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Their Thousandth Season

Edward Bryant

Edward Bryant's stories of the far-future city called Cinnebar have brightened many science fiction publications of late. Here is one of his best—a story of an immortal jet-set, of beautiful people and fading lives, of love and pain and the attempt to forget. But we never forget ourselves, do we?

An A\NN/A Preservation Edition. [Notes](#)

The city. Forever the city. Within it rots the tissue of dreams.

Tourmaline Hayes—“the bright and sensual, sometimes cynical Tourmaline Hayes” according to *The Guide to the Stars*—muses along the thin border between sleep and wakefulness. By choice she lies alone.

She allows the characters to press their noses against her interface with fantasy. The most affecting face is that of Francie, enduring ingenue.

Tourmaline and Francie face each other across a gray, damp beach. Francie approaches with slow, deliberate steps. Tourmaline opens her arms in welcome.

She looks at Francie's face. Through the openings where Francie's eyes should be, she can see the night sky. Tourmaline stares, strains, searches the constellations for *Speculum*, the mirror.

It's a party like all other parties, and by any other name a *Walpurgisnacht*. Yet dull. So much sin, too often, breeds ennui. Everybody knows that. Everyone...

“... who is anybody,” says Francie, completing an unconscious syllogism. She smiles up at Sternig the critic of gay drama. She lightly sucks in her cheeks, hoping to emphasize the high cheekbones everyone says will be beautiful later in life when the skin of her face begins to tauten. It's a harmless deceit.

The gesture doesn't benefit Sternig. Two affinity groups beyond them lounges Francie's prospective lover. Kandelman bestows largess upon three literary sycophants, who giggle shrilly. He leans back against a walnut bookcase, thumbs hooked in his belt, hips cantilevered forward. Kandelman's neglected his codpiece. It looks as though he's storing tennis balls behind the buttoned fly.

“Peanuts,” says Sternig.

Francie's chin jerks up. “What?”

“Or pretzels. Whatever. You know, troll food.” Sternig shrugs.

“I thought you said...”

“Party food progressively deteriorates,” he says. “The second law of gastrodynamics.”

Francie's little catamount tongue strokes nervously between lips.

“I need a drink,” says Sternig. Apparently disinterested, “You want?”

“No.” She smiles mechanically. “You’ll excuse me? I have to use my spray.”

He watches the back of her head blur in the aphrodisiac haze. Her diminishing skull takes all too long to vanish. Sternig brushes long brown hair back from his eyes. He mumbles his self-pity and yearns for beer, dark and draft.

The bathroom is decorated in a style the catalogue calls modern erotic. Surfaces gleam cold, opaque, and hard. Francie’s face explodes back at her from prismatic mirrors. In her peripheral vision the white-on-white tiles fade to arctic vagueness.

She takes the tube from her purse and hikes her skirt. The hiss echoes softly. Francie relaxes and enjoys a brief labial coolness. Scented excitement, no longer bland, she adjusts her panties. No hunter ever more carefully lubricated the action of her weapon.

Francie examines her reflection in the faceted medicine chest. Why is the flesh around her eyes so puffy? Her dark eyes had once snapped—a former lover told her that one passionate afternoon in a motel room in Tondelaya Beach. Francie’s heart-shaped face creases in a frown. Her eyes have the puckered sheen of day-old ripe olives.

The door bangs open and shut; a ghost has passed.

“Got a spare douche?” says the newcomer.

“Need what I’ve got, Marlene.”

Marlene removes a hairbrush from her purse. “Do you ever. Give me a shot.”

“For Tourmaline?” She lazily proffers the jeweled tube. “Love to.”

Marlene giggles and bares feral teeth. “Jealous, Francie? I wasn’t.”

Francie snaps shut the purse, barely missing Marlene’s fingertips. “Shut up!”

“You’re very sensitive, darling. Are *they* still sensitive?”

Francie says again, “Shut up.”

The brush hisses through Marlene’s light lank hair. The strokes are cadenced with her words. “I don’t care, honey. Just because most guys have milk fetishes... I hope it’s worth it.”

“It will be.”

“Kandelman’s big on nipples.” Marlene is laughing. She drops the hairbrush and it clatters across the tile counter. “*Extremely* big.”

“Too big for you?”

“Hardly,” says Marlene. “He’s such a complete bastard.”

Francie smiles. “I can take it.” She stands up.

“Want to hear a riddle?” says Marlene maliciously. “What’s eight inches long and glows in the dark?”

“Glow?”

“Sorry,” says Marlene. “I meant grows.”

Francie looks back from the doorway. “I love it.”

