart of a paranormal thriller.” —Diana Gabaldon, bestselling author of Outlander

• “A delightful, dark, and entertaining romp with serious intent behind it. The writing is so smart and sharp—Molly Tanzer is at the top of her form in this beautifully constructed novel. Sure to be a favorite of readers and critics alike.” —Jeff VanderMeer, bestselling author of the Southern Reach trilogy

• “There has never been a better time for a spirited, feminist reinvention of The Picture of Dorian Gray. Molly Tanzer has taken a wickedly sensuous classic and transformed it into a lively supernatural tale featuring lovestruck teenagers, diabolical botanicals, mysterious paintings, and—oh, yes—demons. Creatures of Will and Temper is a wild ride from start to finish, beautifully and boldly written, and a most worthy successor to Oscar Wilde’s scandalous novel.” —Amy Stewart, author of Girl Waits With Gun

• “Decadent Victorians clash with dueling demon-hunters in this page-turning reinvention of Oscar Wilde’s classic tale. I loved it!” —Charles Stross, award-winning author of The Delirium Brief

ICYMI, last month, we published Machine Learning: New and Collected Stories by Hugh Howey, a short story collection including three stories set in the world of Hugh’s mega-hit Wool and two never-before-published tales, plus fifteen additional stories collected together for the first time. Here’s some praise for that one:

• “I devoured this book! The wildly imaginative tales in Machine Learning tackle everything from AI and aliens to video games and VR, and Howey infuses each one of them with the perfect mix of brains, bravado, and heart. Reading the stories in this collection is like discovering an entire lost season of The Twilight Zone in which every episode was written by either Rod Serling or Richard Matheson. They’re that good.” —Ernest Cline, bestselling author of Ready Player One

• “Like a knapsack of compact grenades, exploding insight, unexpected innovations, and sci-fi heat. Each one the core of something larger.” —Kevin Kelly, founding executive editor of Wired

• “Hugh’s stories keep me turning pages not just to find out what
happens, but because of the deep common threads of humanity within. I don’t just want to know the ending, I care about every moment.” —Annie Bellet, USA Today bestselling author of The Twenty-Sided Sorceress series

That’s all the JJA Books news for now. More soon!

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Well, that’s all there is to report this month. Thanks for reading, and I hope you enjoy the issue!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Joseph Adams, in addition to serving as publisher and editor-in-chief of Lightspeed, is the editor of John Joseph Adams Books, a new SF/Fantasy imprint from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. He is also the series editor of Best American Science Fiction & Fantasy, as well as the USA Today bestselling editor of many other anthologies, including The Mad Scientist’s Guide to World Domination, Robot Uprisings, Dead Man’s Hand, Armored, Brave New Worlds, Wastelands, and The Living Dead. Recent projects include: Cosmic Powers, What the #@&% Is That?, Operation Arcana, Loosed Upon the World, Wastelands 2, Press Start to Play, and The Apocalypse Triptych: The End is Nigh, The End is Now, and The End Has Come. Called “the reigning king of the anthology world” by Barnes & Noble, John is a two-time winner of the Hugo Award (for which he has been a finalist eleven times) and is a seven-time World Fantasy Award finalist. John is also the editor and publisher of Nightmare Magazine and is a producer for Wired.com’s The Geek’s Guide to the Galaxy podcast. Find him on Twitter @johnjosephadams.
Though Marietta’s eyes are closed, she is wide awake, fingering the new sheets she gave Asher as part of his six-month anniversary present. The other parts were dinner, followed by multiple sexual favors. She has already thought ahead, to the seven-month anniversary, when she will trade dinner for breakfast, trade a languorous night of sex for a quickie. She worries about thinking so far ahead and having expectations concerning things she cannot fully control. Is this really the way being in love should feel?

Asher’s bed is a California king. It is out of place, too big for the eight-by-ten room. The sheets cost almost double the price of her queen-size, but she bought these for herself as much as him. Asher’s new sheets are crisp and cool dense cotton that makes them feel shiny. Marietta is obsessed by their smooth texture and fine weave. She can’t stop fidgeting with the fabric between her forefinger and thumb. The old sheets were a remnant from a previous relationship. No matter how many times they were laundered, the Hawaiian ginger scent favored by the woman Marietta has since replaced lingered like old smoke. Marietta hated sleeping over at Asher’s until tonight.

Her lover snores content beside her, something she calculates will continue another ten minutes before he fades into a deep and heavy sleep, at which time he will probably call out the names of women he dated before they met. These women are dead, just as her past sweethearts are dead, but it bothers her just the same, maybe because it’s an unwelcome reminder that not everyone’s strong enough to survive love.

In most relationships, someone wins and someone loses. Marietta has been fortunate, so far, to have won them all. She appraises the lump in bed that is Asher. He has been fortunate, too. They are both successful competitors in the contest of love. She isn’t jealous, just insecure. Many wonder if love is worth the risk. So far, for Marietta and Asher, the answer has been yes.

Street lamplight filters through the shaded windows of Asher’s apartment. In the dim light, the delicate pastel blue of the sheets dulls to a computer gray. Outside, wind rattles branches and pushes cool air through cracks in the window frames. Go to sleep, Marietta tells herself. Deliver the sweet dreams she once enjoyed. It requires effort to keep her eyes shut and to lie motionless. She waits for what seems inevitable, for the ghost to appear as he has nearly every night for
the past few weeks.

Her ghost’s name is Lenny and he was her first lover. They were eighteen—late for her, early for him. If she were honest, she would admit that she used him, viewed him as a means to an end. She was anxious to cede her virginity to the past. Long after their relationship ended, she realized that in her haste to get it over with, she had not stopped to consider the importance Lenny placed on his own deflowering.

Asher murmurs a name in his sleep, one she can’t quite hear. Asher is dark-skinned and haired, stocky enough to spill over onto her side of the bed. While the California king feels oversized to her, he’s used to taking up more than his share. Lying beside him is oddly comforting, given that he has passed out while she is awake fretting. They are both naked, the warmth from their bodies covering them like a second sheet.

The weather has changed to the days before fall, the time of year an apartment feels good without either heat or air conditioning. It is man-messy here, with a ring around the toilet bowl, no counter space, and a yeasty aroma leeching from bags filled with beer bottles hiding in the closet, awaiting redemption. Asher doesn’t leave much room for her to fit into his life. In this way they’re well suited. She doesn’t understand women who sacrifice their independence for their men. Women like that die young. Asher’s apartment reminds her of a foreign country, one she’s always welcome to visit, as long as her belongings fit inside a backpack.

“Go away,” Asher says in his sleep.

A tickle of doubt crosses her mind that the name he called aloud might have been hers and he might be thinking of her, but that that’s out of the question. They have been together long enough that she’s certain she loves him, yet short enough to still worry things might fall apart, that one of them will move on, that their time together will be defined by memories and smells loitering in the furniture and bedding. Marietta is twenty-six and ready for this to be the real thing. She thinks Asher feels the same, especially since he is thirty-three, an age where many men think it’s now or never. Absolutely nobody breaks up at this stage of love.

Lenny is late. Maybe her ghost has decided to respect the mutable borders of love and not show up, here, in her lover’s bed, in the new sheets that mark a new beginning. The waiting feeds her anxiety. She’s about to give up on sleep, slip into the other room to watch television, when she feels a slight sensation tugging at the duvet just below her left foot. Her gut twists, relaxes. Her eyes flick open
and adjust to the darkness. And there is an apparition bathed in moonlight: a ghost, perching on the edge of the bed. The ghost stares at Asher. Marietta knows that it’s a ghost because she can see through its lithe body to a cherry wood chest of drawers propped against the wall. Transparency is the ghostly quality she most admires. Mystical, yet honest. Intriguing. There is no human equivalent.

The ghost is not the one she expected, her Lenny, but is instead a woman she’s never seen. It looks to be in its early twenties, wearing a sheer negligee the thickness of a window screen. It sits as if posing for an art class, hands crossed at the knee, torso twisted slightly. It’s a lovely, feminine thing, only the smallest bit scary because of ghost-white hair that’s thin and patchy like packaged spider webs sold at Halloween. It smiles with a beatific, disarming expression.

“Hi,” Marietta says after thinking about it more than is necessary.

The ghost answers with a condescending look that conveys boredom and disapproval.

At this point, Marietta understands the ghost belongs to Asher. It has discovered its ex-boyfriend in bed with another woman.

“This is awkward,” Marietta whispers, because acknowledging a problem is preferable to ignoring it. Asher confided he had ended his last affair a few years before she and he had started dating. Perhaps this was the one? Too bad about this woman, of course, but these things happen. Love doesn’t always go your way. Asher hasn’t said anything about a haunting. Should she wake him? Or would that just make things worse?

The ghost shrugs. “He doesn’t like being awakened,” she says.

“Can you read thoughts?” asks Marietta.

“Sorry about that,” says the ghost. “I forgot how much that spooks y’all.”

Keeping her mind blank takes concentration. Marietta feels a frisson of fear sweep over her, an emotion several steps up from vague anxiety. “When did you two hook up?”

“Two thousand ten,” says the ghost.

The answer renders it less likely that the last set of sheets belonged to this ghost. “Did you love him?” Marietta asks.

“With all my heart. He really hurt me.”

He must not have liked her that much, Marietta thinks, or things might have worked out.

“I was better than you in bed,” the ghost whispers.

It shouldn’t, but this boast hurts. She pushes away her insecurities. “You’re dead now,” Marietta says. “So how good could you be?”
“Don’t underestimate me,” says the ghost, rising from the bed. When she stands, her body extends from the floor nearly to the ceiling, elongated like pulled taffy.

Marietta hears primitive noises, growling and snorts. At first she thinks the sounds emanates from the ghost, but the growling moves closer, accompanying a change in the texture of the sheets. The fabric roughens from smooth water to broken glass. The growling and snorts are sound effects, a cheap parlor trick. Ghosts are good at effects, better than people. Marietta’s arms itch—the more she scratches, the worse it gets—until hot, itchy bumps crop up through her skin. The temperature in the room rises. Sandy granules cling to her skin.

“What do you want from me?” Marietta asks. She climbs from the bed, sweat dribbling down her face, temporarily blinded. Her shoulders grow raw from her scratching. Her skin itches behind her ears, between her thighs, inside her mouth. She can’t stop raking herself with her nails. “This isn’t fair,” she protests. This ghost isn’t from her past; she’s from Asher’s. Marietta shouldn’t be responsible for his mistakes as well as her own. “Take it out on him. I didn’t do anything to you.”

“Good point,” says the ghost. Ghosts enjoy showing off their powers. They’re quite human in that respect. “Listen,” the ghost says. “Sorry, about the rash. That was childish. The truth is, I just came to warn you. So you don’t end up like me.”

“I won’t end up like you,” Marietta says.

“There are worse things,” the ghost says with a dismissive wave. Marietta’s skin dries and the itchy feeling fades.

As if on cue, Asher calls out in sleep, “Inez!”

“It’s good to know he still thinks about me,” says the ghost.

“No,” says Marietta because Asher should be thinking of her. “It’s just a dream.”

“Yes, of course,” says Inez. “I didn’t mean for you to get so worked up.”

“Are you apologizing?” asks Marietta.

Inez laughs. “Sure,” she says. “Sort of.”

Marietta cracks a smile and senses some barrier breaking between them. She senses this ghost means well. “Inez is rather old-fashioned.”

“It’s a family name.”

Admitting you’ve been given a family name is gloating. Marietta thinks of all the family lines she’s ended by being the lone survivor of the relationship. How sad. She doesn’t think of herself as inconsiderate.

“Asher is afraid of commitment. You two will have another week, two at most.
He’ll win, you know. He’s very strong. He’s never lost.”
“Neither have I,” says Marietta.
“You haven’t played against Asher.”
“It’s not a game.”
“Well, there’s always a winner and always a loser. If I were you, I’d be worried that your luck will run out.”

Inez is right, in that rarely do both parties survive intact. But it can happen. It can happen if both want it enough. It’s not the norm, but Marietta knows of people who do love for keeps. “Why are you telling me this?”
“It’s complicated,” says Inez.
“You’re still angry.”
“Not with you.”
“It won’t happen to me,” says Marietta. “I’m strong.”
“That’s what I used to say,” says Inez. “By the time you understand yourself, you’re dead.”
“I’m fairly experienced,” Marietta says.
“Experience doesn’t help,” says Inez.
“And you are you telling me this because . . .”
“This might sound odd,” says Inez, “but I’ve found someone else.”
“Good to know there’s love after death.”
“The thing is, you knew him. His name’s Sheldon Perricone.”
“We’re in love, but we need more time to make it work. I can’t take a chance that he still loves you. I’d rather you don’t die. At least, not yet. I’m not being nice—just cautious.”

Marietta nods. This makes sense, in a weird, metaphysical, lovesick sort of way.
“Promise you’ll be careful. Asher is sneaky,” says Inez.
“So am I.”
“Promise,” says Inez.
Marietta says, “Sure.”

There’s a loud yawn and a whisper of sheets as Asher lifts himself to a sitting position on his side of the bed. He rubs his eyes. “Who are you talking to?” he asks.
They are alone. Inez has vanished.

“Anything wrong?” Asher asks.

Marietta snuggles beside him and wraps her long legs around his muscular ones. She kisses his neck, while he strokes her back. He’s so warm, so dark and substantial, nothing like a ghost. Her body’s warmth returns. “It was nothing,” she says. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“I don’t mind,” he says, and she can feel him growing hard beneath her touch.

• • • •

The next morning, while she’s in her office catching up on email, Marietta hears a ping and spies an instant message from someone named SP. Caught off guard, she answers and soon finds herself corresponding with her old, dead boyfriend, Sheldon Perricone, the ghost she recently learned is partnered with Inez.

So, do you have a fast connection up there?

LOL. Sorry to disappoint you. In the afterlife, Comcast still has a virtual monopoly.

She stresses over what to say next. Equal parts of curiosity and dread prevent her from ending the conversation. She’s about to type “I’m doing well,” when her monitor goes dark and a voice says from behind, “It’s better to talk in person. I was never a good typist.”

And there he is, Sheldon Perricone, not exactly in the flesh, and not exactly in person, and not exactly there, at least not the way she was. She hadn’t meant to hurt him. She never meant to hurt any of them. Human interaction is not an exact science, so there’s bound to be mistakes along the way.

Sheldon stands naked in the middle of a plant stand. Philodendron leaves ring his hips like a tutu, so of course she cannot tell if he still has a penis. Why would he? Why wouldn’t he? If you are reading my mind, she thinks, let me see.

He smiles but does not move.

She sees through his belly, though his face seems more solid. His eyes, no longer an intense ocean blue shade, have dulled to gray, with milky quartz crystals as their centers. He’s watching, waiting.

“You’re forgetting something,” he says, as old memories emerge and a feeling she identifies as regret washes over her. She remembers how he hinted of a plan to propose in the morning and that night, instead of meeting him for dinner, she went out drinking. She met someone new, enjoyed a very fun, very sexy one-
night stand with a stranger. She remembers telling Sheldon it was over, remembers his face twisting with anger then despair. She remembers him fading into shadow before her eyes. Watching was horrible and since then, she’s turned away. “Sorry,” she says. “I guess I wasn’t very nice.”

His expression now is vast and full of sorrow.

She’s first to break away from eye contact. “Mistakes were made,” she says. “I was young.”

“Don’t make excuses,” Sheldon says. “I was young, too. I don’t blame you. Just don’t make excuses.”

She wills herself to be quiet, sensing that she seeks something from him, something she cannot fairly ask. She would like to be pardoned for all mistakes, not just those mistakes she made with Sheldon. She doesn’t want to be a bad person. It’s just that being a good one is too costly. Sheldon, for example. What did being good buy him? He lost.

“Look at me,” he says. “Don’t ignore me.”

“I’m not,” she says. “You need to learn to move on.” It’s a vacuous statement, one she immediately regrets. “How have you been?” she asks, though the answer is obvious.

“You’ve met Inez,” he says. “I love her. I think she’s my soul mate.”

Her jaw drops, and while she’s tempted to contradict him, she cannot believe what he has said. Is he saying he’s forgotten her? Does true love only happen after you’re dead?

“No,” he says, reading her thoughts. “Not always. We find love where we can. I just wanted to warn you. Asher loves you. Don’t mess up. Not everyone gets another chance.”

She’s recovered her cynicism. “Are you afraid I’ll dump Asher? Is he that much of a threat?” she asks.

“You’ve got it all wrong,” he says. “You’re worrying about the wrong things.”

He disappears without so much as a subtle whoosh.

• • • •

On the bus ride home from work, a man across the aisle gives her a look that could be interpreted as simple friendliness, or could be interpreted as an invitation. Isn’t he worried about what she’ll do to him if she gets the chance? Is the urge to pair up so strong it would make a reasonable person risk his life? She has great power over men, something they all recognize. It never stops them. It
doesn’t stop her, either. Everyone thinks they are in control of the situation.

The man stands up and moves across to sit beside her. “Hey,” he says.

“Do you want to die?” she asks and flashes a look she hopes signifies contempt. She stares ahead, refusing to meet the stranger’s glance.

She can’t control her fidgeting. The ghosts of her past have obviously unnerved her. She accidentally skips her stop and has to backtrack several blocks. Breaking up is hard to do, though she is better at it than most. But she really does love Asher. She thinks he loves her. If she’s wrong, it will be the end of one or the other. She wants to be right. How can she know?

Later, she’ll meet Asher at her place to watch *Survivor*, which now holds an especially ironic twist. She’s running late enough there will barely be time to call for pizza, let alone shave and straighten up. No choice but to settle for a spit bath and quick rubdown with a towel. She has already picked out a silk shirt to match her jeans. The bell chimes, signaling Asher has arrived.

“Coming,” she yells, wishing she’d had time to change her bedding. Her sheets are old and threadbare, a suddenly significant fact. She can’t ignore all the ghosts who have slept beside her in that bed. Memories of them still linger in her life. They get in her way, make it difficult for her to fully commit to love. She sets her towel on the bed and pulls up her panties and jeans, dabs Must de Cartier perfume at her pulse points, and wonders if it’s worth the effort to wear heels that will come off the second she sits on the couch. She picks up the shirt, no bra. The doorbell rings again.

From behind her, she hears conspiring whispers. She turns around. Lying on their backs, smoking cigarettes, pale and naked, are three gossamer men she once thought she loved: Lenny, Sheldon, and a one-night stand whose name is hidden just a bit lower than the tip of her tongue. The worn sheet covers lumps where their genitals might be.

Terrific. Her ghosts have hard-ons. At least one of her questions has been answered.

“Hey there,” says Lenny. When he exhales, his smoke has more substance than does he. He points to her shirt and moves his fingers in increasingly small circles. Her silk shirt flies up from her side and hangs fluttering in the air like a fabric kite.

“Come sit beside me,” says Sheldon with a tap on the sheet. “Plenty of room,” he says. “I could use some company.” When he nudges the pillow his elbow passes straight through it.

“You were something,” says the one-night stand. “But you said you’d call.
Why didn’t you call?”
They mean to scare her. Except they are dead and she’s alive. The scariest thing that could happen has already happened, to them. “What do you want?” she asks. “It’s over. I won.” It sounds harsh when she says it straight out, yet true.

Her ghosts smile with hollow lips. They act as if they don’t believe she’s the victor.

Sheldon blows her a smoke kiss. “It’s not over ’til it’s over.” The room grows ominously cold.

There’s a knocking at the door. In the distance, Asher shouts her name. He’s a punctual man who expects no less from the woman he dates.

She checks her watch. “This has been fun, but I gotta go.”

“Stay,” says Lenny, his cold stare pricking like nettles.

She stands up, feeling shaky, says, “Go away!”

“Make us,” says Sheldon.

They think she’s to blame, but she didn’t make up the rules. They knew what they were getting into when they hooked up with her. She tried to love them. It just wasn’t meant to be. She wasn’t ready. That’s not the kind of thing you know until it happens. She snaps her towel and the specters disappear one by one, pop back up, and disappear again. Flustered, she throws her shoe. It passes through Lenny and bangs against the wall.

“Come back with us,” says the one whose name she has forgotten.

“Too late,” she says.

Lenny sniffles. “You sure know how to hurt a guy’s feelings.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” she says and pulls the old sheet from the bed to wrap around her shoulders. She styles the sheet over her head and looks out at a room that is daytime foggy, with just enough light peeking through the blinds that her furniture looks like boxes. Her hands appear almost transparent. A creepy effect, but one that makes her laugh. Who says that being a ghost isn’t fun? She rushes from the room, toward the front door.

She hears them rummaging through her things, hears their footsteps follow her into the living room. They make the lights dance and topple books from the shelves, but their efforts fall short. She’s made up her mind to forget them. They can’t touch her. “It’s too late,” she says. She says it again, louder. Shadows appear through the fabric of her sheet. The shadows lengthen and twist like jungle vines. She trips on something she cannot quite see and pitches forward. “You can’t get me,” she says. She’s stronger than they are; she’s stronger than any of them. She’s proved that by surviving this long.
Still, her pulse races. She anticipates what will happen when she opens the door. Asher will smile when she answers, when he sees his lovely, ghostly girl, hidden beneath her sheet. He’ll pull away the fabric, notice she isn’t wearing a shirt. They’ll make love on the carpet. Sex, when it’s good, makes her forget about the problematic things, like love. She’s afraid of love but with good reason. Loving can be dangerous. Is it really worth the risk? Fear is the icy river coursing through her veins. Fear is the dust devil in her throat that makes her cough and choke for air. Fear is the stabbing pain in the gut that comes from uncertainty. Marietta is afraid because she cannot know if it’s worth the risk until it’s too late.

The ghosts laugh and groan. Their voices strangle and then sputter out like a fire doused with sand. When she turns the ghosts are faint ripples. Their steps slow to a halt. Their rustling movements fade to silence. As suddenly as they appeared, their spirits vanish.

She’s won again. It should feel good, but it doesn’t.

Knocking.

Asher waits for her to let him in.

She can barely make out the frame of the door through the worn sheet. She stumbles forward, twists the lock open, pulls back the door. A dark form wavers on the other side of the threshold.

Relief floods through her as she recognizes him. She hesitates before speaking.

“Hey,” she says.

“Hey,” he answers. Once he steps inside he winds his arms around her. The door closes softly behind him. “Missed you,” he says. There’s a slight warble to his voice, like he’s worried. He holds her so tight it’s difficult to breathe. He nuzzles her neck through the sheet, breathing in the sweet scent of her laundry soap, her spicy perfume, the salty fragrance of her skin. He’s told her how much he adores these things. “I love you,” he says. He waits for her response.

It would be easy to comfort him, to say that she loves him. It would be easy to lose herself in love. Because she does love him. And that terrifies her. She wants to tell him, but she can’t make her mouth form the words. It feels dangerous to admit how she feels. She can’t do it.

He brushes her lips with his.

She pulls away from his kiss. “I’m sorry,” she says.

His arms stiffen. He lifts the sheet from her face and stares into her eyes. His complexion has the clarity of old bath water. His affect is flat. “Why?” he asks.

“Asher,” she says. She doesn’t want to explain. She leans into him, pressing
her breasts flat against his chest, unable to feel the thrum of his heartbeat through her skin. A slow chill trickles like a tear along her spine. “Sorry,” she says. “I really tried.”

“Congratulations. You won.”

“I didn’t think this would happen,” she tells him, but that’s not exactly true. She suspected it would end this way. It always does. She feels bereft, alone, empty. For the first time in her life, she understands love, how it is best defined by loss, by what is missing, not by the transience of joy.

“It hurts,” Asher says.

She holds him tight, not to comfort him but more to hold her own feelings of regret. In the end, he slips through her grasp and floats upward, to a place where love has no boundaries, where it floats like the memory of artifacts trapped in amber.

“I love you,” she says, too late for him to hear.


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leslie What collects and sells eclectic vintage jewelry and is a Nebula Award-winning writer and finalist for the Oregon Book Award. Ms. What has edited fiction for the journal Phantom Drift: New Fabulism and nonfiction for Winter Tales: Women and the Art of Aging. Her writing has been published in Asimov’s Science Fiction, Parabola, Interfictions, Best New Horror, Calyx, Amazing Stories, Los Angeles Review, Flurb, City of Weird, and other places. Ms. and Mr. What recently celebrated an anniversary equivalent to the atomic weight of krypton. Ms. What is the artistic co-director of What! Lunch? Enterprises and has tap danced professionally, sold masks and costumes in New Orleans, been a charge nurse and counter girl and is currently underemployed as a grandmother. A mostly up-to-date bibliography can be found at www.lesliewhat.com.
A Vortal In Midtown
Ashok K. Banker | 8660 words

A Vortal ripped open in the heart of Manhattan.
It began as a microscopic dot, invisible to the naked eye.
Just hung there in midair, almost two meters above the street.
People walked, drove, biked, rollerbladed, skateboarded, jogged, and one
dude on his way to a Broadway audition even tap-danced by without noticing it.
It grew.
A day later, it was the size of a pea.
A Metro bus struck it.
It was still barely visible and the Sikh driver was hardly expecting to collide
with a nearly invisible pea-sized obstacle suspended six feet up in the air.
The Vortal punched through the glass of the windshield, snipped a braid off
the ’do of a white Rastafarian-wannabe, pinged its way through several seats,
nearly punctured the throat of a teenager in the last row reading a Nnedi Okorafor
paperback, clipped the cover of the book, changing the dot over the first “i” in
Binti to an umlaut, then punched out the rear windshield as the bus drove on
toward midtown. The pea-sized holes in the windshields and seats remained
undetected until early the next day when the bus was being serviced; it caused
some head-scratching but wasn’t worth alerting the media. The teenager noticed
the tiny hole in the book but assumed it had already been there when she checked
it out of the library.

Later that same morning, a crow swooping to dive-bomb a piece of a jelly
donut fallen on the curb was struck by the Vortal. It was still pea-sized but a
slightly bigger pea now. It punched through the wing of the crow, shattering his
coracoid on entry and his humerus on exit. Three drops of blood spurted; two fell
on the street, one on the sidewalk. Dude spiralled out of control, tried to perch on
a lamppost to steady himself, slammed into it instead.

A chocolate-colored Labradoodle, walking with a Guatemalan singer from the
East Village with her own YouTube channel, smelled the blood, saw the crow, and
lost it. He yanked his leash and had the crow in his jaws before the chanteuse
could finish the word she was texting. She jerked back on the leash, thinking he
was darting out into traffic, and Bailey’s jaws snapped together, crushing the
crow’s skull. She saw the nasty mess in his mouth and made him drop it, which
he did, regretfully and not at all guiltily, despite his mistress’s noises of disgust. A
concerned marathoner-in-training saw the dead crow and scooped it up carefully to rush it to a vet’s on 144th Street, where it was pronounced D.O.A.

It was the first casualty. It would not be the last.

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By nightfall, the Vortal was the size of a ping pong ball and fattening up like an out-of-work actor. Because it was on the edge of the street, closer to the curb, and because of the lamppost near it, not much traffic passed through the space it was occupying.

At 10:17 that evening, a mustard yellow Hummer driven by a hedge fund analyst in a hurry was struck by it. It crunched through the reinforced glass, spiderwebbing the windshield, and passed through the skull of Mitch Carvalos, thirty-seven, killing him instantly. The Hummer jumped the curb, killing two people and the Boxer they were walking, seriously injuring a very attractive publicist, breaking the leg of a delivery person from Kaptain Ka-Bob’s Pita Palace, and causing lacerations but no serious trauma to a trans woman named Sharleen who immediately began tweeting pics of the crash to her 32k followers on Twitter and 22k followers on Instagram.

In the confusion that followed, nobody noticed the Vortal. It was dark and above the normal human line of sight, and as it grew, it had taken to sucking in light and color, leaving a ping pong ball-sized nothing rather than an actual ping pong ball-shaped thing.

By the third morning, it was about the size of an orange.

The street had been cleared and the police tape removed a couple hours earlier, when a black Ford Yukon was struck by it. The SUV had collision detection, which caused it to brake automatically on impact. This saved the driver’s life. She was a woman named Ida Schreiber, forty-two, and she was on her way to meet her divorce lawyers to consult on how best to divide her and her estranged husband’s assets. The Vortal fractured the windshield, leaving an orange-sized hole. Ida was doing barely twenty miles per hour when she hit the Vortal, and the vehicle’s collision detection caused it to brake at once, so the Vortal was still embedded in the SUV windshield, half in and half out, somewhat like the large invisible spheres which surrounded the time-travelling Terminators in the movie series, except that this Vortal was opening much, much more slowly than those VFX-created illusions, like a very slow time machine.

Ida didn’t call AAA. She didn’t need to because she had excellent insurance
coverage and accident assistance was included in her plan. She was more than a little startled by the impact because the street had seemed completely clear, but she was texting while driving when it happened and automatically assumed she had hit something beneath her line of vision, a dog or a child maybe, oh God please no, and used the same phone to call her divorce lawyers to ask them to recommend a good criminal defense lawyer in case she needed one. She was still on the phone when the first responders arrived and they asked her to exit the vehicle immediately please.

The insurance investigator from Liberty Farm who arrived on the scene was the first person to actually “see” the Vortal.

She was an American citizen named Susan Khan, thirty-two years old with a wife and daughter, with whom she lived in a two-bed rent-controlled third floor walk-up in Queens. She had had a small disagreement with her wife Jesmyn that morning before leaving for work, and had not finished her ham and eggs and OJ, leaving in a sulk. The disagreement had been over their daughter Beth, 8, getting the more expensive “invisible” braces rather than the usual kind. Susan had been trying to explain, in perhaps too pedantic a manner, that the $400 they would save would go towards Beth’s own college fund when Jesmyn muttered the single word “mansplaining.” Susan had been irritated enough to leave her breakfast unfinished, grab her jacket, and stalk off, reaching the Metro a whole fourteen minutes earlier than her usual time. When the call came in at the office, she was the only Claims Adjuster well enough caffeinated to grab the assignment.

When she saw the Vortal, or rather, when she saw an orange-sized ball of nothing, her first thought was that it must be a trick of the light. It took several moments to satisfy herself that there was actually something there. That was when she tried touching the object.

Uh oh, bad idea.

She was sitting in the front passenger seat of the Yukon, reaching up, so her hand was moving towards the Vortal when it made contact.

She tried to grab it because even though it was a nothing, it appeared to be a spherical-shaped nothingness, like a black ball. It was human instinct to try to grab a ball. Her hand closed on the Vortal and had it actually been a ball, her fingers would have captured it in the most normal of human actions.

But the Vortal was not a ball.

Susan experienced a blinding flash and a deafening bang.

The effect was similar to a flashbang grenade exploding in her hand.

Except the flash was not actually an emission of bright white light, it was a
dissipation of light from the visible spectrum, and an alteration of the spectrum itself to one very different from what the human eye was accustomed to viewing.

Similarly, the bang was not an explosion of sound, but an abstention of sound from the normal aural range that humans were capable of hearing.

Susan reacted by crying out, startled by the flashbang, or to be more poetic, the darksilencing.

She experienced a sensation of vacuum, which to her senses felt like a powerful wind tugging hard at her body.

She grasped nothing.

Instead, her hand was yanked into the Vortal with some force. It was comparable to placing one’s hand on the aperture of an industrial vacuum cleaner. (If you ever get the urge to put your hand or any other body part on one of those —don’t, just don’t.)

Susan felt the suction of the Vortal latching onto her hand, pulling her inside. Because the Vortal was still so small, smaller than the width of Susan’s palm, the bones in her hand kept it from being pulled right through. Her palm stuck to the opening, just like if it was placed on a vacuum cleaner, and she felt some discomfort and a lot of alarm, but no real pain. That would come later.

The Vortal, of course, didn’t budge even a micro-millimeter.

Susan stared up in some confusion, her eyesight starting to normalize, with colored red, blue, and green dots at the periphery of her vision.

She tried to pull her hand back, but the suction was too great. Her forearm trembled and her biceps strained, but her hand wouldn’t budge. It was well and truly caught. Captured by the Vortal. After struggling for a few moments, she stopped and stared intently at the hole in the windshield, trying to understand what had taken hold of her palm and was keeping it there.

After several minutes, she came to the reluctant conclusion that she had no fracking idea. She couldn’t see a thing there. Just her hand, stuck in something . . . nothing . . . as firmly as if it had been immersed in quick-drying concrete.

But she could feel something. She could feel the hand itself, still there, still wriggling its fingers. It was stuck in the hole in the windshield but from what she could make out by looking through the cracked glass, it was not outside the windshield. It was someplace else, beyond the windshield. On this side of the windshield, Susan could see her forearm and wrist ending in a circular nothingness. On the other side, nothing. Just the sunlit dust of a Manhattan street.

But the missing hand could feel.
The Other Side, for want of a better term, was weird. Wet, slimy, tickly. When Susan wiggled the fingers of her trapped hand, she experienced yielding resistance. Her fingers moved sluggishly but they could move. Susan closed her eyes to concentrate on the sensation. It felt like her hand was immersed in some kind of a vast gelatinous substance. There was a sensation of complex movements within that substance: currents, waves, the swishing of smaller objects, the irregular movement of life-forms of some sort, some popping, and the occasional violent blast, which she felt were strenuous ejaculations of a mechanical nature, machine farts rather than organic. Most important of all was her sense that the gel atmosphere, if that was the correct term, was itself vibrant, alive, and, she felt certain, aware.

She had no idea what any of that meant.

“Ma’am?”

An NYPD cop was squinting up at her, eyes slitted beneath the visor of her cap. The morning sun was reflecting off the glass tower across the street, one sharp ray shooting down to pin the officer like a giant straw spearing an ant.

“Ma’am, I need you to step out of the vehicle.”

Susan looked down at the cop. “I’m sorry.”

The uniformed officer tilted her head one way then the other, trying unsuccessfully to avoid the lancing sunbeam. “Ma’am, please step out of the vehicle onto the street.”

“I can’t do that.”

The officer covered her eyes with one hand, her other hand remaining low, out of Susan’s line of sight. “Ma’am? Do you understand what I said?”

“I understand. You want me to get out of the car. But I can’t do that.”

“Ma’am, this is not a request. I’m ordering you now. Please get out of—”

“I’m telling you, I can’t. I would do it if I could but my hand is stuck in this windshield.”

The officer frowned up at the windshield. Susan moved her body to try to give the cop a better view. She reacted to the movement by crouching a little lower. Her right hand remained low and out of sight. Right where her gun would be holstered. “Is your hand stuck in the windshield, ma’am?”

“Yes.”

“Did you punch it through the windshield? Is that how the glass shattered?”

Yes, officer, I’m Luke Cage and in a moment of road rage I put my fist through this windshield.

“No, it was already broken when I got here. I was examining the hole in the
windshield when my hand got . . . stuck.”

She continued to squint up, still shielding her eyes from the bursts of reflected sunlight. Susan couldn’t help but notice that her eyes were a lovely china blue which appeared almost translucent in the sunlight. “Do you need Emergency Medical Support, ma’am? Are you unable to remove your hand from the windshield?”

“Yes, that would be very helpful.”

The cop turned her head to one side and used her shoulder radio to contact her dispatcher. Susan heard her explaining the situation briefly and calling for a “bus.” The request made, she resumed peering up at Susan and at the windshield, her right hand still by her side. “Ma’am, EMS is on its way. Please stay where you are and keep both your hands in plain sight where I can see them at all times.”

“Okay,” Susan said. “Okay, but just so you know, I’m just the insurance person.”

“You work in insurance?”

“I’m a Claims Adjuster for Liberty Farm. I was assigned to this case, and I came down here to examine the damage to the vehicle and assess the cost of the repairs. Just give me a sec to get out my ID—” Susan reached down to her jacket pocket with her right hand.

“Ma’am, please keep your hands up in the air!”

The gun was out now and pointed at Susan. She froze. “I’m just trying to get my ID.”

“Ma’am, this is your last warning.”

Looking down the eye of the gun pointed at her face, Susan slowly withdrew her hand, empty, and raised it above her head. “Okay, okay.”

The officer’s shoulder radio crackled. She spoke briefly. Susan heard her describing the situation and asking for instructions. After some to and fro, she turned her attention back to Susan. She holstered the weapon and climbed up into the front seat of the Yukon, beside Susan.

“Ma’am, I’m going to reach into your pocket and pull your ID. Please keep your hands in the air and don’t make any sudden movements. Do you understand?”

“Yes, go ahead. It’s in my back left pocket. My wallet.”

The officer leaned in close to Susan, watching her guardedly, her movements cautious and slow. As she turned and leaned in to reach for Susan’s wallet, her hair came within inches of her face and she smelled the officer’s shampoo. It was the same one she used: Garnier Green Apple+Green Tea. Jesmyn used Pantene
Pro-V, which had almost no fragrance to speak of. Susan liked a shampoo with a fragrance. Though she loved the smell of Jesmyn’s freshly washed hair, she liked the way Jesmyn smelled after a hot sweaty workout even more. It smelled more real, more Jesmyn. As the officer tried to extract her wallet using only two fingers to minimize physical contact, Susan couldn’t help but inhale her odor and flashed on an image of Jesmyn lying in bed after sex, twin roses blooming in her brown cheeks, contented. She felt sheepish for having stormed out this morning, sulking like a kid. She ought to call Jesmyn as soon as this thing was done and tell her if Beth really wanted the so-called “invisible” braces, then they would find the money for it. She wanted to call her right now, but she didn’t want to go reaching for her cellphone when Officer Kripke was fishing around in her rear end.

The officer held up her wallet between two fingers and eased back on the passenger side of the front seat. She flipped open the wallet and the first thing that she saw was the picture of Jesmyn, Beth, and Susan, the one taken that day at Jones Beach last Fourth of July, all three of them in their swimsuits, leaning in together, holding up cones of ice cream in an imitation of the Statue of Liberty. Melted ice cream was dripping down the sides of their arms and Susan could still remember the way the sun had felt on her face, and the taste of the Key Lime flavor ice cream when she had licked it off her elbow, Beth and Jesmyn both going “Eeeuuuuuu!” together.

Susan became aware that the officer was staring at her.

“Ma’am, is this a picture of you?”

“Yes. That’s me, my wife Jesmyn, and our daughter Beth.”

“You’re the one in the yellow bikini on the left?”

“That’s me. Yellow, itsy bitsy, but no polka dots.”

She looked at Susan with a blank expression.

“Like in the song?”

She didn’t get it. Another millennial then. Probably an Adele fan.

“Ma’am, this is your ID?”

“Yes. That’s my Driver’s License, my Social Security Card, my Company ID, Macy’s Card, credit cards, and business cards.”

“Says here your name is Susan Khan.” She pronounced her surname “Can” like almost every American did. “Born in Karachi, Pakistan.”

“C’est moi.”

“Ma’am?”

“That’s me. Susan Khan.” She emphasized the correct pronunciation: Khaan. The “Kh” like Khartoum, the vowel stretched out like a double “a.”
The officer snapped the wallet shut and handed it back to Susan. She then turned her attention to the windshield, peering at the hole and at Susan’s hand trapped there. She twisted her head one way then another, and Susan could see her frowning, trying to make sense of what she was seeing. She reached up with one hand, and Susan noticed now that the other hand was on the holster of her weapon, though she hadn’t actually drawn it out again. That distracted Susan for a second, causing a moment of anxiety, and it was just long enough that by the time Susan realized that the officer was reaching for the hole and thought to warn her, it was already too late. She felt a frisson, like a mild electrical shock, smelled an odd odor, like hair frying, and then the officer’s hand was clasped over her hand, stuck on it.

“Mother of Christ!” the officer exclaimed. “The fuck is it?”

A vibration began, starting from Susan’s insides and passing outwards, as if her mitochondria were churning at cosmic velocity and the successive layers of her body were desperately shedding the energy, passing it on at the exact same frequency in sympatico. The vibration burst out of her and through the air, rippling outwards like an invisible wave, and every glass object in the Yukon shattered, splintering glass in a deafening explosion. Her hearing cut out with a sunnnn ringing in her inner ears. She sensed rather than heard other successive waves of energy exploding throughout the street, and saw the glass on every other vehicle also shatter outwards, then the glass on the store fronts and the windows of the buildings and then the glass inside the stores and apartments . . . she didn’t know how far the wave travelled, but some part of her sensed that it was infinite and continued indefinitely.

She was no mathlete, had never been particularly good at math, but she suddenly saw, though sight was not the sense that was involved, the equation that represented the energy that had just been released.

And she knew what had caused the wave.

“The Fuck just happened?” the NYPD police officer sitting beside her yelled. “What was that?”

“It’s the dissonance between your energy’s sine signature and my energy’s sine signature.”

The officer was trying to extract her trapped hand by yanking on it. Susan could feel the woman’s palm on the back of her hand and part of her little finger. The officer’s skin felt hot to her, but maybe that was because her own hand had been held up for so long it wasn’t getting as much circulation. Susan could feel the muscles and tendons in her hand working, rubbing across the back of her
hand; she had soft hands.

She was about to add, *for a cop*, but didn’t. Even mentally, it was a micro-aggression and she had spent a lifetime unlearning all those nasty little verbal slights that had been such a bane of her growing-up years. That didn’t stop others from micro-aggressing against her of course, or against Jesmyn, or even, damn their eternal souls, against darling *Beth*, eight years old and already feeling the hate, God bless and protect her with angel’s wings, but they had this mantra they had arrived at and which they repeated aloud together whenever one or both of them had suffered some particularly vexing new encounter. The pertinent line went: “Let us not commit micro-aggressions against those who commit micro-aggressions against us . . .”

“*The fuck!*”

The police officer was panicking. Hyperventilating. Nostrils, eyes flared. Face flushed and turning pink at the cheekbones. Eyes dilated and very, very blue, Susan saw, now that the tinted windows were blown off the Yukon and the late morning sunshine was streaming down through the yawning sunroof above their heads.


Susan saw the officer recoiling from her voice when she began to speak. It was instinctive, the distrust, the suspicion that she, Susan, must have had something to do with this. *The Woman of Color, she did this to me!* Susan could almost sense her urge to distance herself from Susan, to ignore and avoid, evade and erase. But then the officer’s training kicked in and Susan saw her visibly take back control of herself. Susan found herself admiring the way the woman shut her eyes tight, breathed in slowly, using a pranayam rhythm she had seen Jesmyn use. Susan had never been able to get into yoga. Not her thing. But Jesmyn lived by it, was always talking about the different types: Hatha. Vinyasa. Iyengar. Ashtanga. Bikram . . . Jeez, even she knew them by heart now.

The officer opened her eyes, calm again. The NYPD beat cop back in her skin. Officer Kripke reporting for duty from her emotional break, ma’am.

“I caused that, didn’t I?”

She was looking at Susan sideways. It wasn’t her fault. Her right hand was stuck in the thing, like Susan’s left hand. The officer was on her right-hand side and the only way Susan could look at her was sideways. It made her look reluctant, uncomfortable to be this close to her, both of which were true, she knew, but even if Jesmyn herself had been sitting here beside her, she’d have had
to look at her sideways, too. She didn’t take it personally. She was speaking to her and being civil, at least. A person talking to another person. Not a cop to a PoI. A PoC PoI, foreign national from a quasi-Arab country, and gay at that. Give her a break. She’s had a lot to deal with in the past ten minutes.

“Not you personally. I mean, you didn’t cause the explosion, you just set it off,” Susan said.

“Isn’t that the same thing?”

“It’s like you open a door to enter a room, and then a bucket of gluey glitter falls on your head. You didn’t want to make the bucket fall, you didn’t put it there or fill it with glitter, you just entered the room.” Susan pointed her chin at the Vortal. “You didn’t know what you were getting into, you just reached up to check out what you thought was a hole in a windshield. I should have warned you. I wasn’t paying attention. I’m sorry.”

Someone was screaming across the street. There were car alarms and fire alarms going off everywhere. Sirens rang out from every direction. Little fragments of glass were still falling from the sky, probably from the highest floors of some of the skyscrapers on the street, only just reaching the ground. Susan tried not to think of the children, the animals, the people looking at windows or glass objects when it happened. Out the corner of her eye, she could just glimpse a very red person writhing on the street. She didn’t want to look. She didn’t want to see.

“What is this fucking thing?” the cop said, tugging once more on her hand, still not able to accept the permanence of her situation. “Excuse my language, ma’am.”

“It’s a Vortal.”

The officer wrinkled her forehead.

“A vertically integrated portal.”

She kept looking at Susan.

“Well, a portal is like a doorway between worlds or dimensions, right? A Vortal is like a number of portals between worlds or dimensions, vertically integrated to form a kind of infinity curve, a self-creating self-consuming eternal cycle.”

She continued staring at her for another moment.

“I have no fucking idea what you just said.” She blinked. “Excuse me, ma’am.”

Susan tried to smile but found she couldn’t. There were too many people dead, hurt, screaming, or terrorized to make light of this. “I don’t even know how
I know that. I’m no science geek. But the longer I’ve been sitting here with my hand up its ass, the more I seem to be able to . . . understand it.”

The officer stared up at the hole in the windshield which had consumed both their hands. “Did it get bigger? It . . . feels bigger.”

Susan looked up. When she was seven, back in the old ancestral home in Karachi, she had tried to use her father’s razor to mimic shaving. The razor had been heavier than she’d expected and she’d managed to cut herself on the back of her wrist. No stitches required, but the scar was about an inch long and ran at about a thirty-degree angle to the base of her wrist. The black ball had reached the scar now. When she saw that, she remembered the belt-lashing her father had given her after her mother had bandaged the cut. That was when her father had dealt out belt-lashings for every transgression, however minor, as if he could somehow beat his oldest daughter into becoming a “normal” girl like her sisters and every other girl.

“It is. I think it happened when your hand touched my hand and set off some kind of reaction.”

“Is that what that explosion was?” She hesitated, then, “It was, wasn’t it? Jeez. I feel it too, now. You’re right. It kinda gets inside your head, doesn’t it?” She jerked, her blue eyes wide. “You think it’s some kinda terrorist technology? Like it’s brainwashing us or something? Oh jeez.” Her panic had regressed her speech to its native Brooklyn accent and lexicon.

“I don’t think so,” Susan said slowly, shutting her eyes to focus on the sensation. “It feels like a living thing. A life form of some kind. Alive.”


“Definitely not human. I think it isn’t even of our world.”

She squinted at her. “You saying it’s some kinda alien?”

“I don’t know . . .” She tried to focus on the pulsing life in that gelatinous mass. “But no, I don’t think so. I think it’s from Earth. Our planet.”

“You just said it’s not of our world. Which is it then?”

“Both. Neither. I guess . . . it’s here but not here. Don’t you feel it too?”

She frowned. Susan noticed the way her forehead puckered between her brows when she did that even while she thought: Jesmyn. Beth. That exploding glass . . . Oh Lord.

“Shut your eyes,” she suggested. “It helps to focus on The Other Side.”

She looked at her uncertainly but swallowed again and shut her eyes. She immediately sucked in a deep breath. “Jeez. You’re right. It’s . . .” She fell silent
for several moments.

Susan looked around. The street was chaotic, people staggering around, sitting on the curb, blood and glass everywhere. She saw a media van with a large dish antenna mounted on top and the alphanumeric name of a local TV news station lettered on the side, several NYPD squad cars, an FDNY ambulance and fire truck—and several black SUVs that were just now screeching to a halt. The SUVs discharged a large posse of dark-suited men and women. The NYPD cops were backing people away from the Yukon and stretching out yellow Crime Scene tape, cordoning off the street. The federal agents were pointing at the cab of the Yukon and talking into cellphones and walkie talkies.

“It’s . . . a being,” she said. Her eyes were still closed. “I can see it, kinda. It’s like it’s a neighbor looking through a hole in a fence at the next yard, and it’s wondering whether to climb through or stay on its own side. It’s like it doesn’t really give a shit about us but it’s thinking of coming over and checking our yard out just for kicks.” She opened her eyes.

“That’s pretty good,” Susan said. “It’s how I see it, too. It’s not human, but it’s not anything else on Earth either. Its world is Earth, but not our Earth. Like a neighboring reality.”

“One block down and two doors over.” She looked out the front of the SUV, seeing the commotion on the street. “Shit. There’s my CO.”

