

THE DREAMING DERVISH

*This story marks Spider Robinson's first appearance here—and
with a story the impact of which you'll not soon forget ...*

SPIDER ROBINSON

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COME:

There is a place, somewhere between the interstices of what an inhabitant of the smallest subatomic particle posited by Man would think of as the smallest basic elements of matter. To this place, of which we can speak only by analogy, we must go in order to witness an extremely tiny bit of co(s)mic tragedy.

An analogy, then. Consider:

YELLOW.

Everywhere yellow, planes and rods of plunging yellow, flares and beams and swirls of pulsing lemon yellow against a day-glo yellow backdrop.

The backdrop is, to all intents and purposes, infinite.

Before you, focus of your vision, is a large.

Deeply, richly violet.

Velvet.

Snowflake.

It shimmers deep purple and radiates warmth. Warming the yellow.

It is a sub-sub-sub submicroscopic Tool For Good.

ELSEWHERE:

Something dormant stirs. Sluggish activity returns to long-unused cortical matter; feeble awareness flickers.

Massive beyond belief, this dreaming giant, but see him as he sees himself! Thus:

A gaily festooned dancer, his rich blue and green finery ample evidence of wealth and power. A handsome young lord of his race. Deranged now, with the sweet madness of lust and ritual. Deployed, with several rival suitors, in the Dance of Competitive Courtship, circling ever round the bewitching, maddening essence of Woman, wooing her with the polish and precision of his intricate swirls in endless permutations of choreographic brilliance. Steeped in madness, possessed, intoxicated, lost in a kind of adrenalin stupor.

A Dreaming Dervish.

. . .As he sees himself. Now, in a flaring brief gestalt in the first struggling flicker of consciousness, an assertion of his existence and his identity. Through his mind's eye blast your reason with the sight of his Goddess, her coruscating, searing yellow strangely akin to that in the Land of the Purple Snowflake.

As we see him:

Impossibly enormous, immeasurably strong, but in the grip of a sort of inertia of rest. Utilizing perhaps a billionth part of his intellect, and that drugged and torpid. And yet, beneath the paralyzed stupor of utter contentment, possessed of ample power to split a continent as a housewife splits an egg. Fafnir asleep in the caves, "den letzten Riesen- guarding the Nibelung Hoard.

Hercules in Chains.

But dreaming.

Dreaming.

Awareness coalesces, pulses dimly somewhere within the mass.

Annoyance.

Irritation.

The Dancer has contracted fleas.

HE PICKED HIS WAY among the trees, his knapsack stuffed with wine and cheese, and as darkness fell he wrote a song in his mind. It was a lighthearted North Country song, taking its melody and some of its chuckling harmony from the nearby Saranac River which rushed down like a young tidal wave from the mountains to the north. An old Gibson J-45 in a cloth case was slung over his shoulder, the leading edge of the sounding box cupped protectively in his left hand, but he made no attempt to unslung it and pick out the chords his mind envisioned. He had learned long ago not to interrupt when a river took a solo, and concentrated on discovering the words that lay behind the turns of melody (with another, much lonelier part of his mind he wondered who he was writing the song *to*). After a time he began to sing parts that rhymed.

He was a very short man, and more than a few of his friends had yielded to the temptation to describe him—and think of him—as a hobbit. His hair was curly and plentiful and brown, as was his mustache, as were his beard and eyebrows. A long, curved pipe of Borghum Riff climbed in one corner of his mouth and fragrant trails of tobacco-smoke squirted out the other, making his mustache wag back and forth rhythmically, laugh-tracks appearing and disappearing as he shifted gears.

Fifty yards to his left, the Saranac changed key suddenly, rose to a roar. He did not need to peer through the pines to know where he was; he knew this river as lover's hand knows lover's thigh. He was come to the Old Dam, dynamited years ago when the new one was built, further upstream. Massive concrete walls still ran out fifty-odd feet from either side of the river, separated by a hundred yards of smashed ruin. Through this gap boiled hundreds of tons of water, rushing over the immense jagged stone teeth that gleamed green beneath the surface, as though to wash them clean of decay.

