

A CHOICE OF GRACES

By Robin Aurelian

The pertinent question here in Robin Aurelian's latest sf story appears to be "How much do you want?" The answer, of course, is best left as an exercise for the reader.

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"WOMEN! WORRIED? TIRED? Frustrated? At a Dead End? Ready for excitement of a new and different kind? Send your picture and a brief biography to our catalog. We'll connect you with someone who can take care of all your needs!"

Sally brushed sweaty bangs off her forehead and blinked a few times to clear her eyes. All around her, dryers and washing machines whirled, chugged, and rattled. The air was full of the clashing scents of different fabric softeners. By the Launderland door, silhouetted against the blazing day outside, two children wrestled over a toy truck and snarled at each other.

Sally smoothed the slip of slick white plastic she had found below the detergent dispensing machine and read the ad on it again. It pretty much described her mental state. She glanced at a nearby dryer, saw her plain white cotton underpants sliding around Norm's black-with-scarlet-hearts faux-silk boxers. False advertising, at least on his part. There was nothing hot, red, and exciting in Norm's pants.

And he surely generated more than his fair share of work. Sally experienced a stab of fury at Norm's sweat glands. He could wear things once and they stank for days. Another flare of fury passed through her as she thought about Norm's ability to tolerate his own odor much longer than Sally could. He was also impervious to dirty dishes and empty ice trays. There had been a time in their relationship when Sally found this endearing. There was so much she could do for him. He needed her.

Now she spent a lot of time grinding her teeth.

She slipped the strip of plastic into her shorts pocket and forgot about it.

Norm brought her roses. She couldn't figure out why. A dozen dark red roses: in the humid summer heat of the evening, their heavy rich scent filled the room.

"Thank you," she said, six times. Was it their anniversary? They didn't have a real one. They'd only been living together a year and a half. Why would he bring her roses?

She leaned over them and sniffed. Rarely did florists' roses have this strong

spicy scent. “This is so sweet, Norm,” Sally said. What do you want? she managed not to say, but she surely thought it loud and clear. What do you want? What have you done? What am I supposed to forgive you for?

Norm just smiled and kissed her. “Thanks for everything, honey. You’re wonderful.”

Part of her melted into a pool of Silly Putty, and another part maintained its suspicious vigilance.

Later, after they had made love and she had the sinking feeling she had now earned those flowers, she lay thinking as Norm slept beside her.

Why should she suspect him of something when maybe he was just being nice? When was the last time she had done something nice for Norm just to surprise him? Did she view everything about their relationship with resentment and suspicion?

Was this what she wanted to do with her life?

Later, when she was gathering up another laundry load from the hamper and found a crumpled shirt of Norm’s with someone else’s perfume on it, despair swamped her.

She hadn’t wanted to be right.

She went to a digital photobooth and had a picture made up, herself in a Wanted poster. She wrote a fake biography. “I worked three years as a caboose engineer and six months as a stripper. I did one tour of duty as a mess cook on a submarine. Lately I have made my living having knives thrown at me in a circus act. Magnifico the knife-thrower has only missed once, when he hit me on the inside of my thigh. The scar is quite small, but every time I hear that whish of a knife through air I think it might happen again, and I kind of like that.”

After she assembled her bio and photo, she sat and stared at the white plastic strip with the want ad and the address on it.

What kind of people put an ad like this on a piece of plastic and stuck it in the launderland? What sort of answers were they expecting? What did they do when they got them? What if it was some weird female slavery thing, or some other kind of scam? Send us ten thousand dollars and we’ll find your dream lover?

She could always stop before it came to spending money. She could always refuse if some stranger called her up and asked her to meet him alone. Right?

She touched one of last night’s guilt roses, then folded up her photo and bio

and put them in an envelope. Address. Stamp.

She walked to the mailbox on the corner and hesitated before dropping the envelope in.

Really, she had a comfortable life. She worked thirty hours a week at a packing company job where she didn't have to dress in pantyhose. Norm worked more and paid most of the bills. Sure, he was a slob, but his apartment had a nice view of the lake, and his mother almost never visited. What did she have to complain about? Lots of people would like to have it as good as she had it. The bum at the corner whom she gave fifty cents to most days would probably love this life. Maybe he would get along with Norm better, too.

Worried. Tired. Frustrated. At a dead end. Ready for excitement.

Sally opened the mailbox and dropped the letter in.

Norm answered the call.

Sally didn't realize. She was in the kitchen, chopping green peppers and tomatoes for salad when the phone rang. It was usually for him, so she let him pick up.

"Oh, really?" Norm said in the living room. "What gave you that idea.?"