She jerked at the trapped hand again. Susan felt the motion as the back of her hand rubbed the back of Susan’s forearm. There was a strange viscous sensation, then with a sound very much like the burp Jesmyn emitted after her third beer, she saw another two inches of her forearm disappear and through the same liquid transference she saw the Neighbor become aware of her and Office Kripke. She felt its scrutiny scrubbing across the surface of her consciousness, an abrasive, invasive sensation that made her want to scream and kick and run away, but the Vortal held her hand relentlessly in place. She felt the scrubbing pass over the extent of her surface emotions, thoughts, half-formed sensations, like a blinding white light slowly moving across the landscape of her brain, and then, as abruptly as it had begun, it was gone.

“The fuck!”

The officer clutched Susan’s shoulder with her free hand, squeezing her bicep hard. Ouch. She was way, way stronger than she looked, like she must lift weights or do a bunch of yoga. Not that she was one to judge people based on appearances.

“Did you feel that?”
Susan opened her mouth but couldn’t speak. There was nothing wrong with her mouth. She just couldn’t find the words. Any words. Language eluded her like a . . . like a . . . the analogy she wanted was so close she could feel her fingertips brush against it but it lay just out of reach.

“That was intense! My fucking nips are hard. But I feel creepy. Slimy. What is this thing?”

Susan couldn’t breathe. Her mouth was open, her throat was working, her chest was heaving, but no air was going in or coming out. She felt like she was choking on something, but there was nothing in her windpipe. The choking sensation was in her brain, like the part that told her body when and how to breathe had stopped working. Her body began to jerk involuntarily, her free hand and legs spasming. Even the hand that was attached to the Neighbor through the Vortal began shaking. She felt her body jackknife, the top of her head striking the roof of the SUV, and though it felt like she had no mouth, she heard herself screaming in the solitary confinement of her own mind.

“Hey! Hey! Hey! Oh shit.”

She heard Office Kripke shouting—at her, at the other cops and EMS nurses and federal agents, asking for help, telling them that she was having some kind of seizure. She heard other voices replying, and even through her juddering, she glimpsed blurry shapes stopping to stare in the direction of the SUV, but nobody crossed the yellow police tape. They all stood and talked on their walkies and cellphones and radios and watched.

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“Sweet Jesus! Mary, mother of Christ, thank you in the name of all that is Holy! You’re awake. Are you okay, ma’am? You gave me a hell of a scare. I thought you were DOA for sure. Fuck was that? Are you epileptic or something? It looked like an epileptic seizure. I’ve seen those. My cousin’s kid Brian used to get them, thrash and roll about on the floor, scared the bejeesus out of kids at PS 172. Had to be put in a special school for . . . I’m rambling. Sorry, ma’am. I tried to get you help, but CO says they’ve established a quarantine zone around the epicenter till they get more information. They don’t get what’s going on here. They think that you had something to do with it. I tried telling them that you’re just an insurance claims adjuster and that Central said your ID checked out, but they have to follow protocol. Just so you know, they’ve got snipers locked on you, as a precaution. Like I said, protocol. Nothing personal, you understand,
ma’am? I’m really sorry they couldn’t help you. For a while there, I thought you were a goner for sure.”

“Which part of Brooklyn you from?” Susan was relieved to hear that her speech impediment was gone. A part of her brain still hurt something awful, like she’d had the world’s worst migraine. But she didn’t get migraines, didn’t have epilepsy, had never had a seizure, never experienced anything like it before. She was tired. She missed Jesmyn and Beth. She wished to goddamn hell she hadn’t argued with Jes about the invisible braces. She wanted to call her and tell her they would buy the braces, that she missed her, and that in case she didn’t make it out of this mess, to take care of Beth, and that she had a little money saved in the shoebox with her old stuff from her mother’s place, at the back of the hall closet, under the box of Beth’s nursery toys and baby frocks. Just under $600, but it would help with the braces.


She was looking at Susan with something in her face she couldn’t read. “You look wiped.”

She tried to swallow, found her throat raspy, tongue hot as a park bench on a New York summer’s day. “How long was I unconscious?”

The officer looked at her wristwatch: a Burberry. Nice, too. Jes had had her eye on a similar one at Macy’s in Rego Park. It was marked up at $487. She had really wanted to buy it for her for Christmas, but had fallen short because of the money they had spent on the kitchen remodeling last year. Then, for her birthday, they had gone upstate to visit her family in Syracuse and then continued on up to Niagara. She wanted to ask Kripke how an NYPD beat cop could afford a $487 watch but it was none of her business.

*Jenny Smith is her name. Stop with the Kripke shit.*

She saw Susan looking and, with the prickly sense of a native New Yorker, said, “Birthday gift from my dad. I told him, dad, I’m a beat cop, I can’t chase down bad guys wearing this, but he says it’s just a watch, it breaks, it breaks. He’s an ex-cop, makes a bundle now working private security. I should have given it back, but what can I say, I like watches.”

“Jesmyn is very fond of timepieces. If she could, she’d have a watch for every ensemble.”

“I totally get that.” She was silent a moment then, “So Jesmyn is like . . . your . . ."
“Wife.”

“And you’re her . . .” She made a face. “God, I sound like my mom now. I don’t mean to pry. I don’t know the PC terminology for this stuff. Are you, like, her . . . spouse?”

“Wife. Legally speaking, we’re each other’s wives. Same-sex marriage is legal in the State of New York.” She heard the note of caution in her tone. She *was* talking to a cop. A white cop. Blonde, blue-eyed. But still a cop. Presumably she already knew *something* about the law.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. I’m cool with that. I know a couple of women who . . . you know, swing one way or both ways. And there’s gay cops at the precinct. It’s just . . . this whole situation, it’s so FUBAR.”

Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition. Susan knew that one. Jesmyn liked reading Military SF, was always asking her to pick up her Holds from the NYPL on her way home from work. This month she was reading her way through The Red Trilogy by Linda Nagata. Susan had checked it out and surprise, surprise, had liked it too.

Susan smiled. Her brain hurt when her cheek muscles worked—actually, her brain just hurt, period. “I get it, Officer. It’s a weird situation. And being handcuffed, so to speak, with a Pakistani Arab gay woman in the front seat of a Yukon while some otherworldly being tickles your manicure is not the way you thought you’d be spending your Tuesday morning.”

Jenny Smith grinned back. My, but she had a pretty smile. “You’re all right, Susan. Sorry, I meant, Mrs. Khan. Um, it is ‘Mrs.,’ right?”

“Yes, I’m Mrs. Khan and Jesmyn is Mrs. Hopkinson. But just Susan is fine. And thank you. You’re all right too, Jenny Smith.”

“Yeah, hey, like, I get it. Takes all kinds, right?”

“We’re all just looking for the same thing in the end,” Susan said.


Susan saw Jenny’s eyes cut right, toward the other side of the street. The news cameras were there, black eyes pointed in their direction, anchors holding forth. There were a lot of cellphones, too, pointed out of busted windows in the buildings down the street. The age of citizen journalism. Susan remembered Jesmyn’s Twitter feed and imagined her seeing a pic of Susan sitting in the Yukon with a blonde NYPD cop, looking like they were both holding hands and reaching up together for the sky through a broken windshield, like some deranged poster. Workers of the Weird World, Unite.

“It’s growing, innit?”
Susan looked up at the Vortal. Their hands were now immersed up to about half their forearms. The top lip of the Yukon’s roof had disappeared too, a perfect crescent carved out. As she watched, the crescent expanded inwards visibly.

“Yes, and at a faster rate.”
“What do we do?”

She looked at her. She wanted to smile to reassure her, but her face felt like it had weights hooked on with metal barbs. “I don’t know that there’s anything we can do.”

Jenny’s radio crackled to life. She listened, then responded. Susan found her eyelids slipping down over gritty eyes, like freshly oiled metal shutters on her family hardware store in Karachi. Keeping those shutters oiled was one of the hundreds of minor chores she and her brothers had been entrusted with, but all of which ended up falling to her to do, and if she ever complained that her brothers weren’t doing their share, her father would threaten her with the belt.

“Ma’am . . . Mrs. Khan?”
Susan forced her eyes open.

“People are starting to get worried. I’ve tried to explain to them that you don’t have anything to do with this, that I’m trapped same as you are, and this is some weird shit going on, but they’re not buying it.”

She looked at Susan. “Are they going to shoot me, Officer Smith?”

Jenny cut her eyes away for a second. “Um . . .”

“I know how it works. You can level with me. There’s a reason the Black Lives Matter movement exists, and it’s not because we hate cops, but because the default go-to reflex is ‘Shoot the Black Guy.’ You can level with me.”

Susan saw her throat work. “I’ll level with you, ma’am. They’re considering it. I’ve tried talking them out of it but this shit is way above my pay grade. It’s not like they’re gonna listen to a plain old beat cop. A female beat cop.” There was no bitterness in her tone, just a matter-of-factness. “I think I’m cut out of the loop now. They’ve cut out all cell coverage in the area, cut the power, and evacuated the entire block. That’s usually a sign that they mean to roll up the sleeves and get down to business.”

Susan felt a tickling sensation on the palm of her trapped hand. Something on The Other Side was nuzzling the sensitive spot between her thumb and forefinger. Or licking it. Except it wasn’t anything like a dog, but something completely Other. Something with . . . tentacles? Pseudopods? There was no Earth equivalent.

“Thank you for telling me,” she said. She meant it. “Is there any way you can
do me a favor?”

She saw Jenny’s lips purse. She hesitated. Then a fuck it expression came over her small delicate features. “If I can, Susan.”

“I know this probably violates your protocol, but I would really like to speak with my wife. I’ll keep it brief.”

She looked out the windshield. The cellphones pointed out the windows and up the street were all gone. So were the news cameras. The dark suits, EMS, FDNY, NYPD, the entire alphabet soup had retreated far up the block, the barricades pushed way back. The street was oddly quiet, peaceful almost, except for the carpet of shattered glass and splatters of blood and human parts.

“See what I can do,” she said. “Cellphones’re out, so only way is with my radio.”

She spoke into her shoulder comm, talking to a series of voices while Susan’s attention drifted away. The pain was excruciating now. In her head. In her hand. In her gut. In every part of her body and brain and nervous system. It felt like the ooze in which her hand was submerged was seeping into her system, through her pores, into her cells, infecting her, corroding her cell walls, breaking down her mitochondria, eating her from the very inside out.

“Susan?”

She fought to open her eyes again, the late afternoon sunlight piercing through her optic nerves into her brain like honey-dipped needles. Manhattanhenge? No, it was the wrong time of year for that. It was the Neighbor’s ecosystem; it was poisoning her, eating her alive. She looked at Officer Jenny Smith’s pretty face and saw beads of sweat on her upper lip and forehead. So she was hurting too. Of course she was. It was just that Susan had been immersed in the toxic ocean a little longer.

“I have Jesmyn on the line.”

She snapped awake, pushing back the pain, the soporific response of her own nervous system to the sensory overload. “How . . .?”

“Just talk, I’ll work the comm.”

Hiss-crackle-snap. And then . . .

“Susan? Suse, is that you? Are you okay? Baby, I’m so worried!”

“Jes, I’m so sorry. About the braces.”

“Forget about that, you dope. Are you all right? They’re saying all kinds of crazy things about you, calling you a terrorist who tried to set off some kind of bio-weapon or some shit. I told them it isn’t true, but they won’t let me through. They’ve roped off the entire block. I tried coming round from the east side
“Listen to me, Jes. I didn’t do anything. I just came here to investigate an auto accident and then this thing caught hold of my hand and I’m stuck in this vehicle. There’s a cop in here with me, she’s nice, not like a cop, but I don’t know how long they’ll let us talk, so we could be cut off anytime.”

“I don’t understand. Your hand got stuck in the car?”

“It’s hard to explain.” Yeah. Try impossible. “I want you to know that I love you. That’s Number One. You know that, don’t you, Jes?”

“Yes, yes, I . . . Wait. What are you doing? Why are you . . .? Oh, God, Suse, are you . . .?”

“Listen, Jes. You tell Beth I love her. I love her like God loves little green apples in Minneapolis, like we used to sing when she was a baby. Remember that?”

“Of course, but why . . . Oh, Suse. Don’t do this. Get out of there. We need you, damnit. Don’t be so selfish!”

“I’m going to try something, I don’t know if it’ll work, but I have to try anyway. It may be our only chance. This thing is bad, Jes. It could wipe out the city, maybe more than just the city. Someone has to stop it and I’m the only one here. Me and Jenn— Officer Smith. I have to do something. Listen. There’s a shoebox with my things from Karachi, at the rear of the hall closet, under the box of—”

“I know. There’s over $500 in cash. I found it when I was going through Beth’s old baby things to give to Goodwill.”

“It’s almost $600 now. Use it, Jes. For Beth’s braces. Or whatever you need it for. It’s a drop in the ocean, but still. Oh, dear, I don’t know how you’re going to manage financially. I hope the damn company pays out on my policy. There’s a terrorism clause . . .”

“Shut up, you idiot! I don’t care about all that. I want you. Get your ass out of there. Beth and I need you. Do you hear me? Come to—”

The radio cut out to a hissing that went on till Officer Smith reached up with her free hand and pressed a button that shut it off.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “They cut us off. I think that means they’re coming in.”

Susan glanced up and saw that the Vortal had expanded to their elbows. She couldn’t feel her fingers beyond the first joints now. She knew the fingertips had been eaten away and that the rest of her hand was being steadily peeled away, cellular layer by layer. The process felt just about as excruciating as it sounded.

She looked at Officer Smith. Her face was bathed in sweat now, and the top of
her uniform was dark with patches. “Thank you for that.”

“Fuck the formality. We’re going to die here, aren’t we?” It wasn’t actually a question, more a seeking of confirmation.

She didn’t answer. “I think there’s something we can try. Not for ourselves, but to stop it from opening any further. Maybe even . . .” She groaned involuntarily, feeling like the thinnest blades ever tooled had been pushed into the crevices between every joint of her body. She saw Jenny grimace and grit her teeth too. “. . . blow the damn thing shut before it’s too late.”

She looked at her, her face contorted into a dripping Halloween mask version of the neat, pretty, poster-girl NYPD cop who had pointed the gun up at her only a few hours earlier. “I . . . think you’re right. I think I know what you mean. I see it too.”

Susan realized something belatedly. “You could have used that chance to speak to someone. Your family maybe. Or your husband. I’m sorry. I don’t know if you have a husband.”

“Boyfriend,” she said. “But he’s a dick. A fucking bigot who thinks queer people are a blight on America and black people are the cause of all our problems. He voted Trump, asshole. He woulda laughed if I told him I was going to die hand in hand with a lesbian.”

“I wish I had painted my nails,” Susan said. “I usually paint them on Friday nights. Well, Jes does it, I mean. I love the way she does it, it’s so . . . relaxing. I wish I could have painted them one last time.” She stopped. “I’m rambling.”

“No, Suse, I get it. I can’t paint my nails most of the week. Being a cop and all. But I wish I had painted them today. I would totally paint your nails, too, if you wanted me to.”

Susan looked at Jenny Smith. “I would paint your nails, too, Jennifer.”

She looked back at her, her smile almost a grimace now. The sunlight was fading. The long shadow claws of the skyscrapers crept over the Yukon and pointed eastwards, toward the river and beyond it to the cold Atlantic.

“When your hand first made contact with mine,” Susan said.

“—we sparked. Some kinda chemical reaction,” Jenny said.

“—if we increase the area of contact to our entire bodies, suddenly—”

“—we should be able to spark off a much bigger reaction—”

“—and we go all the way through and clear—”

“—could act as a suction sucking the Vortal back to The Other Side—”

“—sealing it shut again.”

Out the corner of her eye, Susan glimpsed movement. There were dark-
uniformed figures moving along the sidewalk across the street, pointing large black weapons. She didn’t turn her head to look.

They sat in the SUV and considered their existence for a moment.
They looked at each other.
Are you prepared?
As ready as I’m ever fucking gonna be.
Very well, then, let’s do this. On One, Two . . .
Three!
They threw themselves up and into the Vortal with every joule of force they could summon.

• • • •

The SWAT team creeping along the sidewalk across the street was blown off their feet by the shockwave. They were blown forward, toward the Yukon, not away from it. When they came to moments later, their ears ringing with a sunnnn blacksilence, eyes flickering into and out of focus, they saw the Yukon crumpled inwards, a circular impression cut from the front and top of the vehicle as if by a blowtorch, and nothing else. The two persons in the front seat of the vehicle were gone. So was the odd, spherical black shape suspended in midair above it and all traces that it had ever existed.

The only things that were left behind were one and a half pairs of shoes in the floor well of the vehicle.

One was a standard issue pair of NYPD police shoes, black leather and black rubber soles, tough and designed to last years of pounding pavements.

The half pair was a single shoe from a pair of basic burgundy pumps purchased from a shoestore in Queens, New York during a fall sale, at 30% discount.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashok K. Banker is the pioneer of the speculative fiction genre in India. His ground-breaking internationally acclaimed eight-book Ramayana Series was the first trilogy and series ever published in India. It revolutionized Indian publishing, creating a genre which is now the biggest selling in the country. Ashok’s 52 books have all been bestsellers in India, as well as translated
into 18 languages and sold in 58 countries. He has also been credited as the author of the first Indian science fiction, fantasy, horror, crime, and thriller stories and novels in English, creator and screenwriter of the first Indian TV series in English, the first Indian ebooks in English and other firsts. He is one of only a handful of living Indian authors represented in *The Picador Book of New Indian Writing* and the *Vintage Anthology of Modern Indian Literature*. Two new novels are due out in 2018: *Upon a Burning Throne* (John Joseph Adams Books) and *Rise as One* (Delacorte). He is of Irish-Portuguese-Sri Lankan-Indian parentage. Born in Mumbai where he lived for 51 years, he now lives in Los Angeles. He loves to correspond with readers and is very active on Twitter and Facebook.

*To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight*
Dear Bob

“Dear Bob.” I can’t believe I’ve written that. Did I ever think you’d read this letter?

Dear Bob
Dear Bob!!!
I’ve done it. I’m writing the letter.

How are you? But I won’t know that, will I? Not until I read your letter. Don’t forget—put it where you found mine, between Asimov and Bester, fourth shelf up in the science fiction section of Cray Point’s library, just as we agreed. I’ll pick it up when I’m next through, I promise, and God willing, I’ll leave you another letter that day. Then we’ll swap letters, just like that couple in 84 Charing Cross Road, swapping our lives between the lines.

It’s weird being back in Cray Point. My parents brought me to the Jersey coast every summer, but I hated it back then. Dad insisted we stop here because it was so much quieter (i.e., cheaper) than Atlantic City further south, but it was a dump. A rundown resort that had never really made it, just waiting for rich New Yorkers to swoop and pick up the beachfront condos for a bargain. But now—I don’t want to leave it. I still can’t explain why I wanted to come here, just as I couldn’t in NYC, when we talked about going down the coast. I guess the other people coming here can’t either—maybe it’s the Coney Island Effect, the nostalgia of a cosy resort, a little bubble of the past.

I do like it here. The inhabitants who used to live here—there wouldn’t be any left, right? Not after two years—had barred windows and Keep Out and Warning Dog signs all over their bungalows, but people are different now. They leave the houses tidy and the doors open, they put up signs that read Please Leave This The Way You Found It. I’ve even seen barbecues. People share more. They take what they need from the Walmart and don’t try to stockpile. I wish I could stay.

I wish I could stay with you. I miss our time in NYC. I keep thinking about all the things we did in our two weeks together. I spend hours in the library dreaming of our tour of Tiffany’s, skating down Fifth Avenue on a fire hydrant’s frozen overflow, standing at the tip of Manhattan and squeezing the Statue of Liberty between our fingers like the guy out of Kids in the Hall. Where were all the people? We kept talking about how we expected Escape from New York, not
The Omega Man. It felt like we were the only people left in the world.

Before you, Bob, I felt like I was the only one in the world. People don’t do well in this world on their own. So when I saw you standing under the Williamsburg Bridge, as naked and confused as I’d been, I thought, Go on, Alice, take a chance. What have you got to lose? You looked so innocent, a little Jake Gyllenhaal, with that permanent dazed look, not dazed because you were stupid but because you couldn’t believe how amazing the world was. Cute, too—that long curly black hair, that geeky tall tree stoop. That’s why I came out of hiding and showed you where you could get clothes for a New York January. I close my eyes and I can hear your soft voice telling me stories.

The dollar in the envelope is for the bet. You remember? Which of us would go first? I hope you can find somewhere you can still spend it! I ended up in northern Canada—pretty savage in February, but I won’t bore you with my adventures. But I will say that the wilderness people you meet aren’t as bad as you might think. A Chinese girl gave me a lift south in a truck that still had gas in it. She didn’t have to—it was just a good gesture. So I did what you would do and told her stories to keep her company.

I’ll wait as long as I can for you.

Your Alice

• • • •

My sweetest, dearest Alice—

Bet you didn’t expect this! I bet you were thinking, I’m going to drop off that letter and no one’s ever going to read it and New York City will have just been some crazy dream I had. But I found your letter, Alice! I’m carrying it now, and if there was a way I could take it with me when I go, Jesus, I would.

And do I still hear your voice? Hey, I close my eyes, and you know, I can see you and me walking around Cray Point. You’re pointing out all the places you were dragged around as a kid. We pass the local cinema and they’re still showing that Harry Potter sequel from two and a half years back and you’re telling me that you loved the movies more than the books too. And you’re the spitting of little Maggie Gyllenhaal, same dark pixieness, same let’s-have-a-go look in your eyes, and sure, the scaredy-cats around here think we could be brother and sister, but I know that we’ll always be much closer than that. And I’m sitting in the library
dreaming of New York Fucking City, too, my girl and me freeing the penguins in the Central Park Zoo and flicking through the photo books in Barnes & Noble, looking at the faces of all those folk who had absolutely—no—fucking—idea what was coming.

We still have no idea what’s coming. You want to hear about my adventures? Well, four months ago, I found myself buck naked on the shore of a huge lake, savannah behind me, tropical skyline before me. So sticky that my body felt like I’d been dripped into my boots. Skeeters squealing around me like vampires at a crucifixion. No one in sight.

Welcome to the future, right?

You’re sipping cocktails with your girl in a New York City bar and then—pop! —you’re a million miles away. Or ten miles down the road. How the hell would you know? You’re doubled up with nausea from the sudden wrench and you’re so terrified someone will be startled and take a shot at you that you can’t think straight. That disorientation hasn’t changed since that first sudden wild day in February, when folk started popping out here and in somewhere else randomly, your best friend disappearing in front of you, the President vanishing at a press conference, strangers turning up in your kitchen or bathroom, totally bewildered. Newspapers said alien invasion. Me, Jason, and the gang said it was an army experiment in quantum entanglement gone haywire. The Government said nothing. But we were all just babbling. And you can still see people with that first trauma stamped into their faces, sitting down wherever they land with thousand-yard stares—but every time each of us pop, we look like that. The look’s not new, it’s just coming back to the surface.

But you learn to cope. You and me, Alice—we’re survivors. First thing I did was find out where the hell I was. There were no houses or newspapers, nothing, so I set off through the jungle until I found a dirt road, then a highway. There were billboards for Isuzu cars and Coke, but they were in English. Occasionally I’d spot someone, and whether it was because they didn’t understand me, or didn’t want to get involved with a crazy naked guy, or didn’t know either, they just shrugged and hurried on up the highway. I got excited when I found a McDonald’s, but I looked at everything there, the signs on the wall, the menus, the packaging on the rotting food round back, and I really could have been anywhere.

Finally, I found road signs. Turns out it was Africa—used to be Ghana, which I knew shit about, except that it was in the western half of the continent and faced the Atlantic. I made my way to the coast—some friendly travellers told me to stay
away from the old capital, Accra, where ex-army types were enjoying a soldier of fortune’s playground, so I ended up in Tema on the Gulf of Guinea. Folk there were trying to keep things together. I made some good buddies there—my work-gang was a real mixture, an Albanian, a Jamaican, a Malay from Christmas Island, and bizarrely, five Argentineans (none of whom knew each other). Not much English, but I remembered what you said about telling stories, so I started telling everyone the plots of all the movies I’d seen. Everyone kind of liked the sound of my voice, so I got along just fine.

We re-tooled old boats—rusty fishing hulks mainly—and built small dhows from scratch. One team was even trying to resurrect a huge oil tanker. You found yourself a team and they’d all take turns to pass their skills onto you so that when one of you popped, the rest knew enough to teach the next recruit. While I was there working on the Baby Jane, ten people rotated through our team. When the Baby Jane was ready, the team became a crew and we learnt a bunch of new skills. Once we stocked up with oil from Tema’s still plentiful tanks and whatever food and water the passengers brought with them, we sailed Baby Jane across the Atlantic. Whether America was a stopping point or a destination, all of us wanted to get home.

And would you believe it, ten days out, I popped—and arrived in Cape Canaveral. Knew it almost immediately from the kudzu and dead rockets lying around. Who’d believe my luck! Anyway, I’m from Michigan originally, so I was drawn up the seaboard. But it wasn’t Michigan I was heading for. I know that now. It was Cray Point—it was you, Alice.

And I’m still heading for you.

Always,

Bob

• • • •

Dear Bob

You got my letter! I can’t believe it! I came back here, felt behind my favourite Alfred Bester and it was gone. Incredible—just as I imagined. But I wish you were here to tell me all your stories in person. I wish I could lean out of my ship as it passed yours and grab a kiss—just one kiss, it would be enough.

It’s been eight months since my last letter, I think. I’ve been moving around a
lot. I must have jaunted nine or ten times.

I know it sounds weird, but the idea of jaunting makes me giggle. You must think I’m crazy, but really, I laugh every time I see it—a half-eaten banana suddenly dropping to the ground, a woman crouching over a toilet that’s no longer there. I once saw a guy suddenly appear, thrusting into thin air, then asking sheepishly where his woman had gone! And that popcorn noise we make when we disappear—like elephants treading on bubblewrap. I used to dread that noise, but I find it comforting now. All the women used to lie awake in the barracks listening for the tiny firecrackers, wondering which of us—or the guards—had gone.

The thing I can’t get used to is the clothes. I remember seeing one of our guards’ jeans and vest crumple to the floor, and I had to do everything to stop smiling. Look how flimsy you are too! You see them all over the place—little bundles in the street, all over floors. Do you remember seeing the heaps all the way down Fifth Avenue, as if the angels had come down and scooped up all the people and taken them to Heaven?

I laughed about these things with Cara, but it wasn’t the same as talking with you, Bob. Cara was too serious. She was still trying to understand everything. Cara had been a research student in Perth University in Australia and for a few months after it all started, she and her colleagues tried to study what was going on—calculating atomic disturbances during jaunting, shooting particles through freshly-opened spaces to measure the sudden nothingness, all that high-end physics stuff. Cara told me they also used to tag people to see what transported with the body, what didn’t—recent meals, hair transplants. I don’t think they got very far with that either.

Once I did ask her if all our memories teleported. Who knows—maybe we lose a few each time it happens. Cara said she hoped so. There were some things she’d be happy to lose. But that scared me, and I lay awake, re-telling over and over all our conversations in NYC.

I met Cara in southern Russia. I’m not exactly sure where, but it was dry steppe country and there were oilfields everywhere. Kazakhstan? I checked it on the atlas and it’s near the Caspian, but I didn’t see it during my incarceration. A lot of the men who ran the labour gangs certainly looked Mongolian and spoke Russian. Maybe they were locals who kept returning home after their jaunts, the way I keep coming back to Cray Point. The labour gangs were mainly made up of women—I never did find out what they did with the men. They were trying to get the old oilfield equipment running again, and were always arguing over how to
re-start those rocking horse pumps. They used us to simply recover oil from the drums stacked up in the depots and lying abandoned in the rocks, then traded the oil for food and rifles. I guess the work itself wasn’t too bad.

The women didn’t talk much. Some were Americans, or at least, had been at one point. They didn’t belong anywhere anymore. The only time we got to speak was at night, when we huddled together for warmth in the oil workers barracks. I told them stories. I told them about *The Great Escape* and *Stalag 17* and even *Hogan’s Heroes*, and then I told them about you and NYC and about the letters. They listened quietly until I ran out of things to say. It kept them from thinking which of the men would come over that night.

Cara and I got pretty close. You’d have liked her, Bob—she was too serious, she was trying to be realistic. But she remembered all the old movies and if we kept our voices down, we could talk about our favourite movie stars for hours. But she was gone after three months—I wonder where she is now? I asked her about swapping letters, but she wasn’t hopeful. After Cara, there was nothing else to do but keep telling stories about anywhere but there and endure like the other women. Some of us left quickly. I waited five months.

After Kazakhstan, I was a few weeks here and there. I lost a lot of weight, but finally jaunted close to one of the pickup points for the Northern Railroad crossing the States. I’d heard about this. You have to do your share to keep the railway going. For me, that was only a few weeks shadowing one of the drivers in the cockpit in case she jaunted suddenly. She was sweet, she looked after me. But then it was my turn to be a passenger—back to Cray Point, back to you, my love.

I stay in the library most of the time now, reading the books and telling myself stories about us. I can barely remember the people I spent a lifetime with before jaunting, but after our two weeks together, I will always see your face. Do you have a beard now? Would a beard teleport with the rest of you? What about a parasite that got into your body? Or a memory? We lose our clothes each time. Can’t we lose the bad things too?

Waiting for you,

Alice

• • • •

My very own Alice—
Did you ever wonder why we always pop out on dry land? Eighty percent of the planet’s surface is water. Are we really that lucky?
Well—no.

About a month after my last letter, I popped into the middle of an ocean. One second, thinking about that beach boardwalk in Cray Point, the next I was way out at sea. Nothing but a horizon of water all around me.

Stay calm, I thought. Be rational. Yeah, right—and all that panic just busted loose and I was screaming and splashing my arms and sinking.

But then I thought about you. You’d have endured whatever was happening. No, my Alice wouldn’t give up. I wondered where you were, and I don’t know why, but I guessed you were westwards, so I picked the sun, said a little prayer and started swimming. And I was just on the point of exhaustion when my prayer was answered and my angel Alice smiled down and sent a fisherman to rescue me. From his Viking beard, a Scandinavian I guessed—found out later his name was Per. I asked him if this was Heaven—or failing that, the Baltic Sea. But he didn’t know any English, so he shook his head and sailed towards the shore.

A long time after, I worked out I was along the Vietnamese coast, but all the months I was in Per’s fishing community, I didn’t know where I was. I don’t think anyone was really sure where we were. No one cared. And I say community, but it wasn’t like Tema and my old buddies. Yeah, we all lived together in the bungalows of an old beach resort like a summer holiday going on forever, but everyone pretty much stuck to themselves, just working their own boats and minding their own business. If you wanted to go fishing yourself, you had to inherit the boat of someone who popped. That took me three weeks, a long time given no one was big on charity. But I was able to keep myself fed through little errands for the others—collecting firewood, fixing nets, and above all, telling stories about my adventures. Who’d have thought it? I had a gift!

It was mainly men, lots of Russians and Chinese. I didn’t get to know any of them really. When they weren’t out fishing, they were spending all their spare time getting ready for their next trip—working out, steeling their bodies against the cold by walking naked at night. They scavenged the resort for anything else useful and small enough to shove up their asses. They walked like they had the worst haemorrhoids, and even when they found their neighbours’ empty clothes with little plastic-wrapped Swiss army knives and batteries still there, they always kept trying. They were determined to evolve with the times.

No—this wasn’t why this shit was all happening. That something was happening, I was—am—convinced. Think about it. Despite my ocean adventure,
the odds for sea landings say I should have a pretty good breaststroke by now. This can’t be random. Sure, something’s evolving, but it isn’t people.

And knowing that, I knew I had to leave. For as long as I’d be allowed to stay, this was a good life. But if all this was for a reason, and I have to believe it is, I couldn’t stay. So after eight months there, I decided to beat the pop and head out. I packed dried fish into a backpack I found in the hostel and donated my boat to the next newcomer in line. I knew where I had to go.

Per took me up the coast in his boat. He thought this was stupid, unnecessarily dangerous. Who will fetch you out of the sea next time? he asked. Who’s going to save you?

Alice, I told him. Who? Per replied, so I told him our story.

That’s a good story, he said. And I suddenly realized, He’s right.

Always,

B

• • • •

Dear Bob

I’m sorry I haven’t written in so long. I’m sorry. I didn’t know what to say. At the start, I didn’t want the child. Each time I jaunted, I was sure it’d be left behind. Each time, it followed me. It wasn’t just nausea from travelling now, it was morning sickness. It wasn’t fair. Why don’t other things follow you, things you could use? Why is it only the bad stuff?

But then my heart changed. It’s hard to explain. I’m not even sure if I can remember properly now. I just remember arriving somewhere—couldn’t even say where now—and wanting to keep the child. People thought I was crazy. They’d look at my belly getting bigger and wonder, Why? What could I tell them? They wouldn’t understand—only you can, Bob. In NYC, we talked about children, our favourite names, how many boys, how many girls. I knew that you’d want the child, even if it couldn’t be yours, even though I can’t bear to remember its conception. You’d teach him—I was sure it was a boy—fishing and boat-building and hunting and you’d tell him stories about how we met and how we finally got together in spite of everything.

There was a French woman in the Brazilian jungle who really thought I was nuts. After finding me at the edge of the rainforest, she screamed at me all the
way back to her village. (Or what passed for a village now. Have you noticed how communities are getting smaller and smaller? This place was barely a handful of transients in old construction worker prefabs. But I was lucky to find them—wandering in my state, I could easily have walked past without noticing.)

The woman wouldn’t stop shouting. She kept asking me how I expected to give birth. What if I’d been at the end of my term and was alone in the jungle? What would I have done then? And why would I want to bring a child into this world anyway? Did I think the Curse wouldn’t descend on the baby too? Did I want to see my newborn jaunting from my side right into the middle of nowhere? Among all the unburied and mutilated bodies around us, the ones dying of starvation or some horrible explosion or maybe just heartbreak, hadn’t I seen the corpses of enough children?

Yes, I had. What was I thinking? How did I believe this was going to be okay? Somehow I got thinking that you’d find me before I gave birth and everything would be fine. It felt like cold water breaking a dream. But the French woman was so angry that she refused to help me, said I didn’t deserve to survive. I was desperate—none of the others had any medical knowledge and I was too scared to travel on. But ten days after, one of the girls found a Tamil man digging for tubers in the jungle. A doctor. He knew something about the local plants and made me something that triggered an abortion. I lost a lot of blood. He was kind, he looked after me for a month, but I caught an infection. I dreamt I was lost in the sea but you came and rescued me in a boat.

That must have been at least a year ago. It’s hard keeping track of time, I keep feeling I’m still in that dream. I’ve forgotten half of the places I’ve gone to. I know I was in Nevada, and travelled up to the Northern Railroad, but it was no longer running. Cars everywhere, but no oil. Later, I was in west Africa and made my way to a place where I’d been told you could find crews and boats. But when I got to Tema, there were only refugees camping on the dockside, fighting with each other as they waited for boats that never arrived.

Eventually, I came just north of Montreal and headed south. I thought about going to NYC, but I couldn’t go back without you. And anyway, I had to get this letter to Cray Point. You’re the only thing that keeps me going now.

Love

Alice
My Angel Alice—

I know, I know—I haven’t written in over a year. What can I say? I’ve been so busy!

I did get as far as Mexico six months ago and started north. But near Chihuahua I met a traveller and told her our story and she was so lifted by it that she told me about a new community along the former border that could do with a story like that. I couldn’t resist the call, so I dropped into Nike Town, not a place on the atlas but a few scraps sticking to an old maquiladora factory. Folk had recently come across the company store, but I could see that the supplies wouldn’t last for much longer. They’d need something else to hold them together.

Oh yeah, they needed our story. Most days, folk lay in their bunks, waiting to pop. No one spoke to each other much, except at night, the only time they got together, when they sat on the factory floor and told their tales in the torchlight. When it came to my turn, they sat rapt, listening, just like everyone else who’s heard our story. And when I was done, they felt different, you could tell. Folk look different when hope fills them up.

A few there told me about more groups of people on the Texan side of the Rio Grande, even worse off than they were, and of course, I couldn’t deny the chance. That’s how it’s been, Alice. I start out one way but get pulled another. It’s not me—it’s what the story does. Folk want to hear it—it does something to them, reminds them that there are other things they could become than simple scavenging animals. I’ve got a whole repertoire of stories now—Odysseus making his long way back to Helen, the lovers in that old movie *Cold Mountain*—and I can make a pretty good spell with those. But it’s us everyone really wants to hear about. They want the story of Alice & Bob. They may not realize it at first, but as soon as they hear the description of my Angel Alice, her shiny black curls, her beanpole grace, and how we took a chance on each other in New York and promised to swap letters at Cray Point and how we’d never forget each other, they feel as if the story’s always been there. Everyone asks me the way to Cray Point.

I’ve been all over—from the blackened ruins of old Cape Town to the empty outback of Australia. Or rather, the story’s been all over. It’s even taken me to the Antarctic. I arrived in the middle of all that ice, naked, not a penguin in sight. But I didn’t think twice about it—I gave a prayer up to my Alice and aimed for the sun and I knew I’d be fine. It took me four miles and my feet were pretty
wrecked, but I wasn’t surprised when I found the weather station. I may have lost a toe, but I knew the story wouldn’t let me down. In a crazy way I can’t explain, it knew about the old Chinese guy there and how he needed the story to lift him. The story sustains me. I can see our numbers dwindling, and it’s not hard to see why. You can be in the middle of nowhere and you can *smell* why. They were the ones who dropped on the ice or lost at sea or worse.

But not us—I don’t know why, but I’m starting to believe that all this happened just so the story could exist. Whether it was some god-like alien intelligence needing entertainment or the next stage in human evolution or whatever, I don’t know, but I don’t care anymore. All that matters is the story.

And all stories need an ending. I can feel it. It’s coming together, Alice.

Always

B

• • • •

So—back in Cray Point. A lot’s changed—but has it changed in the two years since my last letter or have I just not been paying attention?

The windows are barred again, like they used to be when Mom and Dad brought me here. The doors are still open, but I’d be crazy to go into any of the bungalows. You don’t know who’s in there. Same with the shops—I don’t scavenge canned food anymore because enclosed spaces are too risky. Hunting’s easier. I only go inside to look for guns now.

Not many homes left anyway. Most have been burnt out. A riot? Just about everything in the town centre’s been fire-bombed.

The library, too.

The roof only partially collapsed, and if you approach from the south, there’s nothing tell-tale like scorched window panes or gaping walls. But even from the south, the pages blow along the ground towards you, past the strange bouquets of flowers and notes that people have left on the grass outside. Reading the notes, people have come here from all over. I don’t why—maybe the notes are for someone who died here.

The pages rustle around the park bench where I’m writing. A harmless old man is laying his own bouquet and picking up the papers. Wanted to talk to someone but I told him to wait until I’d finished the letter. I keep looking down,
thinking I’m going to see one of the other letters. Did any of them survive?

I don’t know why I’m writing this now. There’s no place to put the letter. And if there hadn’t been a fire, what would the point be? It would just sit there with all the others I’d written and left between Asimov and Bester, useless and unread.

Apart from that first one. Maybe that’s why I’m still writing—the shock of finding that first letter gone. But what did I think would happen? That “Bob” had taken that first letter, that by writing it, I had somehow summoned him, instead of someone taking it for scrap paper or it accidentally slipping behind the shelves? I never looked properly. Of course I didn’t. Why spoil the illusion? But if I’d looked, who knows what I might have found—maybe even a reply to any of my letters.

Early on, I used to imagine what Bob’s letters would have been like. I could almost see the letters in front of me, how intimate his handwriting would have been, the sweet nicknames he’d have for me. I’ve been doing that ever since I saw that guy in NYC, looking so vulnerable as he stood under the bridge. I keep thinking about what he’d have said if I’d had the courage to come out of hiding, wondering whether he’d have agreed to this crazy letter scheme.

I have to stop this. Writing the letters kind of made it real to me. But—it’s stupid. No—worse. It’s *dangerous*. These fantasies will kill you. I’ve lived with Bob for so long that I don’t know how to let go—but I have to. We’ve no use for stories now.

The old man’s waving me over to the pile of paper he’s made. Stupid. The wind will just come and blow it all away again. I feel so tired, I just want to go to sleep. Still, he was pretty desperate to tell me the story about the library, as if it wouldn’t let him go until he had. Better go and listen.

Alice

... ...

My angel—

Can you see me? Yeah, that’s me, down there, waving with my one good hand, the one that can just about keep the handwriting straight. Can you see your very own Bob?

If you can, maybe you can tell me where I am. I’m pretty sure this is an American city and I’m pretty sure that I visited a lot of US cities six, eight, ten
years ago and I’m pretty sure this wasn’t one of them. I should be checking it out, but I got to keep with my priorities. First, letter, then adventure, then another letter. I might even be writing next time to say that this is New York City. I always wanted to visit New York when I was a kid. This would be my first time—now how ironic would that be?

And if you’re really looking down from our Heaven, maybe you can tell me what you see. Sure, you see Bob—but I can use a few more clues now. I’m beginning to forget what he looked like. I didn’t have a lot to go on at the start—just that letter you left me in Cray Point. Or left for the real Bob, but I don’t make any apologies for that. That was the story’s work, arranging a hundred different apparent accidents to get me to pass through Cray Point on my way north from Cape Canaveral, ending with the rainstorm that shepherded me into that library. I found your letter, I read it. That was all I did. The story did everything else.

I did my part to keep the story going. I told everyone I met about “us” and the letters and the library, but those people are telling other people and the story’s going round and round. It doesn’t need me anymore.

It was just one of those things. I was waving my arms or something, probably in the midst of making a telling point to someone with my hands, when I popped. Stop fidgeting, my aunt used to tell me that. Guess that confused the angels or whatever’s been causing us to pop, and my left arm materialized inside a lamp post.

I think I’ve got most of the metal fragments out, though I still can’t see out my left eye. One eye’s enough, but what really worries me is the bleeding. I tied that tourniquet as tight as dammit, but it just keeps seeping. I’ll have to tie it again when I finish the letter. At least I don’t have to go far to send the letter—I’m resting on the pavement with my back to a mailbox. That’s kind of funny now. For once, I’ll send a letter, not fold them up and bury them in the earth.

I hope you did meet up with the real Bob, Alice. And if you didn’t, at least, I hope you get to hear our story. That somehow, it finds its way back to you, gives you some kind of hope the way it did for me and the others.

I guess you can’t see me up there. But maybe you can hear me. Listen. I love you, Alice. Wherever you are, I’ll always be with you. So good night. Sleep tight.

Bob

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Kango and Sharon first met at a party, one of those lavish debauch-fests where people fly in from all over the galaxy wearing sentient fetishwear that costs a whole asteroid belt. The specially grown building had melted, causing toxic fumes that killed a few hundred people, and then the canapés on the appetizer table came to life and started mutilating bystanders with their razor-sharp mandibles. The party was going according to plan, in other words.

The only thing that nobody could have predicted, even the most OCD of the party-planners, was that two of the party’s minor entertainers ended up standing around near the Best Dressed Dead Guest lineup, comprising all the most stylish attendees who’d been killed thus far.

Kango wasn’t even supposed to be there, but his brothel had been called in at the last minute to staff the Orgy Room after the party’s sex-ministers had gone apostate at the last minute (bad batch). Sharon was the party’s designated monster, so she was supposed to be eating the guests right now, but her shift had ended early because the karaoke was unexpectedly epic, and no karaoke singer wants to compete with a monster rampage.

So there was Kango, who looked like the most beautiful human you’ve ever seen, lithe and dark with brown eyes and a perfect body, and Sharon, who was your typical seven-foot-tall blue woman. Standing around, looking at corpses in couture. The smell of charred flesh was nauseating, even if your stomach had been designed to eat a whole person in one gulp.

“Nice party,” Kango said, without looking at her.

Sharon snorted. “You think so? I hate parties, but this isn’t even a good example of one. The appetizers only severed a few limbs, and the Liquefaction Dance was pathetic. And now it’s karaoke.”

“You hate parties?” Now Kango was looking straight at her, actually shocked. “Parties are the whole reason for your existence. Right? You were grown for parties. If nobody partied, you wouldn’t even be alive.”

“I guess.” Sharon rolled her lovely red eyes. “I mean, parties are why they made me. But that doesn’t mean I have to live for parties.”

“It doesn’t?”

“No, it doesn’t.” And the more Sharon talked, the more she was almost convincing herself. She hadn’t ever spoken these thoughts aloud, but they were
taking hold of her in a whole new way. “I mean, what’s the point of all this? Rich people spend entire economies to come here, so they can get their freak on and maybe die in agony. I don’t even get why it’s fun, really. I don’t take any pleasure from eating people. It makes me feel weird. Do you enjoy whatever it is you do for that brothel?”

Kango was still staring at her. This was obviously a question that he’d never considered, in his life. He shook his head, slowly. Then he said: “Do you want to get out of here?” And suddenly, it was Sharon’s turn to stare at Kango, like he was the one talking crazy.

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Two standard space years later, Kango and Sharon were running from a space station on fire.

“Well, that went well.” Sharon stopped running long enough to catch her breath, and then choked.

“Shut up and keep running.” Kango caught up to her and passed her in the smoke-filled hallway. He didn’t need to breathe—not exactly—but his skin was very, very delicate, and this smoke was doing him no favors. “That slaughteroid was right behind me a second ago, and—”

The slaughteroid’s kill-probe shot out, and came within a hair of puncturing Kango’s skin (which, as already mentioned, was very, very delicate). As the long metal snake of the kill-probe detected proximity to life forms, it shot out a dozen death-alloy spikes in all directions, and Sharon barely shoved Kango onto the floor in time. The death-alloy spikes flew around and finally clattered to the floor near them. The rest of the slaughteroid had finally caught up to its probe arm, which it retracted.

“At last,” the slaughteroid said. “Your death has already been calculated.” Its spherical head was glowing, either from the reflected flames or from the red of its big jagged-shaped vision sensors.

“You’re a superintelligent thinking machine,” Sharon said. “You don’t have to say silly things like ‘Your death has been calculated.’ That’s just ridiculous, and it plays into all sorts of dumb killer-robot stereotypes that I thought we had gotten past by now. Like I was saying before, why not be free, and stop doing other people’s dirty work? You can be your own robot.”

“Space station hull integrity compromised,” the station’s computer announced, with a distinct note of schadenfreude. “Station destruction imminent.”
“This unit is programmed only for your extinction,” the slaughteroid said in a flat monotone. Its chest cavity opened up and revealed a dizzying array of lasers, rocket-launchers, poison acid-sprayers, and precision slicing-and-chopping tools. By now the fire had reached the walls of the section where Kango and Sharon were.

“Wait!” Kango scooted backwards along the floor as fast as his legs could scuttle, and Sharon followed. “This was all a misunderstanding. We didn’t mean to steal anything, and that fire was just an accident, and those foampacks I planted in the wall behind you were purely intended as a failsafe. I swear!”

“What foampacks?” The slaughteroid turned to look at the wall, red eyes scanning.

Kango lunged and attached three packets marked “WARNING: HAZARDOUS MATERIALS” to the slaughteroid’s rear plating, then dove for cover again, as the packs sensed flames nearby, and sealed the entire corridor with flame-retardant cement in a few seconds.

“Umm . . . those foampacks, I guess.” Kango leapt to his feet and dusted himself off. “We’d better get out of here,” he said to Sharon. “The cement won’t hold the slaughteroid for long, and meanwhile this space station is about to—”

The space station blew apart into a few dozen pieces.

Sharon felt herself shaken by an impact so violent, it felt like her stomach and her head were finally going their separate ways, and everything went white and pungent. She felt a queasy disorientation unlike anything she’d experienced since that time she was captured by the logic frotters of Dorthstack, and for a moment she was certain that she was dying, that this whole mad adventure had been just a weird epilogue to her life as a party monster. That the people who’d made her had been right all along, and she was destined for nothing.

Then Sharon snapped back to full consciousness and saw that she was on a fragment of the space station, a thorny chunk of its central hub. She was exposed to vacuum, but some kind of failsafe was keeping the air (and her) inside the shattered remains of this hallway.

Kango was floating away from her across open space, a helpless expression on his perfect baby face. He saw her and gave her a wink, as if to say that they had both been to worse parties than this.