He smiled at the simile, knowing that in twenty more years the river would finish what man and gelignite had started, grinding the multi-ton bicuspid to powdery sand. He had spent many happy hours sitting at the abrupt end of the nearside wall, dangling weary feet in the torrent that pelted by, feeling frenzied river-fingers restore the circulation.

He decided to sit there now and make a supper of the wine and red cheese in his pack. In an hour it would be too cool to sit still comfortably (the other, more plaintive part of his mind wondered if there would ever be someone warm here with him). He hitched the guitar strap higher on his sturdy shoulder and set course for the Dam, and as he emerged from the trees a few yards from the breakwater she was simply there, feet raising bow waves in the rushing water.

They saw each other simultaneously, and a kind of mutual recognition was exchanged. She moved sideways to make room, and he walked out onto the concrete strip to join her. She was no taller than he, and long flowing brown hair swept her shoulders as she turned her head toward him. She was fair of face and fair of form, and she had the eyes of a poet, which she was.

In those eyes he saw a mirror-reflection of the question in his own, and the other, more wistful part of his mind was still, hoping.

IRRITATION turns to anger, but oh! slowly. . . .

It has been long and long since the Dancer last employed this mode of consciousness, monitored this level of reality. Or, for that matter, any other.

The Dream fades reluctantly, and decades pass as annoyance gives slow birth to volition. At no time does the slumbering behemoth truly awaken, nor detach any significant fraction of his

real attention from the all consuming intricacies of The Dance—yet somehow there is formed a (Dancer), which slips sideways through forgotten planes and discarded viewpoints until it confronts and considers the sheaf of probabilities in which are to be found The Fleas.

*Comprehension and action are simultaneous; the (Dancer) instantly exerts its full authority, invokes emergency powers, locks into the countless throbbing nodes of thought which are the core ego of the madly whirling, sublimely unconscious Dancer. These pulsing guidance centers are ...
Not disturbed.*

Tapped.

A fine, omnidirectional rain of will saturates the (Dancer) from all sides, and like a sponge it absorbs thirstily, and unlike a sponge it grows smaller as it drinks. And harder. Substance from all phases of the vast ego spirals downward and inward, imploding and shrinking to a sharp, poignant needlepoint.

Of white-hot rage.

The (Dancer) is Taking Steps.

TOWARD FOUR in the morning he rose from the mattress and padded away through the dark. She sat up, reaching over the now-uncased guitar to bring rest to a tone-arm that had been whispering unheard against the last hiccupping groove of the *Carmina Burana* for nearly an hour; and she smiled a smile just a bit softer than her face was used to. Three feet away in any direction was impenetrable black. It emitted treble sounds, and eventually he returned, with two glasses of smoky fluid, his chest still glistening with sweat.

"I (ahem) don't believe we've been properly introduced," he began with exquisite formality, but she giggled and placed a hand over his lips, taking the proffered drink with the other.

"Not now," she said happily but firmly. "Later. Later I'll tell you my name and my hometown and what I do for a living and what my favorite songs are and what I think of Borges and about the time I was in the hospital and what my last lover was like but not now. Let's take tonight for itself, because I've got a funny feeling that we're going to be busy enough the next few years getting to know one another."

"Machka, you speak truth," he said gravely. "Here's to us."

They drank together. She began to cough uncontrollably, liquor splashing over the sides of her glass.

"I oafed out," he cried, rescuing the glass with haste and a certain reverence and patting her efficiently on the back. "You're not used to Bushmill's!"

"You what?" she choked, eyes streaming.

"Oafed out," he repeated, as her spasms subsided. "It's sort of like a freak-out, but without the prestige. Like, it's Senior Prom night and you slam the taxicab door in front of the Rainbow Room and catch the sleeve of your tux in the doorhandle and it rips to the armpit. Or you're having tea with the relatives and you spill whipped cream on your lap and to distract attention you yell, 'Look out the window,' and they all look out to see two dogs locked in congress on the front lawn. Or you try to ski through a revolving door. You know, an oaf-out."