Sternig is talking with Tourmaline Hayes, the sex star. Half a head taller, she slouches against the piano to make him feel at ease. Sternig smiles, aware of her charity.

“I caught all your last performances.”

“Not exactly your sort of thing, I’d think.”

“Don’t confuse the work with the man,” says Sternig.

Tourmaline’s eyes are matched to her name. Their corners crinkle slightly as she smiles. Sternig smiles in return, relaxing. “I know, Sternig. You love everyone, but mainly women. Do you love me?”

Smiling. “Of course.”

Laughing. “Liar. You love one person. Only one.”

He stiffens. “Tourmaline...”

“Apart from yourself, of course.”

“Tourmaline, don’t...”

“It’s not as though I hate her,” says Tourmaline.

“Let’s talk about you,” says Sternig.

“You never learn, do you?”

“I’m only trying...”

“... to divert the conversation,” finishes Tourmaline. “Do you know how many times we’ve gone through this?”

“Christ,” says Sternig. “I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want to think about it.”

Tourmaline touches his cheek, silk to sandpaper. “The one’s easy enough.”

He lightly kisses her fingertips. “I’m beginning to forget the other.”

“Doubly a liar.” She snatches away her hand. “Sternig, Sternig, you stupid ass.”

“I need another drink,” Sternig says quickly. “Do you?”

“I’m not finished,” she says, sloshing the glass. “And I’m not done with you either.”

“Why me?” he asks.

“You’re my good deed for the millennium.” She tosses back her long green hair. “I can’t save you from yourself, but maybe I can keep...” The rest is blotted by laughter. The life of the party has arrived.

“So that’s exactly what I said. The bastard couldn’t believe it.” Secondary chuckles run through the party people. It’s Jack Burton, star of the popular series “Jack Burton— Immortal.” His show has just been

renewed for its one-thousandth season and this party is the celebration.

Tourmaline smiles and speaks softly, as though reporting a sporting event, “Jack Burton grins at his friends, pumps hands, kisses lips, but there’s a forced quality to the gaiety. He moves across the room well attended, but the congratulations verge on the perfunctory. His eyes—and how I envy that piercing blue—sparkle with intelligence, but I see the vagueness flicker now and again. Jack Burton is like a ripe red tomato and inside him are worms.”

“What?” says Sternig.

“Worms. They’ve begun eating through to his eyes.”

Sternig grimaces. “You’re morbid.”

“Watch his eyes, Sternig. You’ll see. Suddenly nothing there but blank holes.”

“That drink,” says Sternig. “I’m going to get it. Stay here. I’ll bring two.”

When he returns, Tourmaline Hayes still leans with her head against the piano. She accepts her new drink silently.

Sternig sips thoughtfully. “After the party...”

She looks at him. He cannot decipher her expression.

“After the party, I want you to go home with me.”

Tourmaline smiles, more to herself than to Sternig. “I’m sorry, I can’t.”

Sternig would like to ask why not, but...

“Maybe another time,” she says. “We’re not ready for that. I’m going home with Marlene.”

She overrides him. “And your Francie will go home with Kandelman. And Jack Burton will go home with his agent. Sternig, who will take you home? Who?”

Instantly alone and lonely, Sternig would like to cry. But he can’t. He’s a big boy now. Has been for longer than he cares to remember. Longer than he can remember.

“Who?” Tourmaline repeats.

Sternig has to dream it, because the memory is too ancient and scoured to recall in his consciousness:

They determined to live happily ever after. Through a friend, Francie obtained the lease on a beach cottage on an isolated stretch of the coast. Sternig moved in his things from the cramped city apartment. The first few evenings they spent on the open porch watching the ocean, listening, feeling the last tailings of spray. They observed the rhythm of the waves sucking at the beach sand in millimeter portions. The house was set a hundred meters back from the water. They wouldn't have to worry for a long time.

Days, they swam in the early-morning sunshine before breakfast. Mornings were for work. Several times each week, Sternig flew the windhover into the city to see to the disposition of his column. Francie spent her mornings writing poetry and scanning tapes of her latest obsession, political history. She wrote essays which Sternig told her would be well received, had she ever bothered to submit them somewhere.

The air was heavy and sweet in the afternoon. The previous tenant had cultivated an extensive flower garden in back of the cottage. Lush beds sprawled among grassy blocks in a patchwork effect. Nothing exotic: scarlet tiger lilies, purple iris, brilliant yellow daisies. Flowers that bloomed repeatedly with a minimum of care.

Francie and Sternig made love in the grass. They lay quietly and smelled their own scent mingle with the heavy floral aroma.