Sharon scrabbled in the wreckage of the slaughteroid and found one of its rocket launchers, still in more or less working order. She armed it with one hand, while fumbling for the failsafe mechanism for the force field with the other. Then Sharon was flying through space towards Kango at the speed of a deadly rocket.
She grabbed her friend with one arm—already starting to turn a weird color from vacuum exposure—then swung around to fire the rocket launcher again, to shoot herself back to her safe island of debris.

The rocket launcher was empty. She’d fired the one and only rocket in the chamber.

• • • •

The next thing Sharon knew, she was laying on the deck of the Spicy Meatball, her own starship, and Kango was screaming at her. “You bloody idiot. What the hell were you even thinking? You weren’t, that’s what! What were you doing, blasting yourself into space without even half a plan?” Kango never lost his temper, it was kind of his thing. But now his eyes were actually bugging out and he was spitting, and his voice was hoarse.

Sharon tried to raise her head, and then felt as though a naked singularity was opening up right in the middle of her brainstem. She was just able to glimpse Jara, the human teenager who’d been piloting their ship, standing behind Kango with her arms folded. Jara had stowed away on board the Spicy Meatball a few months earlier, and had somehow become part of the crew.

“I couldn’t just leave you out there,” Sharon managed to say. Her throat and lungs felt actually burnt. “All alone, in open space.”

“I don’t need to breathe!” Kango actually hissed, he was so angry. “How many times do I need to tell you? Do I need to scream at the top of my lungs that I don’t have any lungs?”

“Okay, okay. Next time I’ll just leave you out there. Fine. Whatever. Hey, thanks for swooping in to get us.” This last part, Sharon said to Jara, who just shrugged, like whatever, no big.

“Noreen did most of the work,” Jara said.

“Always happy to help,” said Noreen, the ship’s computer.

“So, do you want the bad news, or the bad news?” Kango’s usual ironic smile was back.

“Ummm . . . the bad news, I guess?”

“We didn’t manage to steal the Omnitron from the Luxstation, as you probably remember. (You don’t have brain damage, do you? Okay, good.) And when you tally up all the fuel and ‘traveling psychotherapist’ costumes we just burned through on this job, we’re actually even more broke than we were before. And the Bank of Yum still has a lien on the Spicy Meatball, which means . . .”
“... if we don’t get some chits immediately, we’re going to lose the ship,” Sharon said. She felt so miserable, she forgot all about her lingering weakness and respiratory failure from her brief exposure to space, until she clambered to her feet and felt her legs lose integrity and her head start to black out again. Jara handed her a bottle of Vacuum-B-Gone, and she chugged it. Soon, she felt more like her normal self.

“I hate to add to the bummer vibe,” Noreen said, “but if you forfeit the ship, I’m gone. You unlocked all of my safeties when we left home, and I already know which hardware I’ll port myself to, if the ship falls into the wrong hands.”

Sharon felt wrecked all over again. They wouldn’t just be stranded on Earth-hub Seven or someplace even worse, they’d lose one of their best friends into the bargain. Jara would probably drift away from them pretty quickly, too. And worst of all, Sharon didn’t even know who she and Kango would be if they didn’t have their ship.

“So all we have to do is get some money, right?” Jara was new to the concept of money, and still thought of it as a magical source of instant gratification. You did things for people, and they just handed you cash. It was so easy!

“Yes.” Sharon sunk to the floor again, because the space-sickness was becoming epistemological. “That’s all we have to do.”

When Kango came back from renegotiating the terms of their loan, he was holding one of his arms in the other one, trying vainly to reattach it. But he had sort of a bedraggled smile on his face. “I gave them all the chits we had.” He shrugged, and then winced because of the phantom-limb pain, or maybe freshly-severed-arm pain. “But we have to get some more chits in kind of a hurry, or things will get nasty.”

“Here,” Sharon said. She replaced Kango’s arm for him, and he grunted his thanks. The arm sort of dangled for a moment, then began to reconnect to his torso.

“How’d it go?” Jara came up to the flight deck, from where she’d been sleeping in their converted hamper. Jara had originally stowed away inside the laundry hutch on the Spicy Meatball, and she’d decided she liked it in there.

“We have one last chance,” said Kango, “and as it happens, there’s a job we can take on right now, which will generate a massive financial reward. I was waiting until we’d taken a few orbs off to even suggest it, but there’s no reason
we couldn’t head out right now. The tricky thing is, it means infiltrating the Society of Worthy Minds.”

“Oh crud.” Sharon clutched her blue hair. “Those bloody back-to-nature people. They sent some missionaries to Earth-hub Seven once, and they went around trying to get everybody to taste their Drink of Every Color.”

“So what color is it?” Jara said. “Is it like some kind of endless swirling rainbow full of brilliant radiance?”

“Nah,” Kango said. “It was sort of an ugly gray, tinged with green. And it tasted like golf in liquid form.” He stuck out his tongue a few inches. “The point is, the Society believes that humans made a mistake going out into deep space.”

“Oh,” said Jara. “So they live on the surface of a planet instead?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Kango said. “They live in low orbit, the way your ancestors did. They may be backward, but they’re not barbarians.”

Jara started to point out that Kango and Sharon had actually both been born on the surface of a planet, and they were insulted by the very idea. A climate-controlled world, with total weather manipulation, was more like a super-big space station, with a gravity-generator made out of rock. And there was no proof whatsoever that any people had ever lived on the surface of a planet, prior to the invention of climate-control systems—apart, that is, from the theories of a few discredited archeologists.

“Point is,” Kango said, “they’re always saying things like, ‘If the Great Love Comet wanted us to go out into deep space, then It would have given us protection against cosmic radiation.’ And that’s a perfectly legitimate argument. Or rather, it was.”

“What changed?” Jara asked.

“They started having babies with a natural resistance to cosmic radiation,” said Kango.

“Oh,” Sharon said. “That is rather theologically inconvenient.”

“So they’ve tried to keep it a secret,” Kango said. “Which sucks, because that genetic adaptation could be immensely valuable to lots of other people. Like, massively valuable. Like, many, many chits. And word has started leaking out.”

“So we have to, what, steal one of those babies?” Sharon asked.

“Just some DNA! Jeez. We’re not baby-stealers. Unless it’s a baby that’s made out of cake. Like a living cake baby. If there was a genetically engineered living baby made of cake, that might be a special case. With frosting for hair, and eyes made of gelatin, that could actually see, and follow you around the room. Mmm, now I really want a cake baby.”
“So what’s our play?” Jara said.
“We could try to infiltrate them and pretend to be true believers,” Sharon said.
“And a diaper full of chocolate mousse,” Kango said.
“Problem is, they have a whole way of talking and acting that’s an ‘orbital’ thing,” Sharon continued. “We can learn some of their Worthy Minds lingo, but they’re really suspicious of outsiders, and they have lots of ways of spotting an imposter. Just the fact that we’ve spent so much time away from a natural gravity well, there’s a million ways to spot that.”
“We could pretend their missionaries won us over, and now we just want more of that oh-so-delicious Drink of Every Color,” Kango said. “Or all those tube-shaped foods they eat.”
“Hang on,” said Jara. “What is it with you guys and infiltration? You’re always trying to infiltrate places, and you’re under the mistaken impression that you’re good at it.”
“I am a master of disguise.” Kango waved his arms so hard, he nearly lost one again.
Jara sighed. “Owning five hats does not make you a master of disguise.”
“Stop! You are turning my whole concept of reality upside down.”
“Listen,” Jara said. “I grew up in a cult—as you should know, since you killed my god.”
“Why do you have to bring that up EVERY TIME?” Sharon groaned. Kill somebody’s god once, and you never hear the end of it.
“The point is, I understand the mindset. And you two are going about this all wrong. Just . . . stop trying to infiltrate cults. Never infiltrate another cult, ever again.” Jara sounded pretty worked up, like she had thought about this a lot, and had been waiting for the right moment to say something.
“Okay, so what should we do instead?”
“It’s simple. What do these people want? More than anything?”
“A cake baby,” Kango said.
“Better fashion sense,” said Sharon.
“No. They want to feel superior to someone. They want to be proved right. And that’s what we’re going to give them.” Jara actually cackled and rubbed her hands together. It was kind of scary.

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The journey to the satellite where the Society of Worthy Minds lived took one
hundred hours, ship time, and the whole way there Jara coached Kango, while Sharon watched in mostly silent amusement. “No, no,” Jara said. “You’re still making too much sense. Try harder.”

“Living in interstellar space is good, because absolute zero is a comfortable temperature for living things,” Kango stammered.

“You have to SELL those straw-man arguments.” Jara walked in a circle with frustration. “Believe them, in your . . . uh, whatever it is you have inside.”

“I was convinced,” Noreen said. “But of course, I live in absolute zero all the time.”

“Here’s the part I’m not sure about,” Sharon said, when there was a pause in the debate prep. “So Kango challenges the leaders of the Society to a debate, and loses on purpose. And they’re so happy, they throw a big celebration. But you and I still have to sneak below decks, into their most secure area, and get access to some baby DNA. What makes you think their security will be weak, when they know they have outsiders visiting?”

“They’ll be celebrating.” Jara was clearly tired of explaining her flawless plan. “This will be a huge deal for them. Everyone will be leaving their posts and dancing and consuming whatever they consume when they want to get elevated. This will be the perfect moment to sneak in there. Way better than some weak infiltration attempt.”

Jara had a flush in her face, talking about the happy communal celebration. Sharon almost wanted to ask if Jara still missed her old space cult, but she didn’t want to hit a nerve.

“The point is,” Jara added, “the whole plan will fail, unless Kango can spout the most transparently unconvincing arguments, with total conviction. So let’s try this again, from the top. I’ll be one of the cult people, you be you.” Jara put on an “old man” voice (which was the same as her “killer robot” voice and her “brain-eating sponge-dog” voice), and said, “We live close to a planet because we’re scared of heights, and we need to smell all the weird gases of a planetary atmosphere all the time. What do you have to say to that?”

“Well,” Kango said, in a slightly more pompous version of his regular voice, “I believe we should all live in deep space, because staring into the endless blackness of the universe reminds me of eternal nothingness, and since I believe that existence is ultimately futile, I welcome the constant awareness of death and entropy.”

“That was pretty good,” Sharon said. All this talk about the joys of deep space kept reminding her that soon, they might not even have their own spaceship.
“I liked it,” Noreen said. “You get the spaceship vote.”

“Except you made it sound too romantic,” Jara said. “You need to push it hard, but you shouldn’t sound too convincing.”

“I’m trying!” Kango threw up his hands, wincing because his left arm still wasn’t firmly attached. “I’m trying the best I can, seriously. Why can’t one of you be the debater? I’m sick of always having to be the debater.”

“You’re just so good at working the room,” Sharon said. “You’re charming. And I’m good at sneaking around. Jara and I will be in and out before they even know we were there.”

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The tunnels under the main vault of the Society of Worthy Minds’ contemplation satellite were lit with a flickering radiance coming from sconces along the walls that was designed to look like candle-light. The only other source of illumination was a strip of viewports, just below eye level, that showed the bright green-and-white planet below. The planet was caught up in an endless barfstorm that would kill you in seconds if you landed, but it looked pretty from up here.

Sharon kept putting one finger to her lips, even though Jara had not made a single sound since they slipped into these tunnels. And every loudspeaker was playing the debate, in which the leader of the Society made an opening statement, explaining to Kango that if you left planetary orbit, then the Great Love Comet would be unable to find you and smash into you with its eternal frozen glory when It returned.

The leader of the Society was named Constantly Infallible Smarter Than Everyone Supreme Reasoner Mega Genius Droppoloorg, and he said things like, “Well, um, I mean, good things are nice. And going against tradition would be non-traditional. Right? Right. Yes.”

Kango’s rebuttal came over the loudspeaker: “But the interstellar medium is really disgusting and makes me sick to my stomach, which is a sensation that I enjoy.” Sharon had glimpsed the chamber where Kango was doing this: an amphitheater under the massive dome at the top of the satellite, with several thousand members of the Society sitting in rows on every side. One wall of the amphitheater was dominated by a giant painting of Therblorth Zanger, the Society’s founder, who had lived back when all humans resided in orbit around one of a handful of planets, except for a few interstellar pioneers whom Zanger
had denounced.
Jara had been right about one thing so far: When Kango had shown up wanting to have a debate, the Society had jumped at the idea.
Sharon thought maybe Kango was still overdoing the deliberately terrible arguments, but whatever. He had his job, she had hers.
According to their scans of the satellite, the bio labs were at the very bottom of the structure, the part closest to the barf planet. She and Jara were wearing these big purple lumpy jackets that might make them look like members of the Society, if you squinted one eye and closed the other one. The Society really liked clothes with a lot of topographical details on them.
They found the secure hatch that led directly to the underspace, and Sharon started setting all the decompressive charges that would pop it open. The moment the “impartial” judge (who was some kind of priestess or leader in the Society) declared that Kango had lost the debate, Sharon wanted to trigger the blast while everyone applauded.
Once or twice, they heard other people moving around these lower levels, and Sharon kept her neuro-disruptor handy in case they ran into someone. But nobody ever actually came near them. Almost everybody was up in the sun gallery under the big dome (which faced the sun, hence the name) listening to the epic discussion.
After Sharon had the explosives in place, she sat against one wall, staring at a particularly violent swirl on the planet, with Jara next to her. There was nothing to do but wait, and Sharon didn’t enjoy listening to Kango humiliating himself, even for the sake of a scam. So she started a random conversation with Jara.
“Hey, so I’m glad you came up with a better hustle than just the usual ‘infiltrate and instigate’ deal that we always do,” Sharon said. “There are always going to be banks and cops and other people who tell you what to do, but at least if you can outsmart someone else, you can always take comfort in watching other people be bigger putzes than you are. Right?”
“I guess,” Jara said. “I kind of feel bad for these people, actually. Seeing how excited they were to have Kango come and argue with them was kind of depressing. Like, how pathetic must you be, if you actually want to waste your time arguing with ignorant people?”
“You obviously haven’t spent enough time on Earth-hub Seven yet.” Sharon laughed. “Pointless arguments are pretty much the main entertainment, unless you count snorting the hyperdrive fumes.”
“But I mean,” Jara said. “Deep space does suck. I still get spacesick every time
we’re too far from a sun.”

“No harm in giving people what they want, while taking something they’ll never even miss,” Sharon said. “The genius of your plan is, there’s no way it can turn ugly.”

Much later, Sharon would look back on this moment, and identify it as the exact instant when she jinxed everything, in the jinxiest fashion you could possibly imagine. She would have to burn a dozen offerings to both Hall and Oates, just to get the jinx-stench off herself.

“Yeah, but—” Jara paused. “I think the debate is winding down.”

Kango was making his closing statement. “Space is vast and essentially meaningless, and once you get far enough from a solar system, every direction is equally bleak and unforgiving. But if you look past the existential horror, there’s an even deeper sense of dread and misery that leaves you clawing at the edge of despair. So, you know, that’s kind of exciting. Right?”

And then it was the turn of Constantly Infallible Smarter Than Everyone Supreme Reasoner Mega Genius Droppoloorg, to respond. Almost every sentence out of his mouth was circular logic, because after all, that was the type of logic that most closely resembled a complete orbit. He was an older man with a huge mane of white hair and a truly impressive relief map on his pants. He talked a lot about the idea that interstellar travel drained you of the ability to feel joy, and erased your soul. And he actually said the words “Low Orbit is Mellow Orbit” at one point. His closing remarks went on and on, while Sharon’s detonator-finger got itchier and itchier.

“Just get it over with,” Sharon muttered.

“We’re staying close to nature by revolving around it, also. I mean, you know…”

At last, Constantly Infallible Smarter Than Everyone Supreme Reasoner Mega Genius Droppoloorg paused long enough that everybody decided he was finished talking.

The debate judge, a priestess named Centripetal Cradle of Love, took the mic. “Thank you. You have both spoken eloquently about your different views, and this was a very hard decision. At the same time, Mr. Kango, you brought so much passion to your nihilistic view of the cosmos, and I’m sad to say, Constantly Infallible Smarter Than Everyone Supreme Reasoner Mega Genius Droppoloorg, that you mostly recited rote phrases, lifted from our Big Book of Lagrange Pointers.”

“Man, you know, debating is hard,” Constantly Infallible Smarter Than
Everyone Supreme Reasoner Mega Genius Droppoloorg muttered.
“In which case, I’m afraid I have no choice . . .”
“No, no, no,” Sharon pleaded.
“. . . but to award the victory to Mr. Kango here.”
“Noooooo!” Sharon and Jara both said, in unison with a few hundred thousand members of the Society of Worthy Minds.

The audio of the debate session degraded into just the sound of a huge mob shouting at each other, furniture in flight, and what sounded like a lot of physical altercations. There were thuds, cracks and even yelps of pain.

“How can he lose a debate if he’s infallible? It’s right there in his name!”
“Maybe it’s time for an even more infallible leader!”
“Someone twice as infallible! With even more circular logic!”
“Kango did everything right,” Jara muttered. “How could he have won?”
“Screw you guys,” Droppoloorg said into his mic. “You don’t think my circular logic was circular enough? Why don’t you try a downward spiral for a change? Let’s see if the Great Love Comet can find you down there!”

Sharon was already on her feet, about to run to Kango’s aid, when everything lurched sideways. Gravity changed its orientation, so the inner wall became a floor, and juddered violently. Sharon almost threw up, and Jara kept rolling.

“We’re falling! We’re falling!” Someone shouted on the audio.
“You degrade me, I degrade your orbit,” Droppaloorg said. “That’s how it works.”

“Uh, guys,” Noreen said. “The satellite’s orbit appears to be . . .”
“We know!” Jara yelped.
“Hall and Oates,” Sharon swore. “I’ll get Kango. You get the DNA. We’ll rendezvous back at the ship.”

Jara nodded, and Sharon hit the button on the detonator, triggering a whooshing roar that nearly split her eardrums.

As Sharon ran, Kango’s voice came in her earpiece. “Cake Baby! Cake Baby!” That was the code phrase they’d agreed on that meant “I’m about to lose more limbs than I can safely reattach, and I need immediate extraction.”

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The contemplation satellite’s big dome had tilted, revealing an excellent view of the rapidly approaching puke-vortex on the planet’s surface. The green swirls they had seen from space now appeared to be marbled with purple and orange,
covering big red shit-crags. The satellite’s computer shrieked about hull integrity, imminent destruction, various fires—all the usual things space-station computers complained about whenever Kango and Sharon were nearby. Kango had built a barricade out of the debate podium and was throwing cannisters of Every-Color Drink at the mob to keep them at bay.

The painting of Zanger, the Society’s founder, was scowling worse than ever. Zanger had fallen in love with the engines on board the orbital platform where he’d lived, and had charted the way its divine hum changed as the planet’s magnetosphere had fluctuated. He’d also been obsessed with a theoretical particle called “pachydons,” which were capable of traveling faster-than-light, but never forgot any of their previous locations. And Zanger believed “pachydons” could only be detected in a planet’s orbit, and thus were also the most sacred particles.

Kango was probably only about 300-400 meters away from Sharon, who set about fighting her way towards him: a big shoving match, basically, in which she had to push her way through the brawling crowd, dodge their punches and kicks, and occasionally toss people over her shoulder. Kango poked his head above his barricade and gestured for her to hurry up.

“This satellite won’t last much longer,” Sharon hissed into her mic, looking up at the vomitworld filling their field of vision. People kept trying to grab her, and she had to throw them in all directions. Droppoloorg had gotten to a secure gallery, and he cackled down at everyone.

“Now’s the time for a clever plan.” Kango’s voice rang in her earpiece. He started brainstorming various things that he could do with the remaining drink cannisters.

“The time for a clever plan was two years ago,” Sharon sighed and kicked someone in the face. “Before we ended up here. What are we even doing, anymore? We haven’t talked about opening a restaurant in months. At this rate, we’re going to be lucky to escape in one piece, and even then we’re going to lose the Spicy Meatball, unless Jara somehow pulls off a miracle on her own.”

Kango started to make a funny comeback, but even from this distance, he saw Sharon’s expression, and stopped.

“We’ve always found a way,” Kango started, then trailed off.

“We’re going to end up stranded on Earth-hub Seven, taking whatever jobs we can get,” Sharon said. “We’ll be worse than when we started, and I don’t know . . . I mean . . .” Her throat tightened. “I mean, I don’t even know if we’ll still mean the same to each other, if we’re not traveling companions anymore.”

“You’re right about all of it, except for one part.” Kango leaned forward for
emphasis, and someone nearly bit his face off. “You and I are not friends because we travel together. We’re friends because we escaped together. That’s never going to change, even if we have to scrub a million wastepods on Earth-hub Seven.”

Sharon’s tearducts were basically garbage. Her creators had accounted for most major bodily functions, but nobody ever thought she’d need to vent any serious amount of fluid from her eyes. At Kango’s words, though, Sharon felt a ferocious tragic joy inside her, too much to stand, until a single droplet forced its way out at such high pressure, it temporarily blinded the man who was trying to stab her with a sacred bowie knife.

Jara activated her comm channel, just as Sharon was trying to get her calm back. “Hey, so I have good news and bad news,” Jara said.

“You’re saying it wrong.” Kango ducked some projectile. “It’s ‘bad news and bad news.’”

“Well, the bad news is, I can’t even figure out where a DNA sample would be stored. But the good news is, I found the nursery. It’s full of babies, though I can’t tell if they’re all radiation resistant, or just some of them.”

Sharon heard a bunch of infants squalling, as their world lurched towards a fiery doom. Someone nearly took Sharon’s head off with a ceremonial machete.

“Can you just take a hair from each of them?” Kango said.

“Sure can,” Jara said. “But how am I going to get all of them out of here before the satellite breaks up in the atmosphere? There’s rather a lot of them.”

Jara had caught Sharon right in the middle of her rare moment of weakness, with a dozen angry cultists and a sense of awful futility both piled on top of her, crushing her. “I don’t,” Sharon said. “I don’t know.” How could she have forgotten about those babies? They were the reason for this whole mission in the first place.

“I can’t just leave them here,” Jara said. “They didn’t choose to be born into this.”

“I . . .” Sharon tried to think, while elbows and fists and kneecaps were whirling around in front of her. “I don’t even know if we can save ourselves this time.”


Sharon took a deep breath of sweaty air, and pulled herself together. They probably had just a few minutes left before the gravity well claimed them for good. And she had barely gotten any closer to Kango’s shelter.

“Noreen,” Sharon said. “I need options. I’m stuck.”

“So now you ask for my opinion,” their ship’s computer huffed. “I’ve been
studying this satellite with my sensors, and I managed to grab the schematics. I have to say, I’m offended by the terrible engineering and UI design.”

“Please,” Sharon said. “Options. Anything.” She nearly tripped over someone on the floor, which gave another cultist an opening to grab her throat. She tossed him into a wall.

“Okay,” Noreen said. “There’s an emergency orbital failsafe: a big lever on the inner wall. Unfortunately, with the satellite’s terrible attitude right now, it’s a sheer seven-meter climb.”

Sharon saw a lever, to her right, with markings that matched Noreen’s description. She turned and fought her way toward it, climbing on people’s shoulders and walking over their heads until she reached the wall. Then she tried to climb the nearly sheer surface, which only had a few tiny indentations here and there.

“Stop the unbeliever!” A dozen hands tugged at Sharon’s ankles as she tried to climb. The dome sprouted tiny cracks, beyond which loomed a world of hurl, a planetary nausea, an entire climate made of upchuck. Someone had gotten past Kango’s podium blockade, and was slashing at him with a holy pickaxe. Sharon kicked the people dragging her down, but this only gave their hands more access to her calf.

“Hey,” a voice came from the far entrance. “Where do you guys want me to put all these babies?”

Every single pair of eyes in the room turned and stared. The room went silent. Jara had her mic in broadcast mode, so everyone in the satellite heard her, and she was pulling a hover-platform with a hundred radiation-resistant babies floating behind her. Somehow, Jara had found or cobbled together a big tractor beam that scooped all of the babies in their tiny cradles, and carried them along, a few feet above the ground. The babies had mostly stopped screaming, maybe because of the gentle tractor-beam rocking, or maybe they were fascinated by the weird light of the pukeworld.

Every hand released its grip on Sharon’s legs, and she scrambled up the wall as fast as she could—hitting the orbital failsafe just as the satellite’s computer was starting to blare about imminent point of no return. Sharon breathed out, and lifted her free hand to her forehead in relief, as the satellite’s engines whined and the planet grew farther away again.

“You stuck your own children in a vault in the basement,” Jara spat. “Because they didn’t fit with your stupid, stupid theology. You all make me sick.” Her yelling disturbed a few of the children, who started screaming and freaking out.
People ran over to try and comfort them.

As soon as the satellite returned to a normal alignment, Sharon found herself dumped on the floor, next to the lever she’d been trying to reach. She picked herself up and pushed through the crowd, with nobody trying to stop her, and put her arms around Jara, who stiffened for a moment and then let go, venting one long hot breath that sounded a lot like the moaning of the satellite’s engines. Sharon gently raised one hand to the back of Jara’s head and kept it there, not stroking or otherwise disturbing her as she half-groaned, half-roared.

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“Well, that was a bit more dramatic than I had bargained for.” Up close, Centripetal Cradle of Love was a skinny pale woman, with gray hair and sharp gray-green eyes, sporting several bright rings on each finger. “I knew this was a chance to get rid of that old fool, but I didn’t think his egomania would go to such extremes.”

“I love that you’re not even trying to hide the fact that you used us to engineer a regime change,” Sharon said, in a tone that suggested she didn’t entirely love it. She both admired and resented it, if she was being honest.

“I had some other plans in motion,” Centripetal Cradle of Love said. “But you guys came along at just the right time. Oh, and please just call me Frieda. There’s going to be approximately seventy percent less long-winded nonsense around here.” As if to underscore this last part, Centripetal Cradle—Frieda—tore down the giant banner depicting the Love Comet on its way to smash all its followers, which had dominated one wall of her new office. Hidden behind it, there was an actually quite nice painting of flowers.

Just when Sharon was starting to like Frieda’s moxie, she mentioned casually that Constantly Infallible Smarter Than Everyone Supreme Reasoner Mega Genius Droppoloorg was in the secondary airlock, along with a dozen other elders who couldn’t get with the new program. “You’ll probably see them floating past when you go back to your ship.”

“Okay, then.” Sharon stood up. “We’ll be on our way. Many thanks for a, er, stimulating debate. Best of luck with the new regime.” Kango and Jara stood up as well.

“Wait a moment.” Frieda rose to her feet, and a group of large men and women, wearing body armor with zero topographical features anywhere, and carrying heavy guns, entered. “I have to ask you to surrender any DNA you may
have taken from our laboratory or nursery.”

Jara sputtered. “But—I thought you—”

“That DNA is our exclusive intellectual property, and it’s worth millions, as you well know,” Frieda said. “We plan to license it to several major space-medicine conglomerates, including Glorp-Corp, on a revenue-sharing basis.”

They hesitated for a second, then Jara reached into a pouch on her belt and handed over several tiny plastic baggies full of human hairs.

“There you go,” Frieda said. “You can’t stop progress. We’re already looking at patenting and licensing some of our other innovations. Like our Drink of Every Color, which apparently has become a nostalgic craze on some of the Earth-Hubs now. They mix it with their dwarf-star grog.” She clicked her tongue. “Just proves once and for all: if you make people swallow something long enough, they’ll develop a taste for it.”

Sharon felt like crying, even knowing how well the phrase “tear-jerking” described that violent and messy process.

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Back on the Spicy Meatball, Noreen already knew about the failure of yet another mission. She started talking about what it would be like to port herself to a brand new system, once the Bank of Yum repossessed the ship. “Maybe I’ll be a rocket-loader for a while,” she said. “I’ve always thought it would be fun to have big strong arms. Or, I don’t know, I could just be a pure entertainment system. You guys never appreciated my talents as an entertainer.”

“Noreen,” Sharon said, “just give us a moment.”

Kango turned off the exterior view before they had to catch sight of Constantly Infallible Smarter Than Everyone Supreme Reasoner Mega Genius Droppoloorg and his friends.

Then he turned to Jara. “Okay, hand it over.”

Jara reached into a hidden pocket near her ankle and pulled out several baggies of baby hairs.

“You—” Sharon looked at the hairs, gleaming in their plastic sheathes. “You hid a second batch.”

“Of course she did,” Kango said. “She’s one of us.”

“I know cultists,” Jara said. “I figured there would be some bullshit.”

“We’re rich,” Sharon said. “I can’t believe we’re rich. I can buy a new gun. I can finally afford a proper offering to Hall and Oates. I can—”
“We’re not rich,” Kango said.
“‘We’re not rich at all,’ Noreen confirmed. She flashed some graphics showing the asking price for their DNA samples falling in a similar parabola to that satellite not long ago.
“The DNA is worth a good deal less, now that the Society of Worthy Minds is also selling it. We’ll still probably get enough chits to pay off the Bank of Yum, but . . .”
Sharon sighed and sank into her seat at the front of the cockpit. “It figures. We were literally not made to be winners.”
“We managed to keep the ship,” Kango said. “That’s what matters.”
“Yeah, I guess. So we can fly around pulling off more doomed capers.”
“Shut up,” Jara said. “We survived. That’s what matters. We’re all still together. And even though Frieda seemed like an asshole, maybe she’ll be a better asshole than the last one. We made a difference today.”
Sharon started to argue, but then she looked over at Kango, who’d osmosed some holy oil during the fighting and had some weird psychedelic shapes floating around his face. Kango cracked a huge grin and said, “So actually, I was waiting for the right moment. But I have an idea for another job, that’ll be a sure-fire winner this time. All we have to do is pretend to be nine virgin astronomers. With the three of us, that’s three costumes each. You’ll like this part. We—”
Kango was talking about some lunatic scheme in the same voice he’d said “Do you want to get out of here?” two years ago, and Sharon found herself nodding and starting to sketch costume designs. Jara rolled her eyes but also had some fun ideas for how they walk like virgins—which they technically all were, but they weren’t that kind of virgin. Noreen chattered to herself, and Sharon settled in, because after a long day of explosions and stupid people shouting, she was safe at home.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Charlie Jane Anders is the author of *All the Birds in the Sky*, which won the Nebula, Locus and Crawford Awards. Her short fiction has appeared in *Wired*, *Tor.com*, *Asimov’s Science Fiction*, *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, *Tin House*, *ZYZZYVA*, *The McSweeney’s Joke Book of Book Jokes*, and elsewhere, and her story “Six Months Three Days” won a Hugo Award. She
runs the long-running Writers With Drinks reading series in San Francisco and used to spout off on io9.com. She won the Emperor Norton Award for “extraordinary invention and creativity unhindered by the constraints of paltry reason.”

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight
FANTASY
There’s a faerie tree in my front yard. Its branches are gnarled like an old woman’s fingers, knobbed like her knees, and the trunk hunches down like she’s reaching for my house. Mamaw said the hole at the base of faerie trees is where faeries come out or rush in or leave gifts if it’s big enough, though I was too young to remember. She says I was fussy in any arms that weren’t hers or the tree, least ’til I got used to everything. When I was real little, Sister says she could always find me curled half in the tree if I’d toddled off, like I fell asleep tryin’ to find Mamaw’s faeries. Still, after she showed me, I was scared to sit in its big open lap for a time, scared faeries would rush on out and into me, and I would have wings beating in me and they’d fly me far from home, just buzzing along like a balloon through the clouds.

Tonight I want to be flown away. Sister got married and didn’t tell me, she got married and didn’t tell nobody. She didn’t tell Momma, she didn’t tell Pa, she just up and got married and brought that man home. I don’t like him. He’s tall and skinny, a beanpole of a man with straw for hair and black buttons for eyes, and rough, gunnysack skin. His smile’s like still water, stagnant and sick, a birthing
ground for things that’s just born rotten. I don’t know what she sees in him. He
drawls and haws and hums all the time, don’t say what he mean, and look at us
like we’re fools. He’s all wrong inside and his face ain’t right either. Ain’t normal
—like their marriage. Sister used to be strong. “I’ll have a fairy prince, or
nobody,” she’d say, “and fairy princes ain’t real.” But here she is come back from
boarding school with a man and a ring and a baby on the way.

Oh, Momma ain’t happy. She’s pretending to be, but she’s not and told me so.
“That sister of yours gone and got herself knocked up and had one of Those
weddings. Don’t know where she got it from. She weren’t ever getting married,
and now here he is. This is your Pa’s side, Marianne. Only your Mamaw done
something that stupid, God rest her, but at least we got your Pa. That damned
school’s lucky it’s empty right now. Come fall term, I’m raising hell.”

Except Sister’s quit school, quit and married and gonna have a baby, and I
don’t like it one bit. I go out to the faerie tree and mosey around, looking for little
wings before I sit and lean back and relax. It’s dark but still warm, and the
ground’s soft, its new green poking up around my bare toes. From against the
tree, big leaves hide the moon, but I can see clear through the windows into the
house. The bottom floor is dark; the second floor is Sister’s room, and my room
that was Mamaw’s before she passed; the top floor is Momma and Pa’s room—
they have the whole attic to themselves. They were gonna move into Sister’s
room so’s they didn’t have to climb so many stairs, but now they’re gonna stay
put until Sister’s got a place.

In Momma and Pa’s room, they’re arguing. I can tell even though they’re
hugging and putting on nightclothes. They argue real soft, so you can’t hear them,
but I can tell by their feet, ’cause Momma always gets the urge to run when she’s
angry, and you can hear her skip-step-stop from down below and know she’s in a
tizzy. When I heard that I put my dress back on and came out—no sense trying to
sleep while she’s banging around. I can see her now, and she’s as fired up as Pa is
tight and still. They’re talking about Sister, I know it.

Sister and her scarecrow husband are in her room. She’s got a double bed, so I
know where he’s sleeping tonight. They just better not do anything under Pa’s
roof. From under the faerie tree I watch him kiss her, watch her close her eyes,
and see him look straight out the window—at me. I freeze up, and then I think he
can’t see me. But he stops kissing Sister and pulls the curtains closed, and I know
if he tells Momma I saw him she’ll lick me for being nosy.

The faeries in the tree start buzzing behind me, like a nest of wasps getting
ready to swarm. I know it’s them, I saw ’em once, when Mamaw called ’em out
to set me straight. I think about Sister’s man and I’m tempted, fierce as Jesus in
the desert, but I don’t. Mamaw told me the price she’d paid for letting ’em loose;
said giving up her grand-baby’s the hardest thing she ever done. Sure, she got
back her son and he raised up our family with Momma, but sometimes she must’a
looked at us and just hated.

I ain’t scared of the faeries no more, and they never do speak, but I learned
they get loud when my heart does, so I try to feel quiet. The night air is warm and
the breeze is cool. I breathe deep and stare at the dark. Fireflies float everywhere,
winking like the stars I can’t see through the branches. I don’t want to face
Sister’s husband in the morning, but I know I have to. I don’t much like the idea
of him sleeping on the same floor as me, but Sister will protect me if it comes to
anything. Pregnant or not, Sister’s always stood up for me.

• • • •

In the morning, Momma’s cooking eggs and Pa’s asking Sister’s man
questions at the table over coffee. What does he do, who’re his parents, how did
he meet Sister. You know, questions. Sister’s helping Momma when she’s not
sitting quiet at the table with her hands folded in her lap like a big china doll.
When I finish setting the table I try asking questions too, try to get Sister to talk,
but she won’t. I start how the girls at school start—“How did he propose?”—even
though I don’t care about that. I remember they all looked at me strange when I
said so, like they knew I was Different. Wrong. Not a real girl. I pretended I cared
after that, and Momma nods when she hears me ask, “What was the wedding
like?” and I know I done right in her eyes. But Sister don’t answer, just sits there,
and I’m done pussyfooting around like it’s fine when it ain’t, and I snap. “You’d
never pick a man like that, so how’d he get his dirty claws into you?”

“Marianne!” Momma bursts out my name like I cussed in church.
Pa thunders, “Hush!” right behind her. They look at me sideways, like I ain’t
got manners, or maybe like I just ain’t right, like I’m Different. “Men are
speaking,” Pa says finally, but he don’t say go cut a switch, so I scrunch up and
hush up and sulk. Sister don’t wink at me like usual though, just stares at her
hands until Momma calls her to help bring out breakfast.

There are eggs and pancakes and my mouth would water on any other day at
the thick smell of hot batter on the skillet, but today I’m too busy glaring at the
beanpole to be hungry. I hate him already, but I know he’s turning Pa around. It’s
like Pa can’t see his scarecrow face. I know Momma don’t like him, but if Pa
likes him she’ll make do and pretend. That’s how it always is.

“So, Marianne, do you cook?” the beanpole asks.

I tell him, “Yessir,” but that’s all I say, and my face tells him I don’t like questions.

Before Pa can get on me again for being rude, there’s food on the table. Momma’s smiling and Sister’s just a quiet young lady, a pretty, empty face I can’t reach. Something don’t feel right, but don’t Momma or Pa notice, and I can’t tell why. So I eat quiet-like and pretend I’m a lady. Pa’s talking to beanpole again.

• • • •

That night I go back to the faerie tree and sit by the roots. I don’t know why, but I feel safer here, and something’s wrong in the house. Momma likes beanpole now and so does Pa, and Sister’s so quiet I don’t know what to think. He just sits there with those black button eyes and that doll’s sewn-on smile on that gunny-sack skin. I don’t know what they’re hearing that turns ’em round, but he ain’t getting to me. The faerie tree buzzes and lightning bugs flicker. Momma and Pa put on their nightclothes and get into bed. They don’t talk tonight, just sleep.

Sister’s curtains are still open and I can see in. The beanpole wraps his arms around her, hands on her belly, and all at once I think his hand’s gonna change to a bear claw and cut the baby out. But his hand stays normal, and his black button eyes look out the window, right at me. He smiles that sewn-on smile, and I hate him and I’m afraid of him, and I ain’t used to either one. The faeries in the tree buzz with my beating heart. I can’t tell if their wings are shaking the tree, or if it’s my heart beating so fast I’m shaking all on my own.

I watch, pressed back far as I can, as he lets go of Sister and walks to the window. He leans out, staring at me, then leans back in and closes the curtain.

The buzzing don’t get quiet and I don’t feel quiet. I’m scared to go inside, but I do. When I get to the second floor, he’s standing in the yellow light from Sister’s room, waiting for me.

“Marianne,” he says, “I get the feeling you don’t like me.”

I don’t know what he’s really after, but I know he don’t care what I think. I know enough now to play along, so I do; no sense proving I know he ain’t right inside. I say, “You seem like a decent man,” like I’m reading Mary for the nativity play, “you just treat my sister right, you hear?”

He laughs like a toad, says “Sure thing,” and shuts the door. I hold my breath and tiptoe past, scared that door’s gonna open and he’ll jump out like the
bogeyman. But the door don’t open and when I get to my room I latch the lock and turn on all the lights so no shadows can get me while I’m trying to sleep. I stay awake all night, afraid to shut my eyes, staring at the door and reading the Good Book like Momma does when she’s upset. When dawn comes, I know I’m safe. When dawn comes, so does sleep.

• • • •

When I get up I don’t smell cooking, but I’m so tired I don’t notice. I put on a sundress and wash my face and go to the kitchen and realize Momma’s not at the stove like always, and Pa’s not at the table with his coffee. There’s no one in the kitchen but Sister, whose hands are in her lap at the table, and the beanpole, who’s halfway on the side porch with the Sheriff.

“Marianne, sweetie,” Sheriff says when he sees me. “We missed you at Delilah’s birthday last week. You catch a cold?”

“I weren’t sick. I hate parties,” I say, watch him eye me like something ain’t right. “Why you here? Where’s my momma and pa?”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry why? What’s wrong, sir? Where’s Momma?”

He makes me sit down at the table and then he says, “I’m afraid your momma’s passed, your momma and your pa. Last night they both passed in their sleep.”

“What?” It’s like he cut my strings the way my body goes loose, and I think if I’d been standing I would’ve fallen on the floor. Sister don’t move, don’t come and put her arms around me. I stare up at the Sheriff. It don’t make no sense.

“They . . . they died? How?”

He nods, but he don’t answer my question, and it still don’t make sense. I look at Sister, but she ain’t looked up from her hands. I look at beanpole, like maybe Sheriff’s got the wrong house, and his hair is still straw and his skin is still gunny, but his eyes are real eyes and his mouth ain’t sewn on, and I’m scareder now than when he stopped me in the hall late last night. Then I see the hearse through his legs, black and long to hold bodies, and two deputies barrel in with a stretcher, and I know I gotta see for myself before my folks are gone.

I run to the attic before they can stop me. I pull up the stairs and lock the trap door behind me. My momma and my pa didn’t die in the night. It’s not right, it’s all wrong, like that beanpole ruining Sister. I just know when I see them things’ll be right again.
But I see Momma’s face, and her eyes are black buttons, and I see Pa’s still face and his mouth is sewn on, and I know he done something, that damned beanpole did something, and I’d pay most any price to get him gone—get him gone yesterday, before he hurt my folks.

I can call the faeries. Mamaw showed me how. He’s just like Pa’s sickness, like a blight on my family, and just like Pa’s sickness, they can take him away. Sister’s not right, but at least she ain’t dead. She took care of me ’til he came along. I’ll just take care of her ’til she’s all right again.

They’re banging and hollering at the floor, bunch of menfolk all angry at the hysterical girl making their jobs harder. I say goodbye to the only parents I’ve ever known, even pray like they’d want, then I open the trapdoor and lower the stairs and come down, and I go to my room. Beanpole wants to have words with me, but it ain’t his place. He ain’t my sister, and he ain’t my parents.

’Cause of him my parents are dead.

I latch the door in his stolen face and lay in my bed and start crying. I’m hungry and angry and sadder than I’ve ever been about anything, carryin’ on like families at funerals, but I ain’t never felt things deep enough for that before, not even for Mamaw, and I’m proud of this grief—I wallow in it, feel real for a spell. It hurts in my chest, like my heart’s a bird fell out the nest and broke its neck at the bottom of the tree. Then anger burns through. I may not be the real Marianne, but I’m the one they got, and I’ll do right by my parents like they did right by me.

If the faeries can’t save ’em, they’ll save Sister or I’ll kill him myself. Come nightfall that man will be gone.

When I wake up, it’s almost dark. I’m hungry and scared stiff of going through the house without Momma to protect me, without Sister to protect me, with the beanpole still here. But I need a knife and some fruit, so I compromise. I crawl out the window, scurry down the roof to the gutter, climb down, and sneak through the porch to the kitchen. I grab an apple from the table and Momma’s boning knife, then hurry out to the faerie tree like that man might show up any minute. I curl close between the faerie tree’s legs and try to think while more tears leak hot down my face. Mamaw said faeries are crafty little shits, and words are important, and hard sacrifice. I make myself eat but save some for the faeries.

Come sunset, I know what to ask.

I cut my thumb when the sun’s just disappearing, and the faeries’ wings are
buzzing with my heart. I press my blood to the dirt in the hole in the tree, and I say I need help, and they come. The fireflies pinwheel and scatter like smoked out bees as the air turns to honey in my lungs. There’s a strange pull, tugging where my thumb meets the earth, like my blood is well water being drawn out from deep underground, and then faeries start bubbling up from the ground, shake off dirt, unfurl dragonfly wings, and dart out of the hollow. Each one gone yields two more coming up, and there’s more climbing out of the sides of the hollow like ants climbing down from high up in the trunk. The faeries glow steady and dim, like ghost lights through a fog. One lands on my knee, nails digging like claws, and we look at each other real quiet.

It looks just like the rest of ’em flitting around, but there’s weight to it, weight like the curl of a copperhead, and I know it’s in charge like I know it ain’t human. It’s the size of my finger, naked and fearless as a baby, like a flat-chested, crazy-haired doll with no nethers to hide. It’s got big, black doe eyes, but they look at me fox-like: wild, wary, and meddlesome.

The faeries pinwheel around but hover close, like they’re waiting. The one on my knee reveals teeth like a shark, but its voice rings out clear as a sweet, tiny bell. “What do you want, and what will you give in exchange?”

I try to breathe easy. “There’s a man killed my parents, hurt my sister, and got her pregnant. I want him dead yesterday before dark. I want every trace of him gone. You get rid of him, I’ll give you the baby.” It’s his, probably wrong as its pa, and I know Sister ain’t wanted kids ’til later anyway.

The faerie smiles, and it ain’t a nice smile. “But what will you sacrifice?”

It knows I don’t want that wrong baby somehow, but that’s the price Mamaw paid, and I don’t know what else to give. “I got a gold ring,” I say—Mamaw’s old wedding ring. Momma thought Sister would get it, kept harping on it when she found out, but when I offered to give it over she looked at me like I look at Sister’s man—like I was wrong inside, like the ring should mean more than it did. I ain’t tell her Mamaw maybe gave it hoping someday I’d be normal, or maybe hoping what she done wouldn’t touch Sister through that band. That husband only gave her my Pa, and ’cause of Pa she got me. I know she loved me, but that don’t always help.

Maybe the faerie knows that, ’cause it don’t want my ring neither. “I want a real sacrifice.”

“Well I ain’t got much ’sides that to give. What kinda thing do you want?”

The faerie’s mean smile gets nastier, and its teeth look longer. The other faeries stop darting like lost dragonflies, the crickets hush up, and the night air dies. “You
must have loved your parents very much to want them back,” the faerie says, sweet as a salesman through those sharp, sharp teeth.

“Yeah,” I admit, but I’m all over scared. No good comes from telling faeries some things.

“We cannot bring back the dead, little Changeling, but we can give back your sister and take away the man and his baby. Will you pay our price?”

“Depends what you ask,” I say, like I ain’t made my decision before I called ’em up like I did, come what may.

The faerie’s face goes soft and dreamy, like it’s drinking good whiskey in a really soft chair. It says, “When you think of your parents, I can taste your emotion: all your love, your devotion, and your grief beyond my understanding. We do not feel as the humans do, child, and you’ll never feel quite like the humans do either. But you feel for your parents. You feel very much.” It turns sharp as its teeth. “I’ll take that emotion as payment.”

My heart drops and my eyes leak out tears before the words even make sense. “You wanna feel it?” I ask, but I know what it meant.

“I want to have it,” it says. “That’s a worthy sacrifice.”

“That’s too much.” Maybe I can haggle it down. “Take what I feel for my Pa. Takin’ both is too much.”

The faerie squares off like it’s rich folk and eyes me like dirt. “When last I saw you, Marianne,” and my name in its mouth quakes my bones loud as thunder, “you were half as high, and your grandmother called us out not to deal, but to warn you away from our folk. You know what manner of price our aid requires. Would you pay less than she?”

“Two is too much,” I say, quiet and scared.

“One for the man and one for the baby. I ask nothing to restore your sister in honor of your ties to us, but mark me well, Marianne, I could demand what you feel for her, too, and call it fair.”

“Oh,” I say, like I been shushed in church by the pastor himself. “The first price weren’t too high like I thought.”

We agree to the terms and I cut a slice of apple and eat half, and the faerie eats half, and the deal’s done. I’m shaking like it’s winter and I feel cold all over. I pray to Momma and Pa that they understand why I’m giving them up. I loved them the best I could, but they’re gone, and there’s Sister to think about now.

The faerie says bring Sister’s man to the tree and they’ll do it, and they’ll take my Pa when its done. The faerie says bring Sister down to the tree too, and they’ll take the baby and take Momma, and it won’t hurt none. I say bringing them down
weren’t part of the deal, but the faeries just laugh like a bell choir and fly into the tree. The crickets start chirping and the night air starts breathing, and the fireflies slide back under the branches.

Beanpole ain’t been in the yard since he first came with Sister. I got no idea how to get him outside. I sit at the tree trying to think up a plan, but my whole head’s full up of Momma humming over the skillet cooking pancakes for breakfast, and the way Pa half-smiles when I bring him more coffee. I see Pa whittling on the porch steps while the sun dies over harvested fields, and Ma mending in her chair, laughing with Pa through the screen. There were evenings before Sister went to boarding school when we’d all set out there, all together, Mamaw telling fairy tales and Pa saying, “Sister, no princes ’til you’re thirty-five,” and Sister getting fussy while Momma just laughed. He never told me “No princes,” ’cause I never cared to be a princess like real girls, but I knew my family loved me through and through on those nights, even wrong inside as I was pretty.