She was giggling by the time he was done, and he struck up an improvised locomotive, in which she joined without missing a beat.

"Gimme an O!"

"Oh!"

"Gimme an A!"

"A!"

"Gimme an F!"

"F!"

"Gimme a hyphen!"

"Gimme another O!"

"'Nother O!"

"Gimme a U!"

"You!"

"Gimme a T!"

"Sure, want a toke?"

"Whaddya got?"

They chorused.

"OAF-OUT!!!"

In perfect harmony.

"Also," he said seriously when their laughter had subsided, "an oaf-out is when you slip Irish whiskey to someone who may never have tried it before, without warning them. Gee, but ain't it smooth, though?" He did a thing with his mouth that made his mustache ripple.

"How much do they get for this stuff?" she asked.

"Oh, seven, eight bucks a bottle."

"Smooth," she said. "Oh yeah, smooth."

"You'll do," he said judiciously. "Seriously though, would you like some water with that?"

"Could I have just a little?"

"Sure thing. Happen to have some pure water—cold, too." He put both their glasses on the floor and got up, genitals swaying, to wander off into the dark again. She watched his graceful angularity melt away in the gloom, admiring the muscles of his legs.

Light burst from an opened refrigerator, defining the interior of the cabin, placing new limits on the universe which the past five hours had created, but she did not look away. He removed a corked flask of water from the refrigerator, and the limits were gone again. Shortly he reappeared out of the gloom, poured measured amounts of water into both glasses, recorked the flask and sat down, returning her drink to her.

"River water?" she asked, sipping appreciatively.

"Right from the Saranac," he agreed, making his glass empty. "I filled up the flask this morning, about ten minutes before I met you." His smile widened, threatening to outgrow the frame of his beard and mustache. "A good thing, too or I never would have remembered, and we'd be drinking these straight."

"Here's to foresight," she grinned, accepting the compliment.

"And to five-sight in the bargain," he seconded. She winced noticeably. "The success of a pun," he misquoted thoughtfully, "is in the *oy* of the beholder."

She gulped the rest of her drink, underplaying beautifully, and his heart leapt within him and he pulled the cord that turned on the ceiling light so that he might see her better, and then he wished he had not, for there was on the floor that which had better gone unseen. Originally it had been intended for their dinner. Then somehow quickly it had become something in the way, something to be dropped on the floor in the headlong tumble toward the bed, and then it had been simply a collection of chopped meat and chili beans and spices on the floor. And now it was ...

A hundred thousand large black ants, the vanguard of a long, wide column which stretched across the floor from under the sink. A coiling carpet of marching ants, a phalanx of squirming black.

The two made remarkably similar noises, roughly simultaneously. And then he struck, and with hastily rolled-up newspaper and then with a broom and finally with large bowls of water he slew his millions. As she, efficiently brushing her hair back with one hand, kept full bowls coming.

When the carnage was, done. . . .

AFTER A TIME for which there is no measuring the needlepoint (Dancer) reaches its needful dimensions, ceases to shrink inward. It is well beyond any human ken, navigating within the heart of a nucleus as comfortably as might a flea in deep space. It has a vicious urgency, this (Dancer), and a hunger for revenge that passes understanding. Beside it, a diamond is more brittle than dried clay, and there are not sufficient decimal places to write the comparative power of, say, a cobalt bomb.

It orients itself. A strange place, this. Everywhere yellowness. Wave after wave of gentle

yellow.

The (Dancer)'s resolve falters for a microsecond. For yellowness is the essence of the Woman, and to contemplate violence and hatred in this place is primevally disturbing to the (behemoth) (mote). Only the realization that this gentle yellowness had been perverted fires rage again; but now the die is irretrievably cast.

Sensor-functions register.

A shift of viewpoint brings the target into focus, a lambent splash across the yellow, and the spirit of the (Dancer) shrieks within it at the beauty it must destroy, the exquisite intricate symmetry of the notion which must be obliterated. It hangs there innocently, pulsing.