And then, a little later, "Oh, really?" in a voice that wavered between anger and despair.

"Oh, really? I think not," Norm said.

Sally put down her knife and stepped out of the kitchen. Norm was flushed, his eyes narrowed. As she watched, his forehead flushed even darker rose. "Where did you — what are you — ?"

It came to her suddenly. He had answered the phone, but it was for her, and he wasn't going to tell her.

She strode across the room and took the phone from him. "Hello?"

"Ah," said a faintly accented voice, a light honey tenor. "Ms. Sally Norris?"

"That's right."

"You sent us that delightful response to our request."

"Uh," said Sally. She hadn't planned to pursue this with Norm in the same

room.

“Is this a bad time?”

“Uh-huh,” Sally said.

“Your knifethrower is there,” said the voice. She heard an edge of laughter in it that maybe wasn’t there.

“Uh-huh.”

“Would there be a better time to call, say, tomorrow?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Morning?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Shall we say, perhaps, ten A.M.?”

“Uh-huh.”

“It’s an assignation, then. We greatly enjoyed your bio, Ms. Norris.”

“Thanks.”

“Ta ta.”

“Uh-huh.” Sally hung up the phone.

“What the hell is going on here?” Norm yelled.

Sally didn’t say much during the fight that followed. Mostly she listened. Norm said all kinds of things that made her wonder how long he had been suspicious of her. Maybe that was why he slept around. He thought she was already doing it. It had never entered her mind.

I’m glad I sent that letter.

Sally slept in the living room that night. She tried to convince herself that the convertible sofa was actually comfortable. It didn’t work, but she did eventually get a fragment of sleep.

Norm was out of the house the next morning without a word, and Sally vacuumed and waited for the phone to ring. She didn’t have to go in to work until

one in the afternoon.

Ring. “Ms. Norris?”

“Speaking,” she said. This voice was different from the one yesterday. It was a woman. She sounded like she was smiling.

“Apple Blossoms Adventures of a Lifetime here,” said the woman’s voice. “Worlds to offer you, no strings attached.”

“You mean there are actually positions where my job skills would be useful?” Sally couldn’t believe it. Let alone she didn’t really have any of the job skills she had described.

“We appreciate your spirit,” said the woman. “Are you really, truly fed up with your current position, to the point that you would take a big chance?”

That was the question. How desperate am I? A sigh whooshed out of her. Sally sat on the sofa, which she had reconverted into a sitting surface. Something bumped her hip. She dug around under the sofa cushion and came up with her hairbrush. Among the dishwater blonde strands caught in the bristles, she found three gray hairs, and thought, I could spend the rest of my life here.

“I’m ready,” she told the voice on the phone.

“Do you have a lot of material possessions you feel you need to take with you, should you move?”

She thought of the rented storage space where she had put the pieces of her parents’ furniture she really liked when they had moved to Florida and wanted to start with all new furnishings in their fabulous new apartment. The set of dishes that had belonged to her grandmother, a few quilts and photo albums. A cardboard box full of her student compositions, going all the way back to the highway-stitched triple-lined paper of first grade. Several boxes of books she had loved but never had time to reread. A woodcarving that had belonged to her grandfather, depicting a red-nosed drunk leaning against a lamppost: when you wound a key in the base of the carving, the drunk bobbed his head and whistled, “Did You Ever See a Lassie Go This Way and That?”

She could leave all those things in storage.

She glanced around Norm’s apartment. She had clothes and toiletries here, and two houseplants that would die as soon as she left. She had put a Rembrandt print up over the couch when she first moved in, but Norm had moved it to the study, where neither of them ever went. The new towels and washrags she had bought for her and Norm to share? That one kitchen knife she really liked?

She said, “I don’t have that much stuff, actually. I have some things in storage, but I don’t need them right away.”

“We can maintain that account for you indefinitely,” said the woman.

Sally said, “I mean, I’ll want them when I get my own house. How long does this job last?”

“A lifetime, if you’re lucky. You can send for your things later and the company will forward them.”

“What kind of work are we talking about?”

“Come in for an interview, Ms. Norris. I promise you’ll find it rewarding.”

THE OFFICE was lined with plush: purple on the ceiling, pink on the walls, and crimson on the floor. There were no windows. The furniture looked like fuzzy, pastel-colored mushrooms at various heights. A man and a woman in pale blue pantsuits with high pointed collars sat on two low mushroom-colored mushrooms with a broad, slightly taller taupe mushroom before them, shielding their laps. Two low truffle-brown mushrooms stood in front of the broad one.

Sally stood in the oval doorway, wondering why this place looked like a sixties bordello nightmare.