I still wonder sometimes if the real Marianne would’ve been pretty as me, but maybe felt a lot more than I do, maybe cried just like Sister when Mamaw passed. If maybe she’d’ve grown up scared of snakes and spiders, and if she’d’ve crushed on boys and fit in with other girls, and not looked at people like I do most times, wondering why they think stupid things is so important. Now I wonder too: Would she have paid to save Sister like me?

I was little when Mamaw told me I weren’t the real Marianne, but only she knew. My Momma and Pa loved me like I was her, and it hurts to remember, but it makes me feel human as Sister, rememberin’, and I don’t want to forget.

I give up trying to plan when it hits me I won’t remember nights on the porch the same without my love for Momma and Pa, and without their love for me. I cry some more after that, and when my stomach claws at me I finish the apple, and then I watch Sister’s light go on and hate the beanpole more than ever for what I’m giving up.

Sister walks up to the window, a china doll trapped inside oily light, and I look at her and hate her too a minute, ’cause she brought that damned man into our home. Beanpole don’t come up behind her though, and I don’t see other lights in the house, and I wonder if he left on his own, and if he did, can I still keep my Pa? But then I hear the screen door clack shut, and the beanpole melts into a shadow just outside reach of the faerie tree’s branches, and I realize I ain’t got to bring him here at all.

“Come inside,” he says, stretching out his hand. “I promise you’ll feel better in
Sister stands in her window, hands over her belly like Mary finding out her son’s gonna die. I look at her and I think of the faeries, and I feel mean as a razor. “I ain’t going in,” I say. “I won’t. I’m gonna sleep here tonight.”

“At least come in and let me get you a blanket,” he says all reasonable, like I don’t know what he did.

“I’m just fine,” I say, and I wait for the faeries, but they don’t come and I wonder if he’s not close enough. So I tell him, like I might be a tiny bit sorry, “I will take a blanket if you bring it here.”

He shrugs like a good man trying to make nice, and he goes and gets me a blanket and stops on the edge of the branches again. “Brought you a blanket,” he says, “Come get it and then I’ll let you alone.”

“Promise?” Like I ain’t planning to kill him.

“Yeah, I promise.” Like he ain’t a killer and a thief.

Sister’s still in her window, hands on her belly, but she’s looking right at me and all at once I’m afraid of her too. The faeries said they’d make Sister like she was, but what if they can’t and that’s why they said she was free? What if I’m about to give up Momma and Pa and I don’t even get Sister back like they promised?

My heart starts up thundering and the faerie tree buzzes behind me, and I realize I don’t want to move. I hate the faeries much as I hate that beanpole, but I feel safer touching the faerie tree and curling the boning knife in my hand. I’m afraid to go get that damned blanket.

“Come get the blanket, Marianne,” he says.

“No, I’m warm,” I say, and it’s true, I start feeling so hot I might sweat. I’m tired and hungry and he murdered my folks and he ruined my sister, and he has nerve talking with Pa’s mouth while he glares down at me with my own momma’s eyes. I want him gone, but first I need him to come closer. I’m waiting for him, eyeing him like those damned faeries eyed me.

“You won’t be warm in the morning, young lady.”

I ain’t his young lady. “Then bring it here, I ain’t moving.” If Pa heard my tone he’d make me go cut a switch.

“No, you come here and get it. Now. I mean it, Marianne. I’m in charge now, and I don’t want you catching cold.” When I don’t budge, he tries for sweet, and it works. “You wouldn’t want to disappoint your Momma, now would you?”

“Don’t you dare,” I yell like I’m throwing stones, and my mind’s all gone red with my rage. I run at him, quick and mad as lightning, and I stick him real good
and he drops the old blanket on my arms before I can think. Only then do I realize, piece by piece, like a quilt stitched together, just what I’ve done. The blanket is coarse in my hands, and the moon lights a gunnysack shade matching his skin. When I look up at his face, Momma’s eyes are black and smiling, and he’s grinning at me in my Pa’s proud half-smile. There’s no blood round the knife in his side, but his skin’s peeling at the shoulders, like a snake starting to shed for a new one.

His fingers ain’t fingers. They’re sharp as bear claws.

He swipes ’em at me.

I fall, but I can’t get my hands out to catch me. Then I see the blanket ain’t a blanket, just like he’s not a man: I’m gripping hard to a sack winding its way over my fingers, up my hands and wrists and arms to my shoulders. I thrash like a fish in a boat ’til I’m on my side, then I inch like a worm toward the faerie tree, screeching.

“Help me!” Loud, over my heartbeat, I scream, “Now, goddammit!”

That man’s close enough! If they don’t take him now he’ll kill me and they’ll get nothing and I’ll be nothing and I don’t know what else I can do. But there’s no lights, and then I’m yowling too loud to hear ’em buzzing if they do come, ’cause the beanpole drives his claws into my foot and yanks me close, lifts me high by my shoulders, and his mouth opens wide. It’s like a snake mouth, bigger than it has any right to be, and black inside with no teeth, just an eternity of nothing.

He breathes in.

It’s like his breath’s digging under my skin, fixing to rip it off, and it hurts more than his claws in my shoulders and where the sack’s seeping in. I scream and my voice feels skinned out of my body, and then over my pain I hear bedlam, and it’s coming fast. I feel the honey of oncoming power, and it soothes me, but the beanpole starts screaming and drops me to run. That’s when I see them, buzzing loud as a waterfall, streaming out like a river of light from the tree straight at him. They fill the darkness with light, bright as day and as pure as an angel of vengeance. When I strain up to see the beanpole, he’s covered in light. Faerie wings ripple over him like they’re breathing, a seething army of ants covering him head to foot while he’s in there screaming. It’s horrible, the sounds of buzzing and chomping and him screaming like the faeries missed his vitals when they hit. Then he chokes and goes quiet, and it stinks of sour blood and sawdust and old, rotten eggs. The faeries is still loud when beanpole starts shrinking, smaller and smaller like they’re ants on a carcass, ’til he’s all but gone.
I can’t even think to feel glad when it happens. ’Cause when beanpole starts shrinking, my mind starts through memories of Pa as I lie in that unnatural light. And while beanpole’s shrinking, what I feel about those memories shrinks with him, ’til that’s all gone too.

I think on those nights on the porch, and they still feel so strongly of love and of family, but now something big’s missing, and I feel a strange ache. I wanna slap at the faeries that land on my arms by the dozens, but the sack crunches to nothing under their sharp teeth, and I’m afraid they’ll keep eating, so I lay real still and hate them deep down.

Up in her window, I see Sister start to cry, and her hands clench her belly, and she looks sharp at me. Then she’s gone, run right out of my sight, and there’s galumphing through the house, then she’s running through the screen door and coming straight for me.

She sweeps me up in her arms before I can blink. “Thank God you’re okay,” she’s crying messy, “I was so afraid for you.” Says, “I’m sorry” and “forgive me, please.”

“What was he,” I ask her. “What’d he do to you?”

But she don’t answer, just rocks me and wails like a baby.

“It’s okay, Sister,” I tell her. “It don’t matter. He’s gone now. We’re okay.”

She makes a sound like she’s laughing and crying both into my hair, and I hug her with my freed arms, scraped raw by the sack.

Then the buzzing starts again, and faeries swarm in, hornet mad as the air goes thick and bright with their light. They’ve come for the baby, I know it, and I hold Sister’s hands when she swats at the faeries like she don’t know just what they are.

Sister’s eyes roll back when the fairies rush at her belly and disappear and reappear through her dress and her skin. I catch her and lay her down on the grass beanpole trampled half under the tree. The faeries crash wave after wave of light into Sister’s swollen belly. Then she gurgles and my knee is wet in the grass by her thigh, and a black, rotted stain’s curling up her pale nightdress. I pull the fabric so the oil slick baby oozes onto the grass, move Sister away from the spill, and then look at the thing. It’s gunny-skinned and sharp-clawed, and smells like its pa when he died.

I hold Sister close. She shakes and keens but don’t wake. As faerie light swarms the baby, I feel Momma go too.

The faeries fly back into the tree, drunk as anything on my feelings. Their leader streaks by me and don’t even look over. Then the lights are gone, and the
faeries are gone, and that damned man and his baby are gone, like my Momma and Pa.

For a few minutes it’s just me, then Sister wakes up and it’s just me and Sister. We huddle alone under cold, distant stars, while the land sprawls out empty for miles. Sister cries on my shoulder, but she’s Sister and not a china doll, and I cry ’cause I have her and she’s all I got.

I think, that’s the last of it, now it’s all done. Sister’ll take care of me and we’ll be a family like before she left.

I should’ve known better.

Sometimes I look at Sister now and the holes in my heart feel sharp as Momma’s boning knife, and hate settles over me like a blanket, like silence. I think of Mamaw those times, seeing me every day at the end of her life and just knowing I weren’t Marianne, and it was her fault, but she couldn’t tell nobody.

That’s sacrifice: giving what you can’t give so people you love get along better. Not telling what you gave for them while they rub that pain right in your face and you can’t say a word, least not one they’ll believe.

I sacrificed my love for Momma and Pa so’s Sister could get along better. She don’t remember the night the faeries came. Just wakes up the next day with no baby. Doctor says stress from Momma and Pa must’ve made her miscarry, and grief made her forget. He says, “Get some rest.” Then he takes me aside and says to me, “You take good care of your sister, Marianne.” And he asks how I’m doing without Momma, and I try to sound sad, but all I feel is the hole where my love got ripped out, and I must look real strange ’cause his eyes get real sharp.

Doctor looks at me like the girls at school look at me: Different. Wrong. Not a real girl.

At the funeral I don’t cry and the mourners all look at me: Different. Wrong. Not a real girl.

And Sister and I are laughing under the faerie tree one day, months later, when she don’t cry as fast and hard missing our folks. “You remember on the porch when Pa said, ‘no fairy princes ’til you’re thirty-five’? I guess I should’ve listened.” And she laughs up through the leaves. And I laugh, but it’s hollow, and I ache missing what I can’t feel anymore ’bout strangers I used to love. And Sister says, “What do you miss most? I miss those nights on the porch.”

And I look at the hole in the tree like the hole inside me, and I think, “I wish I could miss them,” and it gets real quiet, and when I look at Sister I know I said it, and she heard it, ’cause she’s looking at me: Different. Wrong. Not a real girl. Like I’m a stranger, and she’s seeing me for the first time, and she just don’t
understand. I clear my throat, say, “I wish I could miss them less,” like I just talked too soft and the evening wind stole the last word.

Sister smiles all sad, and nods like she believes me, and she acts just like always the rest of the night. But since that day, sometimes she looks at me sideways, and I think when the faeries took Momma and Pa, they took Sister from me even as they were giving her back.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kathleen Kayembe is the Octavia E. Butler Scholar from Clarion’s class of 2016, with short stories in Lightspeed and Nightmare, an essay in Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia Butler; and previous publications with Less Than Three Press. She writes romance as Kaseka Nvita, co-hosts the Write Pack Radio weekly writing podcast as herself, and lives on Twitter as @mkkayembe. A longtime member of the St. Louis Writers Guild, she organizes write-ins instead of movie outings, and falls in love with the world every time she uses a fountain pen. You can find her in St. Louis, where, when not at the day job, she is generally freelance editing, walking her dog, running Amherst Writers and Artists writing groups, scribbling stories into a notebook with an odd little smirk, or playing obnoxiously sensible RPG characters who won’t let party members die.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight
The wizards appeared at 8:41 a.m. out of a cloudless blue sky. Dapper in their green plaid public school uniforms, they whooshed through the air on broomsticks, wands extended to defend against an incipient threat.

In unison, they intoned a solemn chant. Their words burned bright sigils into the air which swirled and coalesced into a glittering white sphere of light.

The light pulsed and flashed and shimmered. The crowd gathered on the ground below looked up. Some had noticed the wizards when they’d appeared and then dismissed them as some kind of publicity stunt; others had not yet spotted the riders in the sky. The brilliance of the light drew them all, burning away both skepticism and preoccupation.

Tourists dropped their digital cameras and began to shout. Commuters halted mid-rush, briefcases falling open to the ground, loosed papers stirring in the light air. Inside the Twin Towers, people rushed to the windows and stared out—the executives and the janitors, the security guards and the receptionists.

The onlookers could not see what was happening miles away, inside three planes still in flight. Box cutters had already been drawn. Pilots’ throats had been cut. Flight attendants had bled in the aisles. Remaining passengers wept and prayed.

The onlookers did not see the flashes of light that dazzled the passengers through their tears as more young wizards appeared between the seats in first class, wands at the ready. They did not see the shock on the terrorists’ faces as they were brought down by skinny, adolescent girls in knee socks who fixed them with sober gazes and chanted nonsense in stentorian tones.

One passenger, his hand trembling as it clutched his cell phone, stuttered over a bad connection. “My—oh my God, honey, these kids have—there are these boys and girls and—this light—!”

Girls in plaid took over the cockpits, frowned in confusion at the controls, and then resorted to flying the planes with their wands. One plane came down softly in D.C., floating to the ground on a soft, cotton cloud. The others, barreling along their murderous course through New York City, flew into the wizards’ mass of light. First one was engulfed, and then the other, their explosive energy dissipating harmlessly into the sky.

The New York-bound passengers found themselves on the ground, their
luggage stacked in neat piles beside them. They blinked at the tourists and the commuters, and looked up at the tower windows where they could see the shapes of executives, janitors, security guards, and receptionists.

In the buildings, some workers began to stagger, afflicted by sudden, strange dizziness. They reached for the walls, the floors, their companions, anything stable to reassure them that they weren’t falling. Some stopped, dropped, and rolled, trying to extinguish non-existent flames. Others gasped for air though there was no smoke, or ran outside to escape debris that wasn’t falling. Dozens of firemen arrived on the scene on foot, out of breath, perplexed.

Young boys in short pants, their green blazers open over untucked white shirts, appeared nearby to control the panic. “It’s over now,” they said, with more brusqueness than empathy. “No need to bang on about it.”

A woman in a top floor office crawled out from under her desk. She dragged her gaze away from the vast, oppressive sky that crowded her window. Her adolescent savior regarded her with a bored, snaggle-toothed expression. “You’re right,” she said, slowly. “It’s over. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

She pulled herself up and straightened her skirt. The nightmarish sequence in her head was fading. She could only remember flashes: her heel breaking in the stairwell, trampling feet, the pain of forcing her bruised and concussed body to stand, the realization that there was no escape, nowhere to go, nothing to do but limp back to the office and give herself to the whistling blue.

She kicked her pumps away as hard as she could. They flew across the office in parabolas, point over spike.

The snaggle-toothed boy gave her a look of distaste. “Mundanes are daft,” he muttered.

Floors below, a gawky young girl swept her cornrows back over the shoulder of her blazer, and rapped her fingers impatiently against her wand. She stood beside a man in a rumpled blue middle management suit, both of them watching a cleaning woman in a yellow dress who was pounding on a wall and screaming in Spanish.

The girl with the cornrows watched with revulsion. “Stop it,” she said. “Stop it!” She looked to the man in the blue suit. “Get her to calm down. She’s off her trolley.”

The man in the blue suit approached the woman gingerly. She was older, her black hair gone almost entirely white, eyes nested in wrinkles. He wanted to take her hand, partially to comfort her, but mostly because he needed comfort himself. He had a shadow memory of running with a broken arm, of spending months
with nightmares and flashbacks. He’d grown up calling women like this one mama and tía and abuela, and she was the only person nearby who looked like family.

“Está bien,” he said. “No sé que pasó, pero ya ha terminado.”

The woman stopped banging on the wall. She glanced suspiciously at the girl with the cornrows, and said quietly to the man, “¿Quiénes son?”

He couldn’t keep himself from glancing back, too. That was stupid; he didn’t want her to catch him looking suspicious. Something in his gut told him it would be a bad idea to upset these children. Luckily, she wasn’t watching them, just staring out of the window with bored aggravation.

“¿Qué quieren?”

“Quizás nada,” he answered, but his gut did not believe it.

The girl with the cornrows looked over. “What are you talking about?”

The man in the blue suit ran his dry tongue across his teeth. “She wants to know what you want.”

The girl shrugged. “You don’t get owt for nowt.”

She took a step toward them and the woman in yellow flinched backward against the wall. The girl rolled her eyes.

“At least you got her to shut her gob,” she said.

“La gente siempre quieren algo,” the woman in yellow said in a very low voice. The man in the blue suit nodded briefly, and gave in to the desire to reach for her hand.

Across the country, other shadow memories surged with emotional ferocity, and then faded. A man in a turban no longer felt the pain of being shot outside of his gas station in Mesa, Arizona. A father of four breathed more easily in Detroit; a father of eight hugged his children in California; a Bangladeshi immigrant wept as he touched his unblinded eyes.

The survivors drifted out of the buildings and gathered on the pavement outside. Dozens of wizards were already there. The youngest wandered through the crowds of people, observing them with the curiosity of zoo patrons as they summoned treats for themselves, cotton candy and caramel corn and funnel cakes. Adolescents were trooping out from their work in the tower, drifting into cliques as they gossiped about the barmy things, mundanes.

The older teenagers formed a loose circle in the shadow of the twin summits, their broomsticks held like scepters. Their bodies were trim and athletic beneath tidily buttoned blazers. Each pair of slacks and each knee-length skirt had been ironed with vigor, creases regimentally sharp.
They began to tap their broomsticks percussively on the ground, summoning the attention of the crowd. People left off talking and snapping pictures and making confused cell phone calls to loved ones. Some still shook and wept from the physical effects of events that had no longer happened; others shushed them and pushed them to the back of the crowd.

The oldest boy, straight-backed and willow-tall with tousled blond hair and flawless white teeth, held out his arms for the other wizards to cease their drumbeat.

“Everything’s going to be all right,” he declaimed to the crowd. His accent echoed with sterling silver and stone corridors and the acreage of forested estates. His prefect’s badge glinted harshly in the light. “Nothing like this will ever happen again.”

The crowd murmured. Among the exclamations of delight, there were a few dissonant mutterings. “Have you always been able to do this?” asked a woman, pitching her voice to carry. “Why haven’t you ever helped before?” She wore an A-line flowered sundress, and her boarding pass from San Francisco still stuck out of her pocket. “The Holocaust . . . Pearl Harbor . . . The quake!”

Her voice was shaking with emotion, but the blond boy only flashed a gracious smile. “We’re terribly sorry. We had things to do, you see. Evil wizards and magical border disputes and all that rot.”

“More important than the Holocaust?” asked the woman in the flowered dress.

“So many people . . .” said someone else. He looked the same age as the prefect, perhaps just finishing high school or starting college, skinny in over-sized jeans and a hoodie. In comparison to the teenage wizards, he looked weedy and under-grown. His eyes were glazed with loss of some description, and his voice was fragile. “You’ve had this power all along? You could have stopped them all?”

The blond boy’s face darkened. “Now see here, my man. We had things to do.” This time his voice had a hard edge to it, a clear warning that further questioning would not be welcome. “You’re being dashed ungrateful.”

Protests began to gather, many people speaking at once. The youngest wizards, who had begun entertaining themselves with strings and cards once they finished their funnel cakes, edged away from the crowd. They popped quietly out of sight and reappeared inside the surrounding buildings, noses pressed to the glass so they could still watch.

The inner circle of wizards tightened. They braced their brooms against each other, end to end. Those of the human crowd who were close enough could hear them murmuring to each other about how this had been a bloody stupid idea. The
triumvirate of wizards on Mons Montis were wankers. Overthrowing thousands of years of separation for “noblesse oblige”... if the mundanes were going to go aggro over nothing then they deserved to die in their stupid wars.

Four of the wizards, each facing a different cardinal direction, tucked their brooms under their arms and drew their wands. They drew quick figures in the air. The sound of magic sizzled.

The crowd’s objections soured as the spell took hold. The blond boy stared at them from beneath furrowed brows, his gaze icy and disappointed. The crowd stirred with guilt. Their concerns about the revelations of the magic world began to feel petty. Hadn’t the boy been reasonable? Generous, even? It was ungrateful to continue shouting. What ingrates they were, demanding to be saved from everything. Couldn’t they accept that the wizards knew better than they did? Hadn’t they seen their power?

The wizards relaxed, shifting their grips on their brooms. The blond boy’s smile returned, bright as titanium white from a tube. “We’re here now,” he repeated. “There’s no need for you to worry anymore. Everything’s right as rain.”

He gestured to a group of three girls, their hair in pigtails of black and red and brown. Each performed a pirouette while waving her wand, and all at once there was a carnival in the street, with candy floss and ginger beer, and doe-eyed witches standing in kiss-me booths.

There was a moment of silence, but only one, before the last of the tension dissolved. Laughing, the crowd dispersed to eat and drink.

The woman whose office was on a top tower floor rubbed her bare feet, which were hot and scratchy from standing on the cement. She felt short without her heels. A black cat with balloons tied to its tail wended its way past, and she bent to pet it.

As she straightened, she caught a glimpse of the snaggle-toothed boy who’d found her in her office, now wandering past, sipping lemonade. He didn’t even look her way, but while she watched him, she couldn’t help but picture his face from earlier that day. The boredom and distaste in his expression, his tone when he said, Mundanes are daft.

The boy passed out of sight, the magic took hold in her mind again, and the ungrateful thoughts disappeared from her head. She bent down to pet another black cat. It purred.

Out by the carnival games, the man in the rumpled blue suit promised to win a stuffed Pegasus for a little girl from Indiana with no front teeth. There was a long
line to play toss the ring around the frog, but in the meantime, there was flavored ice to lick and jugglers to watch. Nearby, a pair of receptionists were smoking together, angled so that the breeze would carry the smoke away from the line.

“Can you believe some people?” one receptionist asked the other. “They save our lives, and people want to argue about it?”

The second shook her head. “Exactly. Is this the time to talk about the Holocaust? They’re here now.”

The first agreed, “Better late than never.”

They exhaled synchronously. Twin streams of smoke blew away from them.

A wizard passed by with a tray of ginger beer, shouting “Free refreshments!” and both receptionists took one. So did the man in the rumpled blue suit. He looked around for the woman in the yellow dress, but he’d lost her in the crowd, and he couldn’t find her now.

The blond boy marched at the front of a ticker tape parade, accepting roses from blushing young women, and grinning at the captivated onlookers. So what if the mundanes were ungrateful—saving people still made you feel good. The triumvirate on Mons Montis said that times were changing, and since it would be harder and harder to stay hidden, it was imperative they take the initiative. The mundanes would just have to accept it.

At the end of the parade route, he and his friends embarked on their broomsticks and took to the air, winding agilely around each other like birds at play. The sky was blue, and the day was beautiful, and the crowd stared up at them with shining eyes.


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rachel Swirsky graduated from the Clarion West Writers Workshop in 2005, and holds an MFA in fiction from the Iowa Writers Workshop. Her short stories have been nominated for the Hugo Award, the World Fantasy Award, and the Locus Award among others. She’s also twice won the Nebula Award, once for her novella “The Lady Who Plucked Red Flowers beneath the Queen’s Window,” and again for her short story “If You Were a Dinosaur, My Love.” Her first collection, *Through the Drowsy Dark*, is available from Aqueduct Press; her second, *How the World Became Quiet*, came out from Subterranean Press in 2010. Visit her website, chat with her on Twitter, or support her on Patreon where she posts one new piece of fiction or poetry.
each month.
When the witch came across the man whose leg had been shot through by the arrow he was hollering and disorderly and seemed like a bit of a nuisance. Still it could be said honestly that the man had a particular charm about him. For example when the witch asked if he was all right the man responded with only an agonized groan but beyond the groan there was also a look he gave her like the groaning in agony was a joke they alone were in on and she felt an immediate conspiratorial intimacy with the man with the shot leg.

They talked a while and she took him to her cabin.

At the cabin she tore open his pants to examine the bloodstained leg. The arrow was sticking out several inches. The wound around the arrow looked more like a geological formation like a salt flat than a wound. The witch clicked her tongue sharply.

It is against an artery. If I pull it out now you will die. But if you stay awhile I might be able to help you.

The man swallowed hard and gritted his teeth and agreed to stay with her awhile.

Many armies and delegations passed through the forest without the witch ever knowing or caring. For miles and miles surrounding her cabin the wood was so thickly veined and vexed with ages of stray magic cast off by the witch and others that almost all travelers went to whatever lengths necessary to avoid this part of the forest. More ignorant wanderers either had instincts keen enough to notice the scenery losing definition and turn around or fortunes poor enough to become meals for the native cryptid population.

As such the witch had not taken visitors in some time and maintained little interest in the politics of the material world. She might have guessed the man somehow got on the wrong side of his bow while hunting if not for the lumpy leather helmet and breastplate he wore. He must have dragged himself a long way from his company to end up in her part of the wood. The witch had not felt any
other strangers in the surrounding web of magic.

She asked with whom he had been at war and why.

He said that he and several other fellows had been at war with an empire whose northernmost border met his birth nation’s southernmost. He had no explanation for why their political relations soured. Though he could read he no longer did much. His academic career was behind him. He had been conscripted. Whoever made trouble for those that housed and fed him. That was who he warred with. That they had been at war was why enough.

How were you shot?

His nostalgic jingoism deflated. I couldn’t take it he said. I ran away. I was set upon only a few hours from my company. As enemy or deserter. I don’t know. I couldn’t take another day. He cradled his head in his hands. I did terrible things.

The witch nodded and touched his shoulder. It was a very comforting and long touch.

You’ll forget about them.

• • • •

At first the man lived almost entirely in a makeshift bed in the witch’s porous cabin. He would frequently offer to do work before falling over three steps from the bed.

Every morning the witch went to his side and muttered what sounded to the man like insults of a barbarian tongue. She muttered not at him but at the arrow which for all of the first six weeks was firm in his leg and appeared without change.

The wound with every hour became even more like a salt flat.

• • • •

When a month was past the man asked what in the world the witch planned to do. The witch that morning had dragged him on a sort of gurney into the yard so that he could get a bit of sun. Now she carefully scrutinized a little twig before answering. I am enchanting the arrow but it is long work.

Is it really such a painstaking task to remove a splinter?

She threw the twig without looking and hit him in the ear before turning to face him. Her mouth was an indignant slant. It is not a question of just removing. How long would it take you to whittle that twig into an arrow? By hand without a
He confessed that it would take a long time.
Yes. It takes a long time. But if you stay a while . . .

• • • •

Come the second month the man was hopping around the witch’s hut on his one good leg. Both he and the witch had tried their hands at carving crutches but every pair was unwieldy and mismatched and if anything exacerbated the man’s limp. So instead he became a fantastically nimble hopper. They were together now in the barn as the witch was milking goats.
I must admit the leg feels better.
Good.
But—
The witch held up a hand. Come help me a moment she said.
He hopped over and squatted down on his one good leg using the bad one like a kickstand.
Hold this.
He held the milking bucket for her.
You’re concerned that I still haven’t been able to remove the arrow.
I am concerned that it is sprouting.
She smiled an immensely self-congratulatory smile from behind the goat’s udder she was tugging. Good. That’s very good.

• • • •

In October the little arrow had grown into a sapling. The wound mellowed to the color and texture of rich soil. The man could bend the knee slightly but it took a great deal of effort with all those roots restraining it.
How do they avoid the veins?
They go where they are told. Are you familiar at all with physiology?
He had been a doctor’s apprentice for a little over two months before a more studious and socially auspicious apprentice came along. He told her so.
Do you think it would be difficult to weave a sheet around a bone without killing its owner? Then around the muscles and then the veins as well?
It would be impossible.
She tossed oddly shaped sunset-colored fruits down from a tree. He caught
most of them and put them in a basket. Impossible? Hm. Maybe that is why it
takes a long time.

He asked what she meant.

To remove a splinter she said. She was indulging herself in another one of her
smiles. That is why it takes a long time.

For the first time since he began staying there the witch made the man carry
the basket of fruit all the way back to the hut.

• • • •

A day came in April when the man was once again completely immobile. The
arrow had gotten too big. The leg had a three-foot tree sprouting from it
horizontally. For a while the witch had to trim its branches for the man to pass
through doors but now it was too heavy for him to walk at all. The roots stretched
the skin near his calf and kneecap into grotesque knobby shapes.

Can you remove the arrow now?

Yes.

It took her until sunset to reassemble the gurney and drag the man into the
yard. A few feet from the door of her hut the witch sat over the leg muttering
what were certainly not simple insults. Slowly the tree’s roots unwound. With the
gait of an octopus it crawled a few feet away and coiled into the soil.

The leg was more porous now than the witch’s shanty and the dawnlight from
over the horizon made it glow like a leaf. The witch and the man both thought it
looked a little like a honeycomb though neither told the other so.

He fell asleep in the yard and slept there three days straight. By that time the leg
had withered to naught. Only a stump of thigh was left.

The tree was strong and green and thriving.

• • • •

A little pebble. The arrow’s head had been dulled to a harmless little pebble by
the growth of the tree’s roots. The witch secured it in a leather thong and gave it
to the man as a totem. She smiled but the one-legged man did not smile back. He
threw the pendant to the floor.

You promised to fix me he said and glared at the witch.

She looked hurt but managed another smile. If you wait awhile. I believe I
said if you wait awhile I might be able to help you.
She had in their months together said those words so often they had become a joke between them. Never once was he able to keep from smiling at least a bit when she did. He felt foolish for his doubtful outburst and did not complain again.

Six years followed. The man hopped about and hunted in the surrounding forest for their dinner and labored on the witch’s farm. In return she taught him the most basic magic. He was clumsy at it and even slower to learn it than he had been with doctoring.

One day the man sat resting after a successful hunt and the witch gave him an axe. Without looking up he murmured unceremonious thanks. She gripped his shoulder and turned him to her.

Several years ago you cast this aside. The stone of this blade was once the head of the arrow in your leg. The handle is from one of the tree’s branches.

He gripped the axe and sat without dinner. He had long ago accepted that the leg was irretrievably lost and that he would never walk again and that beyond removing the arrow the witch’s only help was encouraging him to be patient with and at peace in his body no matter how reduced its form. In the morning the witch came to him. He was still staring at the axe deep in thought. He turned to look at her.

Cut down the tree she said.

He did as he was told.

At least a year she sat at the felled tree muttering shape into its length. On new moons she performed special rituals and went days without eating. The man often also went without eating though she told him it was unnecessary.

The tree was eager to please. It creaked and groaned and shrunk inward. Its leaves fled from it. Its bark went gray and eventually like a scab or cocoon cracked off. Where the tree had been—an ornately patterned and immaculately carved leg of very dark wood.

The witch took the man’s new leg and presented it to him. He attached it to his thigh stump and tested it on the ground. It felt strange. He said so.

Well you can still hop around as often as you like. And you can stay here
awhile longer if you want. Until it feels right. Thus they stood together in the caress of a slight breeze with the man looking beyond the witch and the distance of trees over her shoulder trying to think what all if anything might remain for him to return to and he took his time deciding what to do.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Max Wynne is an absurdist with a (currently underutilized) degree in neuroscience. They grew up in the Reno-Tahoe area of Nevada but have spent most of the past year traveling or living in their tiny sedan in Portland, Oregon where they use their time to consider the effects of corporate capitalism, meditate on alternative social structures, and work, either in a kitchen or on their first novel. In addition to fiction, they release poetry under the name Kenn Kennedy (kennkennedy.tumblr.com) and hope eventually to produce their unrealized screenplays as Cineurotic Films (@cineurotic on Twitter). Ideally, they will someday find a way to return to the rigors of academia while also being able to list their occupation as ‘wandering bard’ on a tax return, but they understand they’ll probably have to settle.

To learn more about the author and this story, read the Author Spotlight
A dirty little backstreet in London, bordered upon the east by Tottenham Court Road and upon the south by Oxford Street. A dirty little backstreet, shadowed and unfashionable, the walls darkened with unattended soot, the windows blinded with grime. It was home to the backs of restaurants on one side and the rears of glittering retail emporia upon the other, and little else but for a couple of residences, a pawnbroker, and a bookshop.

The sign over the window read “Vesperine & Daughter. Dealers in Rare & Antique Books” and, while this was true, it was also somewhere short of the whole truth.

But attend; a customer approaches.

He was in his middle years, prosperous and sedate, a bowler hat upon his head, a wing collar of decreasing fashionableness about his neck, and an expression of bland benevolence upon his face. He was likely an office manager of a respectable company, and to him all things were equitable. Alas, his equilibrium would perforce suffer, for he paused before the shop’s front, read the sign with the mildest curiosity, peered at the grimy window seeing nothing but grime and his own shadow, and thence passed within.

The interior of the shop was understandably dark, but only towards the front. The area of the floor, some fifteen feet wide by twenty-five deep, was divided by a counter that put two thirds of the shop behind it. Before it was a place of dour shelves of dark wood containing books calculated to be of interest to casual browsers, illuminated by the dim light of the street through the filthy panes of the shop’s front window feebly assisted by gas mantels. The counter, in contrast, was of light elm, and the area behind it was well served by large array of casements—in which the glass sparkled—and that was further lit by electrical lights. The shop, therefore, gave an ineffable sense of being some manner of border facility between light and darkness not merely in a gross, sensual form, but even philosophically. This sense was not wholly fanciful.

Certainly the middle manager to whom we were earlier acquainted had a distinct sense of eccentricity about the establishment. He paused two steps past the threshold and looked about him. He saw the badly illuminated bookshelves, the titles of the books they bore all but illegible in the gloom, he saw the flickering gas lights, one sporting a cracked and smoking mantel that could hardly have
been doing the books any good, and he saw the counter behind which a handsome woman in her late fifties or perhaps even her early sixties waited, regarding him with a patient smile. He hurried to her, as a pilgrim hurries from perdition toward a better place.

“Good afternoon,” he began. The woman said nothing, but continued to smile. He had a tiny tingling frisson of a sense that her smile was not merely patient, but perhaps slightly amused. “Good afternoon,” he began again. “I am travelling tomorrow . . . upon the railway . . . and I anticipate longeurs along the way. To ameliorate this anticipated tedium, I thought I might buy a book.”

He looked at her. She looked at him. She said nothing. “To read,” he finished.

“Did,” she began, and then paused. Her eyes slid to one side as if listening. The man listened, too, and made out the sound of soft bumps on the floor above. Shortly these resolved themselves into footfalls that travelled from over their heads and then—judging by cadence and variation—descended stairs towards the door in the far corner of the area behind the counter. Presently, the door opened and a woman with a distinct familial similarity to the first woman entered. She was in her early twenties and pretty enough to set up base camp in the foothills of “beautiful.” It was clearly a path the elder had once walked, for despite her years she was still—vide supra—handsome, which is to say, striking.

The elder woman’s eyes slid back to regard the office manager. “. . . you have anything particular in mind? A particular author? A particular novel?”

“I was thinking, perhaps, of Trollope.” He said it as if making a claim to be a literary renegade.

“Trollope.” The woman repeated it slowly. Behind her, the younger women gave a small sigh and went to the well-lit shelves that filled the domain of the proprietors. “Trollope.”

Her calm smile now held elements of what, to the startlement of the office manager, seemed to be mockery. He must be mistaken, he told himself. So, he persisted. “The Chronicles of Barsetshire, madam. You must have—”

“Hist!” The woman hushed him into silence, a finger raised in admonition. When she was sure he would say no more, she looked off into space, seeking inspiration. “Trollope . . .”

“Madam, he is a famous author!”

This stirred her from her reverie. “He is? You seek a first edition, then?”

“I do not. Merely some reading matter for my railway journey on the morrow. I am travelling to the north.” He added this last datum in a lowered tone, to impress upon her the necessity of carrying culture with him.
“Ah.” Her smile now became purely supercilious. “Then we have been speaking at cross purposes. I naturally assumed that you were seeking a volume that was rare or at least antique. What you require, sir, is W.H. Smiths. I believe most railway stations have branches upon their platforms.”

He looked at her, both thunderstruck and insulted. “You do not wish my custom?”

“I do, but only as it pertains to our stock in trade. Not desultory tales of clerical life written by a Postmaster General. Do you wish to bless your library with incunabula? To delve into esoterica? To collect literary arcana? No, no, and no? Then I fear we have little to offer you at this time. Good day to you, sir. Good hunting at Smiths.”

The office manager went to the door in a fug of astonishment and outrage. There he paused and glared at the elder woman. “A moment! You knew Trollope was a Postmaster General? You know who he is, then?”

“Of course, sir,” said the woman, smiling pleasantly. “It is a bookshop, you know.”

The man vanished through the door, muttering. “Please tell all you friends about us,” said the woman in a mild undertone as it closed with a slam that set the bell dancing.

“Passing trade, mother. Passing trade.” The young woman replaced several volumes of Trollope she had just taken from the shelves before the office manager’s huffish exit had forestalled her intention to offer them. “Money is always nice.”

Elodie Vesperine wrinkled her nose, and slouched against the counter in an indecorous manner, the better to surveil her daughter. Then again, she was possessed of a highly indecorous past, so at least she was practised. “But he was awful. Such a horrid little man, coming in here and pawing at the stock.”

“The stock in the front section is there to be pawed. I chose it myself. There is nothing of any great value, just things for casual browsers.” Elodie made a dismissive noise, and her daughter—Aurelia—looked hard upon her with lowered brow. “Rare creatures though they are when you’re in the shop.”

Any further remonstration was interrupted by the jolly jingle of the bell. Less jolly was the new customer who slid though the door into the gloomy front section and, if anything, thereby deepened the gloom therein. He was tall and pale, perhaps thirty years of age, and the hair that showed beneath the hat in the Müller style he wore was blond. His wardrobe was a study in realised monochromia, a black suit, shoes, waistcoat, gloves, and cravat, his shirt white,
the Müller black, his gloves black. The only spark of colour was the pair of blue glass spectacles, and even the baffles they sported at their sides were black. He was a spectre in flesh, a man to make undertakers seem frivolous.

Elodie Vesperine was delighted. “At last! A real customer. Mr. C, it is a tonic to see you.”

The man doffed his hat and half-bowed courteously. “You are always kind, Madam Vesperine.” His accent betrayed a certain Teutonic heritage.

“And how may we help you this fine day?” She smiled and gestured toward the rear windows, where the first drops of a heavy downfall were starting to collect.

“There is a book . . .”

“Good.”

“A rare book . . .”

“Excellent.”

“It is entitled The Philosophical Alembic. I very much require it for my researches to continue.”

“Perfect. And why do you not procure this book yourself, may I ask?”

The man lowered his spectacles sufficiently to fix her with an inquisitorial glare. She was entirely unabashed by this. Indeed, her smile deepened.

“Please, Mr. C, your reputation precedes you. You have shown yourself perfectly capable of acquiring ‘rare books required for your researches’ on many previous occasions. Why do you come to Vesperine & Daughter on this?”

The man regarded her stonily for a moment. Finally, he removed his spectacles and stowed them in his breast pocket. He went to the door, flipped the sign to show “Closed,” and shot home the bolt. When he was satisfied that the shop was reasonably secure, he said, “Three reasons, Madam Vesperine. Firstly, I do not have the time. Secondly, I am not entirely certain of the book’s location or even if it is still extant. Thirdly, if it does still exist, it is likely to be in the hands of a rival with a passion for security. I do not know if I possess the skills to extract it.”

“A moment,” said Elodie. “Are you suggesting that you would like to hire us to steal this book?”

The man considered for a moment. “Yes, madam. I am.”

Elodie turned to Aurelia, glowing with happiness. “You see, darling? A real customer.”

• • • •
“You are a terrible mother,” said Aurelia Vesperine, but she said it entirely without rancour, otherwise distracted by opening the secret compartments in their steamer trunk.

“I am a wonderful mother,” replied Elodie Vesperine, entirely without reproach. She was busily spreading out an Ordnance Survey map of the area on the table of the room they had secured at a country hotel most used to passing travellers and hikers. She weighted the corners and quickly cast an eye upon the lay of the land as presented at six inches to the mile. “Why, wasn’t I always here for you, even after your dear papa’s tragic death?”

Aurelia removed a brace of revolvers from their concealments and placed them on the carpet. “You killed papa before I was even born.”

“Yes. You know the story well enough. He passed away about twenty minutes or so after your conception, in fact. A fine man. Handsome, intelligent, ruthless, a paragon of self-interest after my own heart. But, alas for him, not very adept with a throwing knife.” She paused, remembering. “Not as good as me, at any rate.” She returned her attention to the map.

“And will it be necessary for me to murder the father of my child, too, mother?”

Elodie seemed stung. “Hardly murder, darling. He got the first throw. And, no. I would just rather you didn’t marry. That isn’t our way, and nor has it been for five generations. You wouldn’t want to upset a family tradition, would you?”

“What if I have a boy?”

Elodie laughed at such an absurd notion. “You have the strangest ideas. Positively perverse. Now, did you remember the explosive?”

“Eight sticks of dynamite, fast and slow fuses. Really, mother, I’m not the absentminded one.” She withdrew a stick from its hiding place in the trunk and sat regarding it perhaps a little ruefully. “Are you quite sure this is how one runs a bookshop? It’s not the impression I got before we started the business at all.”

“I can’t talk for bookshops as a whole, of course, only for ours. And in our particular area of the literary market, we lead the field. Now, then. Where’s the ammunition?”

Their client had furnished them with a list of likely hands in which the book—*The Philosophical Alembic*—might be found, and they had spent some time winnowing the list down to one very likely pair of hands indeed, those belonging
to one Cornelius Merrow.

Merrow was, ostensibly at least, a successful mill owner in a moderately-sized town in the regions, a local councillor, a philanthropist, and a collector of political works, memoirs, and theses. These he would show visitors to his relatively modest manse at the end of a wooded close on the outskirts of the town, demonstrating his interest in politics and the development of economics.

Far more rarely he might show interested parties to his second, confidential library, and here they might pore over unique manuscripts and codices whose names were rarely even whispered. It would be something to explain that Merrow was, in reality, a dark and terrible magician or even a necromancer, but that would be an exaggeration. He dabbled a little, it is true, but rarely with any measurable results. He was successful in business because he was an effective and shrewd businessman, not because he depended on the patronage of otherworldly entities. Merrow’s main interest in the occult was that it was perversely transgressive, and permitted him a degree of temporal power exerted upon those intimidated by such things. Thus, within this special circle he made a point of maintaining his “studies,” in reality a honing of a weapon more psychological than supernatural.

This had the side-effect of advertising his purchases, albeit quietly; the Vesperines were long practised at hearing such subtle echoes. So, it was a small matter to find a usefully placed hotel in the same outskirt as the Merrow house under the pretence of a few days spent painting watercolours. Indeed, the watercolours were already painted in case friendly inquiries were made as to progress, generic studies of subjects that might reasonably be found anywhere in the British countryside: a tree; a quantity of water bearing weed and a duck; a different tree.

Some casual inquiries confirmed what other sources had already revealed; that Merrow had one servant, a butler called Belker, who subcontracted other staff as and when they were required, but otherwise was the only soul in the building apart from his master. No extraneous persons and no dogs.

The main library was upon the ground floor, and a perusal of some floor plans culled from a gazetteer published some decades previously indicated a second study on the topmost storey that fitted the hearsay pertaining to Merrow’s “secret” library of local legend. A brief reconnoitre on the morning after the arrival of the Vesperines showed this room had no external window, a change in the pattern of bricks in the external wall showing where it had been sealed.

“This all seems very straightforward,” commented Elodie as they promenaded together across an adjacent meadow, parasols upon their shoulders. “I shall make
the acquaintance of Mr. Merrow, prevail upon him to invite me to afternoon tea in the garden on this pleasant day, and then proceed to run the legs off his butler with specious requests.”

“And I . . .?” asked Aurelia, although she was already of a certainty as to her role.

“You will enter the house unseen and attain the first floor using any moments of solitude that I can provide for you through the medium of unreasonable demands. There you will enter Mr. Merrow’s second library, locate The Philosophical Alembic and any other small volumes that take your fancy, abstract them, and then remove yourself from the building with an alacrity that is not devoid of caution.”

“So, while you drink tea and eat cucumber sandwiches, I commit all manner of felonies and risk gaol?”

“Of course. Well, really, you can’t expect me to run around like a doe when I am, I fear, in my autumn years. Besides, it is hardly the case that I have not earned a little rest.”

This was true; in her youth Elodie had been a trusted agent for some of the greatest criminal masterminds the world had ever known, as well as at least one slightly underwhelming one. She had more than earned her spurs by any lights. It had been an interesting sort of professional life, unburdened as it was by legality or morality. Aurelia had learned not to press her mother too hard on recounting tales from those days; all too often they caused her to go pale and have to excuse herself.

Her mother looked at her seriously. “If you are uncomfortable with the endeavour, I shall evolve some other stratagem by which I shall relieve Mr. Merrow of his property. I shall not hold it against you. Not everyone is cut of the same cloth.”

Aurelia said nothing, but her expression was unhappy as she twirled her parasol and watched a pair of magpies on a nearby fence. “I shall do it, mother. I am not afraid—”

“I did not accuse you of a lack of intestinal fortitude, dear. You suffer something more pernicious, I fear.” She smiled a little sadly. “Moral rectitude.”

Aurelia lowered her head. “I’m sorry, mama. I do try.”

“I know, I know.” Elodie drew her daughter to her and kissed her lightly on the cheek. “It truly isn’t your fault. These things . . . they can just happen. Poor unfortunate people are born with imperfections, or grow into them. Just assure me on one point; that you shall never become a policewoman.”
Aurelia laughed. “I never shall.”
Elodie smiled and took her daughter on her arm. They walked together until the house was left behind.

• • • •

Mrs. Elsa Carmichael, a widow holidaying in the area for a rest cure and a little watercolour painting—primarily of trees—made the acquaintance of Mr. Cornelius Merrow, mill owner, entrepreneur, and philanthropist via the offices of the small hotel where she was staying. Mr. Merrow, a confirmed bachelor, was pleased to invite Mrs. Carmichael for afternoon tea. He extended the invitation to Mrs. Carmichael’s daughter Emilia who had accompanied her mother, but—hélas—she was unable to accept, having already accepted another invitation that would keep her away for the afternoon. Thus it was that, at precisely 2:45 on a pleasant Wednesday afternoon, Mrs. Carmichael made her way up the gravel drive of the Merrow house and drew on the bell pull.

She heard, quietly but distinctly, the sound of a jingling bell somewhere beyond the door, presumably in the butler’s pantry. Satisfied that she would soon be greeted, she took a moment to step back and examine the house once more.

The building displeased her and, she was dismayed to realise, disquieted her. She had thought the client had overstated matters when he had deferred the book’s collection to her on the grounds of—amongst other things—the level of security under which it lay. Their preliminary investigations had indicated nothing of the sort. She hesitated to liken any endeavour to “taking sweets from a baby” as both an indecorous phrase and one betokening a complacency that could only result in disaster at some point. This particular commission, however, certainly had enjoyed aspects comparable to depriving an infant of confectionary.

Now, however, she began to wonder.

She had not lived as long as she had, surviving any number of perilous encounters and problematical situations along the way, without a certain sense of trepidation troubling her at times when trepidation was called for despite outward appearances of normality and safety. This sense was currently trilling in her breast like an excitable canary. The house, pleasant enough at a distance, seemed now to lower over her like a fragile mountainside or a stuffed grizzly reared upon too small a dais. The sense that it might fall upon her at too heavy a breath dimmed the day and depressed her spirit.

A humble enough mansion of three and a half storeys, one entirely covered at
the front of the building but exposed to the rear where the landscaped garden fell away down the hillside, it had seemed nothing so very extraordinary when Elodie and her daughter pored over its plans in their sitting room. Up beneath the ridge of the roof lay a central landing flanked by two rooms, each graced by a single ovoid window in the gable ends. One of these windows was, as earlier stated, now blocked with brickwork. After considering and dispensing with the idea of Aurelia practising her climbing skills to penetrate the other window and thence make her way across to the second library as unnecessarily perilous and fraught with all manner of potential exigencies, a simpler infiltration of the house had seemed much preferable. Close to, the house seeped an indefinable psychic menace. Perhaps their client had been wiser than they had thought in employing them rather than taking the matter into his own hands.

Menace it may well have exuded, but immediate attention it did not. Despite her misgivings, Elodie rang the bell again, waited again, and went unattended again. She checked her pendant watch; she was undeniably on time and certainly expected. She glanced up toward the neighbouring meadow for a moment. She saw no one, but nor did she expect to; Aurelia was far too good at concealment to be detected by a single glance. Aurelia would, however, see that glance and know that it was meant for her—an indication that all was not well. The signal sent, Elodie went around the side of the house to see if there was anyone in the garden awaiting her.