A warm, violet, velvet snow-flake.

"**S**' FUNNY," he said, rummaging in a kitchen drawer. "This thing has got to be one of the all-time kitchen indispensables, and nobody ever talks about it. Unsung, ignored, it sits in lonely grandeur in every home across the country, and it hasn't even got a fancy name."

"What's that?" she exclaimed.

"Why the Tool Drawer, of course. Why, they . . ."

"No, turkey, what's that in your *hand*?"

He glanced down in mock surprise at the small object he had just removed from the boundless clutter of the Tool Drawer. It was a disc-shaped object, of the approximate size and dimensions of a hockey puck, spotted with the acne of advertising small print. "Oh this? It's called an ant-trap. Also a kitchen indispensable. See, there's a very sweet stuff inside, which is a thoroughly energetic poison. Along comes an advance scout for the ants, and he figures it's raining soup and brings a huge chunk home to share with the boys. In a couple of days, your kitchen is your own, and you don't even have to sweep 'em up. They're all at home, sitting 'round the dinner table, wiped out by what you might call their just dessert." He grinned.

THERE is no way to describe the sorrow of the (Dancer); hundreds of decades would have to pass before human intellect could hope to comprehend the nature of that thing we have chosen to call a violet snowflake, understand the place of that tenuous analogy in the grand puzzle of physics. But it too has been subverted, all its loveliness shot through with cancer and made ugly in the end. And so with redoubled fury the (Dancer) hardens itself within as well as without, and reaches beyond itself, and. . .wills.

The warm violet snowflake, sole warmth of the yellow here, shimmers.

The shimmer becomes a shiver. The shiver increases.

Builds.

Swells.

Rises to a screaming crescendo of dysharmonic, uncomprehending agony.

The violet snowflake disintegrates into a million shards which evaporate instantly. There is no sound. There is no flash. There is nothing. Nothing at all.

Except yellow.

(THE PASSING of the "violet snowflake" kicks off several interesting subatomic reactions, whose effects on a molecular level are decidedly unusual. Think of Yellowness Unchained.)

"**W**HAT'S so gross about it? It's just an efficient way to knock off ants, is all. Surely you don't object to killing ants? So why not do a proper job?" He sipped his drink and lay back on the bed, swaying to Mose Allison on the stereo.

"I suppose," she said, biting her lip. She hugged herself tightly and shivered, though she could not know it, just like a violet snowflake. "But it seems so cold-blooded. "I . . . how would you like it if, say, somebody poisoned the river?"

"Been done," he said sardonically, still moving to Mose's walking bass line. "You can't drink water from downriver past the college and live. But see, that's your whole mistake. You're identifying with the little bastards. You've let yourself get wrapped up in the very anthropomorphic idea of inevitable, inescapable Doom, but you've lost sight of the Doomee."

She did not laugh.

"After all," he was going to say, "they're only ants," but he did not say that because as he formed the words in his throat they seemed to catch fire and grow spikes, convulsing his body with a searing black pain that spread outward from his esophagus until the room ran red before him. The last thing he heard was Mose Allison (" . . .the Foolkiller's comin', gettin' closer every day. . ."), and the last thing he saw was the way in which her expression changed from terrified incomprehension to gasping agony. Then he was dead on his feet, toppling like a felled oak.

Her eyes fell with sick horror to the two empty whiskey glasses on the floor, by the bedside, and widened. Somehow, impossibly, she made the last correct guess of her life, entirely intuitively. Then something behind her pupils shattered, and her dying thought ("*The water!*") spun sideways and dissipated.

So did *all* human thought over the next few days.

***T**HE Dancer sighs almost audibly (a mountain range crumbles) and shivers slightly in ecstasy (a tsunami cleanses the barren lands), without losing step in his Dance Of Love. Happily, he returns his full attention to the incandescently yellow Woman and sinks back into deep trance. The infection has been wiped out. Order is restored. The Fleas are no more. The Dance goes on.*

LISTEN. LISTEN HARD. Do you hear the echo of a warm violet snowflake?

--SPIDER ROBINSON