“I want this to go on forever,” said Francie. She looked up at her lover. “Can’t it?”

“Yes,” said Sternig, not then understanding the deceit of time.

Like all Sternig’s dreams, it fades with awakening, leaving no specific words or images; only feelings.

Kandelman admires her breasts. He would touch them already, but etiquette demands a delay. Still, fifty percent of his eye contact is below her collar bone. Under his gaze, erectile tissue stiffens and her nipples poke against soft fabric. She loves it.

“What are you writing now?” Francie asks.

“I’m well into the new novel,” says Kandelman. “It’s a psychosexual thing.”

“That’s very interesting.” Francie angles her chin, knowing her cheekbones appear to advantage.

“What’s it about?”

“Brothers and sisters. That’s about all I can tell you at this point. The book’s writing itself. I’ve got very little to do with the process, aside from feeding in the paper.”

“Have you picked a title?”

“*Brothers and Sisters*, I think.”

“Oh.” Francie is losing interest in the novel. Unless, of course, Kandelman should volunteer a precis of a titillating passage.

“It’s not really erotica,” he says, “though it might sound like it from the title.”

“Oh,” she says vaguely. “I thought it might be, from the title.”

“It may turn out that way,” he hastens to say. “But for now it’s a very serious book.”

She says seriously, “Erotica *can* be serious.”

He stares at her chest. Francie’s breasts have assumed an orogenic significance in his mind. They are large, yet possess no hint of sag. They project without visible support. Kandelman wonders silently that he has not noticed them before this party.

“I think it can,” Francie continues.

“What?” Kandelman breaks free of his preoccupation. “Oh yes. Of course it can.”

“I’d like to see you write a really erotic book.”

“Well,” says Kandelman.

“I’d like to help you with it.”

Kandelman realizes he could have predicted the entire sequence of conversation and is glad that he didn't.

The party is so brittle, thinks Sternig, at any moment it will shatter like hard candy. The great marble hall is festooned with streamers of candy-stripe crêpe. Lighter-than-air balloons, fashioned in the image of extinct beasts, float from tethers. Sternig sips his drink in the shadow of a hippogriff.

With displeasure he stares across the swirling mass of the party at Francie and Kandelman, animatedly talking. They sit close together on a low foam couch, beneath the spread-antlered shelter of an inflated elk.

"Bitch," says Sternig.

"Who?" says Tourmaline. "Kandelman or your Francie?"

"Stop it." Sternig frowns. "She's not mine."

"Wasn't she?"

When did she go home with me? Sternig wonders. There was a time... Jack Burton was celebrating one of his renewals. She didn't go home with me, but we went to the beach from the party. Together...

They drove out of the city on the Klein Expressway. He drove Francie's car, a low and powerful convertible. At speed he drifted it around the tight curves of each clover-leaf as the expressway redoubled upon itself. Francie cuddled against him, laughing, whispering in his ear. They exited at Tondelaya Beach, and between the towering red bluffs and the flat sea found a motel.

Light, reflecting from the water, rippled across the ceiling. He gently lowered her to the bed and began to undo her hooks and eyes and buttons. She smiled up at him and he told Francie how her dark eyes were snapping with excitement.

Soon, as he lay beside her, his own excitement became too great and he turned away, uncertain and apologetic.

"No," she said. "Don't go soft on me."

But... "I'm sorry." He could repeat that, but there was little else to say.

What she said then was too cruel for remembering.

"I remember once," says Sternig. "When... when..."

"Yes?" Tourmaline prompts.

"I can't remember," he says finally. "And I need another drink."

"Can't remember? Or won't?"

"Can't," he says. "I think it's can't. I'm not really sure. I have my mind sponged periodically. Don't you?"

Tourmaline nods. "Occasionally. As seldom as I can. I prefer to keep as many memories as possible. Otherwise I tend to repeat my mistakes."

"In time," says Sternig, "we all repeat."

“Some of us more often than others.” She gestures across the hall. “Francie goes to the sponge once a year, maybe more. I suspect her of monthly visits, even weekly.”

“I suppose she doesn’t like her memories,” he says.

“She overdoes the forgetting. Her mind is always fresh for the next party. All washed, whirled, fluffed, tumbled, and spun dry. It could make me sad.”

“It doesn’t.”

“No,” Tourmaline says.

“You shouldn’t hate her...” Sternig starts to say.

“Shut up,” but her voice is still soft. “I know. Now get yourself that drink.”