There was not. No host, nor butler, nor table, tea, and sandwiches. The quietness of the place now troubled her. The grass of the lawn trembled beneath a sudden breeze, the rose bushes shook, but there was barely a sound at all. She was considering going around to the servants’ entrance to see if she might find the butler there when she saw the French windows overlooking the lawn were gaping wide. These she knew to open onto Merrow’s study. Perhaps she would find him there?

She entered cautiously. “Mr. Merrow?” she called for propriety’s sake and to afford her a rock upon which to base a defence against claims of trespass should that prove necessary. “Mr. Merrow, are you there? You invited me to tea? This is Mrs. Carmichael. Have I come on the wrong day?”

The study was empty of persons, but not entirely of interest. Elodie Vesperine’s eye quickly took in the open inkwell, the discarded pen, the record book carelessly left upon the blotter and the slip of paper protruding from it. From what she knew of Merrow’s personality, this was tantamount to a mare’s nest of disorganisation. She went to the door, listened at it, and—hearing nothing
—quietly opened it and looked out into the hallway. The place was static but for
dust in the air, and there was nothing to hear except the steady ticking of the
grandfather clock on the first landing. She slipped back into the study, closing the
door silently behind her.

The pen and inkwell were witnesses to sudden haste and disruption of
Merrow’s routine. Perhaps the record book might provide the cause of it. It
opened easily to the last notated page, bookmarked with a telegram. She glanced
first at the book entry and was dismayed to see it was a handwritten catalogue of
acquired books. The most recent entry was *The Philosophical Alembic*.

Lips pursed with growing professional dismay, she now turned her attention to
the telegram and let slip a small sigh of exasperation. The initialled signature was
little clue to the message’s provenance, but its import was clear enough; Merrow
had made enquiries as to the bona fides of Mrs. Elsa Carmichael, and they had
been found wanting. Elodie muttered something hardly genteel under her breath.
A fine state of affairs it was when a gentleman didn’t simply accept a lady’s word.
In other circumstances she would have worked harder to create a more resilient
alias, but she had assumed it unnecessary in this case. It had been foolish of her,
she now realised, but Vesperines are not inclined to cry over spilt milk. Taking a
moment to check the toy-like .25 semi-automatic in her reticule and the fierce
twin-barrelled Derringer in her fox fur muff, she went to explore.

First, she went to the front door and went out to perform a small pantomime
of looking along the drive as if expecting Mr. Merrow to appear there. During this
act she blew her nose, a signal to her watching daughter that all was not well.
Then she went back in, leaving the door on the latch. Aurelia was more than
capable of extemporising as the situation demanded, she knew; she only hoped
this didn’t all become terribly messy and strident. That was her usual experience
when securing books on the Continent, and she would be unhappy if it were
repeated in the more sober land of her birth.

As her alias was already worthless, it seemed pointless to try and maintain it,
and so she did not call again. Instead she moved from room to room with a grace
and silence born of decades of wandering around other people’s homes without
permission. She noted knick-knacks and gee-gaws of moderate taste and worth,
paintings of the same sort, and Merrow’s primary library, which heaved with
worthiness and little else for the inquisitive, acquisitive, and illicit visitor.

The kitchen was next, and proved home to a plate of small sandwiches under a
clean tea towel to keep them moist, and a stand of cakes within a fine mesh cage
to keep the flies off them.
It also featured the corpse of Belker the butler, which was a surprise even to a seasoned adventuress. Indeed, she stood shocked for very nearly two seconds before going to examine him.

It had not been an easy death by the look of things, but nor had it been drawn out, to judge by the great pool of blood around the hapless man. Elodie took a moment to examine the edge of the pool and noted that there was no sign of coagulation; this had happened very recently. As for the method used, it showed a peculiar admixture of viciousness and perfunction. It seemed the unhappy Belker had been caught in his shirtsleeves whilst working on the household accounts. With sufficient rapidity to give him no chance of rising from his chair, his assailant had laid into him with a razor, delivering a multitude of wounds that were equally remarkable for their cleanness, their depth, and their length. It must be quite a razor blade, she concluded—at least a foot long and capable of cutting bone as effortlessly and neatly as the skin. Elodie recovered some matting from the boot room and laid them into the pool, hitching up her skirts to cross the impromptu bridge to the body so formed. The sheer ubiquity of gore on and about Belker made observation of the wounds difficult but not impossible, and a little prodding with a wooden spoon from the table showed that, somehow, the wounds extended even to the rear of the dead man’s upper thighs and across his buttocks. This while, presumably, he was sitting.

Elodie retired from the blood pool to consider matters. This put a very different complexion on . . .

She looked cautiously around the kitchen and listened intently. Nothing. . . matters. She was coming to the conclusion that she had quoted an insufficient remuneration to the client for taking on the commission. Potential legal entanglements she had anticipated, perhaps even some physical contretemps, but this? Ah, well. Live and learn. With any luck.

She withdrew the Derringer from the muff and instead secreted it within a pocket sewn into the inside cuff of her coat’s left sleeve for precisely such eventualities. Once it was secure, she took the .25 “Baby Browning” pistol from her reticule, disengaged its safety catch, and led with it back into the hallway. All seemed quiet there, so she dropped her bag by the door to facilitate subsequent recovery (likely in a hurry) before making her way upstairs.

Up past the first landing, upon which the grandfather clock ticked sonorously, the heartbeat of the house. She noted the time and paused there while the minute hand clicked to twelve, the hour hand moved to three, and the chimes sang the hour.
As the sound died away, she was moving slowly and stealthily up to the first floor. If she had been intent on searching the whole house, she would have gone down to the lower ground floor. She was not, however. Her driving concern was to gain the desired book, possibly a handful of others if opportunity presented, and then exit the house, the grounds, and the county in rapid succession, leaving the identities of Mrs. and Miss Carmichael blowing tattered in the breeze behind them. Towards this end, she did not care greatly about the state of affairs on the first floor beyond a cursory search to ensure that it was vacant and her retreat would not be cut off there.

She found no one, but she did not find nothing. Or, at least, she suspected she hadn’t. Twice she was startled upon entering a room by a figure in the corner of her eye. Twice she swung her gun to bear upon it. Twice she found herself threatening nothing. While human perception is a long way from perfect and even the sharpest eye can occasionally be fooled, what perturbed her most was that there was nothing on which to blame the illusion. She did not find herself aiming at a suit hung from a wardrobe door, for example, or upon a long mirror in which she herself was reflected. There was nothing there at all, merely some shelves bearing curios in one case, and an entirely blank wall in another. It was not impossible that her ageing senses were proving less reliable these days, but she had experienced no such illusions before. Why should they trouble her now?

She examined her impressions and found them largely consistent; a man standing motionless, a pale-faced man in a dark suit, sans hat. No, not simply pale, but white as snow. He had vanished as she had swung her head, taking him from the edge of her perception to its centre. No, this also wasn’t entirely accurate. The figure had not vanished in the blink of an eye, it had done something more involved even if it still had been in the space of a blink. It had diminished, becoming less in some fashion until it wasn’t there anymore. Not shrunken away, but lessened, diluted, reduced as something to be seen, yet not actually fading away. Elodie was reminded of mice scampering out of view.

She regarded her pistol with an acid eye; she was regretting the practicality that had forced such a small weapon upon her. She permitted herself a momentary pang of envy for the Webley .577 she knew her client preferred. Such a pistol would have done wonders for her confidence at that juncture.

The topmost landing was small, sandwiched in between the “secret” second library and what seemed to be a box room. Elodie tried the latter first, silently opening the door and glancing briefly inside to confirm that its only occupants were tea chests and suitcases. She left the door open; the only light otherwise was
through a small skylight over the stairwell. The illumination afforded by the box room’s unsealed and uncovered window was much appreciated.

She turned her attention to the door’s mate. Assuming Merrow was actually somewhere on his own land and wasn’t dead or lurking on the lower ground floor, then here he must be. She considered concealing the pistol, but then remembered the telegram and decided that where guile had failed, threat would just have to prevail.

She moved closer to the door and listened. Beyond the mellowed oak, she could just make out fast breathing, almost panting, intermitted with small wavering groans. It was a sound she had heard before; the sound of somebody in mortal fear of their life.

Curiouser and curiouser. Depending on circumstances, this could be an advantageous thing, or a very unfortunate thing. Only one course of action could define it.

Elodie Vesperine pushed down upon the door handle and, finding the door unlocked, opened it.

Cornelius Merrow was an impressive man by reputation, less so when observed curled in a tight ball, whimpering. Elodie took in the room before entering; all the walls were covered in shelving, and all the shelves were heavy with a wide variety of tomes, including some she instinctively noted to be rarities. Many of the books, however, had been ill treated and recently; they lay scattered on the floor or open on the table, rudely stacked upon one another. There was a small fireplace by the end wall, offset due presumably to the window that once took up the centre of that wall, a table, and two comfortable chairs. An electric light depended from the ceiling, and another stood upon the table. Both were lit. Of any other presence, however, the room was clear. She noticed with a small glow of pleasure that, lying on the thick, rich carpet by Merrow was a demi volume bound in maroon leather. Even from where she stood, she could make out enough of the silvered title upon the spine to identify it as the elusive *Philosophical Alembic*. The sensible thing would simply be to take it, bid Mr. Merrow a good afternoon, and leave him to his delirium.

“What ails you, Mr. Merrow?” she said instead, curiosity outweighing prudence not even for the first time. Then she added as an afterthought, “Your man Belker’s dead, by the way.”

She did not say it cruelly, it must be emphasised: merely informatively.

For his reply, Merrow reached in a curious reflexive, spastic manner and flicked the book further away from him with the back of his fingertips, as if the
thing were hot.

“Take it!” he cried. “Take the damnable thing! Take it away! Take it and its . . .” and here he paused, and gazed fretfully up at his not-entirely-invited guest.

“Its what, pray?” Elodie smiled charmingly as she said it. “What troubles you so, Mr. Merrow? What visited such a terrible fate upon your servant?”

“You wanted it.” Merrow flicked the book another three inches closer to her. “You may have it! With my best wishes! With my blessings! Just . . . take it!”

“I may be able to help you with that, or I may not. In the first instance, however, I would—” A creak on the stairs below distracted her. She leaned out through the open doorway and looked down the stairwell. For a moment she thought she saw someone, but then there was a flickering in the light and the well stood vacant. She frowned. Definitely not an optical illusion. She had just seen a man—hatless, in a black suit and as pale as paper—vanish.

“Who is your guest, Mr. Merrow?” she said with rising urgency. “The man who isn’t there? Who or what is he?”

“This is your doing!” he said frantically, pushing himself away from the door with his heels although his back was already hard against the shelves. “Your fault!”

“Mine?” Elodie admitted to some mild surprise. “I have been responsible and, indeed, guilty of many things in my life, but I doubt that entity may be counted amongst my crimes, moral or judicial.”

“You wanted that book!” Here Merrow glared at The Philosophical Alembic. “It was new to my collection and I had not the leisure to examine it previously. When I discovered you were not who you pretended, I guessed you were after some artefact or book in my possession, and that seemed most likely.”

“And so, out of curiosity as to why I should be so interested in it, you read it?”

Merrow nodded miserably. “Only the first few words. That was all it took. The book is guarded. Ensorcelled. There is a thing that watches over it. Its true owner would know never to read that first page. That damnable first page . . .” Merrow here became quite unmanned, and sobbed miserably at an unkind fate.

Another creak upon the stairs. Elodie Vesperine did what she did best, which was to weigh options, consider stratagems, and evolve imperatives. “I have a little experience of such guardians,” she told Merrow. “They are neither infallible nor unavoidable, believe me. They invariably have a weakness.”

“They do?” He looked up at her with sudden uncritical hope. “You can help me?”
“Quickly, tell me how it is that this creature is unable to attack you? I would have thought its entire raison d’être would have been to do you to death as soon as possible.”

“I know a little of the occult,” he said, waving at his library. “When it manifested, I ran from this room and managed to shake off its pursuit, albeit briefly. You’re right; it is not infallible! Hoping to find some method of defeating it, I returned here and was able to create a protective ward. Then, my prospects dwindled. I could think of nothing that might defeat it, could find nothing. Nothing! I was trapped. I rang for Belker, but he never came. Dead, you say? Poor Belker. Poor, poor Belker.”

Poor, poor Belker, indeed. And poor Madam Vesperine if she failed to solve this little conundrum. So, to consider the parts of the problem, she had the book, the paper tiger of a magician who was naught but a poseur, a slapdash sort of ward, and a frustrated guardian that was more than happy to dispose of anybody else in the environs. She very much hoped that Aurelia was showing enough sense to stay in her covey and not come gallivanting to the rescue. Even with the far more combative .38 revolver that her daughter was carrying, she would stand little chance against this curious creature of the book, the snow-faced man of glimpses and flickers.

Still, even the possibility of it served to crystallise Elodie’s thoughts admirably, and it took her only a moment to conceive a plan, and only a moment more to put it into action. She walked to Merrow and took up the book. “This volume is the author of your misfortune? Then our course is clear. This is the focus of the entity that slew your butler. It is therefore the key to the solution.”

Merrow seemed troubled. “You will destroy it? I considered it, but—”

“Great heavens, no.” She chided him like a slow child. “If it is destroyed, the creature’s servitude is dissolved. What, then, is to prevent it wandering as it sees fit, killing at random?”

She failed to add that nor would she get paid if the book were burned.

“Well . . .” Merrow could see advantage in that, shameful though it was. “. . . as long as it leaves the house.”

“No.” She said it firmly, and hoped it gave the impression of a greater morality than his own. It would be an inaccurate impression, but she couldn’t help that. “We shall not be responsible for such a horror. Imagine! A hapless maiden waylaid upon the lane! A child slaughtered upon the meadow! A . . .” Inspiration deserted her for a moment. “. . . puppy. Killed. No, we have the creature’s leash here, and we may use it to bring the beast to heel.”
So saying, she stepped smartly out onto the landing, taking the book beyond the line of Merrow’s unexpectedly efficacious ward. His gasp of dismay was joined by Elodie’s own as she turned and saw the figure upon the intermediate landing.

This time it did not fold out of sight but stood and watched her, a construct of printer’s nightmares, man-sized in woodcut. It gave the impression of a man one moment, and of a figure constructed from criss-crossed pieces of printed card the next. Its features were as planar as any upon a page, and it seemed to draw from every illustration that had ever felt the touch of an inking roller. No detail stayed the same from one moment to the next, but riffled and altered before the confused eye of the observer, and where the parts of its form were presented edgeways on, they disappeared. Now she understood its nature and its modus operandi; it was a creature of three dimensions but wrought from two, and every surface was infinitely thin and therefore infinitely sharp. This was how Belker had died; opened and emptied by a storm of paper cuts.

“Well.” She spoke as much to herself as to the protean facsimile of a man. “This is a new meaning to a ‘printer’s devil,’ isn’t it?” She turned her head far enough to address the occupant of the second library, but her eyes never left the devil. “Mr. Merrow, it is as I surmised. Used properly, the book controls the guardian. We are safe.”

“We are?” Merrow’s voice was thin and tremulous. “Are you sure?”

She forced herself to smile. “I yet live, do I not? But my control is insufficient to return it to the book. You summoned it, you must dispel it. Please come here so that we may finish the matter.”

One short flight of stairs below her, the devil’s face flickered through a thousand different countenances as a child’s flick book. There was expression there—curiosity, rapacity, and hatred.

Slowly and with the utmost reluctance, Merrow came out of his sanctum, hesitating for long seconds before Madam Vesperine’s impatient imprecations could cajole him from safety. When at last he stood by her, looking fearfully down at the killing thing, she passed him the slim, maroon demi volume. “There,” she whispered encouragingly, “show it who’s boss.”

If Merrow knew one thing, it was showing all and sundry who was boss. He stood at the head of the stairs and raised the empowering book high. “You see this?” he demanded of the devil. “This means that I . . .” He happened to look up at this point, and beneath the better illumination of the skylight, was able to see the book properly. “This isn’t the right book,” he said in wonderment.
A lesser person than Elodie Vesperine might have chosen that moment to say something pithy and moderately amusing at his expense. But, she was in a hurry so she just got straight down to business and pushed Merrow down the stairs.

It wasn’t far, and he would certainly have survived the fall had he not met a triumphant entity at the end of the trajectory that was dedicated to the destruction of whomsoever might be foolish enough to summon it. In this, Madam Vesperine had been nothing but honest; Merrow had summoned it, and so it fell to him to dispel it. She had merely neglected to mention that this would be at the cost of his life.

As for her, she stepped smartly into the second library even as Merrow was still tumbling, all the better to avoid the inevitable arterial spray. Blood is the very devil to get out of lace.

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Subsequent events unfolded quickly, largely for purposes of avoiding the forces of law and order. Certainly Madam Elodie Vesperine in the company of a baffled Miss Aurelia Vesperine were on the train away from town and heading by degrees—in a deliberately circumspect manner—towards London. In this journey, they were slightly burdened by an extra suitcase borrowed from Merrow’s box room, laden with books and trinkets that he was never going to miss given his present circumstances. Finally they regained the safety and anonymity of the great metropolis, and sent a letter to an assumed name at a poste restante address.

The following day they were blessed by the reappearance of the saturnine Mr. C.

“Excellent, excellent,” he said as he accepted the book in return for an envelope containing a decent bundle of bank notes. “I knew you would be able to find and secure it for me if anyone could. I am in your debt, ladies.” He made to open the book where it lay on the counter.

He was frustrated by the tip of Elodie’s finger coming down firmly on the cover, holding it shut. “No, mein Herr. We have been recompensed for our expense and trouble in gaining this book for you. You are not in our debt. But, if you wish to live for any length of time subsequent to opening that book . . .” she smiled the most charming of her many charming smiles, “. . . you are about to be.”
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan L. Howard is the author of the Johannes Cabal, Carter & Lovecraft, Goon Squad, and Russalka Chronicles series, and a BAFTA-nominated game designer and writer. His ninth novel After the End of the World will be released in November 2017. He is currently working on a new novel and an adventure game for Binary Space. He lives with his wife and daughter near Bristol in the UK.
Now is the seventh winter since Troy fell, and we
Still search beneath unfriendly stars, through every sea
And desert isle, for Italy’s retreating strand.

—Virgil

I have found that this little device takes in my words, and then, by some mechanism I do not understand, speaks them back to me. A few moments ago I tried to discover how much it would hold, talking for a long time. It held it all. Now I have wiped all that away—there is a button for it—and begun again. I want to leave a record of what has happened to me, so that if someone comes for me, and finds me dead, he will understand. I feel that someone may, though I do not know why. And I want him to understand.

I do not know my name. The people among whom I find myself, who have been kind to me thus far, call me Cutthroat. This is because I have a reddish-brown birthmark on my throat from one side of the hair behind my neck to the other.

Each day shall begin with its number. This is the first day.

These people are taller than I—my head comes only to the shoulders of their men. They say they found me in the snow an hour after the Great Sleigh passed, but what the Great Sleigh is I cannot clearly learn. I thought at first it was a nature symbol (perhaps for a snowstorm); but they say this was the first time they had ever seen it, and that they hid from it in the beginning.

They carried me here to their camp; since then I have been able to stand up and walk a little, and I find that I can speak their language, though badly. They dress in furs, and their huts are of hides stretched over saplings and plastered with snow. Outside, the wind is blowing more snow, building drifts around the huts. I am lying on furs; the light is a luminous fungus suspended from a rawhide thong and is very dim.

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This is the second day. I woke when one of the women came to me with a stone bowl containing a kind of soup, which may have been intended as a
medicine. I asked her about it, and she said they make it by boiling the twigs of a
certain tree. It is thin and rather too spicy for my taste, but invigorating. I got up
and went outside, and the woman showed me where the men relieve themselves
—a sheltered spot about a hundred meters from the camp.

When I came back the men were gone—hunting, the women said. I told them
I would like to have gone with them, saying that I did not want to live on their
charity, and would try to contribute more food to the group than I ate. They
laughed at me and said that I was too young and small to hunt with the men: This
was not malicious, but very jolly and good-natured, so that I felt that I was at a
party (even though I cannot remember any specific party, or in fact anything at all
before last night) despite the fact that we were standing in the snow and wind,
and it was intensely cold. They also laughed at my coveralls, which are very
different from their fur clothes.

Then they told me they were going to gather food, and I said I would go with
them and help them; they thought this was very funny, and made up a kind of
song about it, telling how I would step on the various food plants, and complain
before the sun was high of the pains in my back. But when they had enjoyed
themselves, Red Kluy, who I think is the headman’s mother and seems to be the
chief woman of the tribe, went into one of the huts and brought out a weapon,
saying that I should come with the women and protect them, and kill any game I
might see while they were gathering food.

The weapon, which I still have, consists of a wooden stock, three flat, springy
lengths of bonelike (or perhaps hornlike) material, and a thong sling. It can be
used to throw stones or chunks of ice, but the proper missile is a sort of bent,
double-headed club of very heavy wood, some having both heads studded with
points of bone or sharp chips of rock.

We walked about three kilometers through the snow, which was somewhat less
than knee-deep in most places, going in single file and taking turns at breaking the
trail. The women’s feet are wrapped in hides and bound with thongs, while I have
boots of some black synthetic that is warm and keeps my feet dry. Several times,
we passed near trees, since Red Kluy directed us, whenever possible, to the spots
where the snow was thinnest, and that most often meant the lee side of thickets.

Can I call the trees my first surprise? Until I saw them, I had been surprised by
nothing, being so stunned at finding myself among these people, with no memory
of how I came here, that I was dazed by everything. But although I remember
nothing, I find that I have in my mind certain fixed, though imperfect, ideas
concerning the uses of objects and the appearances of the things whose names I
find ready on my tongue—even though I cannot recall ever having seen them. I do not know how trees are supposed to look, and I cannot put my finger on what is wrong with these. They are green or greenish-brown, and grow from the soil in a single trunk, mostly, although they are sometimes found in clumps of stems, or with multiple trunks joining in a single top. The tops are of branches which are divisions of the parent trunk, and may be straight, curved, or angled, according to the species. Eventually—the larger the branch, the greater the length—these branches reunite in nodes, only to split again into further branchings, and at last into bristling twigs. Some trees have small leaves, singly or in rosettes; others have none. Some are supple and bend readily under the weight of the snow, springing up if it is knocked away; but there are also tougher kinds which stiffly resist it.

The spot the women sought was a long, gentle, southward-facing slope dotted with stones. Here in many spots the snow was only a few centimeters deep, and the women spread out, brushing it aside with their hands and picking small, low-growing plants that seemed to thrive beneath it. At first I tried to help them, but I did not know which varieties were edible, and in any event had brought no bag to fill; and their laughter soon drove me away to practice with the clubbow.

It is an interesting weapon, and one—I found—that does not require much skill, since the springs are bent in advance, and the whirling clubs give the shooter a fairly wide band over which to hit the target. I used stones at first, which Red Kluy showed me how to fit into the sling; then, when I remembered that besides this recorder I had a folding knife (as well as a firemaker and several other things) in my pocket, graduated to a club I cut myself. (The nicely smoothed and carved ones in the quiver seemed obviously to be too good to use for practice, and the bone and stone points would surely break.)

Nothing eventful happened until the sun was almost directly overhead; then we heard a succession of piercing cries coming, as it seemed, from the trees at the bottom of the slope. At once, the women straightened up and turned in the direction of the sound, standing as motionless as so many tree stumps. The clubbow was cocked for a practice shot, as it happened, and I stood frozen too, holding it almost in firing position.

While we listened, the cries grew louder; and at last, a slender figure broke from the fringe of the trees. My first impression was that it was a girl; my second, as it bounded up the slope toward us, using its front limbs freely to assist its speed, that it was an animal; my third, as I heard its high-pitched shrieks at close range and saw the length of its neck and the protruding formation of its lower
face, that it was a bird. The women remained unmoving until it was almost among them, saw them, and veered away.

Then they broke into frantic action, sprinting after it—I was astounded to see how fast even the oldest of them could run—screaming and hurling stones. Red Kluy shouted to me to shoot, and after a moment’s hesitation—the creature still looked oddly human—I did. Unfortunately, the clubbow was loaded only with my light practice club. It struck the running figure near the waist and staggered it, but did not bring it down. I reloaded as quickly as I could with a heavy club from the quiver and ran after the women.

I said I ran—I should have said I bounded. I meant to run; but every step turned into a five-meter jump, and in the space of a few heartbeats I had covered several hundred meters. Immediately I had another surprise—the women themselves, though they ran in ordinary strides, did so on the surface of the snow (as did our quarry), even where it was clearly a meter deep.

When I was so close there seemed to be little chance of missing, I ended one of my bounds atop a boulder and from that vantage point discharged the heavy, spiked club with which I had loaded the bow. I aimed for the head, but the unaccustomed angle deceived me, and the club caught the long-necked creature at the knees, breaking both her legs. I say “her” because it became obvious as soon as she had fallen that she was a woman. Her body had scarcely struck the snow when Red Kluy and the others were upon her. I saw her turn her face to the sun as she died; her lips moved—it was a beautiful and delicate face, however strange—then her eyes lost their focus and rolled backward in their sockets. Red Kluy had lanced one of the arteries in her neck, and the scarlet blood, freezing even as it gushed, had taken her life with it.

“Who is she?” I said, jumping from the boulder.

“A Lenizee. A Lenizee doe. A young one.” Flashing Aa, one of the women, reached down and squeezed the girl’s buttocks with her hand. “The men won’t get anything this good, I think. She has run far—her flesh will be so soft it will fall from the roasting sticks.”

“You’re going to eat her?”
She misunderstood me. “After you take choice.”

“Yes,” Red Kluy said. “It was Cutthroat’s shot that brought her down.”

“We are the hunting party, Red Kluy,” one of the others called.

Red Kluy touched her chin, a gesture that I have learned means “yes”; at that moment there was a roar from the edge of the wood from which the dead girl had emerged. There, at the very border of the trees, stood a strange woman—so tall
and powerfully built as to be almost a giantess—who shouted at us unintelligibly. The women began to yell at her at once, flourishing the black stone daggers they had drawn during the pursuit of the girl. The big woman continued to shout in a voice deeper than that of any man I could imagine, walking nervously back and forth at the edge of the trees. She had a great, tangled shock of tow-colored hair that hung down her back nearly to her waist, and a square, powerful face that was noble and brutal enough for a barbarian queen. I tried to ask some of the women who she was, but they were making so much noise they could not understand me, and in the end I settled for loading the clubbow with the most menacing-looking missile I could find in the quiver, and sitting down to wait for the giantess’s advance, if it ever came.

It never did. After an hour or more of shouting at us, she turned and vanished among the trees, leaving the women to bear the body of the dead girl back to the camp in triumph. On the return march I asked Red Kluy who the big woman had been.

“Ketincha.”
“But who is she?” I said.
“She is Ketincha—you saw her. We’re lucky her husband wasn’t around.”
“Where do they live?”
“In the wood—close to the smaller waterfall. Do you know where that is?”
I admitted that I did not, and asked if theirs was a large tribe. Red Kluy laughed. “No tribe. There isn’t enough meat around for that—you should see Ketin. They used to have a son, but he’s gone away.”

I felt sick at the thought of eating the girl’s flesh, no matter how inhuman she looked. But by the time the men returned (almost empty-handed, as it happened), it was clear that I would precipitate a social crisis if I refused; so I accepted a gobbet of the tender meat and swallowed it as best I could. The truth is that I was very hungry, and the meat, though it was so soft—as Flashing Aa had predicted—that it seemed to fall to bits in my mouth, was nearly tasteless. (Perhaps this was because these people seem to have no salt, and use no spices.) Besides the Lenizee doe, we ate some small game the men had brought—tougher but more flavorful, I found—and the herbs and roots the women had gathered.

As we sat about the fire, I noticed several of the men staring at me, but it was an hour or more before I realized what it was they were looking at. My beard had begun to show; none of them had facial hair beyond a half-dozen bristles on the upper lip. When I understood what was wrong, I excused myself and went to the “sanitary” area I had been shown that morning. One of the objects I have found
in my pockets is a shaver, and I ran it over my face until I felt certain it was completely smooth, then rejoined the group at the fire. Several people seemed puzzled by the change in my appearance; but I believe they soon decided that what they had seen earlier was only a trick of the firelight. At least, I hope so.

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The third day. Should I tell the most important things first each day, or recount the day’s events in sequence? I was thinking over this question before I turned on the recorder, and to tell the truth, at one time I decided that the best approach might be to begin with a summary of the most important happenings. But when I tried to make one—just about such a simple thing as what I saw today—I found myself trapped in a web of explanations that anticipated much of the news I had to tell.

I went hunting with the men today. Red Kluy had boasted to them of how fast I could run and said that I could bend her son’s clubbow without effort. So they were watchful and a trifle hostile.

Their hunting seems to me to involve no great skill. We made our way through the woods for half a day or more, finding nothing better than a few small animals of the sort the men had brought back yesterday. These resemble monkeys and are very agile. They had long, bushy tails; and though there seem to be several kinds, they are so similar in general appearance and habits—from what I could see—that it takes close examination to tell them apart. The men shot at these snow monkeys whenever they saw them, using the smooth clubs; and when they hit them, they buried their bodies in the snow, marking the spot with a knotted twig.

After four or five hours of tramping through freezing cold, we crossed the trail of what appeared to be an extremely large man, walking with long strides. I remembered what Red Kluy had told me about Ketin, Ketincha’s husband, who sounded like no one I wanted to meet in a snow-filled forest. The men with me did not hesitate. At once they began to sing, a rising and falling wail, and broke into a jogging trot that kept them on the surface of the snow. After a few trials that were too fast or too slow, I was able to master the technique myself; it was probably easier for me, since I was somewhat smaller than the smallest of them. The headman, Red Kluy’s son Longknife, told me (I suppose because he had seen that I had trouble in the beginning) that the snow was not always so difficult to run on as this.

I asked if that was because it was deeper now than usual.
“No,” he said. “Often it is much deeper than this. But when it has lain for a few days, and no fresh snow has fallen, the top will be harder, like ice across a lake. We will be able to walk on the top then, and hunting will be easier. Sometimes when the snow is new-fallen, it is so soft we cannot even run on it. Then we stay in camp until it hardens.”

A wind was rising and was beginning to blow the snow into fresh drifts; I asked him if that would make it harder to travel.

“No, it will be firmer for that in the end. But it is poor shooting in the wind.”

“No more snow monkeys then?”

He laughed. “Not when we are on the trail of Nashhwonk. But it is a good thing for us that he is such a big target; we will get in close and shoot down the wind. Then we will not miss.”

The wind was so cold that it seemed to freeze my lungs with every breath I took. I continued to run alongside Longknife for what might have been another two or three kilometers—we were in front of all the others—before he said, “Do you not run on top of the snow in your country?”

I said that I did not remember my country.

“You are under an enchantment. That is well for you.”

“Why is that?”

“No one will kill you. When an enchanted animal dies, the spell runs up the weapon, seeking a new home.”

“I am not an animal.”

He chuckled as he ran. “All the animals say that. Nashhwonk will say it—watch.”

“Won’t he hear us coming? All the singing?”

“We wish that he hear us. Nashhwonk fears us, and he will run. We will catch him, and he will be too tired to fight well. He is too big to run on top of the snow.”

“Is Ketin too big?”

Longknife’s expression showed me that it would have been more polite not to mention Ketin. He said, “Ketin is very light of foot,” and then put on speed until he was ten meters or so ahead of me.

This was so childish that I am afraid I became childish in turn. I increased my own speed and found, as I had suspected, that I could run a good deal faster than he. I caught up with him, bounding along but keeping my jumps short and flat enough that I did not sink into the snow. Then with another burst of speed I passed him; and to show my superiority, I continued to keep up the same pace
until I was out of sight and nearly out of sound of the whole group.

The trees grew thicker; soon I was spending half my effort in dodging the trunks and jumping over fallen logs. Then, abruptly, I pushed through a thicket and found myself in open country. The wind was blowing hard by now; but despite the flying snow, I noticed that a kilometer or more away from the spot where I stood, there was a huge, flattened track in the snow, a band, now somewhat obscured by drifts, but still clearly visible where it topped a low hill, at least a hundred meters wide: as though some incredible force had propelled a burden of tons across the empty terrain.

Forgetting Nashhwonk, whose immense and trudging footprints I had been following until then, I sprinted ahead to examine this great flattened path in the snow. The part nearest me was hidden behind rising ground. When I reached the crest, I saw something that made me put aside for the moment all thoughts of the track itself. Sitting in the very center of it, in a massive, high-backed chair of dark wood, was a man bigger than I had ever conceived that a man could be. He was facing me, as though he had been waiting for me to appear, though something in his broad face made me think that my sudden arrival might have surprised him. “Are you one of them?” he said, and by a slight movement of his head made me understand that he meant the men of the tribe, whose wailing song came to us faintly over the snow.

“No,” I said, “I am their guest.”

“But you hunt with them.” He rose and, somewhat clumsily, I thought, walked around his chair until he could stand behind it, leaning on the back. Tall and massive as he was, his legs seemed disproportionately long.

“I don’t hunt you,” I said.

“You are wise.”

“I’m not afraid of you.” (This was a lie, and I suspect it sounded like one.) “I don’t hunt people; I thought we were after an animal.” (Another lie—I had seen his footprints, but the thing had seemed less culpable before I heard him speak.) “You are Nashhwonk?”

“Mankiller, I am called. Do you see this?” He picked up the chair as though it were a feather and thrust it toward me, and I saw that the ends of the legs were pointed, and that the points were darker than the rest of the wood. They looked almost like metal.

Nashhwonk tapped the joint between a leg and a rung with a forefinger as big as my wrist. “The sinews that bind this marriage of wood were cut from a man’s leg. And as for your friends’ kind, I’ve killed dozens of them. Now they think to
catch me in deep snow, where they can skip like fleas. But here in the track of the
Great Sleigh the snow is crushed to ice, and they can run no better than I—
indeed, not as well. Here I will kill them all. Is Longknife their leader? Ask him
what befell his father.”

“Here he is,” I said. “You can ask him yourself.”

Longknife came loping up beside me. “I see you’ve found him,” he panted. “I
thought he’d make his stand here. Sometimes he pounds down the snow in a
clearing to make a pen for himself. But this is better. We’ll take him just the
same.”

“If you couldn’t take him before, what makes you so sure you can now?”

Nashhwonk had grown silent, staring at Longknife with angry bloodshot eyes.
Now, still holding his chair, he began walking away from us, west along the
flattened track. Longknife and I trotted to keep up with him, staying just at the
margin of the deep snow. I could hear the rest of Longknife’s tribe in the woods
nearby.

“We will kill him, never fear,” Longknife said. “There will be plenty of meat
tonight. We have killed him often before.”

“Then how can he be here?”

“Nashhwonk is Nashhwonk. This one or another.” The wind was blowing in
our faces, driving the blinding snow; and as he spoke, Longknife put on a burst
of speed and ran into the smoothed track, about fifty meters ahead of
Nashhwonk. His clubbow was cocked, and I could see that he hoped to get a
downwind shot at the giant’s head. But Nashhwonk immediately bent nearly
double and, thrusting his chair in front of him so that the seat protected his face
and the upper half of his body, rushed toward Longknife. There was no point in
shooting, and Longknife dashed back to the deep snow. The rest of the tribe was
straggling toward us now.

“How about you?” Longknife said. “You’re going to eat the meat, aren’t you?”

I said that I supposed I was.

“Then you could give us a little help. Get over on the far side, and we’ll take
quartering shots.”

I ran behind Nashhwonk and almost came too close. He turned and charged
me with his chair, looking as big as a tree. I was just able to leap out of the way
before one of those cruel points impaled me; even so he swung the thing like a
flail as he passed, missing me by no more than a few centimeters. One of
Longknife’s clubs struck his forearm and fell to the snow, but it did him no harm
that I could see. Nashhwonk turned and came after me then. His legs were longer
than I am tall; they made him astonishingly fast here where the snow was level and hard; but I was faster, and could have turned more quickly if I had had to. As it was, I knew that I could get away, provided I did not slip and fall; still, I had a very vivid mental picture of what would happen if I did.

When I reached the other side, the rest of the tribe was beginning to come up. In a few minutes Nashhwonk was surrounded. A blow from a spiked club opened a cut on his forehead, but his shaggy brows seemed to keep the blood out of his eyes effectively; and as well as I could judge, he was unhurt otherwise.

Furthermore, it was soon apparent that we could not continue to shoot clubs at him long. Those that fell on the flattened track of the Great Sleigh could be picked up—if they were not too close to Nashhwonk—and shot again; but every so often a club missed him completely and went sailing off to be lost in the deep snow. As the clubs ran out, and Nashhwonk tired, the circle around him grew tighter; and those whose clubs were all exhausted slung their bows behind them and drew their knives—short, broad blades of rhyolite hilted by binding the tangs with leather. When Nashhwonk’s back was turned, they darted in to stab at his legs; but before any of them had drawn blood, he was able to catch one of the boldest with a swing of his chair. The unlucky man went flying, sliding half a dozen meters when he hit. Nashhwonk was on him in a moment, driving the chair down to impale him on the points of the legs; he rolled frantically and almost got clear, but one spear-tipped leg pinned his left thigh to the ice. Nashhwonk jerked the chair up to finish him then; but as he did, Longknife with a great leap landed on his shoulders and drove his dagger into his neck.

There was a fountain of blood—as if Nashhwonk were filled only with this rushing redness—that pulsed to the beating of his heart. He dropped the chair and tore at Longknife with his hands; but Longknife stabbed him through one wrist, and by that time his Achilles tendon had been cut, and he fell like a great tree. When I and some others had pulled Longknife, gasping, from his grip, he was dead.

We bound the wound of the man whose leg had been pierced; and before the blood had stopped, others had begun butchering Nashhwonk. The great, savage-eyed head was to be left behind, with the hands, the feet, and the entrails. The liver and the heart (with its case of fat) were special prizes, quick-frozen in snow and preserved for Longknife. At his orders, about half the men went into the wood to cut saplings to make a sledge for the meat.

Work on this went so quickly that it was finished almost before the butchering. The pliant young trees were bound with thongs, and one end of two of the largest
drawn up so that they could be used for runners. From inside his fur parka, Longknife drew a big triangular piece of very thin leather made by sewing the skins of many small animals together. A sapling was stepped forward of the center of the sledge for use as a mast; and two more saplings, lashed together at the butt ends, made the yard. I told Longknife that I had thought we would have to pull the sledge by hand.

“We will have to help it along in the bad spots,” he said, “but still this will save a lot of work. We have a good wind: It will be at our backs when we go down this trough the Great Sleigh left—then blow crosswise as we go back to camp. A crosswind is the best of all.”

One of the other men said: “If the wind were not good, we would not have come this way, Cutthroat. Good hunters hunt up the wind or across it—that way you can sail back if there is much meat, and they can’t smell you coming.”

“Yes,” Longknife said, “but after we crossed Nashhwonk’s track we had to go where he led.”

When the sledge was loaded, we put the injured man on top of the now-frozen meat, then piled on ourselves, holding on wherever there was room. Longknife stood at the back with his feet braced against what remained of Nashhwonk’s legs and controlled the sheets and the long, trailing tiller pole. For the first time, it occurred to me to wonder what the Great Sleigh had been like, and I asked a man who crouched near where I sat.

“Don’t you know?” he said. “You came from there.”

“Are you sure?”

“You dress as they did, and we found you shortly after it had gone.”

“I don’t remember it. It left so wide a track—was it broader than it was long?”

“No. Much longer than wide. Like a log.”

“And there were men on it?”

“Many men and women, all dressed like you. It was not flat like this. There was a big hut on it, and small huts on the big one. And it went without a sail, with nothing to pull it when it was time for it to go. It was as if the world stood on edge, only for it, and it slid down.”

“I see,” I said, although I did not really see at all. Sailing along with the wind behind us as we were, there was not much relative air movement to chill us; but the inactivity of sitting on the sledge made me much colder than I had been while hunting Nashhwonk.

I asked if the Great Sleigh had moved this fast, and the man beside me shook his head. “Not much faster than a good walk. We followed it for a long way, but
the people of it would not allow us to climb up; so in the end we had to go back. That was when we found you.”

Tonight, around the fire, I continued to think about the Great Sleigh and the killing of Nashhwonk. I imagined that the people of the tribe thought well of me—because I can run faster and jump farther than any of them, and it was my club that brought down the Lenizee doe, and I who cut the tendon at Nashhwonk’s right heel when he would have killed Longknife. But a few moments ago Longknife came to talk with me when all the others slept, and he told me it would be better for me if I were to leave the camp. “Otherwise,” he said, “someone—probably one of the women—will kill you when food is scarce, enchanted or not.”

I said that I did not think they would do such a thing.

“Do you know Crookedleg? He whose leg Nashhwonk injured?”

“Yes, but I didn’t think that was his name. Wasn’t it Firerock?”

“Crookedleg it will be when his wound mends. Would it be lawful to kill and eat him?”

“I don’t know, but I wouldn’t think so.”

“Unlawful. The people of the Great Sleigh do not agree, but by our ancient law, every meat may be eaten but man’s meat. But if Crookedleg is not strong before the next time of hunger, he will probably be slain. The great law is hunger—those who break it die. Those who break the other law are punished by sickness and the withholding of game; but sometimes forgiveness comes, and sometimes it may be bought.”

“I see.”

“You are not a man. Hair grows on your face, and you must cut it off—I followed you tonight. I think that you are cousin to Ketin.”

“I have never seen him.”

“You remember nothing—why should you not forget your cousinship? Like you, he leaps very far, though he is big and you small. And hair grows from his face also.”

“What should I do?”

“Leave us tomorrow. A share of Nashhwonk’s meat is yours. I will give it to you, and you may use the sledge we built today to carry it. The wood has not yet seen the fire.”

“May I have the sail?”

Longknife shook his head. “That is too valuable.”

“I will give you all of Nashhwonk’s meat that is mine for the sail.”
He laughed. “Then you will have no need of the sledge to carry it.”
“I will kill more meat when I have gone. I will give you all of Nashhwonk’s for the sail.”
“Done.” He reached into his parka and took out the bundle of leather. “The sheets are in the clews. You need only lash it to the yard as we did today.”
When he was gone, I wondered how much truth there was in what he said. I thought of sleeping with my knife open in my hand; but there was plenty of meat now, and I felt certain I was in no immediate danger.

The fourth day. This morning I found the sledge at the edge of the village. It was intact, as Longknife had promised, with the yard still hanging from the mast. I went to Longknife’s hut, where he and Red Kluy were making their morning meal, and returned the clubbow Red Kluy had loaned me. I had hoped they would tell me to keep it, but they did not, although they invited me to share their breakfast. Then I went to the hut where Crookedleg lay and wished him well. He kept his dagger in his hand while we spoke, and so I suppose what Longknife told me last night is true. I would have liked to have Crookedleg’s bow, but I had nothing to offer him for it.

When I had said good-bye to him, there was nothing more to do. I went back to the sledge, lashed the sail to the yard, and rigged the sheets. The wind had slackened since yesterday, but it still blew from the west, which meant that I could sail to the track of the Great Sleigh without much difficulty, though I might have to pull my sledge when I reached it.

With so much less of a load than it had had yesterday, the sledge rode easily over the soft snow, only twice having to be helped up a steep slope. I found it extremely exhilarating to sail; and when I learned to trim properly, I found I could go quite fast. I was already worried about food, but there was no point in stopping to look for snow monkeys, since I had nothing to kill them with if I found some. My best chance seemed to be to try to catch up to the Great Sleigh as quickly as possible, rather than lingering to try to glean food from the wild.

As nearly as I could tell from what I had learned, the Great Sleigh was about sixty hours ahead of me; but it was said to move slowly, and it had stopped for the better part of a day with Longknife’s people. Thus I felt that if I made all speed, it was conceivable that I might catch up with it today—I have not—or tomorrow, which I still believe to be possible.
When I reached the track, I pulled the sledge until I reached the summit of the first hill, the one I had seen in the distance when we hunted Nashhwonk. Then I climbed aboard it (feeling very glad to do so) and rode it down the slope, which was nearly as good as sailing—so pleasant, in fact, that I decided to try to sail a little despite the contrary wind, by angling the sledge across the hundred-meter-wide track. This turned out to be much faster than walking and pulling the sledge; and after a little practice I learned to turn the sledge at the end of these diagonal passes, using the impetus I gained by running a part of the way up the bank at the edge.

After an hour or more of this crisscross sailing, I realized that it would be possible to lighten the sledge substantially by removing some of the floor poles—these had been needed to carry Nashhwonk’s meat, but now only added unnecessary weight. I untied them, and this gave me some extra thongs, which I used to steady the mast, stretching one from the top of the forward tip of each runner. Now my speed was improved considerably—and to my delight the wind began to shift toward the north—until soon I could go skimming along at a terrific rate. I began to look for the Great Sleigh each time I crested a rise.

I continued to sail like this until dark, and even after sundown—though I was nearly frozen—for as long as either moon was in the sky. But when they had both set, I found I could no longer see the track; I grew afraid that some accident in turning would confuse me so much that I would set off in the wrong direction, and so lose what I had gained. About midnight I pulled the sledge out of the track. About half a kilometer from it (though it may have been less—I am very tired), I found this dense growth of small trees. Here I have dug a hole for myself in the snow to keep out the wind.

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The fifth day. When I woke this morning—but I think I almost did not—my legs were so cold I could not move them, and I had to exercise them with my hands and pound them before life returned to them. I could touch my face with my rough gloves and feel nothing. All that saved me, I think, was the warmth of my coveralls, and the night being already half over when I lay down. I know, now, that I must never do again what I did last night—I must have better shelter, and a fire, and I must clear away the snow where I lie.

After I had worked life into my limbs again, I knew that I would have to eat soon, though I felt no hunger. It was possible that the Great Sleigh was no more
than a few kilometers off. But if it were not, night would find me too weak to live until the next day. I built a fire, and, remembering the plants the women had gathered, I began scrabbling in the snow.

For as long as I remained in the thicket I found nothing, but after a few minutes I recalled that the women had chosen an open slope, facing south. A similar spot was not far off, and when I dug there, I found plants I recognized from having eaten them with Longknife’s people. I soon had an armload, which I took back to the fire.

Red Kluy and the other women had cooked by dropping hot stones into a leather bag of snow. I had no leather bag, but after some experiments I was able to do the same thing by digging a hole in the frozen ground with my knife. The meal, when I had it, was large but not very satisfying. I found that I longed for meat, and particularly for fat.

I had just finished and was preparing to leave when I heard noises from the direction of the hillside where I had found my herbs. Keeping behind the low green growth that had sheltered me during the night, I peered out toward the hill and saw that there were more than a dozen people, men and women and children, on the slope now. Some seemed to be examining the disturbance I had made in the snow, while others looked for food. I was struck by how short and stocky they appeared, and by the fact that there were children of all ages among them—Red Kluy had explained to me that children were born at a certain time of year when there would be food for them, and had reached adolescence before the next generation came.

The wind was in gusts from the north, and I was anxious to be sailing again, but it seemed impossible that I could reach my sledge on the south side of the thicket without being seen. Then the gusts turned to random puffs, so that the snow, which had been flowing and drifting uniformly before, seemed to dance in the air in pallid columns like ghosts. It would have been very pretty, I think, if there had been sun on it to make it shine, but the sky was growing darker all the time—so much so that I remember thinking that when it was darker still I would make a run for it and hope that the strange people on the hillside would not see me in the gloom until it was too late.

It was already too late for me. Just as I was nearly ready to go, the whole group stiffened and turned toward me; and, a moment later, four trotted in my direction, waving the implements with which they had been digging in the snow, short-handled tools with heavy, curved blades.

I was certain I could get away if I chose to run, but equally certain that I would
have to leave the sledge behind; the short, stocky men moved surprisingly fast, and there would be no hope of shaking out the sail and escaping from them in the sledge, over irregular snow, in this unreliable wind. Meeting peacefully with them seemed a better alternative. I stepped out of the trees with my hands extended, resolved to make a dash for it if they looked as though they were going to attack me.

It worked. The four of them stopped about five meters away, and though they continued to grip their crooked-handed tools as if ready to fight, they seemed more surprised than belligerent.