Periodically, but never so often as to compromise the privacy of the place, Tourmaline came to visit at the beach cottage. More than almost anything else, she loved to swim naked in the sea. Late in the afternoon; she lay with Francie on the swimming platform while Sternig fixed supper on the shore. She massaged the taut muscles of Francie’s neck with strong, gentle fingers.

“Tell me why you’re upset.”

Francie denied it.

“No,” Tourmaline said. “I’ve known you too long and too well.”

Francie was silent for a while, allowing her head to roll with the kneading of Tourmaline’s fingers. “Are you afraid of dying?”

Tourmaline’s voice was surprised. “Not any more.”

“Not your body,” said Francie. “I mean you.”

“My mind?” Francie didn’t answer. Tourmaline continued. “I’ll think about it eventually.”

“I’ve thought” said Francie, “and I’m afraid.”

“Then for now, forget it.”

“My father, did you know him?”

“No.”

“He was too old for the treatments,” said Francie, “but he lived well into his second century. As he grew older, something happened with his mind.”

“Senility.”

“That’s it. He stayed with us and I watched him every day. I had to be extraordinarily quiet, or he would become upset. At times he didn’t know me.”

Tourmaline stroked Francie’s hair soothingly. “Wasn’t it a peaceful and gentle decline?”

“It was decay,” said Francie, beginning to weep and muffling her voice in the plush towel. “He was buried when he was a hundred and thirty. My father died long before that”

Tourmaline kissed Francie gently. “Don’t think about it,” she said again. “Don’t think.”

Jack Burton intimidates. More than two meters tall, the Network star is proportionately muscled, and that muscle tissue is in exquisite tone. He does all his own stunt work. Only his flame-red hair is fake. Burton has backed Francie and Kandelman into a corner. Drunkenly, gait unsteady, he perorates:

“So I told them at the Network, ‘Goddammit, guys, this is the best script we’ve picked up in the century. It’s got drama, it’s got meaning, it’s got—goddammit—true seriousness.’ You know what those bastards said?”

“No,” Francie says, bored. “Mannie!” Kandelman yells. “Get over here.”

“They said,” Burton continues. “They said... you won’t believe what they said. The bastards.”

Kandelman peeks past Burton’s shoulder. “Goddammit, Mannie!”

“The bastards said it’d hurt my image.” Francie giggles. “We love your image, Jack.”

“After all the shit melodrama. This was going to be *something*. A complete turning point for me—I mean, for the character. But the Network...”

Mannie arrives, agent, manager, keeper, lover. He puts his manicured hand on Burton’s arm. “Party’s over, Jack. Time to go home.”

Burton’s eyes widen maniacally, staring at the pair in the corner. He ignores Mannie. “The realization, you know? All cells in the body can regenerate. Anything can be renewed. Anything but brain cells.”

Mannie’s grip tightens. “Come on, Jack.”

“An epiphany: when they die, they die. Forever, goddammit.”

“Forget it,” says Mannie. “Now come on.”

“Forever.” Burton’s chin drops, the animation leaves his face. He begins to weep softly. Mannie, short and burly, leads Jack Burton away like a draft animal. They disappear in the crowd.

“Cortex,” says Francie. “Gray matter.” She dredges the shibboleths from some vagrant memory, then looks brightly up at Kandelman for approval.

“Cerebrum,” says Kandelman sourly.

Francie doesn’t really understand the game. “What?”

“Forget it.” He stares speculatively at her breasts. “Come on. Let’s go for a drive.”

The party pavilion smolders with the muted colors of a thousand simulated tropical birds. Over the crowd-mutter sounds the whirl of wings. Francie and Kandelman exit between twin columns of whirling doves. Feather-light touches brush against clothing.

Sternig watches. His jealousy is deeply embedded. The pair disappears beyond the pavilion and Sternig turns back to *Tourmaline* and his ever-present drink. Aware of her eyes, he frowns self-consciously. Her face betrays no judgment.

Yes, there was a time... When was it, he wonders, or when will it be. A time, together...

They hired a room, not on the water this time, but at an inn near the desert. They spent an hour wandering among the dunes. Francie wore her sunsuit, narrow yellow bands across the mahogany of her flesh, dark wood-stain skin that took on an added sheen of sweat.

She laughed and rolled down a slope, coming up at the dune's base with her skin lightly dusted with sand. She brushed the grit away from her eyes. "Let's go back to the room," she said. "I want a shower"

Out of the languorous heat, bodies clean and oiled, they made love. Francie shrieked and thrashed and bit and moaned and sucked and scratched. Eventually, during a quietus, he asked her if it had been good, and she, hesitating a long minute, finally answered, no, not exactly. He asked why not and she replied that she was never quite satisfied. He prodded for details. She attempted to explain.