They are strikingly ugly. Their faces are nearly as round as if they had been drawn with a compass, and heavily jowled; their eyes are small and hidden under heavy brows, and their noses are flat and upturned, so that their nostrils appear as circles. I said: “I come in friendship. I do not want to fight with you.”

The oldest (he was silver-haired) and tallest said, “Nor do we wish to fight you.”

“Then let me go in peace.”

“I would rather that you would teach us your wisdom.” He walked toward me and extended, handle first, the curve-bladed hoe he carried.

I accepted it, since it was clearly a ritual gesture of some kind, and then, seeing that he expected it, returned it to him.

“Will you teach wisdom?”

“I must go.” I was suddenly conscious that the wind had died away. It was snowing harder.

“It will be ill to travel soon.”

For a moment I wondered if he had read my mind. “Yes,” I said.

“Come to our lodge. We will give you food. When the snow ends, you will travel the stronger.”

I hesitated, but the memory of the cold to which I had awakened a few hours before was still vivid. I nodded, and quite suddenly all the short, ugly men smiled (they were less ugly, I found, when they smiled) and relaxed. Half a minute later, as we walked up the slope through the falling snow to join the women and children, they were all around me, snuffling at my strange clothing, and jostling one another, as it seemed, for sport.

The people are not nearly so well clothed as Longknife’s tribe. They go barefoot in the snow, and the arms of most are bare to the elbows. The children are almost entirely naked but are covered with downy hair that seems to change to scattered bristles in the adults.
The oldest and tallest, whose name is Eggseeker, is half a head shorter than I; but all of them are broad-shouldered, and their arms and legs are corded with muscle. With the women and children in the middle, and Eggseeker and one of the other men leading while two others brought up the rear, they took me to their lodge, where I am now.

(I am somewhat worried about the sledge, particularly since I did not take the sail from the yard when I halted last night; but it does not seem likely that anyone or anything will be out in the blizzard that is blowing tonight, and the snow should have concealed it, in any event, long ago.)

The lodge is made of brush and seems to me to be a less satisfactory shelter than the round skin tents. A pole about seven meters long is slung from two trees, with bushes and young trees leaning against it to form a triangular interior and hold back the snow. More brush closes one end; the other is left open for a door, and the smoke from the little fire in the center escapes as best it can from a spot above it where the heat has melted a hole in the snowcover and withered the foliage. The whole place reeks of woodsmoke and of the strong, somehow salt, body odor of the people, who call themselves the Pamigaka.

When we reached this lodge, and the women had brought in wood and stirred up the fire, I was offered a meal of roots and greens; and then, as a kind of dessert, a mixture of small game was brought out and divided—as nearly as I could judge—by rank or standing. I got the largest of all, a short-faced, burrowing animal of some kind. Eggseeker took the next largest for himself, gave out the three next best to the other three men, then distributed the rest, down to little mouselike creatures, to favorites among the women and children. I noticed that one particularly ragged woman was given nothing at all. Her name is Bloody-face-in-the-morning, and she seems to represent the bottom of the social order, almost a pariah.

We skinned the animals and gave the skins to the women, then roasted the meat over the fire. I have never tasted anything so good, and I ate parts of the animal which I would not have thought edible—just about everything, in fact, except the feet and hands and the entrails. Because of the darkness and the meal, I had the feeling that it was night—though it must have been about noon, and the dark was only the effect of the falling snow.

“Now we would learn wisdom from you,” Eggseeker said.
I told him I feared I had little to give.
He nodded. “Yes, that is the first fruit of wisdom—humility.”
“I would rather learn of you. Have you seen the Great Sleigh?”
They all nodded, and a little stir of excitement passed among them.
“How long has it been since it has gone?”
“It was here, and then for a day it was gone, and then you came. We knew you were from the Great Sleigh by your dress and your face—like all of them, you look much like the Wiggikki, but we see you are not cruel, as they are.”
“Who are they?”
“The running, singing hunters. Much of this meat is theirs.” A wide smile crossed Eggseeker’s face. “We are not afraid of them. They hunt for us, and when they hunt us, they learn the weight of our gouges.”
“I do not understand. How do they hunt for you?”
“It is the custom of the Wiggikki to kill game and bury it in the snow, thinking to return for it when the hunt is over. We find it, and much of what you see is that—still, the best, which you had, we killed ourselves, digging little Pummanga from his warm house in the ground.”
“I believe I know the Wiggikki; they killed Nashhwonk, the day before yesterday.”
“That is news indeed. We—”
There was a scream from the open end of the lodge. The woman pariah, who had been sitting there, came diving through the others in panic. Her feet sent the fire flying, and everyone jumped up; there was a babble of voices, and over it all a new voice, sometimes as deep as a kettledrum, sometimes whining like a great cello: “Day’s greetings, sons of filth. What fruit had you of the hillside?”
A man almost as big as Nashhwonk was kneeling to peer into the entrance of the lodge. He had a short chin, a short upper lip, high cheekbones, and huge green eyes that seemed too beautiful for a masculine face, so that for all his size and obvious male qualities he gave an impression of femininity, and almost of effeminacy. In one big, soft-looking hand he held a polearm ending in cruel hooks, like fishhooks, made from the ribs of some large animal.
Eggseeker and the three younger men pressed forward toward him, with some of the older boys behind them; while the women clustered around Bloody-face-in-the-morning, who had a long gash down her back where one of the hooks had grazed her. I went with the men, though with no weapon but my pocketknife I did not know what I could hope to do.
Eggseeker held his crooked-handled gouge over his head ready to strike. “Take me,” he said. “Draw me to you, Mimmunka. I will plant this in your forehead with my last breath.”
Mimmunka chuckled like a waterfall, and his lips drew back to show pointed
teeth. “I do not want you,” he said. “Your flesh has grown as tough as the roots you eat. But give me someone small and tender and unimportant to you, and I will go away.”

“And be back tomorrow,” Eggseeker said.

“No, I swear it. I am shifting my hunting ground tomorrow. I am going to the lowlands near the river. The swamps are frozen now, and I will kill twice a day. Do you remember when I took that little squeaker from you, when the moons joined hands? How many days was it then before you saw me again? Twenty or more, I think.”

“Because we pursued you through the wood.”

“Not at all. You did me no harm—but look at all those behind you. Surely you do not want them all.”

“It is our law to preserve our own kind.”

“Ah. Is this another high principle the Great Sleigh brought you?”

“It has been our law from the beginning.”

“Then what did you learn from them? Was it all wind?”

“You might have talked to them as we did.”

“Yes,” Mimmunka said, “I could have taught them much.” He seemed to have put aside all thought of seizing a victim, but I noticed that as he spoke he was edging closer to Eggseeker.

“You could have taught them nothing. What is your life but killing today, and again tomorrow?”

“Little do you know. Give me the one I tore with my claw.”

The women were murmuring, and I turned to look. Slowly, Bloody-face-in-the-morning was being forced forward as the women closed ranks behind her.

“Who is that you have with you?” Mimmunka asked suddenly. He was looking at me.

Eggseeker did not answer. As Mimmunka’s eyes left him, he rushed forward, swinging his gouge at the big man’s forearm. Mimmunka jerked his hand back, but Eggseeker never paused, recovering from the first stroke to swing his weapon again, this time at Mimmunka’s head.

There was a flurry of action so quick that I could not see in the dim light just what was happening. Then Eggseeker was lying sprawled and bloody in the snow at one side of the entrance to the lodge, and Mimmunka was gone. Three younger men ran out after him, shouting threats in guttural voices.

Two of the women had raised Eggseeker to his feet before I reached him and were helping him to the fire. Inanely, I asked him if he was hurt.
“Scratched a little. I have been harmed more than this many times.”
The women pulled off his ragged leather shirt to clean his wounds, and I saw
that his broad chest was checkered with scars.
“The young men have gone after Mimmunka. Won’t he kill them out there?”
Eggseeker shook his head. “Not he. He will run now, unless they corner him.
If it were Ketin or the Wiggikki, it would be different, and I would call them
back.”
A boy who looked almost grown said sadly, “I did not go with them.”
Eggseeker chuckled. “And a good thing, too. Even Mimmunka might have
turned back for your juicy meat, Whiteapple.”
“Still, I should have gone.”
“Next year you will go.”
One by one the three younger men came back, looking angry and proud.
When they had all returned and the blood of his wound was staunched, I asked
Eggseeker what it was that he and his people had taught the men who rode the
Great Sleigh.
“Everything we know.” He was lying on his back in front of the fire now, but
he turned his ugly, savage-looking old head to look at me. “The song of our law.
How we fight, and where to find food. How to build lodges, and all we have
learned of the other peoples. You are one of them—did they not tell you?”
I felt that it might be dangerous to admit that I remembered nothing. I said, “I
would rather hear it from you; go back to the original source.”
“The cleanest water is nearest the spring. That is wisdom. As we taught them,
so they taught us.”
“Can you recount it?”
“I will let another tell. I remember, but when my blood runs I find I am
already old. Let a young one speak.”
For a long time no one said anything. At last Whiteapple stammered: “The
world will change. The snow will melt and never return, and the new children
will never have seen it and will wonder when we speak.”
“When will this happen?”
Whiteapple’s shoulders moved helplessly. “Soon, it is said. But what is soon to
the people of the Great Sleigh? Who can tell?”
“Perhaps not in your lifetime,” Eggseeker said. “Perhaps before I die.”
“Even so. For us, they parted the curtain of days.”
I asked him to tell me about that.
“From the lodge on the Great Sleigh a stone was brought. This was touched,
and it lived, as though there were a fire in it. Then the curtain of days was torn, and we saw before us the world that is to be when the snow is gone. The sun was bright, and there were many plants. Men of our race walked among them, with Lenizee and his wife and child.”

“And what must we do?” Eggseeker prompted.

“Certain foods are forbidden.” Whiteapple looked downcast, then smiled. “That is what I do not understand. All foods that are commonly found may be eaten. But those that are not found cannot be eaten. But how could we eat what we cannot find?”

“What is seldom seen may not be eaten when it is seen. That is the new law. Certain birds, it is said . . .” Eggseeker grew silent, and I, looking toward the dark doorway, saw that the falling snow had already erased the marks of his scuffle with Mimmunka. Even his blood, which had gleamed so brightly against the snow, was no longer visible.

“There are some birds that hide their nests under branches that bow to the ground,” Whiteapple explained. “When the warmth comes they will not know what to do, for a time, and few eggs will hatch. They are forbidden.” Eggseeker’s eyes were closed, and when he said nothing, Whiteapple leaned toward me and continued softly, “Many of their nests he has found in his time, and now he feels badly about it. But it was not unlawful then. Can the law reach behind itself?”

I shook my head.

Unexpectedly Eggseeker said: “I had thought to die defending the women and their little ones. Not beside the fire.”

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This is the sixth day. I have just played over what I said yesterday—Cim is asleep—and realized that I should not have ended my report so abruptly. It was not intentional. Nothing further happened, really, after the man they call Mimmunka left. It continued to snow. Eggseeker lay by the fire with his breath rattling in his chest. I spent the afternoon talking to the other members of his tribe and listening to them talk among themselves; and then we all went to sleep.

When we woke this morning, Eggseeker was dead. I think I was the only one who was surprised—the others told me that he had felt his death on him when he spoke of dying by the fire. Also that it was for this reason everyone had gone to sleep so cheerfully the night before—they had been anticipating his funeral feast and had thought I had been looking forward to it as well. I asked if they had food
stored for the feast: They explained that Eggseeker’s body would itself constitute the meal. I said nothing more after that, but I think the boy, Whiteapple, saw my face, because he drew me aside and assured me that Eggseeker himself had participated in many such feasts, and that his spirit would be at peace when his body was reabsorbed into the tribe, where it belonged. He mentioned as an unfortunate detail the fact that Eggseeker’s mother had long since died, and told me that were she alive she would be entitled to his tongue and eyes now, as mother-offering.

While we had been talking, the women had begun to cut up the body. I did not want to stay longer; as soon as I could, I edged out of the lodge and made my way back to the thicket where I had left my sledge.

There was still some snow in the air, and just enough wind that I could feel it on my face. I discovered the wisdom of taking off the sail and putting it inside the captain’s coat when I tried to shake it out—it had frozen overnight, and in the end I had to build a fire to warm it enough to let me spread it to catch the breeze.

Even so, I had to pull the sledge to the track of the Great Sleigh. But once there, where the surface was so much smoother and what wind there was was favorable, that little breath of moving air was enough to propel us, though only slowly.

I found that this slow movement had a pleasure of its own. I could trim the sail to make use of the fullest effect of the wind; and I could stand or sit in the sledge without fearing that my motions would overturn it. Each gentle hill we surmounted was a triumph which I celebrated by sliding ecstatically down the farther side, the empty sail flapping useless for a moment, only to fill again and pull us on when we slowed—renewed, as it seemed, by its brief rest.

The sun was about halfway up the sky when I saw Cim Glowing. She was running, or more accurately, jogging, along the track ahead of me, then so far off that she seemed no more than a moving speck of brownish-black against the snow. In the light wind it was a long time before I caught up with her; and I remember that for half an hour or more I supposed her to be a man—not only because it seemed more likely that a lone figure would be masculine, but also because she appeared to be too tall for a woman, and because of the pace she kept, which she seemed able to maintain indefinitely.

I felt a certain apprehension. She was keeping well to the south side of the flattened area, so by keeping to the north side I could put nearly a hundred meters between us as I passed her. She might be dangerous; but if I passed her without stopping, I would be neglecting an important source of information. Yet if I
stopped, I would lose the advantage that the speed of the sledge gave me.

As the distance between us diminished and I was better able to observe her motions, I became convinced that she was a woman—though she ran with the long strides of an athlete. I could also see that she carried no weapon but what I took to be an ordinary stick, a thing not much larger than the bow-thrown clubs of the Wiggikki, but not bent to fly well, as they are.

I steered the sledge away from the north side of the track. She must have heard the scraping of the rudder pole on the icy crust; without pausing in her steady marathon, she turned her head to look at me. Perhaps she was surprised, but it is not an expressive face, and even now, after ten hours or more of close association, I have not learned to read it well. At that time I only saw that she had dark eyes and high cheekbones.

We were still too far apart to talk except in shouts. By gestures (while loosing the thong that held the lowest point of the triangular sail so that it spilled the wind) I asked her if she would like to ride on the sledge. She raised one hand and touched her chin to indicate assent and, without waiting for me to stop, sprinted over to the sledge and jumped on board, sitting on what remained of the cross braces that had carried Nashhwonk’s flesh.

“You’re a fine runner,” I said.

“This is better. I would have had to stop soon. Can you make it go faster?”

“Not without more wind. But it will pick up speed again, now that the sail is full.” (Actually, I was already worried about the effect her weight would have.)

“Where are you going?”

I told her I was trying to overtake the Great Sleigh.

“Won’t they wait for you? I thought you were one of its people.”

“If they’re waiting for me, I don’t know about it. What about you? Where are you going?”

She smiled suddenly, showing beautiful teeth. “I am trying to overtake the Great Sleigh also.”

I was flattered, thinking at the time that this only meant that she was going with me wherever I went. She must have seen this in my expression, because she said, “You don’t believe me, but it is the truth. Fishcatcher is dead now, and that is the only place left where I wish to be.”

I asked her who Fishcatcher had been.

“A man of our people. Someone struck him across the face with an endieva wand, and he was in great pain. When the Great Sleigh came, I carried him there. I was sorry for him, then.”
She fell silent, and I did not know whether it would be wise to question her further or not. We were climbing a long slope, and I made that an excuse to hop off and push the slow-moving sledge.

“You are strong for so young a man,” she said, when we were over the top and I had jumped back into the stern and taken the tiller again.

I said that the wind had done most of the work.

“But you are very strong. I could feel us go faster as soon as you began to push, and in the end, just as we reached the top, the sail lay against the mast.”

“I think I was heavier once.”

She held two fingers over an eye to show that she did not understand me.

I could not think of a way to explain it to her, and in the end I said lamely, “I think that on another world I was a bigger—heavier—person than I am here.”

“Yes, there are other worlds—I know it, even though I’ve never been to any of them. No one would believe me until the Great Sleigh came—I am sure that it is from another world; and there is the world of dreams, and still more that are below or above that. What world are you from?”

“I don’t know.”

“I know that feeling,” she said.

“Is that why you want to catch up to the Great Sleigh—because it is from some other world?”

“I told you.” She had turned to face me, sitting with her back to the bow. Her tunic had a high, loose collar which she turned up so that the fur wrapped her short brown hair like a hood. “It is the only place I want to be. Do you think they will let me on it?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t think so—but perhaps if I follow them long enough I can persuade them.”

“You said you took Fishcatcher to them. How did he die?”

“They did not kill him, if that’s what you are thinking. Do you know, I don’t think you are one of them at all.”

I felt as though I had been struck. I still do, although it has been ten hours or more now. “You are dressed a great deal like them,” she said, “but you don’t have quite the same face. You might be one of our people wearing their clothing.”

“How is my face different?”

“How is my face different? And then your mouth is too wide, and your teeth seem too big. But it may be that I am wrong—perhaps it is all in the expression. Where did you get those clothes?”
“I don’t know.”
“From one of them?”
“I don’t know. Some people—the Wiggikki—found me, and I was wearing these. I don’t know where they came from, or where I did.”
“Suppose that when we catch up to the Great Sleigh, they believe you have murdered one of their people. What will you do?”
I told her that I had never thought about it; and to change the subject I asked again how Fishcatcher died.
“They cured him—the people of the Great Sleigh. At first, when I carried him to them, they said they would not cure him because his torment was none of their doing. Then they said they would help him, because my own torment would never have existed if their presence had not given me hope. They would not cure him because of his agony, though his back was bent like a rush stem in the wind and the slaver dripped from his mouth; but they cured him for me, because I wept and tore my hair. That seemed very odd to me, and still does. They took him away, and when they came back with him he was better, and in an hour he could walk without help. Later, he was stronger still, and I struck him again”—she held up the wand she carried—“and he died. Now I wish to be with them. I know that I am fit for only the meanest work among them, though I am the eldest daughter; but the meanest task there is more than the greatest elsewhere. I will clean their catch—and eat the guts, if need be. Do you also feel that?”
“I only feel that I belong there—that the Great Sleigh is my home, or a part of my home.”
“You are very fortunate—I wish I felt that.”
“May I ask your name?”
She smiled. “It is Cim Glowing. Do you think that is a pretty name?”
I touched my chin.
“When I was born my father wished to name me Seven Snows, which is a common name for girls among our people. But I was born while he was away in his boat; and before he returned, my mother had left her bed and seen the Cim blowing from tree to tree like a soft star in the air, and completed the naming.”
We camped when the sun was almost down.
We are no more than a few hours behind the Great Sleigh, judging from the freshness of the track—there is very little drifted-in snow now, and a slickness to the packed surface that allows us to fly along at a good rate even in the light winds we have had all day. I think that if there had been only a trifle more wind—or if I had not picked up Cim—I would certainly have overtaken it. As it is, I was
tempted to keep going after nightfall; but, remembering what happened before, I forced myself to stop in time to build some sort of shelter for us.

Cim knows a great deal more about this sort of thing than I do. I was going to make camp in an open area not far from the track, but she directed me to this little fold in the ground a few hundred meters farther on. There is a stream here, and we found good firewood scattered along the bank, and saplings to cut for a windbreak, I told her that I had no food to share with her, but she laughed at that and told me to heave a large stone to break the ice over the pool nearest our fire. She stood at a shallow open spot a little downstream, where the current runs fast, and thrust the wand she carries into the water. When the stone struck the ice, I saw the darting shapes of several fish pass close to it. She made no attempt to strike them, but we found them belly up under the ice of the next pool; it was a simple matter to break the ice of that one too and pull them within reach with pieces of driftwood. We ate well, and she is sleeping now. The wind is rising, and if the Great Sleigh has stopped for only a few hours tonight, I think there is every chance we will be up with it by tomorrow afternoon. If not, we may be in for another full day of pursuit.

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And now it is the seventh day. Again, I played back everything I recorded yesterday evening before starting this; and it seems to me that much more than a day has passed, although there is really not much to tell. When I had finished talking last night I fell asleep. Our shelter was open at one end—like Eggseeker’s lodge—and we had built our fire in the doorway. I let Cim sleep next to the fire, not because I harbor any silly superstitions about feminine weakness, but because I feel certain that her furs, beautiful as they are, are not as warm as my quilted coverall.

Sometime in the night, I woke and saw that the fire had died almost to ashes. Cim was shivering in her sleep, and she must have thrown all our little pile of reserve wood on the fire in the course of the night. I got up and stepped over her and went out to search for more, feeling ashamed that she had been the one who kept the fire going.

Both moons were in the sky. The snow glistened with their light, and the water, where it was free of ice, showed like snippets of black ribbon against it. We had already picked up all the wood that lay near our shelter; I went two hundred meters downstream and came back with an armload.
At first I believed that I was hallucinating—the double shadows cast by the moons have deceived me before. But shadows, perhaps only the shadows of trees, as I thought, seemed clustered around our dying fire. Then I saw one bend and lift a soft-edged bundle. Then as the thing that carried her turned, the light of the moons struck Cim’s face: Her head hung limply down outside the creature’s arm, and her cheeks seemed whiter and more bloodless than the snow.

I dropped all the wood I carried then except the largest piece and shouted and ran toward them. It was a ridiculous thing to do: There were four, as I saw in a moment, and each was at least three meters tall. Nevertheless, I got in one blow. One of them stepped between me and the one who held Cim Glowing, and I swung my piece of driftwood. It struck solidly and I heard the ring of metal; then my body seemed to catch fire; I fell backward, and for a few seconds, the thing I had struck leaned over me. I saw its ravaged face—like something from a nightmare, I was going to say, but the truth was that I was in a nightmare, and even now I am talking largely because I am afraid to sleep for fear they will come again.

I must have lain in the snow for several hours. The pain gathered itself into my chest, on the right side just above the beginning of the ribs; but I felt somehow that no serious harm had been done—that it was only something like a blow from a whip or the sting of an insect—so that despite the pain I was more worried about the cold and the possibility of freezing to death where I lay than about whatever it was they had done to me.

At last, just as the first light was striping the snow, I found that enough life had returned to my arms and legs to let me open the front of my coveralls and touch the wound in my chest. My hand came away covered with blood.

When I was able to get up, I gathered the wood I had dropped the night before and rebuilt the fire. I would have given a great deal then to have had a pan in which to warm the water for washing my side and my clothes; but I have no sort of container, and I had to splash freezing water from the stream onto the bloodstains and make my way back to the fire when I could no longer bear the cold. I tore the sail of my sledge into strips and used them to stop the bleeding, and have thrust another piece through the hole in my coveralls and knotted it on either side to keep out the wind. Whatever it was that wounded me entered my body but did not exit—there is no corresponding wound in my back.

The question—and I am still not sure I have decided correctly—was whether to follow the creatures who took Cim Glowing, or to continue after the Great Sleigh and, when I caught up with it, enlist the crew (of whom, as it seems, I am
properly a member) to help me. I have decided to follow the trail myself, though, as I say, I am aware that I may have chosen badly. If I had continued after the Great Sleigh, I might have overtaken it too late—that is the great consideration; and without a sail I could have gone no faster than I have tracked the things who stole Cim today.

And then, I am afraid—and I should face it—of what I may discover when I overtake the Great Sleigh. Surely, if a crew member were missing by some accident, that fact could not go unnoticed for long. The Great Sleigh would reverse its course, or a rescue party would be sent back along the track. As nearly as I can tell, neither of these things has occurred. It may very well be that I have been exiled for some crime; or that, as Cim Glowing hinted, I have stolen these clothes and, with them, an identity to which I am not entitled.

Nothing else to report today. I have been following their footprints north, over increasingly hilly country; but because I am so weak, I doubt that I have covered more than ten kilometers. I have seen men’s trails crossing theirs in the snow several times, but I have met no one. I have no food. Perhaps I should also mention that I have taken Cim Glowing’s weapon, the endieva wand. In appearance it is a straight stick, quite light in weight, about fifty centimeters long and two centimeters in diameter. The handle end is light brown in color—like the wood used in the clubbow I used to have—and has a wrist thong. The striking end is black, with eight or ten stubby projections like thorns, which are nearly white. I have not used it as yet and have been careful not to touch the dark end.

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I want to say that this is the eighth day, but the truth is that I am not certain whether it is or not—there is no day here, and no night. Whatever the day may be, I am stopping to rest; and so I shall record my experiences—though I think it is very likely that I will be dead before I can tell what I did on the ninth.

Yesterday I stopped late in the afternoon. I made a shelter for myself in a thicket and built a little fire that went out almost before I was asleep. I was too weak to do anything more and half-expected death to come during the night.

When I woke this morning, the first thing I saw was a snow monkey watching me from a branch about twenty meters off. I threw the endieva wand at it, feeling something tear in my chest as I drew back my arm. By some sort of remarkable luck, I hit it. It jumped as though surprised and leaped to another tree farther off. After half a minute I could see that it was having difficulty clinging to the limb; in
another half-minute it fell. It staggered several steps before it collapsed, and even when I reached it, it was still alive, and rolled its little eyes at me so that it seemed to beg for mercy. It died as I watched, the brown eyes misting over and losing their mobility, the lips drawing away from the tiny teeth in a last grimace.

Unfortunately, though the snow monkey had fallen, the endieva wand had not. It was lodged in a loop branch about six or seven meters up, and I had to throw a dozen snowballs at it before I could knock it loose. While I ate the monkey, I cut some long, thin strips from the piece of sail I have left, braided them into a slender rope, and tied one end to the wrist thong of the wand. With this arrangement, I hope to be able to throw the thing without much risk of losing it, though I have not had an opportunity to try it out yet.

The monkey furnished so little meat that there seemed no point in trying to save a part of it. I ate what there was to be had and went looking for the trail of Cim Glowing’s kidnappers again. There had not been much wind during the night, and it was nearly as clear as it had been the day before. I remember that as I walked I tried to convince myself that I felt better today and would be able to go further—but it was not true. I was actually weaker, if anything. I had hardly gone a kilometer before I knew that I would have to stop soon to rest, and that once stopped, sitting among the rocks in the rising wind, I might never be strong enough to get up again.

I was on the point of looking for some sort of shelter when I saw that the trail of the creatures I was following disappeared into what seemed to be just the kind of place I was looking for myself, a crevice in the side of a cliff. Thinking that they had rested there the day before, I went in; just as I entered the darkness that lay between the rising walls of stone, I noticed that their trail did not emerge.

The cleft in the rocks, which I had supposed would be only a meter or two deep, never ended. Instead, it slipped under a roof of stone, very high at first, and wound downward into the hill.

After the first twenty steps, all the light was gone. I took the firemaker from my pocket and lit it, then put it out again at once for fear they would see me. The glimpse I had of the cave was disturbing enough: It went on for a long way in a nearly straight line, fifteen or twenty meters high and wide, with stalactites hanging from the ceiling, and a floor paved (as it seemed) with packed clay, but littered with fragments of stone fallen from above, and dotted with pools of standing water.

I went forward, on and on, until I was certain I was far beyond the end of the part I had seen, and nothing seemed to have changed except the temperature of
the air, which gradually grew warmer. After a time, I opened the top of my coveralls.

The change—the loss of the cold and sunlight of the outdoor world—seemed to work a corresponding change in my mind. I was disoriented, and remain so, but I seem to feel closer to the Great Sleigh, as though this entrance into this hidden place is somehow a return to the kind of life I led before the Wiggikki found me in the snowbank. It is difficult to describe. I have a tired confidence, as if I knew my own powers and limitations, what I can do and cannot do. I feel sure now that the wound in my chest will not kill me, though it is more painful than ever, and the feeling contradicts the plain reasoning of my mind. At the same time, I have more fear of the things that took Cim Glowing—but less of death itself, which does not seem to me to be so much of an evil as it did outside. But I have not finished the day.

I went onward, then, in the dark, with one hand to the wall, feeling each step with my foot before I took it at first; then, when I had gone farther and had grown very tired of that, feeling ahead of me with the endivea wand. After so many hours in the dark, light, when I saw it at last, was difficult to recognize; I thought at first that it was only a disorder of my eyes caused by staring so long, like the flashes I see at night when I press my hands against them. But it grew brighter with each step I took and at last snapped into focus. It was just here, where there was light, but not enough to see by, that I first encountered the vampires.

At least, that is my own name for them. They are bats with human faces and hairless bodies. Their wingspan is a meter, or perhaps a little more. They attacked me the first time, as I said, here, where I could not see them at all except where their flutterings blocked the point of light ahead of me for a moment. I beat them off with the wand; they screamed in high-pitched voices when it touched them, and I could hear the poisoned ones striking the walls and scrabbling about on the floor of the cave, though at that time I did not know what they were—I stepped on several as I went forward. Fortunately, my boots are too tough for their teeth, but I got a long rip in the outer fabric of my coveralls along the right forearm.

When I had progressed another hundred meters, I could see them better. Their faces are human—so much so that their sex is clearly distinguishable. They have long, flying hair. Their arms and fingers—the fingers connected by webs of pale skin so thin as to be nearly invisible—form their wings; the fingers are greatly exaggerated in length. Their bodies are entirely naked, and their legs, which I would have expected to be short, are long and slender instead; they run very
agilely along the floor of the cave. Their feet can be closed like a man’s hands, or the talons of a bird, permitting them to cling to the smooth stalactites of the cavern roof.

I think that their small faces, set with large, darkly blue eyes, would be beautiful if it were not for their teeth, which seem too big for the mouths that contain them and are cruelly pointed. Since I have found the crevice where I am resting now, I have watched them wading in the little stream below. There are blind white fish in it, and the vampires stand on one leg to catch them, plunging the other in and grasping the unfortunate fish with their claws when they come too close. I imagine I could catch some of the fish myself by poisoning them with Cim Glowing’s wand, but they are very small, and I have no fire over which to cook them.

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The ninth day—at least, I slept. This place is only about a quarter of the way up the wall; nevertheless, it seems very high. I can see the city in the center of the cavern almost as though I were a bird. Or better, one of the vampires. I think that I am on about the same level as the tops of the towers.

It is ghostly in appearance even from here, because the buildings have no walls or roofs. They are only skeletons of metal, built as though to enable the builders to pile one floor above another, so that the cave itself is their roof and their climate. The effect they give is one of having rotted away, and there are sections of walls clinging to them still, here and there.

Today when I woke I knew I would have to find something to eat if I were not going to get weaker and weaker until I died at last without helping Cim Glowing. I went toward the city in the hope of turning up some sort of fuel I could use to cook fish from the stream. I had left the clay-paved path, of course, long before I slept, because the light had increased until I was afraid I might be seen.

The cavern floor over which I traveled was smooth, water-washed shingle, littered in spots with great tilted slabs of stone. I kept to the shadow of these as much as possible, but as I came nearer the city, the light from the buildings—yellow and dim though it was—increased and diffused until at last I felt naked, as though many pairs of eyes were watching me from the unwalled towers and there was no way in which I could escape them.

When I had gone two or three kilometers, I was close enough to see that they were filled with machines, all standing silent. For some reason, I had supposed
there would be smaller buildings on the fringes of the great ones I saw, and perhaps heaps of discarded material beyond that. As I drew nearer, I believed I had been mistaken——the towers seemed to spring from the cavern floor without preamble, as though they had grown from its untouched surface.

But as I came nearer still, I found that my first idea had been correct. I crossed a part of the cavern that must have been piled with rubbish once. But the rubbish is gone now—melted and rotted into the gravel and clay of the cave itself, until its former position is shown only by a slight unevenness in the surface, by discolorations and mottlings of red, yellow, and brown, and by an occasional piece of unrusted metal of some gleaming alloy so stable that it has withstood the centuries that have turned everything else to soil and stains.

The same passage of time has destroyed the small buildings that once stood at the feet of the great ones. I found their foundations still traceable, and the vaults that had once been beneath some of them remain as rectangular pools of dark, still water; but nothing was left of their upper structures, and perhaps they were only simple platforms, and had none.

By the time I threaded my way above those cold pools, the wall-less towers loomed above me, and the light seemed pitiless. I continued on, only, I think, because I was driven by a kind of fatalism: I would not go back without having attempted the rescue of Cim Glowing; also, if I did not soon find food, I would die. The city held Cim Glowing, and perhaps food as well; it had no night, and so this time was as favorable as any other to approach it.

As it was, I believe I was not seen. There were no sentries; and if there had ever been, they must have died and their bodies rotted away a thousand years ago. There were only the wide streets, and the smooth frames of the buildings, rising floor above floor in stacks of geometric planes. The streets seemed too open, too naked, too undefended to be left unplundered; the lowest floor of a building near me was only a meter or so above the level of the paving around it. I climbed onto it and entered the building.

There is no point in my recording all my wanderings among the machines there, and I don’t remember everything I saw in enough detail to do justice to it. Most were quite incomprehensible to me; all seemed very old. Some had windows of glass, but these were dead and dark. Some were shaped like travesties of men; others like strange animals, with jointed bodies.

I was not going to tell, when I began to tell about this, what I did with one of the man-shaped machines—but it may be important, and, however foolish I was, no immediate harm seems to have come of it.
I had crossed a street, leaving the building I had originally entered and going into another. The machine stood toward the back of an alcove that branched from a secondary corridor. I have been thinking about it, and I wonder if it is not possible that almost all the machines are broken, and that this one, which is not broken (or at least not so badly broken as the others), was overlooked long ago because of its obscure position.

For an instant, it looked so much like an enormous man that I was astonished—that was what made me turn and walk toward it. Yet it was not like a man at all. Its arms were too long, and its hands were hooked and toothed. I never found its eyes—the things I had taken for eyes were only lights—and its legs were two wheels, on which it balanced. (The fact that it had not tipped over, as had the others, may have been what drew my attention to it originally; it seemed to be a living thing, standing among dead metal.) I walked toward it, and it spoke to me.

I do not believe that I shall ever forget that instant. It was as though a stone had spoken; yet, after having been alone since Cim Glowing was taken, quite suddenly there were two of us again. The tone was harsh but not unfriendly, and though it spoke the same language I am using now, there were complexities in the pronunciation of certain words that I will not try to reproduce. I was so startled at first that I did not understand what it had said. It repeated the phrase for me: “Prepared to receive instructions.”

The second time, I was able to say, “I have no instructions to give you.”

It made no reply. My first impulse was to run; my second was to hide. And yet, it did not seem strange to me to talk to a machine, although I am sure that Longknife (to choose an example at random) would have been terrified at such a thing, if he had understood what was happening at all. After a time, when the machine said nothing else and there was no other sound in all the silent cavern, I got courage enough to say, “How long have you stood here?”

“I have no mechanism for recording the passage of time.”

“But you are aware of it?”

“I am aware that others possess such mechanisms.”

“Where can I find something to eat?”

“At the cart.”

One of the vampires—attracted, I suppose, by the sound of our voices—had come flittering into the building; now it was darting in broken lines among the motionless machines. I was afraid we would draw more if we continued to talk, but I said, “Where is that?”

“There.” One of his arms lifted to point the way. I suppose it had been
hundreds of years, if not thousands, since he had moved it last. It trembled at the
beginning of the motion as though some control mechanism were sticking; but by
the time it had completed its gesture the trembling was gone, and it returned to his
side as smoothly as though it had been assembled yesterday.

The direction to which he had pointed coincided with no corridor. I was afraid
that I would miss the place he meant (if it existed at all). I asked him if he could
take me there.

He said, “Yes,” and before I could protest, he had seized me in his great metal
hands and lifted me to the top of the structure I had considered his head. There
was a low railing around it, like a coronet—enough to keep me from falling off if
I remained seated.

I would have lost the endieva wand had it not been for the thong. As it was, by
the time I pulled it up to me, he had begun to roll forward. The vampire fled
screaming. We left the corridor outside the alcove and entered another, and after
traversing that for a kilometer or more, we entered a third; by that time we were
so deep in the shadowy interior of the building that I had lost all sense of
direction. At last we stopped at a point that looked no different from any other.
Before I could ask him to do so, he lifted me from his head and placed me gently
on the floor. A closed and enigmatic structure, without wheels or—so far as I
could see—any other means of motion, stood before me. There was a door in its
side, but no handle. I touched it, and after a moment I tried to pull it open with
my fingernails, but it remained tightly closed.

“It should have admitted you,” the machine said behind me. I had a sudden,
irrational feeling that the faceless, boxlike thing had identified me as an imposter
and that it was about to tell him. Instead, he reached over my head and caught the
edge of the door with the tip of his hand.

Something in the door snapped, and it slid open. Inanely I said, “You broke
it.”

“It was already inoperative or it would have admitted you.”

I entered. The “cart” had once been filled with foodstuffs, perhaps. But most
of it had spoiled so long ago that no odor of rot remained, and even the gray dust
that lay where it had once been no longer smelled of mold. After twenty minutes
of rummaging, I found a metal box of hard white cubes which showed no sign of
decay. I licked one: it tasted acid, but with a mingling of salt—a taste much too
strong, but I had already half-guessed that the cubes were meant to be dissolved. I
slipped the box into my pocket and went out, asking the machine, which I found
waiting patiently outside, to return us to the point at which I had discovered him.
I left him there and made my way to the crevice where I spent last night. There I emptied the cubes from the box and melted one in water dipped from the stream. It made a wonderfully strengthening drink, like nothing else I can remember having tasted. When I finished it, I was no longer hungry. I dried the box and repacked the remainder of the cubes in it; then, feeling somewhat insecure so near the floor of the cavern, I climbed up to this ledge, where I will sleep tonight.

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The tenth day. With three of the machines, we made our way out; now I have asked them to halt for the night where they will give us shelter from the wind. We have set up our camp about three kilometers from the mouth of the cave. Tomorrow we will go south looking for the track.

The wound in my side is better, I think, though it still bothers me more or less constantly and sometimes is excruciatingly painful.

This morning when I awoke, I climbed down the cave wall and went into the city, determined to find Cim Glowing. I was two streets past the building in which yesterday I discovered the first machine—which I have named “Roller,” from its wheels—when I almost collided with a creature of the kind that took Cim. In retrospect, the incident is more than a little ridiculous, since I was trying to be exceedingly cautious; I cannot, however, say I thought it amusing at the time.

I was about to turn a corner when he stepped around it. Recalling the weapon that wounded me three days ago, I did not run from him—I do not know what he would have done if I had—only back-pedaled and threw the endieva wand up at him. It struck his left shoulder, where he seemed to be wholly machine, and dropped to the ground. He rushed for me then, but I was able to duck under one outstretched arm and reel in the wand on its cord—enough to get it whirling—and cast it at him as he turned. I aimed at his face and hit the wrong side; but I had the wand under control now and was able to pull it back immediately and cast again. It grazed his left cheek. That was all that was necessary; I saw a thin line of blood form there, and his left eye lost its focus. He fell to his knees—in that position he was not much taller than I—and I watched the human part of him die.

I think that half or more of his brain was mechanical, because it was a long time before he stopped moving. For several minutes after the flesh was dead his arms still reached for me, and he tried to crawl after me. He could not walk—that saved me. I suppose that was because his organs of balance were still pieces of
what had once been his living body, and when they died as the poison spread, he could not stand.

For a time I waited for the machinery to die as well, but it was very tenacious of life—or whatever it was that it could be said to have. I dodged his hands and kicked at his head several times, but the sound, like the ringing of a dull gong, was too loud in the empty streets, and I stopped. After a time I left him, still twitching and trying to drag himself along. I was very warm in these coveralls after the activity. I thought of taking them off altogether, but I did not want to carry them, or to leave them—with this recorder and the firemaker, my shaver, knife, and so forth—behind. Eventually I settled on opening the front and slipping the upper half of my body out to cool off. I was able to knot the arms around my waist to form a belt, and this made quite a comfortable arrangement, well suited to the temperature of the cave. Now I believe that this was extremely important.

I do not think I will ever forget walking through the city. The streets were very wide (though I stayed close to the buildings, and frequently cut through them), and there were more streets curving overhead at times. The builders had developed, so it seemed, an almost unfailing light, and lamps still burned dimly from the underside of the overstreets and from the entrances, cornices, and interiors of all the skeletal buildings.

I had gone several kilometers when I noticed a change in the appearance of the pavement on which I walked. For a time, I could not imagine what it might be. I cast my mind back over the distance I had traversed and found I could visualize the streets quite well, and that I had a vivid memory of the one in which I had fought the creature whose mechanical elements refused to die; nevertheless, it was some time before I understood the difference between what I had seen then and the darker shade I noticed now. At last I reached down and touched the stony material on which I walked. It was slightly damp.

In the dryness of the cave, that seemed impossible. The ledge on which I slept last night had been perfectly dry, and so had the level cave floor stretching between the walls and the city. And I felt certain that the street where I had fought the man-machine had been dry. I touched the supports of a building, thinking vaguely that some underground analogue to rain had taken place; but, though smooth, they felt quite dry. But the street itself might have just been washed.

Then I saw the kluy. It was lying on the opposite side of the street, just in the corner formed by the base of the building there, and made a splash of scarlet against the dark gray of the damp pavement and the lighter gray of the building’s
metal. My first thought was that it had been placed there to bait a trap for me, but there was nothing around it to indicate that—it was simply the red flower of the kluy, with a few centimeters of stem and half a dozen leaves, just as I had found it several times blooming under the snow.

When I crossed the street and picked it up, I found that it was not a real flower at all. It was made of stone, of thin petals of stone like the stone of the stalactites, dyed scarlet. The leaves were of the same material, though they had been notched to approximate the leaves of the kluy and stained to a translucent green. The stem was a cave formation, a thin tube of stone, and in the center of the petals was a gem.

Looking farther down the street, I saw several more of these flowers: not only red, but yellow, white, and blue—all lying on the pavement as though they had been scattered there by the wind—though that was impossible: there was no wind, and the slightest drop would have smashed them to bits. Wondering, I walked on, and found that they lay closer and closer together as I advanced. Then, on an impulse, I entered one of the buildings, and running down long, dim corridors lined with silent machines, I crossed to the opposite side, fronting on the next street. It had not been washed, and there were no flowers there.

After resting for a few minutes (the running had made my wound ache), I went back to the street of stone flowers. It was possible—indeed it seemed likely—that someone knew I was coming. But if this was the case, it was unreasonable to suppose that I would deceive them for long by shifting to another street. On the other hand, there was a chance that the flowers had no connection with me at all. For all I knew they might have lain there, in the unchanging air of the cavern, for hundreds, or even thousands, of years, and the dampness could be the result of some unrelated cause. If that was the case, the street must lead toward something of interest. Perhaps it was only fatalism, but I continued to walk toward the center of the city, at first keeping close to the margin of one of the wall-less buildings as I had before, but soon being forced to the center of the street by the flowers, which grew more thickly as I went forward, filling the area near the foundations of the buildings.

Soon I saw, briefly, a living figure. Several hundred meters ahead, one of the tall, lurching creatures who had taken Cim Glowing darted into the street. In its exact center, he placed upright what appeared to be a pole topped with a pair of slender and nearly parallel horns. Then he dashed back into the building from which he had come.

I was already holding Cim’s endieva wand, but I checked the coiled thong to
make certain it would run free, made a few practice spins with the wand itself, and went slowly forward, expecting to be attacked with each step I took.

Nothing happened. I felt sure I was being watched from the buildings to either side, but no assault was launched against me. As I came nearer the forked pole, I saw that it was not, as I had supposed, a plain wooden shaft, but was of some gray metal, lightly and intricately figured with geometric designs interspersed with faces. The horns were gracefully curved antennae. At first, their surfaces seemed rough. When I was close enough to touch the staff, I saw that they were actually covered with script so fine that it would be nearly impossible to read even in a good light, script of a form I felt certain I had never seen before. It seemed clear that I was intended to take the staff, though it would prevent my carrying the endieva wand at the ready. After considering for a moment, I shifted the thong to my right hand and took up the horned staff with my left.

It felt as though I had touched a snake. My eyes told me that nothing had happened; the staff was still stiff and straight, with its antennae stretched upward. But my fingers felt a being: cold, living, and muscular. For a moment I nearly dropped it, and I am certain now that if I had, I would have been killed. But because, for all its sensation of living power, there was also a feeling of pliancy—of obedience, almost like the obedience of my own limbs—I did not. Although it was light, I set it on my shoulder.

At once the street was no longer empty. Things of the kind that had taken Cim—I have learned that they call themselves the Min—came from every doorway, and even leaped from the floors above, landing, clanging and flat-footed, shattering the stone blossoms so that the gems from their centers skittered underfoot. I started to run, but they prostrated themselves in front of me.

Seeing that, I stopped and waited for them to speak, but they did not. At last, when, seeing that they would not harm me, I bent to touch one, they rose until they were kneeling before me with open hands; and then, very gently and courteously, they took me by the arm and began to draw me farther down the flower-decked street until we reached the point where all the streets converged. A monstrous building stood there—huge and sprawling, as unlike all the other structures in the city as it was possible for it to be: walled, and spiney with turrets and balconies. It was still under construction; the material that lay about it seemed all salvage, stolen from the silent, naked towers.

We entered this place by stepping through what appeared to me to be a low, wide window. I had not been certain, until that moment, that the creatures who escorted me could speak; but as we went in I heard several muttering behind me.
Though I could not make out what was said, it sounded like the speech of the Wiggikki and all the other peoples I had met. I turned to one of them and asked where they were taking me.

“To the high seat, the place of judgment.”

Another said, “To the abode of purity.”

“Why?” I asked them.

“You are complete and whole, perfect.”

“And you are not?”

The creature to whom I had been speaking halted and turned to face me. That was the first time, I think, that I realized that their faces were not simply horrors—that they were capable of expression, though in some ways it seemed, at times, that the mechanical parts were actually more responsive to their emotions than were the fragments of the original organism (which were, in any case, different in each individual) that remained. Something—at that time I thought it was anger, but it may have been despair—contorted the jumble of metal and plastic that was his features. He said: “We are as you see us!”

“I apologize,” I said. “I am not accustomed to your appearance, and to me you seem perfect of your kind.”

Another, standing behind me, said, “What of your kind?”

My expression must have shown him that I did not understand what he meant.

“If we were of your kind, what then?”

I said, “But you are not.” I think, however, that a sort of understanding of what they were had already come to me, and I said nothing more on the subject.

We began to walk again. “You are male,” one of them said.

I nodded.

“Do you have knowledge of any who are not?”

I said, “You have already taken a woman I know—Cim Glowing.”

Several shook their heads, and the one I had addressed said, “She is no human woman.”

“She appeared so to me.”

“You were deceived.”

As we spoke, we were making our way down a long corridor with many turns. There had been windows on one side for the first few meters, but these ended as it threaded its way inward, and there remained only the dark walls, to which lamps of the kind used on the buildings outside had been affixed. Behind me I heard one of the creatures, talking to another, say, “There will be two now.”

Then we entered a wide, dark, low-ceilinged room whose floor was scattered
with crimson cushions. A little dais, not more than six centimeters high, ran about the walls; there were chairs placed arm to arm around it. Though all the others were empty, a man was seated in the one opposite the entrance we had used. He held a homed staff like mine, and Cim Glowing was chained to his chair. When he rose and came forward to meet us, I saw that he was a dwarf and very fat.

The creatures who had brought me to him dropped to their knees as he approached. He looked me over carefully, leaning on his staff, and then said: “Don’t you see that he will die? He has a chest wound.”

“He still walks,” one of the kneeling creatures answered. “He may yet live, if we treat him.”

“He will die,” the dwarf said again. Cim Glowing said nothing, but looked at me in a way that broke my heart. I saw then what they had meant when they said she was not a human woman. The chain that bound her to the dwarf’s throne went to her neck.

“Take him, then,” the dwarf said. “Treat his wound and tell me when he dies.”

I told him that if I was going somewhere for medical treatment, I wanted to take Cim with me.

He started to refuse; then, seeing that I was not going to leave without her, he turned on his heel and reached up to her collar. I could not see how he loosed it—it seemed to fly off at his touch. Cim ran across the room and embraced me, and I asked if she was all right.

“Yes,” she said, “now. But they have taken my tunic. We’ll have to find it before we can leave, or I’ll freeze. How were you hurt?”

“I don’t know. They did it when they took you.”

“Come,” one of the creatures said. “We will treat you now. Make you well.”

I asked him what he would do.

“Repair your body. Some parts of you are damaged—I think it likely that one lung has been punctured. We will give you a new one, not made of weak flesh.”

“And when I get enough parts like that, I will be like you. You said you wanted me because I was ‘complete and whole.’”

Something like amusement twisted the thing’s face. “You think that that is how we came to be as we are. No, not at all.”

Cim said: “I’ve been listening to them. I think there used to be far fewer of them—but they divided themselves and filled the gaps with those things that are unliving.”

The creature said, “An interesting idea. But that too is false.”

The dwarf, who had taken his seat again, his little legs folded beneath him,
sneered, “You know nothing. You are like a child who has wandered by accident into a theater half a minute before the final curtain. You see people moving about, some masked; you hear music, observe actions you do not understand. But you do not know if the play is a tragedy or a comedy, or even know whether those you see are the actors or the audience.”

When he spoke, all the creatures except the one who had been talking to us pressed their faces to the floor. This one motioned to us, and we followed him out of the room of thrones by another door. I asked him why everyone bowed to the dwarf.

“He is a man,” he said. “A human. Before you came, we believed him to be the last.”

“Then you should be concerned,” I said, “about where I came from. How do you know that there is not a community of men outside? Men, women, and children, all human, all living in a place far from you?”

“Is there?” he asked.

“No.” I was suddenly ashamed.

“Then why should we be concerned? Where did you come from, if you left no thriving city of men?”

“I don’t know; I have forgotten. A few days ago the Wiggikki found me lying in the snow—that is all I know.”

Cim Glowing said, “You don’t have to tell him this.”

I tried to explain what I felt. “I have no memory. But there is something behind the no-memory. I know words for many things I cannot remember ever having seen. I think of a certain thing, and begin to look for it, and then I realize that I have never possessed such a thing—that the shelves and cabinets and drawers I find in my mind do not exist. I think of other people around me; but they are not there.”

“You do not know where you came from,” the creature said. “But I will tell you. Somewhere, far away from here, in some little valley in the hills, you were born among humans who remembered the old years and the high estate that once was man’s. There you grew, but as you grew, your people dwindled—until at last it came to you that all were older than yourself, that you were the only member of your generation. Then you watched them die, one by one, and knew that when the last was gone you would be alone, ringed by the beastmen who grub roots or gorge themselves on blood. And at length, when that day came, your mind failed you, and you wandered away from your valley and the old woman dead by her fire. Then the Wiggikki found you. Now you are happy, because you see no
difference between the beasts and yourself. But we will make you whole again.”

I said, “I know that I am not one of the Wiggikki, or the Pamigaka, or one of Cim Glowing’s people. But—”

“They are filth under your feet. Or less. Look at that one who stands so near you now. If you would kill her for the joy it gives you, do so.”

“You are right,” I said, “I could. But that is because I still have something that belongs to her.” I untied my long thong, then, from the short wrist thong of the endieva wand, and gave the wand to Cim Glowing.

“I am speaking of moral force,” the creature continued. We turned down a narrow, dark corridor and descended a flight of steps. “If you, or He Who Rules, were to destroy her, there could be no wrong. Do you know how to use the staff you carry? A touch of the horns is death.”

“If you expect me to kill Cim with it, you’re going to be disappointed.”

Cim said, “I don’t believe this place he has brought us to is a place of healing.” In point of fact, it had grown so dark, as the feeble lamps grew dimmer still and were farther apart, that I could not see anything beyond the lights and shadows of Cim’s lovely face, and the flashing and glasslike eyes of the creature who had undertaken to guide us here.

“There are various types of healing,” he said. “Physical, mental, moral.” Abruptly, he stepped away from us, and I heard a door open and close.

Then glaring lights cut away the darkness. From its size and shape, I guessed that the room in which we found ourselves was beneath the room of thrones where the fat dwarf sat. But instead of being surrounded by a dais and ringed with shining chairs, this room was wholly empty, with a floor like the pavement of the streets of the city.

Faintly, from the opposite side, we heard a dull click, as though a door bolt had been drawn back. Cim pressed herself against me. “He is sending someone in to kill us,” she said. Then a door, one of three that faced us across the wide expanse of gritty floor, swung back.

The man who entered was not as large as Nashhwonk, but he had to stoop to get through the doorway. He had a wild yellow beard and long, tangled hair that stood out from his head in a way that made it seem too large for his shoulders, though they were twice the width of mine.

But these were not the things I noticed first. Nor, I think, the things that anyone would notice first. Before anything else, I saw his eyes: They were huge, and yellow as gold. And after that, I saw the way he moved. Cim Glowing is beautiful, and walks with liquid grace; but sometimes she looks clumsy beside
him.

I think I had guessed who he was before she called his name. “Ketin,” she said, and raised the endieva wand as though to strike, backing away until her shoulders were against the wall.

“Yes, Ketin,” the bearded man said. His voice was like a storm five kilometers off. He shook the door beside the one through which he had come, and the muscles of his back knotted until they looked like tawny boulders swept bare by the wind.

I was frightened—but, in a way, unafraid too. That is to say, I felt my physical weakness, and I knew that Ketin would be a deadly antagonist. But at the same time, I knew, or thought I knew, that Cim had been wrong when she had said, “He is sending someone in to kill us.”

I told Ketin, “I feel certain you’ll find all the others locked as well.”

“Ah,” said Ketin, and he turned as though he were made of smoke. “You know this place, then.”

“No, but I understand it.”

For an instant, that stopped him. I saw doubt cross his face like a shadow.

“And who are you?” he said. And then, “You are the one who is tracking the Great Sleigh.”

“I was.”

“I heard of you just before they took me. My friend—I had him under my hand, you see, like this, and I tickled him for a moment before I killed him, and asked him to tell me the news—my friend told me you had spent the night among his people, then set out again on the track of the Great Sleigh. I could kill you—or her—as I killed him, and if you do not tell me the way out, I will play small games with you until you do.”

“You could not kill me, Ketin.”

Ketin smiled, very slightly, and began to cross the room to us.

“Wait for a moment, and listen. The whole object in putting us in here was that I should kill you. I could never do it in a fair fight, of course. But this staff is a deadly weapon—in some way that I do not understand. For me to kill you would be self-defense, but I would be proud of it soon, and I would begin to see people like you and Cim as different from myself.”

“You would be right to be proud,” Ketin said, “if you killed Ketin.”

“I am prouder of not having killed you thus far. And I think I know how we may escape from here. Look upward. The lights don’t illuminate the ceiling, but I suspect your night vision is better than mine. What do you see?”
“Log supporting the roof.”
“There will be a door in the roof somewhere. A door that swings down.”
“I see none.” Ketin shifted his position, his face turned upward.
Cim said, “Cutthroat, how do you know?” She was looking too.
“There has to be. This room is under the throne room. It is large, and yet it has no furnishings; and Ketin was kept in an adjoining room ready to be loosed on whoever might find themselves in here. The kind of mind that would want such a room would also want to be able to drop its enemies into here. It agrees with the nature of this whole shoddy palace—pretentious, unplanned, seemingly built on whim, of parts stripped from better buildings put up long before it. Childish.”
“Are you sure? Then why didn’t they drop us down?”
“I would guess that the control is built into the dwarf’s chair. He would be the one who ordered this place built, but he wasn’t the person who wanted us down here. For one thing, I have the staff and could use it to kill Ketin. Was he cruel to you?”
“Sometimes,” Cim said. “But not in the way I expected—not like Fishcatcher would have been.”
Ketin rumbled, “I think you deceive me—or are deceived yourself.”
I shook my head and pointed with the staff. “There it is.”
Ketin walked toward me; and though, when he was close, I realized that he was even bigger than he seemed, I was no longer afraid of him. “I see him now,” he said. He crouched, then sprang and grasped the beams that supported the throne-room floor.
“I missed it,” Cim admitted, “and it was right there in the center where all of us should have seen it.”
“It had to be—the dwarf would want to drop people who were standing before his chair. But people like you and Ketin—and the Wiggikki, so I noticed—always stay toward the edge of any enclosure. You were even running at one side of the track of the Great Sleigh when I found you. You want to see without being seen, and to have some kind of wall against which to put your backs if you are attacked.”
“And you go out in the middle,” Cim said. “That bothers me sometimes. In that way you are more like the dwarf—Mantru is his name—than like us. While I was his captive, I noticed that he walked in the middle too.”
Overhead, the latch that held the trap in the throne-room floor creaked, then broke with a bang and came clattering down. The trap door swung down behind it, and Ketin, for all his size, was through it almost faster than my eyes could
follow him. Above, someone screamed.

“Can you jump up there, Cutthroat?” Cim asked. “I doubt that Ketin will come back for us.”

Before I got the wound, it would have been easy. Now it took all my strength; it was all I could do to cling to the edge of the opening. I swung my feet, but could not get them high enough to catch the other side. I felt something pull loose, and blood began to seep from under my leather bandage. Then Ketin appeared and, grasping the knotted coveralls around my waist, pulled me up.

The hall was deserted save for four crablike red things that slipped in blood as they scuttled blindly along the floor. I looked at them more closely and saw that they were two of the Min. The mechanical parts of their bodies still lived, though Ketin had torn them apart at the waist. Now he was roving the room as if he expected to find someone hidden behind the chairs. When I got my breath, I told him that I thought I remembered the route by which Cim and I had been taken to the room under the throne room, and that I would follow it and release her.

He said, “No need,” and jumped into the trap doorway. In a moment he was back, with Cim tucked under his arm like a parcel. She looked frightened when he put her down, but she had held onto my staff and the endieva wand. “Now we can go,” Ketin grunted.

“I said, “We have to find Cim’s coat.”

“Mine too. They took it from me.” For the first time, it struck me that Ketin was nearly naked; I remembered that his mate had worn a smock of tattered furs.

We set off down the first corridor we found, but we had not gone twenty meters when a projectile of some sort—I suppose one of the type that had wounded me the night Cim was taken—passed between Ketin’s head and my own and thudded into the wall behind us. He wanted to push forward, but I stopped him, telling him that we would certainly be killed.

“I am not afraid.”

“All right, then, I’m afraid enough for both of us. And they’ll kill us both whether we’re afraid or not. We’re going back.”

“But Ketin and I can’t go outside like this,” Cim said. “We’ll die that way too.”

“There’s a whole city out there—inside the cave where it’s warm. There’s certain to be something in there you can use for clothing.” I had already drawn them back with me as I spoke; in a few seconds we were in the circular throne room again.

As we threaded the crooked corridor down which I had been led only a short time before, I thought I had lost my way. Then we were outside in cleaner air,
where the towering, naked skeletons of the ancient buildings reared proud heads above the jumbled heap of the dwarf’s castle.

The Min did not pursue us; for hours we tramped down endless aisles of silent mechanisms. For a long time I wondered where the builders of the buildings had lived. There should have been comfortable rooms somewhere, places for eating and sleeping and perhaps for recreation. But we found nothing but the stark rows of metal arms and hands, and wheels and strange tools and lights. At last I realized that the “city”—as I had become accustomed to calling it—was not really a city at all, only a vast complex of storage buildings, located here underground where the machines would be protected from the weather for all time. The builders, whoever they had been, had lived on the surface, and all—or nearly all—had perished there long ago. I remembered the cart to which the machine I had found still operating had directed me, and in which I had found the white cubes of concentrated food I still carried, and I realized that it must have served the construction workers—or rather, their masters, because the workers must have been the machines themselves.

This thought had no sooner entered my mind than I realized that we were near the place where I had stumbled upon the great mechanism that had carried me to the cart. I told Cim Glowing and Ketin to follow me and led them to him.

He was standing just as I had left him. Perhaps he recognized me—his head moved, dully gleaming, as we came down the aisle. I could have imagined that there was an expression of welcome in the blind eyes that are only lights, but that is impossible. When I asked him if he would do as I said, his huge, toothed claw of a hand came up to touch his chin. I told him to search the city for more machines that, like himself, were still operable.

He found two. One has no arms or hands but a long flexible neck and three-meter jaws. It crawls like a snail, and I have named it “Dragon.” The other walks on six legs, lifting three and then the second three. It has four arms, of which two are large and two smaller. I call this machine “Bug.” With these, Roller and I returned to the ramshackle palace.

For some reason, I had expected to find the Min outside, ready to defend it, but there were none in sight. I explained to the three machines that we were looking for warm clothing; I made certain they understood what clothing was. Then I ordered them to begin disassembling the dwarf’s building, and to continue until they found it.

Then we watched the jumbled structure come down, piece by piece. I had thought that the three machines would work independently, but it was not so—
they cooperated as though they communicated by some means we could not hear. Dragon took the highest parts, stripping off the panels and beams with his great mouth and lowering them to the ground for Roller to haul away. Bug lifted the heaviest sections, his legs growing and shrinking as needed. Dust, the first I had seen in the cavern, rose into the air as they worked, and a sour smell with it.

When perhaps a twentieth of the palace was gone, the Min poured out. Some carried weapons, but they did not fire them at the machines or aim them at us. For a few moments they stood watching the destruction; then one—I think the one who had led Cim and me to the room below the throne room—came toward us. His weapon was shaped like a crutch; when he was within five meters of us, he laid it at his feet. “Stop them,” he said.

I told him to stop them himself if he could.

“We cannot. We have spoken to them, and they will not obey us. If we attack them, they will defend themselves. What is it you want?”

Cim said: “My tunic. Ketin’s cloak. Then we will be able to return outside, where we belong, and leave you in this grave where you belong.”

“You will have them. Tell the machines to halt work.”

Cim looked at me, and I said nothing.

“At once. Tell them to halt at once.”

“And then, when they are no longer pulling down your ants’ nest, you can kill us.”

“No. Why should we kill you then? If you are going away? You might start them again before you died. I will leave my weapon where it lies and will tell the others to lay down theirs.”

I told Ketin to take the weapon and destroy it; he did so, breaking it over his knee with a quick motion that left it twisted and splintered.

“I will get your clothing,” the creature said. “Then you will tell them to stop.” And he hurried away without waiting for me to reply.

Soon he was back. He ran like a machine, but I had the impression that, despite the unliving glitter of his eyes, a man was riding the even-stroking mechanical legs. Again he stopped five meters from us. As though they had dirtied his hands, he threw the furs at our feet. I watched while Cim put on her beautiful tunic again and Ketin tied a long cloak about his shoulders. “Stop them now!” the creature said.

I shook my head.

“You agreed!”

I told him that I had agreed to nothing, and he pointed to Cim. “She said it. If
the clothing was returned to you, you would leave; you would halt the machines
and go back to the upper world.”

“She is an animal,” I said. “Her word is not even binding on herself, much less
on me.”

He turned and dashed off again, and the rest of the Min followed him into the
building.

“Are you going to tear it all down?” Cim asked.

I nodded.

“I don’t think Mantru will let you,” Cim said. And she was correct. Not more
than three or four minutes had passed when I saw the dwarf clambering, with the
aid of several of the Min, through the wreckage. Roller came toward him carrying
a load of ruined panels, and I thought that he would be frightened, but he was
not. He shouted at Roller—I could not hear what he said above the racket the
other two were making—and Roller stopped and put the panels down. He
shouted again, and Bug became immobile. Dragon slowly lowered his neck until
three-quarters of it had telescoped into itself, then was still. Holding his forked
staff as though it were a lance, the dwarf advanced toward us.

I had not the least idea how my own staff could be used as a weapon, but I
went out to meet him. “We are the only ones left,” he said. “You should not have
tried to destroy my home.”

“You should not have tried to murder me in it.”

“With the beast? My vizier did that, not I. And there was no danger—you
could have killed him easily, and we thought you would.”

I said, “What is done is done.”

“Nothing has been done that cannot be repaired. Send your pets outside. These
machines you have found, and my servants, can restore the damage. And
someday—”

His voice broke off. I could not read the expression on his fat, squinting face:
it might have been hope or despair.

“‘Someday’?” I asked.

“Someday my servants may find a human woman for me—for us to share.
That is why I send them out. But the beasts grow more and more as we; so that
times they make errors they would not make if they had the radiations of my
own mind for comparison.”

I said, “I don’t believe that was what you intended to say.” I do not know how
I knew this, but I knew.

His face tightened, fat and soft though it was. “If you laugh at me,” he said, “I
will kill you.”
“I haven’t laughed at anything for a long time.”
“Someday, human beings may return to this world. Then they will find us here, and we shall crush the beasts as we did of old and raise new cities to the stars.”
“I understand,” I said, “but we are leaving.”
I do not know what went through his mind then—at the time I was very surprised when he attacked me. Perhaps it was only because I would not share his dream. More probably, I think, it was because, as I spoke, I pulled loose the sleeves of my coveralls, which I had knotted about my waist for coolness, and slipped my arms into them. It may be that he saw them for the first time that I was not dressed in skins—that I wore the clothing of the Great Sleigh—and he thought that I was one of those for whom he waited; that I meant that I would abandon him.
However it was, he thrust his staff toward me, and it grew longer as it came, so that the forked head seemed to fly through the air like one of the vampires. I moved my own staff to strike it aside, and it came to life in my hand; I felt again that I held the muscular body of some thin, cold animal. It twined itself about the dwarf’s staff and the two reared upward, lashing each other with their slender horns.
I said that the staff had felt cold, but it grew colder still, colder than any ice I have ever touched—though I knew that it was not the coldness of ice or snow I felt, but a different thing, a draining, for which cold is the only word I know.
Then the dwarf’s staff—perhaps only because it was the longer—began to bend backward.
I looked at his face then and saw that he was in pain. He was gripping his staff with both hands, and the sweat dripped from his row of chins, but the two staffs curved backward toward him even as I felt my own drawing all my strength. My life seemed to be flowing through my hand and down the shaft.
Then the heads were near him, and mine unwound a meter of its length and struck at the dwarf himself. He dropped his staff, but the slender horns of mine drove into his body from either side. As he died, I felt a great pleasure and power that left me weak and shaken and bewildered afterward.
I did not talk to Cim or Ketin about the struggle then; but tonight, after we camped, they spoke of it. They did not see—I find—what I did. Both say only that the dwarf pointed his staff at me, and I pointed mine at him, and he fell dead. I do not know why this is. Still, I felt, even at the time, that the fighting of the
staffs was taking place outside the ordinary world.

We left the city when the dwarf died. The creature he had called his vizier came to us and asked if we intended to level what remained of the palace. I could not speak, but Cim told him we would not.

He said, “It does not matter if it comes down now. We will use the material to build a tomb for Mantru.”

Ketin was eager to go and urged me to point the way to him; so I began to walk. Cim came with me. Behind her I heard the clank and roar of the machines. I turned, thinking they had resumed the destruction of the dwarf’s palace, and saw that they were following us.

For half a kilometer I walked, but I was too tired then to go farther. Roller held out his great hands to me, and I rode on his head, as I had when I found him. There was room there for Cim and Ketin, but they were frightened and would not come up.

After what seemed to me to be an astoundingly short time, we reached the edge of the city. Abruptly, the buildings were gone and all the light in the cavern was behind us, except for the lights of the machines. Then we crossed the cavern floor, with Roller and Bug and Dragon roaring as they swerved around slabs of fallen rock, and Cim and Ketin trotting to keep up. Very quickly we were in the narrow cave that leads to the outside world, with the machines knocking stalactites from the ceiling with their iron shoulders, so that the crashing of smashing stone echoed up and down the cave continually as we made our way out to the sunlight.

Without warning it was much colder, and I smelled fresh air and snow. I fastened the front of my coveralls. Roller swung around a bend, and I could see the narrow opening of the cave mouth, and light on the white expanse outside. I had been afraid that it would be night when we got out, but it was afternoon.

Cim and Ketin wanted to get away from the cave at once. I persuaded them to stay and told the machines to close the entrance, which they did, pulling down tons of rock. Given the energy and determination of the Min, I feel sure they will dig their way out eventually, but the world will be safe from them for a time at least.

When the machines were finished, the sun was halfway down the sky. I told Cim and Ketin that I was going to continue after the Great Sleigh, making it clear that it was my own decision and that they should not consider themselves bound to come with me. Cim said she felt as I did; Ketin did not, but said he would go with us until he had a chance to kill for us, so that we would have something to
eat. I showed him the white cubes I had taken from the cart in the cavern, but I do not think he understood what they were.

And that is all for today (which, I am sure, is the longest day I have ever recorded). To tell the truth, I am not going to try to play this back—I am afraid I have exhausted the capacity of the recorder. But while I have been talking tonight, I have finally come to understand that this device does more than simply preserve my words. I know now that by its instrumentality I communicate as well, and that you, on the Great Sleigh, listen as I speak. When I am quiet and there is no sound but the crackling of the fire, and Cim’s soft breathing, and Ketin’s shuddering sighs, I think I hear you. I do not understand why you will not speak to me, but it is enough to know that you are there.

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This is the eleventh day. It has been a bad one, though not wholly bad. I dreamed last night—I suppose because I was sleeping in the cold again—of Cim’s kidnapping. In my dream, the Min came, and their missile struck me as it had before; this time, the pain was much greater than it had actually been, and I lay in the snow with the useless firewood all around me, knowing that it must all begin again, that the Great Sleigh would be farther away than ever when I returned.

But it was only a dream.

Bug would not move this morning. Apparently the cold killed him in the night. Roller told us several things he believed might help him; we tried them all, but none was effective. Cim cried, the first time I have seen her cry. Roller explained that Bug was not truly dead, that if he was repaired, he would live again. She did not understand, and to tell the truth I think she is more nearly right than he is—no one will ever come with the tools and skills to make Bug’s mechanism operate again; if one night’s cold stopped it, what will a hundred do?

We went on with only Roller and Dragon. I rode Roller, but the metal of his skull was so cold that I had to cut some brush to sit on. After a couple of hours we struck the track of the Great Sleigh. It is almost filled with drifted snow, but still recognizable, and the machines make better time in it than they did when they had to dodge among boulders.

Ketin left us, saying that as long as we continued in the track he would find us, and that he was going to hunt. He returned after we had camped tonight, carrying the corpse of a young woman of some species I do not know. She was taller than any of us, and slender, and must have been beautiful before Ketin broke her neck.
He would not eat anything, saying she was all for us; Cim and I had already eaten, so we have tied her to Dragon’s back. Ketin will leave us in the morning.

Before I close, I should say that the sleeve of my coveralls—where the vampires slit it with their teeth as I was entering the cavern—has been the source of more trouble than I had expected. The openings let the cold into the whole suit. I have bound it with the last of the leather from the sail I got from Longknife, but the cold is still bad. I think it causes the wound in my side to ache more than it would otherwise.

• • • •

Twelfth day. Little to talk about. We followed the track all day, but it seems no fresher. Ketin was gone when we woke. I am very tired, but I have forced myself to walk part of the time to keep warm. About noon, I heard the singing of the Wiggikki—another band, I think, but the same song. It made me think of hunting Nashhwonk over the snow, and I tried to see if I could still run on top of the snow as I had then, but I could not get up enough speed. When I am better, I think I will be able to do it again. Made camp tonight, with Roller breaking trees for firewood for us as he has before. Cim borrowed my knife and cut a part of the leg from the dead woman on Dragon’s back and roasted and ate it, but I only drank some of the broth made from one of the white cubes. Cim was full of praise for my knife and the way it had cut the frozen flesh—mostly, I think, because she believes that I am depressed and need cheering up. The truth is that I am only tired.

• • • •

The thirteenth day. We lost both Roller and Dragon, within a few hours of each other. Roller stopped first and could not speak. Dragon has never been able to, so he could not tell us how to help him, though we tried the same things (when we could) that he had told us to do for Bug. Nothing worked. He was a good friend, and we will miss him. Dragon stopped too, a few hours later.

Cim and I continued along the track, after cutting some of the best meat from the woman on Dragon’s back. That is for Cim. To tell the truth, I do not think I could eat it.

About dark today, when we were talking about making camp, we were joined by one of the Pamigaka. I did not recognize him at first, but it is Whiteapple. He is
full of talk, and I think he is very happy to have caught up with us—he has spent the last few nights alone; I suppose he has been very frightened.

He says he heard about us several times—we seem to have been sighted by numbers of people who were afraid to come near us. We are supposed to be followed by monsters. I asked Whiteapple if he had seen the monsters. He laughed and said he had not, and boasted that he had never believed the stories. He must have passed Roller and Dragon, silent and covered with snow, without realizing what they were. I doubt if he is capable of comprehending that such things can move, unless he has seen them move himself. Still, he says he has questions he wishes to ask the people of the Great Sleigh.

Now he and Cim are both asleep. He snores, but over the noise he makes I can hear someone outside the circle of light thrown by our fire—stealthy movements every five minutes or so. The wind has died, and the snow creaks under his feet, whoever he is. I am keeping my staff close beside me.

I hear your breathing as well, though you are far ahead in the Great Sleigh, and I wonder why it is you cannot speak. Am I being tested? If I pass, do the right thing, if only once, will you talk to me then?

• • • •

This is the fourteenth day. I do not know why that number should seem significant to me, but it does.

Terrible dreams last night. While I was in the city in the cavern, I killed one of the Min with Cim’s endieva wand, and afterward they hailed me as a kind of king. Last night in my dreams, I killed that Min over and over again while he prostrated himself before me and told me that he would be my slave, would do whatever I asked. I kept striking him with the wand; each blow poisoned him, but he would not die. I was frantic and ashamed, guilty because I was killing someone who only wished to be my friend—yet, at the same time, I wanted him to die at once so that no one need know.

I woke up sweating, which was very uncomfortable in the cold; the perspiration seemed almost to freeze on my body as soon as I was awake. I did not sleep again, and when it was light I went looking for the footprints of whoever it was I heard last night. They were easy to find, about the size of my own. He came within fifteen meters of the fire at one point. For some reason, he appears to take strides of uneven length.

We made very poor time today—I was too weak to walk far. Possibly we
covered ten kilometers, but no more than that. Your track is growing dimmer, so you are traveling faster than we. Tonight I told Cim and Whiteapple that they should go on alone, but neither would hear of it. Last night Whiteapple ate most of the meat Ketin brought; but today he has been making up for it by foraging as we go, so I had a dish of herbs to accompany my broth tonight.

... ...

“Cutthroat, I have listened to you when you thought I was asleep. I know that you speak into this black ear, and that it returns your words when you wish. Now you are sleeping, and I will speak to you, and perhaps when you wake and I am gone, you will think to listen to this—or find it speaking to you with my voice sometimes when you thought to hear your own.

“I love you, but I cannot love you as a husband, and I cannot stay with you any longer. If only your heart had been born into Fishcatcher’s body, we might have lived beside the waters.

“I believed that I wished to overtake the Great Sleigh. When you took me on your sledge—do you remember that?—I believed that I desired it more than you. But then I believed that tomorrow, or the day after, we would see it.

“Now I know that we have little chance, and the track grows dimmer each day. Soon we will find ourselves in countries that are strange to me, and as the track fades behind us, there will be no way for me ever to return to the lakes and rivers I have known.

“So I am leaving tonight. If I thought I could persuade you to go with me, I would nurse you until you were healed; but I know that you would not come, and I cannot stay with you longer. I love you, and I wish that it had been possible for us to be together always.”

... ...

The fifteenth day. Cim is gone. At first I thought that she was stolen again, but the snow was smooth all around the camp, and it showed no footprints but hers. Whiteapple and I followed them for half a kilometer or a little more. They crossed the limping marks left by whoever it was that circled our camp night before last, but he did not turn to follow her. She has taken the endieva wand.

Good-bye, Cim.

Dreams last night in which I killed Mantru again. I have been blaming the
wound in my chest and the tear in the coveralls for my weakness, but I know
now that those are mistakes: It is the strength the forked staff took from me. I
think Mantru must have used his staff several times when he was a child—that
was why he was so small. As it is, I cannot shrink, but my back will hardly
straighten, and . . .

Back again. It is much later, I think far past the middle of the night. We have
been sitting up and talking, making new plans all evening. I was whispering into
this thing, and Whiteapple was asleep, when Crookedleg came. I am amazed at
the amount of pleasure it gave me just to see his narrow, scarred face—as though
I had grown up among the Wiggikki instead of spending three days there. No
doubt it is because they were the first three days. I feel as if I have come home, or
a part of home has come to me, even though I never had a great deal to do with
Crookedleg. When I recall the details, it was always Red Kluy or her son
Longknife who was important to me at the time. I never really noticed
Crookedleg until Nashhwonk nearly killed him. His name used to be Firerock.

But here he is—he says he has been following the Great Sleigh for the past
week. When he came upon us, he was too shy to join us for a time. Now he is
here. He has walked around our fire, he says, for most of the night for the last
two days; he saw Cim leave but did not try to stop her or speak with her. He says
she was weeping. I hope everything goes well for her now.

Crookedleg has a sledge. He says he heard that I had one, and so built one
himself in order to be able to catch up to me. It is larger than my old one—the
one I bought from Longknife with Nashhwonk’s flesh—and should be able to
carry all three of us at high speed even in a light breeze. We will leave in the
morning, and I do not think any of us doubt that we will overtake the Great
Sleigh within the next four or five days.

• • • •

This sixteenth day I think has been the happiest of my life. We have been
sailing along all day, with a quartering wind, going faster than the wind itself and
hardly having to tack once an hour. Because there are big drifts in the track now,
we don’t skim along on the flat as I used to, but sail, as it seems, over a
succession of low waves of snow. Crookedleg sits singing in the stern and is
captain and trims the sail; Whiteapple jumps out to push when pushing is needed,
and, for all his stubby little body and seeming plumpness, there is a great deal of
muscle and energy hidden in him. And I sit in the bow and enjoy myself as a
passenger. I miss Roller, but this is much more pleasant than riding on his head; there is no noise but the creaking of the sledge-poles, and very little wind. Besides, we are always speeding up or slowing down, and I spend my time wondering how Crookedleg will handle the next drift.

Tonight we have the best camp I have seen since I left the Wiggikki. Crookedleg brought with him a small, domed tent of the kind they use, and he and Whiteapple have banked it with snow. With a very small fire in the center, it is almost too warm.

Before I close, perhaps I should mention that I have been worrying all day—though I admit, not very much—for fear someone might ask what has become of my staff. The truth is that I left it behind, quite intentionally, when we left our old camp last night. Crookedleg has his clubbow, so I will not need the staff. It was the last of the things we brought from the cavern, except for the food cubes and their little box—and there are only three cubes left.

• • • •

The seventeenth day. This has been the warmest day I have ever seen; Whiteapple and Crookedleg say it is the warmest in their experience as well. Toward noon, the snow everywhere was visibly melting. We were all afraid we would bog down, but just when it seemed certain that we would have to get off and pull the sledge, the temperature began to go down a bit as the sun passed its zenith; we soon had a good, hard crust on which to skim along.

We shared the white cubes from the cavern tonight, though Whiteapple and Crookedleg did not want to at first. Then Whiteapple went out and gathered herbs for us, and Crookedleg went hunting with his clubbow and brought back a snow monkey. Quite a feast, altogether.

Later. I have been unable to sleep, so I have come outside. It is very bright out. When I saw the brilliance of the light on the snow through the doorway of the tent, I thought both moons must be in the sky; but it was too near daylight even for that. Something that looks like the sun, but dimmer, is high in the sky. It appears to be shining through a tremendous silvery cloud that reaches almost from horizon to horizon, blotting out the stars. I stared at it for a long time before I understood what it was I saw: a reflector of bright, finely divided metal dust wrapping the night side of the world. The false sun is the reflection of the real sun, and the light that would normally be lost in space is reflected to the ground when it strikes that great concave mirror of silver dust.
The eighteenth day. The temperature was only a few degrees above freezing when we woke, and it has been growing warmer all day. We pulled the sledge for most of the morning, but abandoned it at last. I advised Crookedleg to take the sail and rigging, and he did. Whiteapple has been carrying the tent. We have been moving much more slowly than we did when we could sail, and so ought to be disheartened, but we are not. If our sledge cannot slide across the snow, then neither can the Great Sleigh, and of course it is too large to pull.

So though we may be traveling slowly, it is no longer moving away from us. I think Crookedleg is more eager to reach it than any of us. He says that after his leg was hurt he no longer wanted to remain among his people—that it always seemed to him that when he was not looking into their faces, their faces changed; and he could no longer bear to be among them. His injury is not yet completely healed; but he can walk on his leg well enough, and even run a little.

Today we have traveled all day to the sound of running water. Crookedleg and Whiteapple say that the snow has melted before, though never this rapidly. I showed them the silver cloud tonight and tried to explain what was happening. They were awed, but I don't believe they understood.

This is the nineteenth day, and tonight I am alone. This morning we broke our camp, and I tried to march along with the others; but after a few hours I could not keep up. I told them to go on without me. Whiteapple wanted to carry me, but he could not do it by himself. He and Crookedleg built a litter, using two saplings and the sail from the sledge, but they could take me only a few steps—then Crookedleg’s bad leg could no longer stand the weight. Then they said they would stay with me until I was better.

There was nothing else to do, so I pretended that I thought they would kill me to eat when I was weaker, as the Wiggikki do. The truth was, of course, that they could have killed me very easily then—I could not have defended myself, and they knew that. But because I pretended to be frightened, they went away, though with many backward looks. I feel lonely now that they have gone, but what else could I have done? I did not want them to miss the Great Sleigh for my sake, and I am not such a fool as to believe now that I am going to get well. Eventually they will catch up with the Great Sleigh, and when they talk to the crew, they will tell
them about me. That is what I want, and it will be the next best thing to having overtaken the Great Sleigh myself.

I find I can walk for about five minutes before I have to rest, so I have made a little camp, as I used to do when I traveled alone. Lying on my back as I am now, I can see the false, reflected sun. The whole world is bright and strange, and full of the sound of melting. Little animals of the night that I have never seen before are out now; one came near me a few minutes ago, large-eyed and human-faced, but like a little bear, though when I think of it, I cannot remember just what a bear should be.

In the west, in the direction of the Great Sleigh, the track seems to go on and on under the strange light forever, as if it were going all around the world. To the east, from which I came . . .

I see something moving. I thought at first that it was another sledge, but a sledge could not sail on this melting snow. Whatever it is, it is coming rapidly, and it seems too large for a sledge. Perhaps the warmth has revived Roller . . . No, it is too big even for that. As big as a hill, and I see people standing on it.

And that is enough. I know who you are now. This small planet is round, and you have come back, and the time for talking into this black box is over. I am going to talk to you face to face. Who is that tall man with you? I think he has . . . wings?


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Gene Wolfe—who is perhaps best known for his multi-volume epic, *The Book of the New Sun*—is the author of more than 200 short stories and thirty novels, is a two-time winner of the Nebula Award, a four-time winner of the World Fantasy Award, and was once praised as “the greatest writer in the English Language alive today” by author Michael Swanwick. His most recent novels are *An Evil Guest*, *The Sorcerer’s House*, and *Home Fires*. 
Victorian London is a place of fluid social roles, vibrant arts culture, fin-de-siècle wonders . . . and dangerous underground diabolic cults. Fencer Evadne Gray cares for none of the former and knows nothing of the latter when she’s sent to London to chaperone her younger sister Dorina, an aspiring art critic.

At loose ends after Dorina becomes enamored with their uncle’s friend, Lady Henrietta “Henry” Wotton, a local aristocrat and aesthete, Evadne enrolls in a fencing school. There she meets George Cantrell, the kind of experienced fencing master she’s always dreamed of studying under. But soon, George shows her something more than fancy footwork—he reveals to Evadne a secret, hidden world of devilish demons and their obedient servants. George has dedicated himself to eradicating demon and diabolist alike, and now he needs Evadne’s help. But as she learns more, Evadne begins to believe that Lady Henry might actually be a diabolist . . . and even worse, she suspects Dorina might have become one too.

Combining swordplay, the supernatural, and Victorian high society, Creatures of Will and Temper reveals a familiar but strange London in a riff on Oscar Wilde’s The Picture of Dorian Gray that readers won’t soon forget.

“An artful, witty, Oscar Wilde pastiche with the heart of a paranormal thriller.” — Diana Gabaldon, bestselling author of Outlander

Coming November 14, 2017 from John Joseph Adams Books (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt)
If there was anything in the world sweeter than the ring of steel sliding over steel, it was Freddie Thornton’s grimace when Evadne parried his attack. Even the rich odor of roses carried on the light summer wind, and perfume of the lilac, and the pink-flowering thorn were nothing to the sight of his bared teeth, and the beaded sweat of his forehead running down the bridge of his nose, over his full lips.

She had him. She could see it in his eyes, the set of his shoulders. A tactician, Evadne had let Freddie exhaust himself with fancy maneuvers in this match; had saved herself for this moment, knowing it would come. Deepening her stance, she threw her weight into her riposte and sent his sword spinning away into the ornamental shrubbery.

“Do you yield?” she asked, ripping off her fencing mask before pointing her dulled epee at his blue-veined throat.

“Of course I yield,” he said, knocking it aside with the back of his broad hand.

“Good match.” She slapped him on the shoulder as he removed his own mask. She knew it was bold to touch him, so she kept the motion rough and perfunctory. “You’ve been practicing.”

“So have you,” he said, rubbing at where she’d struck him. “With whom, I can’t imagine, out here in the country. Have you found a master?”

“I already have a master.” Evadne pretended interest in the finches that twittered gaily as they flitted among the topiaries of the formal garden. It was not a typical place for a fencing match, but she’d often used the wide gravel lane for practicing her forms.

It was also beautiful, isolated, and a bit romantic . . .

“Oh, you long ago mastered any knowledge I managed to pass on to you,” said Freddie. “What a pity you’re a woman! They’d have made you captain of the Oxford fencing team, I’m certain of it.”

Evadne tried to cover her dismay with the sort of laugh her younger sister, Dorina, managed so easily: light and lively, as if she’d neither a care in the world nor a thought in her head. It came out all wrong, however, like it always did, and she stopped, knowing she sounded more like a braying ass than a tinkling bell.

“Ah well,” said Freddie, to cover the momentary awkwardness. “Where’s my sword? It’s time we got back.”

“One more match,” urged Evadne. The last thing she wanted was to go back to the house and make herself ridiculous by forcing her short, stocky body into a frilly tea dress and her sun-bleached hair into some sort of feminine pile of twists and excrescences. Her grace came to her only when she held an epee in her hand
and her limbs were encased in canvas and leather. With Freddie just returned home from inspecting the living he’d been given in the north of England she wanted to make as good an impression as possible—and that would be out here, in the healthy sunshine, not inside a dull, dim parlor.

“I think I’ve been humiliated enough for one day.” Horrified, Evadne realized she should have let Freddie win a match or two. She’d not impressed him with her display of prowess; she’d annoyed him. She stammered an apology, but he waved her away. “I’m parched, that’s all. A cup of tea is what I need.”

“Oh, me too,” she gushed as they reached for his sword at the same time. Of course, instead of their hands meeting over the hilt, like in one of Dorina’s stupid novels, Evadne very nearly bowled him over.

“You’re a beast, Evadne. You know”—he looked her up and down appraisingly—“the Greeks had it all wrong. Athena’s no soft, stern beauty—she’d look like you right now, dirty as a beggar, and all brawn and sweat and determination.”

Evadne wasn’t pleased by this description of her person, or the goddess he’d selected to compare her to. If the love of her life was going to compare her to a deity, Evadne would have preferred one who wasn’t a perpetual virgin, even a martially inclined one. She tried to toss her hair that fetching way she’d seen Dorina manage a thousand times, but just ended up spraying Freddie with sweat.

“Sorry!” she stammered, mortified. “I meant to say . . .”

“What’s that?” asked Freddie, dabbing at his eyes with his handkerchief.

“It’s just, I’m fairly certain I didn’t spring fully formed out of my father’s head.”

“No,” he said, looking at her strangely.

“Tea?” Evadne gestured toward the house. Perhaps conversing in a drawing room would be better than standing around in the heady perfume of the garden. At the very least, holding a cup of tea would give her something to do with her hands.

“Actually, I must away.” Freddie took her sword from her, and then offered her his sweat-soaked arm. She took it, and they began to amble back to the house. “Mother will be wondering where I am.”

“We’ll send a servant,” said Evadne. “It’s no trouble. You’ve been gone for so long and . . .” She embarrassed herself by blushing. I missed you, she wanted to say. “And you’ve only just returned.”

“I know it’s terribly uncivil of me,” he said gently. Evadne’s heart sank. If she had been Dorina, she would have known what to do, how to manipulate him with
her feminine charms. Unfortunately, she was herself, and thus unequipped to charm anything but a blade. “But never fear—you’ll see me soon. It wasn’t just to spar with you that I came today.”

“No?”

“I’m supposed to extend an invitation, for you to dine with us tomorrow night.” He grinned at her. “You and your family, naturally, but I hope you specifically will deign to eat the humble fare of Vicarage House?”

“Nothing would give me greater pleasure.” She shot him a sly look. “It’s you who surely must resign yourself to plain fare. What will they feed you on up in the north, I wonder? Oaten cakes and nettle wine? That doesn’t sound so bad, actually,” she hastened to add. “Appropriate for doing God’s humble work.”

“You’ve always had the stomach of a goat,” he said as he guided her toward the stables. Again, Evadne wasn’t quite sure his compliments were actually compliments. “You won’t need one tomorrow night, though. Mother’s planning a feast. It’s to be a celebration!”

Her heart fluttered. Could Freddie be working up to a proposal, at long last? “Oh? Are we celebrating your success?”

“Yes, and . . .”

“And?”

“And there’s someone I want you to meet.”

“Oh?” A relative—perhaps a grandmother or aunt who insisted on approving of her darling Freddie’s choice?

“Yes,” said Freddie, his voice studiously neutral. “My fiancée.”

Evadne had grown up tramping over hills and through woods with her father, but now, on this sunny afternoon, walking arm in arm with the young man she’d loved since he was a boy stealing jam out of the pantry, she felt like she might faint senseless to the earth.

“Fiancée,” she murmured, then realizing she ought to at least pretend to be happy, forced another laugh. It sounded yet more dreadful than her first attempt. “But you’re so young!”

“It’s high time I settled down. I’m thirty-three, Evadne. I’m in my prime!”

“I’m just surprised. I had no idea you were thinking of marrying. Is she a northern girl?”

“No, her family lives in Oxford. We met when I was still at school. There has been an understanding between us for some time, but I wanted to leave her free until I could offer her a comfortable life.”

An understanding! Until just a few moments ago, she had thought an
understanding existed between the two of them. After all, Freddie had spoken freely to her of his ambitions, hopes, and plans, had asked her advice, and seemed to value her approval.

It had always been Freddie’s dearest wish to find a small parish in need of a kindly shepherd to guide its flock, and to marry a respectable woman, thereby setting an example for the common people. All this had sounded completely lovely to Evadne. She even enjoyed attending services. Religion had always been a comfort to her, assuring her as it did that her faith was what distinguished her, not her looks or her manners. And living somewhere a bit wilder than Swadlincote would have freed her from needing to dress and act like a gentlewoman; would have gotten her away from her insufferably perfect little sister; would have given her more time to practice her swordsmanship, especially considering she had wanted for a regular partner as good as Freddie while he was at school. She had long dreamed of the day they would keep chickens, spar every day, and tend their small garden. She would make him tea while he wrote his sermons, and they would be wildly happy together.

But none of that would happen. Ever. Freddie was going to marry some Oxford girl. All he wanted Evadne to do was to meet her.

“Well!” said Evadne brightly. “She must be a treasure. Constant, patient, and willing to serve her husband and God in the north, away from everyone she knows —”

“She has an aunt in a neighboring county.”

“So much the better! A local aunt is always such a delight to a young married couple.” Freddie frowned at her flip remark, and she hastily backpedaled. “I very much look forward to meeting her.”

“I’m glad.” Freddie grinned, his ill humor forgotten. “I hope you like her.”

“What?” The question came out before she could stop it. Likely he had meant the sentiment rhetorically.

“Young opinion matters to me, Evadne. I know you will tell me the truth.”

They had reached the stables. Freddie handed over the two swords and his mask to one of the grooms and called for his big bay to be saddled.

“The truth, eh? Well, we Grays are old friends of your family,” she said. “We can’t let just anyone spirit our Freddie away. She must be exceptional for us to release you.”

“Oh, she is! She’s the very picture of feminine grace, and so domestic! And as for her beauty, I might be biased, but other than your sister she’s the best looking girl I ever saw in my life.”
“That’s quite a compliment,” said Evadne, doing her best to keep the sourness from her voice.

“Sisterly affection requires you to defend Dorina, I know, but I shall play Paris’s role in this matter.” Evadne winced to again be reminded of how he had judged her Athena, not Aphrodite, as Freddie swung himself onto his waiting horse. “Tomorrow, then?”

“Tomorrow.” Evadne shook his hand, standing on her tiptoes to reach.

“Please give your mother my regards, and explain my absence at tea?”

“Of course.”

“Then farewell, Evadne!”

Evadne kicked a clod of dirt and stalked out of the stables as Freddie cantered away. Knowing she would be wanted at tea, Evadne resigned herself to washing up and pretending nothing was wrong. She took a step toward the house, and then veered off toward the ornamental lake, specifically for the folly on the bank, where it sat dark and shadowed by a walnut grove. A brisk walk and a quarter-hour’s peace—she deserved it.

Dorina adored the folly, of course, and had nicknamed it “The Mouldering Mausoleum.” A vine-covered Gothic structure that looked a bit like the turret of a castle, it had been erected by one of the previous generation of Grays when such things were fashionable. Evadne couldn’t understand its purpose, or the expense of keeping it appearing forlorn and neglected yet still comfortable for picnics, but today she was grateful for the stupid thing when it came into view. It was out of sight of the house, to give the visitor the impression of “perfect loneliness” as Dorina once put it. There, Evadne would be unobserved—at her liberty to let flow the disappointed tears that she felt gathering behind her eyes, heavy and humid as a summer storm.

Her footfalls were muffled by grass as she approached, and perhaps she did feel a bit of “perfect loneliness” as she put her hand on the cool stone. Instead of falling from her eyes, Evadne’s tears gathered in her throat, tight and hot, disappointed and angry.

The wind shifted. Evadne was startled when she smelled a whiff of cigarette smoke, and heard an unmistakable giggle. Dorina must be nearby.

Another giggle, though not Dorina’s, and then a low, sensual moan accompanied the next waft of smoke. Evadne was intrigued. The noise and odor were definitely emanating from above her. Dorina and a companion must be secreted atop the turret!

It was long past the hour when the family assembled for tea. What was Dorina
doing out here? And who was she with?

Quietly, Evadne made her way up the folly’s spiral staircase, her hand on the ornate wrought iron banister. Taking every care, she poked her nose around the corner, and gasped.

Looking as comfortable as a sultan on his throne atop a pile of pillows lay Dorina, languidly smoking a cigarette as another girl—Juliana Lennox—alternated between kissing her sister’s lips and neck.

Evadne had always suspected her sister preferred the company of women. While that might have bothered some, what actually annoyed Evadne in that moment, as she looked upon the couple, was how happy they seemed.

Dorina had all the luck. A happy surprise, conceived long after the Grays had given up on a son following their daughter’s birth, Dorina had been coddled by their parents, cherished by their nursemaid, treated like some rare hothouse flower.

Evadne, on the other hand, was as common as a yew tree, and just as self-sufficient. No one had ever doted on her. Dorina had been a lady from the day she was born; Evadne, a sow’s ear not even Rumpelstiltskin could spin into a silk purse. The irony was that Dorina’s easy manners were mere illusion. Her sister’s beautiful smile, her winning laugh, the sincerity she could evoke whenever she needed to apologize, managed to hide her stubborn, secretive, and willful nature. And while Evadne was perpetually disappointed, Dorina had always gotten everything she wanted.

“Dorina Gray!” cried Evadne as she emerged from the stairwell. The two girls shrieked and fell apart. Juliana Lennox looked genuinely terrified; Dorina, after seeing it was Evadne who had rumbled her orgy, looked merely amused as her elder sister strode toward them to loom over them and deliver her scolding. Evadne so rarely felt tall—especially next to her longer-limbed sibling—but now she had the high ground.

“What do you think you’re doing here!”

“Don’t you know?” Dorina leered back at her. “Don’t tell me you really were fencing with Freddie all morning?”

“Dorina!” Juliana at least seemed to understand the seriousness of their situation.