"Sisyphic orgasm," he mused aloud.

She wanted to know what that meant so he began to explain the legend. She grew bored and touched his body, again hungry. He stopped talking and tried to kiss each inch of her skin.

Finally—again—she drew back shuddering from the brink.

As he was about to drift into sleep, Francie asked him to tell her something beautiful.

"There is no greater sorrow than to recall, in misery, the time when we were happy."

"That's pretty."

"Its Dante," he said.

"Poor Sternig," says Tourmaline.

"Don't pity me."

"I don't. I hate pity. I'm only concerned."

Sternig scowls and says, "Don't be concerned about me."

She ruffles his hair slightly, as though he were a child, then runs an index finger along the underline of his jaw. "I like you, Sternig. You remind me of an ancient friend. I hate to see you hurting yourself, replaying old mistakes again and again."

"What happened to your friend?"

"Metaphorically dead," says Tourmaline flatly. "I think. Maybe he's mad and locked away somewhere. Or mad and running loose."

Sternig says, "I know what I'm doing."

"No," she says, "you don't. You may think you do."

"You think I should forget about Francie."

"Yes," she says patiently. "Yes. That's it."

"And if I don't?"

“You’ll lose your mind, your soul, whatever, you’ll lose it.”

Sternig says thoughtfully, “I don’t know.”

Her brow creases with exasperation and anger. “Sternig, get off the carousel!”

Backseat sex, adolescence recollected in senility. Kandelman wheels Francie’s car onto an eroded bluff overlooking the sea. Tonight the water is glassy. For a brief time they stare at the reflected stars extending out to the horizon.

Francie’s gambit, “It’s awfully beautiful.”

Kandelman inwardly winces. “No more so than you.”

“No talking,” says Francie. “Please love me.” She lies across the seat so her head settles in Kandelman’s lap. She wonders when she last used the spray and how she smells.

Kandelman touches her hair, lifts her face toward him, kisses her tenderly at first, then harder. She lies back and he begins to massage her body, starting with her thighs. Tiny animal cries come from Francie’s throat; she shivers as though with a chill. Kandelman’s fingers stroke and stroke. He will save those wondrous breasts for the last, a gourmet dessert.

But when he does touch those breasts, naked to his eyes for the first time, his hands freeze in mid-motion. He again tentatively touches the breasts. And again stops.

Eyes closed, Francie says, “What’s wrong?”

“They don’t feel right,” says Kandelman.

Francie opens her eyes. “Don’t you like them?”

“They look great. But there’s something...”

“I had them fixed just for you,” cries Francie.

“Such a strange feel.” Kandelman gingerly touches her with a finger.

Francie says angrily, “They’re fine. They’re nonallergenic. They’re the best alloplastics I could...”

Kandelman interrupts. “They’re not right. Something unnatural...”

“The nipples are electrostimulating. They’re wired to...”

“I want a woman,” says Kandelman.

Francie resorts to tears and Kandelman strokes her hair. She stops crying abruptly, raises her head, and extends an investigatory hand. “No,” she says. “Don’t go soft on me.”

He tries to pass it off wittily, but fumbles. While the silence lengthens, he stares out at the ocean. After a minute or two, he says, “How about a little game of stiff ‘n’ whiff?”

“Fuck you,” she says.

Silence resumes until Kandelman, uncomfortable, shifts his position. Francie sighs, sits erect, and gazes out the window.

“Let’s go back to the party.”

The dance floor seems suspended in night. Tourmaline and Sternig sit at a table on the periphery. Couples drift past; groups, an occasional single.

“Sponge and renewal,” says Tourmaline. They’ve been talking of the past again. “But time wears deeply. We tend to keep our lives in endless repetitions. The grooves are too deeply etched. It takes a supreme act of will to break free.”

“I don’t have that will,” Sternig says. “I know that now.”

“You knew that before. I can remember. Can’t you?”

He looks at her mutely.

“How can you know,” she asks, “but still not act on it?”

Sternig sees Francie waiting on the opposite side of the dance floor. She waves to him. He stands and looks bleakly down at Tourmaline. “Next time around, help me? Please?” He stammers slightly.

“Next time around,” she says. “We can try.”

Sternig leaves her. Halfway across the floor, he stops among the whirling dancers and smiles briefly and sadly back at Tourmaline.

She watches Francie and Sternig disappear in the dark. What she says is, “People receive the kind of lovers they deserve,” but she knows she doesn’t feel that. Tourmaline sighs; then scans the party crowd, seeking out the clean beauty of Marlene’s bright hair.

The End.

Notes and proofing history

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