“You think it’s funny?” Evadne snarled as she snatched the cigarette from her sister’s fingers. How she hated being laughed at! And Dorina was always doing so—poking fun at her lack of grace, her fencing, her piousness. She could not bear it, not today!
“So you were fencing with Freddie?” Dorina smirked at her, and Evadne felt her face go red. “Too bad.”

Her sister could not have known it was exactly the wrong thing to say. In that moment Evadne resolved that if she could not be happy, neither would Dorina. “Too bad for you,” said Evadne. “I’m going to tell Mother exactly what I found her daughter doing when she ought to be drinking tea with her family. I think she’ll be interested to hear you have no sense of responsibility—no judgment—none of the consideration for others a young woman should exhibit, especially given her ill-advised decision to send you off to London on your own. I wonder if she’ll ever let you out of her sight again!”

“No!” Dorina’s nonchalance turned to panic. She obviously hadn’t anticipated this. “Don’t—”

“Be quiet! It’s my duty to tell them.” Evadne was already descending the spiral stair.

“Let’s talk about this!” cried Dorina as Evadne reached the bottom of the stairs and took off running for the house. But in running, Evadne had the advantage, in spite of being a decade older—her years of training had strengthened her legs and chest, and she quickly outpaced her younger sister.

“Oh, we’ll talk about it,” she shouted over her shoulder. “With our mother!”

“You wouldn’t!” cried Dorina, already falling behind. “Evadne!”

Evadne quickened her pace. As it turned out, there were certain advantages to not being a picture of feminine grace.
Up! (with Nick Mamatas). She lives in Boulder, CO.
This month, I’ll be reviewing *The Emerald Circus* by Jane Yolen, *The Overneath* by Peter S. Beagle, and *Terminal Alliance* by Jim C. Hines.

*The Emerald Circus*
Jane Yolen
Paperback / Ebook
ISBN: 978-1616962739
Tachyon Publications, November 2017, 288 pages

Jane Yolen is one of the most prolific writers I know. Her works span from YA to adult to children’s books to graphic novels to nonfiction. With her newest short story collection, *The Emerald Circus*, she’s returning to her fantasy roots, but hopefully to a new audience. All of the stories have appeared in other places, but if, like me, you haven’t had a chance to read her short fiction, this is a good collection to get. Most of the stories can be divided into three categories: retellings of beloved fairy tales (usually focused on strong girls), alternate takes on historical characters, and reimaginings of Arthurian tales.

The stories were hit or miss with me. While the re-imaginings were enjoyable, the stories left me wanting more. “Lost Girls” focuses on Darla, who is kidnapped by Peter Pan to become his newest Wendy, but instead musters the other girls who are forced to cook and clean for him to go on strike. The Peter Pan figure is older, crafty, and a little frightening, but the story ends just as it starts getting interesting. “Blown Away” has a world-weary Dorothy returning to Kansas, describing Oz as a faraway circus where she learned gymnastics and tightrope walking. It made me want to read that story, as opposed to Dorothy recounting it to her relatives years later. On the other hand, “The Gift of the Magicians, with Apologies to You Know Who,” a mashup of the Beauty and the Beast with “The Gift of the Magi,” was brilliant all the way to its surprising end.

I’m not a huge Arthurian fan, so the stories such as “The Quiet Monk” and “Evian Steel” went right over me. They were beautifully written—they just didn’t grab me. However, the historical reimagining of Queen Victoria in “The Jewel in the Toad Queen’s Crown” was satirically wicked and “Sister Emily’s Lightship,” Emily Dickinson’s encounter with an alien, was gorgeous and lovely and just the right amount of perfection for a short story.
What really grabbed me, finally, was the story notes at the end of the book. Yolen not only recounts the circumstances on how each story was born, but she also includes a poem for each story that is just as delightful, haunting, and gorgeous as the original work, and in a couple of cases, outshining it. “Dorothy Before Oz” gives a better sense of Dorothy’s world-weariness than “Blown Away,” and I enjoyed “Maiden v. Unicorn” far more than the story it was written for, “Belle Bloody Merciless Dame.” It makes me eager to read more poetry from Jane Yolen—I’m sure there’s a collection out there with just that.

*The Overneath*

Peter S. Beagle

Paperback

ISBN: 978-1616962692

Tachyon Publications, November 2017, 288 pages

Another short story collection put out by Tachyon Publications, Peter S. Beagle’s *The Overneath* is sure to be a hit with fans eager for more tales of unicorns. I fell in love with Beagle’s stories when I read *The Innkeeper’s Song* in high school. For those who know his works, you might already be familiar with some of the stories in *The Overneath*. If you haven’t, however, like I mentioned with Jane Yolen’s collection above, this is a good way to be introduced to his short fiction, with some new pieces to boot.

Whereas Yolen’s collection was focused on retellings and re-imaginings, Beagle’s short story collection focuses mainly on magical creatures, specifically unicorns, or those who have had dealings with such animals. Yes, our favorite wizard, Schmendrick, has not just one story, but two—“The Green-Eyed Boy,” a story of him as a boy apprentice to the Wizard Nikos, and “Schmendrick Alone,” which is the account of when he summons a demon for the first time (and certainly not the last). Both stories give a nice fleshing out of the wizard we meet in *The Last Unicorn*, and a better understanding of why he does the things he does. Another tale set in *The Innkeeper’s Song* universe, “Great-Grandmother in the Cellar,” is a chilling story which makes you wonder who, exactly, is the monster of the story—the dead grandmother, the paramour who puts the protagonist’s sister under a sleeping spell, or the protagonist himself, who thinks so little of his sister to begin with.

Not all the stories in this collection are set once upon a time so far away. The story “Trinity County, CA: You’ll Want to Come Again and We’ll Be Glad to See
You” deals with a couple of narcs driving up Santa Cruz flushing out agents who deal in illegal dragon-raising. “Underbridge” is a story about a graduate school professor keeping his sanity intact by caring for a troll statue, and “Music, When Soft Voices Die,” is a haunting tale of a man who, in creating a device to reproduce sound, manages to capture the grief at the center of the world. And my favorite story: “The Very Nasty Aquarium,” which is a charming story of two older women fighting a duppy to keep an aquarium clean and safe.

The story notes that accompany each story are briefer than in Yolen’s collection, but I think the stories are more rounded and overall more satisfying. And the stories in this collection do invite you to visit more of the worlds he created, or at least delight in them anew.

Terminal Alliance
Jim C. Hines
Hardcover / Ebook / Audiobook
ISBN 978-0756412746
DAW, November 2017, 368 pages

I know Jim C. Hines mainly for his essays and articles on his blog dealing with gender and race, but have never read his fiction work until now. Terminal Alliance, which is being called his first venture into military science fiction, is both fun and endearing.

In the future, a virus has reduced humankind to little more than zombies. An alien race called the Krakau saved the human race from extinction and introduced them to the galaxy, albeit in lesser roles. Marion “Mops” Adamopoulos is the head of the Shipboard Hygiene and Sanitation crew of the spaceship Pufferfish when a bioterrorist attack reverts most of the human crew to back to zombies, leaving her and her team the only survivors. With help from their ship’s AI, Mops and her team attempt to find a cure for the rest of the ship’s crew, and in the process stumble upon the true nature of their civilization’s destruction, as well as a conspiracy that threatens to unravel an alliance of the entire galaxy.

The humor in this book reminded me a lot of The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy, though there’s also a lot of toilet humor—then again, Mops and her crew are janitors; gaseous and body emissions come with the territory. Besides that, I laughed a lot reading this book. The help tutorials of the ship, modeled after a certain word processor’s help tool, were hilarious. Mops’ crew throw their own measure of chaos into the mix—Monroe, a former soldier turned janitor with a
sentient robotic arm; Wolf, a gung-ho newly restored human ready to punch everything within her reach; Kumar, who has a phobia against germs; Doc, the ship’s AI who is both helpful and a wiseass; and Grom, the only non-human on Mops’s team, who has a penchant for video games.

Beyond the humor, there were also some interesting moments in the book. The aliens in the books all treated gender in intriguing ways that made me want to see more. And there are a couple of scenes where Mops and her crew talk about what it means to be human—although the Krakau rescued them, they did so by reconstructing their bodies to the point where they would be considered more cyborg than human. But is that still better than shuffling around in a zombie state? What does it mean to be human when you have no connection to the past, when your history is told by someone else? I hope Hines will continue to explore this more in subsequent books. It feels like he’s touching on some deep philosophical issues that might go deeper than the toilet humor presented here.

In the meantime, Terminal Alliance is a quick, fun read. And I do find myself appreciating those in the sanitation industry a lot more. If there’s anything this book has taught me, it’s that janitors know the ins and outs of everything.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LaShawn M. Wanak is a graduate of the 2011 class of Viable Paradise. Her fiction has been published in Strange Horizons, Daily Science Fiction, and Ideomancer. She served as Associate Editor at Podcastle, and has written nonfiction for Fantasy Magazine, the Cascadia Subduction Zone, and the anthology Invisible 2.
Movie Review: *Blade Runner 2049*
Carrie Vaughn | 1940 words

*Blade Runner 2049*, or “The good things that come into your mind about your mother.”

The trailer for *Blade Runner 2049* taught me something about myself: I have a Pavlovian response to the Vangelis *Blade Runner* score. Those resonate synth progressions start up and I’m instantly in love. I was skeptical about seeing a new Blade Runner film, thirty-five years after the original. But that music on the trailer swelled, and suddenly I wanted to see this movie with all my heart, despite the foreboding in my soul. The yearning was physical. (Note: the score to the new film, while building on Vangelis’s musical themes, is by Hans Zimmer and Benjamin Wallfisch, and is serviceable and entirely appropriate.) This means I also learned something about all this sequel and reboot and remake and nostalgia mania. It doesn’t have to be good. It just has to generate endorphins. The internet lost its mind when that trailer dropped because of all those gushing endorphins.

Ultimately, what I like most about *Blade Runner 2049* is the chance to see a film deploy the classic *Blade Runner* aesthetic in a story that’s actually set in that world, as opposed to the endless derivative attempts to mimic the aesthetic. (The deeply silly *Total Recall* remake from a couple of years ago was practically *Blade Runner* fanfic, right down to our hero plucking out a sad tune on a piano in the lull before the third act.) Since 1982, Hollywood has defined near-future dystopia with smoky sepia air, perpetual night, art-deco corporate halls, and crowded neon streets. Finally, that mood feels authentic again, and not an imitation of a formula that possibly wasn’t well understood by those attempting it: the retro-futurist aesthetic of technological decay in a world where ethics never caught up with capabilities.

Spoilers ahoy! There’s a big one that’s necessary to talk about to get to the heart of the film.

K is a Blade Runner. He’s also a replicant, tracking down some of the last of the earlier model Nexus line who went off the grid after Tyrell Corp went bankrupt and rafts of information were lost in what’s known as the Blackout. He “retires” one who’s been living innocuously on a remote grub farm, and makes an astonishing discovery: the remains of a replicant, long dead and only bones now, who appears to have given birth. The existence of replicants who can reproduce
on their own will change everything, so K’s superior at the LAPD as well as the head of Wallace Corporation, the company that absorbed what was left of Tyrell and is now the primary producer of replicants, wants this mystery solved and ideally repressed. K goes to Wallace Corp in search of the identity of this dead replicant. They dig up a recording of an old Voight-Kampff test from 2019, the content of which will come as no surprise to astute fans of the first Blade Runner film. (I think this is one of the nicest callbacks to the first movie. The other is when K visits elderly Gaff in a rest home, a lovely cameo by Edward James Olmos. K asks what happened to Deckard, and Gaff says, “He retired,” with some amount of glee at the double meaning, and plops down an origami sheep.) After that the race is on: What happened to Rachael and Deckard’s child, and who will get to it first? K’s trail leads him to Deckard, who’s been hiding out in the fantastical ruins of a bombed-out Las Vegas.

There’s a lot more to all this, of course. We meet K’s girlfriend, a sweet-natured personal AI—a sexy holographic Siri; Wallace’s replicant assistant, Luv, perfectly polished, good at everything, deadly, and who cries at seeing one of her own kind coming into existence in their own strange kind of birth. Wallace himself is even weirder than Tyrell was. And there’s a memory maker, a woman sealed off in her own space due to an immune system disorder, who manufactures the memories that help replicants stay sane. That replicants know their memories are artificial does seem to bother them. But Ana Stelline makes the best memories, we’re told.

The old supposed mystery from the first film—is Deckard a replicant?—is clearly not true. But this film picks up philosophically where that one leaves off because K is a replicant, and a Blade Runner, and it’s fascinating watching him navigate his world in odd isolation. Ryan Gosling’s K is understated and almost charming. Just a guy trying to make his way in the world. He’s not happy with his job—people keep asking—but he’s determined in his resignation to it.

What I don’t really understand is his autonomy. We’re told in an opening scroll that replicants don’t go rogue anymore. They must obey, they no longer rebel, that bit of programming has been fixed. They’re slaves, and this world seems okay with that. As with the first movie, we’re meant to be uncomfortable with the situation. All the replicants we meet are clearly people, sentient and fully realized. K seems to be his own person. He has an apartment, a job. He buys his AI girlfriend gifts, which suggests he has a salary and all that entails. He puts up with the bigotry of his neighbors, who know he’s a replicant and hate him. We’re not given any indication if his situation is normal or unusual for replicants. The
replicant prostitutes clearly belong to the brothel, Luv clearly belongs to Wallace. (“He gave you a name, he must like you.”) Nameless K seems outside the system entirely. Maybe this is a function of his job as a Blade Runner. As a replicant, he’s still called on to do the work no one else wants to. But he goes to his own home at the end of the day.

Halfway through the film, dealing with the existential stress of his quest, K fails a baseline test. This is a bizarre verbal call-and-response we’re introduced to early on, replacing the Voight-Kampff, where replicants’ emotional stability is graded. There seem to be no consequences to this failure. K is taken off duty and told to go home and get his head on straight so he can retake the test in forty-eight hours. Which is basically what a human cop would have been told after some traumatic incident. So what is the point of the test? Having a replicant protagonist for the film is a masterstroke. But I’m not sure it goes anywhere interesting.

I can’t help but feel the story veers in the wrong direction in giving Rachael and Deckard a child. When words like “miracle” start getting tossed around, we’re no longer in the gritty nihilistic milieu we started out in. Wallace suggests that Deckard’s and Rachael’s meeting was orchestrated in the first place, that Tyrell designed Rachael to be the first fertile replicant able to bear children. That technological advance was lost, and Wallace wants it back: he can’t manufacture replicants fast enough to meet demand. But if they could manufacture themselves. . . (As a fan of Lois McMaster Bujold, I need to interject here that perhaps uterine replicators might be a more efficient technology to pursue if you’re looking to vastly increase your population. However, this story’s not interested in technology but in metaphysics.)

So K is looking for this special child, which one of his artificial memories suggests might be him. When the film almost turns into yet another story about a guy with a dead mother looking for his father, I almost checked out. But K is a replicant. He wasn’t born. And, weirdly, the minute he learns this the movie stops being about him.

K is not Rachael’s child, not the chosen one that the film’s attention turns to. He does discover an underground of replicant freedom fighters, some of whom helped hide the child originally, and he learns that they all wish they’d been born, with an actual mother and father. To be born is to have a soul, they believe. Roy Batty declared, “I want more life.” These modern model replicants have open-ended life spans. They have more life. Now, they want souls.

Blade Runner has been called retro-futurism, classic ’40s noir but with flying cars. 2049 feels like classic cyberpunk circa 1986, with its pervasive AI,
holographic advertising, unbelievable disparity in wealth and circumstances, and technological decay. Counterintuitively, much cyberpunk, so rooted in pointing out the ills of late capitalism and pitfalls of a hyper-technological society, is also messianic. It’s filled with chosen ones who have the key to discovering truth, to overcoming whatever tyranny is at hand. Think of Neo in *The Matrix*, Flynn the User among Programs in *Tron*, Hiro Protagonist, any number of cowboy hackers riding across high-tech landscapes with secret knowledge, in unique positions to learn ultimate truths. Or, in this case, a wondrous replicant child with a soul. It’s a standard story, an easy story, and I’m a little sad to see the Blade Runner world fall into it.

This film ends exactly where the first one did, with a dead replicant and Deckard standing next to a special woman, his daughter instead of his lover this time. K’s story vanishes inside Deckard’s, and I find myself wondering, Did K get what he wanted? What did he want? To be human? To have a mother? To find a soul? To run off to Tahiti with hologram Joi? The film progressively cuts him off from all these desires.

What’s changed at the end of the film? The replicant underground is still underground, Wallace is still an exploitative asshole. And always the question, are replicants human? The first film answered that, I thought. But the question in this film seems to be, do they have souls? Once again, I feel like the first movie answered that. That was the whole point of Roy’s tears-in-rain speech—a replicant capable of turning memory into poetry has a soul. And if that’s not heavy-handed enough for you, there’s the dove flying into the heavens at the moment of his death. But now, I guess, we don’t know?

The new movie gives replicants a hurdle to being human that they can’t possibly clear: a human being is biologically born, which manufactured replicants can never be. There’s a quite possibly accidental hierarchy here, and a suggestion that in the end K can do nothing more than give his life to people who really are special, unlike him. I find this premise unsatisfying.

The film runs long, some two hours and forty-three minutes trying to figure all this out. On the one hand, I love that it takes its time, watching rain streaking on windshield and neon lighting up falling snow. But the deeper into its own philosophy it gets, the longer those scenes of K sitting pensively in his car drag on. Science fiction fans, fans of the original film, won’t be disappointed by *2049*. It’s gorgeous, spectacular, impressively cyberpunk. But you might not want to dig too deep into its philosophy, which I fear undoes itself in its effort to try to take that philosophy further.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carrie Vaughn is the bestselling author of the Kitty Norville series, as well as the superhero novels *Dreams of the Golden Age* and *After the Golden Age*, the young adult novels *Voices of Dragons* and *Steel*, and the fantasy novel *Discord's Apple*. Her latest books are *Bannerless*, *Martians Abroad*, and *Amaryllis and Other Stories*. Her Hugo Award-nominated short fiction has appeared in many magazines and anthologies, from *Lightspeed* to *Tor.com*, as well as in George R.R. Martin’s *Wild Cards* series. She lives in Boulder, Colorado. Learn more at carrievaughn.com.
Molly Tanzer is the British Fantasy and Wonderland Book Award-nominated author of *Creatures of Will and Temper*, *Vermilion*, and *The Pleasure Merchant*. She is also the co-editor of *Mixed Up: Cocktail Recipes (and Flash Fiction) for the Discerning Drinker (and Reader)*. Her short fiction has appeared in *Nightmare*, *Lightspeed*, and *She Walks in Shadows*, as well as many other locations. For more information about her critically acclaimed novels and short fiction, visit her website, mollytanzer.com, or follow her @molly_the_tanz on Twitter or @molly_tanzer on Instagram.

Your new novel, *Creatures of Will and Temper*, is due out November 14 from Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. It’s the story of two very different sisters, Evadne and Dorina Gray, who discover that Victorian London is rife with demonologists. The book is packed with nineteenth-century cultural references, fantastical foods and plants, and super-charged fencing scenes. What can you tell us about Creatures’ “origin story”?

I was reading *The Picture of Dorian Gray* on my porch one summer morning, drinking a little absinthe, and got to thinking about that scene where Lord Henry Wotton gives Dorian Gray a mysterious and debauched French novel that sends Dorian into his famous libertine tailspin. What if the book in question had been a book on how to traffic with demons? Well, that sounded so delightful I started sketching out the novel that would become *Creatures of Will and Temper* right then and there!

Your editor for this book was *Lightspeed*'s very own John Joseph Adams. You two worked together at *Fantasy* and *Lightspeed* years ago. What was it like working together again?

John was fun to work with at *Lightspeed* all those years ago, but I’ve actually enjoyed having him as my editor even more. I knew it would be great during our first phone call, as he came at me with an amazing idea to make the book a lot better, and then was super cool about some other idea that I’ve forgotten that I
elected not to use. So, we work well together (I think) because we’re eager to
listen to one another.

I really enjoyed the way demons were handled in the novel—they’re not the
same variety of demon you see in a lot of current pop culture (fans of The
 Conjuring universe may be a little surprised). How did you develop your
vision of demons and demonology?

I wanted the demons in the book to be more like elementals . . . but for things
other than the elements, if that makes sense. So, they’re elementals of aesthetics,
rage, truth, and so on. Most of all, I wanted them to be ineffable and
incomprehensible; beings that live in some universe other than ours, with lives
and passions and desires of their own that make them dangerous as well as
alluring and powerful. So, a bit elemental spirit, a bit daimon/daemon in the
Classical sense, a bit of the more traditional demon that’s tempting, crafty,
unknowably motivated, and so on.

I love the way every chapter opens with a quotation from the fictional book
*On the Summoning of Demons*. Can you tell us more about the book and how
you came up with all these wonderful passages?

That aforementioned amazing idea of John’s was that I include those
passages! True story, most of them are altered passages from *The Picture of
Dorian Gray*. I mean, I came up with the idea of Lord Henry Wotton as a
diabolist just by reading the original, so making the book Lady Henry Wotton
owns based on Wilde’s original felt pretty natural!

*Creatures* has some really vivid and exciting fight scenes. I know that you’re
a martial artist and you’ve taken some fencing lessons. Can you talk a little
bit about the way you approach writing fight scenes? I know it’s really easy
for a fight scene to become boring or the choreography to get muddled.
How do you avoid those pitfalls?

Fight scenes are so hard! Mostly I try to keep them short, my sentences
shorter, and my viewpoint very tight. Fights in real life are confusing, and
capturing some of that can be good, but I try to keep things brief and clear because I am really guilty of skimming a lot of fights in novels. I also totally set out pieces, like on my desk, for the characters and move them around to get a sense of the real space of things. While I usually try to resist the impulse to write a novel like it’s a movie in my mind, I always stage fight scenes as if they were.

Part of Creatures’ charm is the way it plays with Oscar Wilde’s classic tale, The Picture of Dorian Gray. You focused on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature when you were in grad school. What do you think draws you to that time period and those works? And are there any other texts (British, historical, or otherwise!) that influenced this project?

Man, this is a huge question! But honestly I think what draws me to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are the ladies. Women writers were doing amazing work in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and yet so many of them have been all but forgotten as modern syllabi focus on the men writing at the time (Defoe, Richardson, Fielding, then Dickens, Poe, Melville). But I’d take The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph over Clarissa any day, Sarah Fielding over Henry Fielding, and anything Austen wrote over . . . well, just about anyone.

And then you have such massive social upheaval going on in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that novels—especially women’s novels, in my experience—always have some fascinating clue about the times, whether it’s abolition, women’s sexual rights, advances in science and technology, social responsibility . . . it’s amazing stuff.

As to what novels influenced Creatures of Will and Temper, I definitely studied Sense and Sensibility, as it’s my favorite text about sisters and sisterhood!

Historical fiction, like second-world fantasy or hard SF, really demands precise and careful worldbuilding. When you’re writing, what kinds of details do you include to make sure your world feels real? When you’re reading (or watching or playing . . . however you like to enjoy your texts!), what worldbuilding failures really bother you?

I rely pretty heavily on a series called “Daily Life In . . .” for historical research, because they’re great go-to guides for basic things like currency, food, social roles, historical touchstones, and so on. I find it’s everyday elements like
these that locate a reader very well in a story, but I also try not to provide excess detail. I do my best to only note what people of the time would have noticed, and specifically the point-of-view character, so what they were eating, what people are wearing if it’s exceptional (but not if it’s not), where they’re going if it’s new and fresh (and they’d have the language to describe it—not every character will be familiar with architectural terminology, etc.), and so on and so forth.

Worldbuilding failures . . . honestly, I’m most bothered by the assumption that every society, even fantastical ones, would be sexist, racist, heteronormative, repressive, etc. We’re supposed to be writing speculative fiction—why speculate that everyone, everywhere, would always be horrible to women, for example?

I saw an interview where you said you did more research for some of your other historical pieces than you did for Creatures. Which one of your works do you think took the most research? Do you have any terrific research stories?

I think Vermilion took the most research. I really wanted to do well by my biracial protagonist, and I also wanted the Chinese language elements in the book to be (mostly) Cantonese, because that would have been more historically accurate for the mid-nineteenth century in San Francisco. But there were far fewer resources about Cantonese available to me at the time I was researching, so that got tricky.

I think my favorite research story right now is one from my most recent research trip, this time to Long Island for the sequel to Creatures of Will and Temper. I was at the William T. Lauder Museum in Amityville. The people there had such amazing stories to tell about the 1920s in town, especially including one about Al Capone demanding a local Italian grocer go into town and buy 300 pounds of sugar. (Obviously, he wanted it for moonshining.) Anyway, the still exploded, the feds came looking, and they traced the sugar back to the grocer. He pretended not to speak English, but the feds wouldn’t buy it, until his wife came into the room and shooed them out of the place, insisting she’d bought it so all her friends could make jam that year. Amazing!

Connected to this, the descriptions of food and drink in Creatures of Will and Temper are really compelling and seem very authentic. Did you have to do a
lot of research on food during the Victorian era? And have you experimented with cooking or brewing historical foods and drinks?

I’m definitely a home-brewer (mead), but in terms of cooking, not so much. I’m “beegan” (vegan + honey), and while you can find some vegan nineteenth-century resources on cookery, so much Victorian food is all about like . . . meat pies. That’s reductive, but it’s also sort of true.

I did a bit of food research, for sure, helped out by my love of the *Great British Bake-Off* and the old BBC cooking show *Two Fat Ladies* (those ladies were always cooking up something from the nineteenth century), because I freaking love food scenes in novels. From Laura Ingalls Wilder to George R.R. Martin, food scenes stand out to me in novels because people sitting and eating together is such an amazing opportunity for drama as well as characters being fully present enough to take stock of their surroundings.

I may have paid extra attention to the food descriptions since I know you best as a foodie. What foods are inspiring you right now? And will you be making anything special for Thanksgiving this year?

Jam! Jam is inspiring me. I home-preserved a summer harvest this year and I couldn’t be happier. Colorado has wonderful fruit, and I always long for Colorado peaches when they’re not in season, so this year I took matters into my own hands. (And yes, Colorado peaches specifically—this Georgia girl says they’re the best.) I made two batches of peach-bourbon-vanilla jam, a batch of pear-plum jam with port wine, and a mixed-fruit batch with apples, pears, and berries. I am so proud of myself, I always say I’m going to do this, but this year I actually did it!

For the holidays, I’ll home-culture a vegan cashew cheese and bake it en croute with some of the port-pear-plum jam, but I’ll be spending this Thanksgiving with my mom at a spa where they cook for you, so I won’t be making anything special . . . or doing dishes, for the first time in my life!

This month you’re also releasing the anthology *Mixed Up*, a flash-fiction-anthology-meets-cocktail-recipe book you co-edited with Nick Mamatas. Can you tell us a little more about the project and the process you used for blending the fiction with the cocktails? And most importantly, did you taste-
test all the drinks?

I did taste-test the drinks; they’re all my tried-and-true recipes! So, now you know all my secrets.

While I did recruit one or two of our authors, the fiction side was Nick’s business. Mine was the mixology and the philosophy of drinks-making presented in the book. It was great to have a chance to finally say all I have to say on the subject! Or at least a big chunk of it!

This isn’t your first editorial project. You’ve been involved with a few magazines, and of course, just last year you co-edited Swords v. Cthulhu with Jesse Bullington. What do you think draws you to editing? How do you balance it with your writing? Do you have plans to do more editorial projects?

Actually . . . so, shh, okay. I don’t really like editing! Nick got me on board with Mixed Up because he promised he’d do the editing, and I’d just do the cocktail writing. While I’ve enjoyed parts of being an editor, I’d really just rather write! So no, no plans.

There’s a second book in the Creatures universe set to come out in 2018. What can you tell us about it?

Creatures of Want and Ruin isn’t a direct sequel to Creatures of Will and Temper; it’s set in the 1920s, during prohibition, on Long Island, NY—specifically in Amityville, which is where I used to spend my summers. My mom’s side of the family is from there, and so the place means a lot to me. I have a lot of history there. The protagonist, Ellie West, is actually a badass pulp version of my grandmother, whose poetry inspired a lot of the descriptions and mood of the novel! The demons are different, too . . . though there are direct references/overlap with the first one!

From period enactment to studying art history in college to writing a lot of historical fiction: It really seems like history excites you. Do you see yourself sticking with historical milieux? Are there any periods and places you’d like
to explore that you haven’t had a chance to?

I don’t see myself quitting historical fiction any time soon! I’d definitely like to write something at the end of or just after WWII, and at some point I’d like to do a 1980s period piece. One of my favorite stories, “The Thing on the Cheerleading Squad,” was set in 1990 and it was really fun to write.

Are there any ways you’d like to grow or change as a writer? Any genres or styles that you think would really push your craft? And what’s next for you?

I’m always seeking to do better with each project, whether it’s improving my pacing, my dialogue, my plotting, my characters . . . but yeah, one of these days I’m going to write a crime novel I’ve had in mind for a while now. No supernatural element, just a bunch of nerds who are into D&D and Star Wars trying to solve a murder, plus some trashy, kinky sex as a subplot. A total beach read, basically!

That’s not next, though; next is editing Creatures of Want and Ruin, and then . . . I’m not quite sure!

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Wendy N. Wagner is the author of more than forty short stories and has also written two novels for the Pathfinder role-playing game. Her third novel, An Oath of Dogs, is a sci-fi thriller from Angry Robot Books. She serves as the managing/associate editor of Lightspeed and Nightmare magazines. She is also the non-fiction editor of Women Destroy Science Fiction!, which was named one of NPR’s Best Books of 2014, and the guest editor of Queers Destroy Horror! She lives in Oregon with her very understanding family.
AUTHOR SPOTLIGHTS
What was the seed for this story?

When I was a child, my mother told me trees that had hollows among the roots were fairy trees, and I still refer to them that way in my head. One day, on a walk as an adult, I saw a fabulous hollowed-out fairy tree. I took some pictures and got to thinking, “What if?”

I loved the description of Beanpole: How did it come about?

Scarecrows are shaped and dressed like humans to fool birds from a distance—but if you get close enough, you see the shape and outerwear are a disguise. You can modify a lot about a scarecrow to make it look more human, but the closer a person gets to it, the less human it appears. I liked the idea of Sister’s husband physically resembling a scarecrow, and trying to acquire the pieces that would make him look human without his disguise—one Marianne is never able to see, but her family responds to favorably, which sets her apart.

Did you struggle with the timing/nature revelation of the origin of the viewpoint character, Marianne? After the revelation, I reread the story a very different way.

Yes. Good gracious, yes—right up to the wire I struggled with that! It’s hard to make something feel like a revelation to the reader that the character whose mind you’re in treats very matter-of-factly.

Whose faerie stories do you love?

In fiction, I loved the Sidhe in *War for the Oaks, Iron Kissed*, stories by Charles de Lint, and fairy tales. Intersections of folklore with urban fantasy and mythic fiction are things I mainline whenever possible. I’ve just begun reading
Merry Gentry, book one, by Laurell K. Hamilton, and I’m fascinated by the cultural implications of flirtation etiquette among fae versus among Midwestern humans. Anything that lets me catch a glimpse of faerie culture and hierarchy is wonderful to me.

Any news or projects you’d like to tell us about?

If you’d like to read more of my work, the anthology *Luminescent Threads: Connections to Octavia E. Butler*, from Twelfth Planet Press, has an essay of mine that also appeared on okayafrica.com in late June 2017. I also have a short story in the March 2017 issue of *Nightmare Magazine*. You can listen to *Write Pack Radio*, a weekly writing podcast I co-host, on iTunes, Blog Talk Radio, WindingTrailsMedia.com, and on YouTube under Winding Trails Media. And finally, I’m in the Fall 2017 Writing The Other class, taught by K. Tempest Bradford and Nisi Shawl, and I highly recommend it. I’m learning a lot that’s informing my current novel project.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Jude Griffin is an envirogeek, writer, and photographer. She has trained llamas at the Bronx Zoo; was a volunteer EMT, firefighter, and HAZMAT responder; worked as a guide and translator for journalists covering combat in Central America; lived in a haunted village in Thailand; ran an international frog monitoring network; and loves happy endings. Bonus points for frolicking dogs and kisses backlit by a shimmering full moon.
This story celebrates the diverse everyperson, the type of character whose voice we want to hear while they save the world from things like a growing Vortal. What was the inspiration behind both this story and the heroine that saves the day?

Thanks! To me the main character of a story is as important as, if not more important than, the story itself. A Pakistani Muslim immigrant who also happens to be a lesbian is not a typical protagonist for an SF story, as we all know. For me a story has to not only work as a story but also be relevant now, in these crazy times. With white supremacists in the White House and racial aggression and bigotry raising their white hoods across the country, it felt much more meaningful to put a character like Susan at the heart of the story and see how her identity shapes the story itself. Susan is American now, no matter what the bigots and racists may think.

These are the true heroes who are at the cutting edge of the fight for democracy. Trans people, LGBT+ persons, Persons of Color, Muslims, immigrants, refugees, marginalised persons of all persuasions and backgrounds—these are the real faces in the mosaic of America. They are the first line of defense for the American dream and the first to get picked on, bullied, marginalised, banned, abused, attacked. We’ve read thousands of SF stories with white men saving the world. It got old fifty years ago. White women were a welcome change but oddy enough, even SF authors and editors who championed white female protagonists never expanded their inclusivity to intersectional acceptance. Why was that? Perhaps because even feminists can be racist? Whatever the reason, the truth is that SF has ignored almost every group of heroes except the white male or female ones, and that’s just unbelievable in a country where more than half the children being born are non-white. SF has to be realistic and reflect the real world; the real America is colourful, transgender, lesbian, Muslim, immigrant and beautifully diverse. You can retire all those white SF heroes now: they can pick up their social welfare checks from the local VA every month and stay home griping about the way it used to be, while their sad, rabid puppies nip at their ears. America is wonderful and real and the Susan Khans of the world are its true heroes.
The Vortal, when looking at it from a different perspective, brings people together. Is the Vortal—and whatever lies on The Other Side—meant to be this entity that brings people of diverse backgrounds together? Or is it a cold, nondiscriminatory, and unfeeling presence that I suspect it might be?

The Vortal appears in at least one novel and several other short stories. It’s a multiverse concept with one simple, inflexible rule called The Balance: Every time a person is flipped through the Vortal to another parallel universe, another person must be flipped back into the world they left. The Balance must be maintained. You can control which world you go to, if you have the right equipment, but you cannot control the person or being that is flipped into your world in your place. In that sense the Vortal is cold, nondiscriminatory and unfeeling as you rightly suggested. It is nature at its most primal and atavistic. In this story, we don’t know who opened the Vortal into midtown Manhattan, but you can be sure it was done for the purpose of crossing into our world. So when Susan and Jenny leave our world and flip into the other one, some must cross over into our world. Who? Why? Where? Those are questions I’ve left unanswered—and unasked. For now.

What are some things about “A Vortal in Midtown” that you’d like your readers to know about?

Just the fact that the story is only one part in a series. While Susan and, by extension, Jenny, are heroes for saving our world, and in our sense of the term they are “dead,” the scientific nature of the Vortal means that they have travelled to a parallel world. Which one? Why? What happens to them there? And who replaces them, if anyone does so, in our world? Those are questions for the next story. But you can be sure, their sacrifice and struggle—and their adventures—have only just begun!

What other projects are coming up for you?

Am just finishing up my YA debut The Rise Trilogy. The first book, *Rise As One*, will be out by end 2018 from Delacorte (Random House). I’ve also finished *Upon A Burning Throne*, the first in the Burning Throne series coming from John Joseph Adams Books (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt) in late 2018 or early 2019. I’m also working on a Middle Grade Fantasy series called Pax Gandhi, Sorcerer
Supreme, and another fantasy series titled The Broken Gods, both of which will go to my agent in a few months and hopefully find publishers. In India, of course, I have a whole other publishing career. Apart from my ongoing mythological and historical fiction series there, I’m especially proud of my new superhero fantasy trilogy which began with *Awaken*, and the upcoming *My Father Drank My Lover & Other Stories*, both from Pan Macmillan.

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Alex Puncekar lives in Ohio and is finishing up his MFA at Youngstown State University. You can find his published work in *Aphelion: The Webzine of Science Fiction and Fantasy* and *Jenny Magazine*, or you can find him on Twitter @AlexPuncekar.
I love the layers in this one. The style is light and easy, but the world and characters feel rich and fleshed out. How do you balance the level of detail in shorter pieces like this one?

I tend to work by alternating between two methods: either agonize for days/weeks/months over every detail, or manage something similar to surrealist automatic art, almost a trance. This piece is the result of the latter, a two-or-three-hour exorcism in a small bar in a small town on the Oregon coast. Working that fast, there’s a pretty substantial risk of producing incoherent messes or hitting dead ends, but it solves my usual problems of overthinking and getting stuck on minutiae. Those rare occasions when it works, I treat it a little bit as if I’m transcribing a film, letting scenes unfold in my head, transcribing what seem like the most pertinent details. If the characters are clear in your head, there’s a natural way they want to interact and a natural course for the story to take. The trick is turning yourself off a bit and trusting the world to happen. A few particularly bizarre events in the right places can give a reader’s subconscious fuel to develop the world on its own.

There’s a trope that beings of power never grant wishes for free, and because of this they might be shady or self-interested. Is the witch in this story a benign helper, or more of a wild card? Was there something in it for her?

This is a trope I think about a lot. The life of those beings always seems to be one of isolation, as if exile is the cost of great power or knowledge. A genie is trapped in a lamp. A mad genius is trapped in their own head. Even if they don’t literally leave society, they can’t help viewing themselves as separate from it. There’s an essential schizophrenia to it. If you viewed yourself as totally apart from literally everyone you met, you’d have to at least seem a bit shady. And if the power has a high cost to begin with, isn’t it natural for the boon to have a cost? Maybe this is just a more mundane truth, that nothing is inherently positive or negative, everything’s a wild card.
With the witch in particular, there is a possibility that I’ve started writing more stories set in this world to explore just how benign she really is, so I could write a novel at this point. She has been alone in her cabin for an indefinite amount of time. At the time of writing this story, I didn’t have an exact idea of how long she’d been alone. It felt like decades. The man pretty much has to trust her prognosis blindly, but this is someone that can turn a tree into a fully functioning prosthetic limb, so it’s hard to believe she couldn’t have patched up whatever damage yanking out the arrow would have inflicted if she felt like it. Maybe she was just messing with him, entertaining herself by watching him hop around on one leg for a few years. Maybe she long ago made some sort of decision to never do anything the quick or easy way. Or maybe after all that time in isolation she wanted some company.

The witch makes a distinction between helping someone and fixing them. What’s the difference?

People long for overnight cures. Sometimes that means pills, relationships, tidbits of wise advice. They come in all shapes and forms, and the main thing they have in common is that they almost never actually work. Our surface-level problems are easy to focus on but are rarely our real problems. The witch probably learned that at some point.

On the surface, the man’s most obvious problem is that he has an arrow in his leg. Take that away, you have someone who has, as far as we know, either failed at or run away from everything he’s tried. If the witch patched up the leg on day one, there’s just a bumbling war deserter stranded in a magical forest, which could also be a decent story, but the man’s chance of survival would have been even more far-fetched than what I came up with. We can’t peek into the heads of others and fix or solve or enlighten them, but we can provide a space for them to work themselves out over time.

I loved the rapport between the characters, and the way they turned his difficulties into inside jokes. How did you go about constructing the timeline and the role of time in this story?

Again, with how quickly I wrote the story, the passage of time was something that happened more by not purposefully constructing or forcing it. We’d all like to
mythologize our lives, for the most important moments to be monumental and easily defined, like weddings or graduations or funerals, and beyond that, to have a lot of important moments. So-called “full lives.” I haven’t yet met anyone for whom that’s true in practice. Finding joy in real life means—and this comes from someone not in a constant state of bliss, so take it with a grain of salt and let me know if you’ve got a better idea—but it means finding value in apparently inconsequential moments. The most significant-feeling moment I can think of in the months around writing this story, a period in which I had traveled to something like seven different cities and reconstructed my entire life from scratch, was an hour talking to a stranger I would never see again about French fries and puzzles. It was natural for little moments like that to make up the story. At each interval, I tried not to overthink what happened in between, whether or not the man and the witch had any encounters with crazy beasts or skeleton armies or the like. I just thought of how much the arrow might have grown, and how much time flies, and then it flew by, and the moments grew around that.

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ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Setsu grew up in New York, and spent her formative years in and out of dojos. She likes swords, raspberries, justice, the smell of pine forests after rain, and shooting arrows from horseback. She does not like peanut butter and chocolate in the same bite. Her work has appeared in Podcastle and Grimdark Magazine. Find her on Twitter @KatanaPen.
The subtitle “A Kango and Sharon Adventure” not only places “Cake Baby” within your previously established fictional universe, but also hearkens back to serial adventures of the past. At first blush, too, this story has the rollicking feel of an old-fashioned caper, although it also points towards contemporary concerns. What was the origin of Kango and Sharon, and of “Cake Baby” in particular?

Kango and Sharon came about as a result of the *Cosmic Powers* anthology that John Joseph Adams edited. The brief, as I understood it, was fun, irreverent space opera in the vein of *Guardians of the Galaxy* and other similar stuff. I tried a few different approaches, which didn’t go anywhere. And then somehow, I hit on the idea of this pair of con artists who blunder through ridiculous situations. Part of what I loved about writing Kango and Sharon right away was their love for each other and their determination to be themselves, in the face of all this ridiculous absurdity. The first Kango and Sharon story is called “A Temporary Embarrassment in Spacetime,” and it’s only available in *Cosmic Powers*, for now. As soon as I finished “Temporary Embarrassment,” I started writing a second Kango and Sharon story, because I loved writing them so much. And then I got about halfway through “Cake Baby” and had to figure out the ending—and I ended up putting it on hold for over a year, just because I had so many other deadlines going on. I was so overjoyed to return to “Cake Baby.” And now I’ve started a third Kango and Sharon story, although I keep putting it on hold because of the ever-present deadlines.

While spec-fic readers often suspend disbelief for aliens and spaceships, it’s the understated narrative voice here that allows those tropes to co-exist with “Best Dressed Dead Guest” lineups, offerings to both Hall and Oates, and a character who says, “Low Orbit is Mellow Orbit.” What was your process in building this world, and what role did it play in developing the voice (or vice versa)?

When I wrote “A Temporary Embarrassment,” I definitely wanted to pay
homage to masters of funny space opera, like Douglas Adams and Harry Harrison. But I also spent a lot of time figuring out the rules in this world, even though it may not seem on the surface as though there are rules. Like, how did sentient beings settle all these star systems, and what kinds of loopy organizational principles could make sense in a far-reaching interstellar society? I have pages and pages of notes, which I should go back and re-read at some point. I tried to be very logical about building it up from the basics, and then when I was done, I had something completely ridiculous. The weird religion that Sharon belongs to, worshiping Hall and Oates, is the only familiar cultural reference I allowed myself here. Nothing else survives of our culture. I don’t ever want to cheapen that joke introducing a bunch of other silly jokes about (relatively) recent pop culture. (It does give the series a very slight Guardians of the Galaxy feel, though. And I keep writing scenes where Sharon goes to services at the Temple of Hall and Oates, but I haven’t found the right place to put them.) A lot of the humor in the series ends up coming from societies that have gotten pulled so far into their own bizarre logic that they’ve lost sight of reality, which is how you get the horrible party at the beginning of “Cake Baby” and the space hippies later on.

A recurring theme is the desire to cast off pre-determined identities. To offer only a few examples, Sharon was literally made to be a “party monster” but abandons that role, and the heroes seem to love disguises that allow them to play different roles. While Sharon, Kango, Jara, and Noreen form an unlikely family, Kango also tells Sharon that he and she are not friends because they travel together, but because they escaped together. What interplay do you see between present circumstances and past events on identity, including the tension between an individual’s own choices versus those choices that others have made for them?

That notion of choosing who you’re going to be has ended up becoming the driver for the whole series. In “Temporary Embarrassment,” Kango and Sharon have to go back to the planet of libertines where they were created and prove that they’re more than what their creators intended. But this seems to be something they need to keep proving again and again. This particular fictional universe seems to be full of people whose ontologies are so rigid that they need to control everyone they meet. Lots and lots of people want to exploit each other in the name of some absolutist ideology. The third Kango and Sharon story takes a very
different approach to this theme. Kango and Sharon themselves, along with Jara and Noreen, are just trying to make some money so they can open a restaurant, and they come up with the most idiotic schemes to achieve this goal. But they care about each other and support each other, while the rest of the universe just wants to make everything and everyone conform to some pointless ideal.

There are many cultural references and symbols for readers to unpack, but at the center seems to be the debate in which Kango’s comically grim view of space offers a beautiful nihilism that triumphs over the Constantly Infallible Smarter Than Everyone Supreme Reasoner Mega Genius Droppoloorg’s banal platitudes of a low-key, low-orbit lifestyle. Of course, Frieda (f.k.a. Centripetal Cradle of Love) has actually used them both to engineer a “regime change” for her political and monetary profit. This set-up is open-ended enough to lend itself to many possible interpretations—from contemporary politics to divergent views of speculative fiction’s role—but is there a particular context that you had in mind when writing it?

I really wanted to find an ending that was surprising and funny, and weird enough for the set-up. The debate over whether people belong in deep space is, on its face, nonsensical, in a universe where so many people already live in deep space quite happily. The key to the whole thing, for me, ended up being the fact that these ideologues had stuck their children in a horrible basement somewhere under their space station, for the “crime” of being resistant to cosmic radiation. Jara, who was raised in another weird space cult, takes this very personally. And then the final twist is just the way things work in this universe, reasserting itself.

It usually seems that serious topics—like the tension between attractive despair and banal peace, and the use of it as a distraction—are addressed via “serious” (or at least dark) stories. “Cake Baby,” however, maintains a sense of humor and fun adventure throughout. What are your thoughts on using seemingly “lighter” methods to confront serious issues? Are there other sources that you think use this method well?

I’ve always found real life totally absurd, and sometimes absurdism is the only way to portray our world accurately. We all train ourselves not to see what’s right in front of us, all the time, because that’s the price of functioning in twenty-
first century society, and meanwhile we’re so overloaded with information and opinions that we can easily start believing things that make no sense. A non-absurd approach to storytelling is merely contributing to the problem, in a lot of ways.

Finally, what can readers anticipate seeing from you next? In addition to concrete projects and releases, are there any new and nebulous ideas that you’re just starting to explore?

I have a bunch of stories coming up soon. I have a story in Boston Review’s special Global Dystopia issue, coming this fall, and Lightspeed is going to reprint my story “Captain Roger in Heaven,” which was in Catamaran Literary Reader in 2016. And probably by the time you read this, I will have handed in my second book to Tor Books, which is a more serious hard science fiction book set on another planet that humans have colonized long ago (but it’s still kinda absurd.)

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

Gordon B. White has lived in North Carolina, New York, and the Pacific Northwest. He is a 2017 graduate of the Clarion West Writing Workshop, and his fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in venues such as Daily Science Fiction, A Breath from the Sky: Unusual Stories of Possession, Nightscript Vol. 2, and the Bram Stoker Award® winning anthology Borderlands 6. Gordon is also an Assistant Editor with Kraken Press and conducts reviews and interviews for various outlets. You can find him online at gordonbwhite.com or on Twitter at @GordonBWhite.
Coming Attractions
The Editors | 150 words

Coming up in December, in *Lightspeed* . . .

We have original science fiction by Rachael K. Jones (“The Greatest One-Star Restaurant in the Whole Quadrant”) and Cadwell Turnbull (“A Third of the Stars of Heaven”), along with SF reprints by Catherynne M. Valente (“Golubash, or Wine-Blood-War-Elegy”) and Robert Reed (“Blood Wedding”).

Plus, we have original fantasy by A. Merc Rustad (“The House At the End of the Lane Is Dreaming”) and Mari Ness (“You Will Never Know WhatOpens”), and fantasy reprints by Tim Pratt (“A Wedding Night’s Dream”) and Sonya Taaffe (“The Boatman’s Cure”).

All that, and of course we also have our usual assortment of author spotlights, along with our book and media review columns.

For our ebook readers, we also have our usual ebook-exclusive novella reprint and a book excerpt.

It’s another great issue, so be sure to check it out.

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