The woman smiled at her, and the man beckoned her forward. “Don’t worry,” he said, in that same light tenor, “we don’t bite.” His smile revealed bright flat-edged teeth.

Sally looked behind her at the dingy, ordinary corridor of a downtown office building. No waiting room. No secretary or receptionist. Talk about fly-by-night.

“Is not the contrast amusing?” asked the woman.

“What kind of outfit are you guys running?” Sally asked. Some cheap stunt! How could she trust her future to people with taste this bad?

“Our primary headquarters are much better looking,” said the man, smiling. “This is a temporary outpost.”

“Uh...what, exactly, do you do?” Sally asked.

“We find people ready to have adventures, and then we supply the adventures!” said the woman. Her green gaze and warm tone mesmerized Sally in a snaky way. “We have an adventure specially selected for you already, though your

advantage profile is so high we could find more than one suitable destination for you. Are you ready for a whole...new... life?" She sounded like a preacher who had reached the sermon's punchline.

"What?"

"Just say yes," the man said. "You're exactly the type of client we specialize in!"

"Who are you people? What kind of con game are you running?"

"There's nothing phony about what we're doing," said the man. "We match people with adventure. That's all there is to it!"

"People? The ad said women," Sally said. She chewed her lower lip, then stepped all the way into the room. A door slid out of the wall and whooshed shut, just like the ones on Star Trek. It was covered with lavender plush and had no handle. She stepped toward it. It didn't whoosh open again. She glanced over her shoulder at the smiling man and woman.

"Have a seat," the man suggested gently.

Well, those two would have to leave sometime. They would have to open the door. She would get out. Still, she felt totally trapped.

She went over and sat on one of the mushrooms. It was warm and bent gently under her. She felt as though she were sitting on slightly solid warm water.

"Sally," said the woman, "the truth is, we are recruiting only women. Women have the qualities we need."

"What exactly does that mean?" Sally shifted, and the mushroom conformed to her new position. Comfortable but unnerving.

"We'll tell you more when you're committed to your new life!" the woman said.

"Oh, no, you don't," Sally protested. "I'm not saying yes to anything without reading the fine print."

The man smiled forlornly at her, blinked suddenly tear-brimmed eyes. "Well, we'll have to say good-bye, then. Such a shame. You're an excellent prospect for the highest grade adventure we offer."

Sally struggled to her feet. "Where did you get this furniture?" she asked. She wished she had mushrooms like this at home, no matter how tacky they looked.

“You can’t get that around here,” said the woman. “But it’s standard issue in the living quarters where you would have been going.”

“Too bad,” Sally said. She had been wondering if a bed made out of a giant mushroom would feel like this, and imagining rolling around on one with Norm. She headed for the door. If it would just open as she approached, this could make an okay exit. Woman acts in her own best interests. Period.

“There’s nothing more you can tell me?” she asked, turning back.

“Where I want to send you,” said the woman, “you would have servants to take care of all household chores, access to your favorite foods, literature, television programs, and movies, and all the furniture acts like these comfichairs.”

“How can I be sure you’re telling the truth?”

“You can’t,” said the man. “You’ll have to trust your instincts.”

Her instincts had led her to Herb, and Jacob, and Petey, and Norm. To doing extra laundry and filling ice trays and cleaning shaving stubble out of sinks and waking up to find she was in the wrong place with the wrong person again. Some instincts.

Then again, what else did she have to work with?

She stared at the man and woman. Studied their strange pantsuits. Not from around here, she thought. Definitely. What kind of material was that, slick and shiny but not exactly vinyl? Were the man’s eyes really silver? Did the woman’s skin have a faint green tinge to it? That spot in the middle of her forehead: megazit or vestigial third eye? Why was the man hiding his hands under the big mushroom?

“How much torture and pain is involved in this job?” Sally asked.

“How much do you want?” asked the woman.

The man went back to Norm’s apartment with Sally after she had set her hand on some slick flesh-colored surface that the woman called a contract. “Just point to anything you want to take with you,” he said. Sally stared at the stereo for a minute. Technically, it was Norm’s, but she used it a lot more than he did.

“Don’t worry about that,” said the man. “You’ll have a much better sound system, and access to almost everything ever recorded in any medium.”

“Cool,” said Sally. She took him to the bedroom and started to pull her clothes down from the hangers.

He fingered a pink summer dress with a small stain on the front. “Do you really want this?”

“I have to have clothes.”

“Just take a few things. You’ll get a whole new and more appropriate wardrobe when you get there. What do you have here that’s really meaningful to you, that you’d feel heartsick if you lost, that you can’t live without?”

In the end Sally had a small stack that included sixteen hardback books, the contents of the spice cabinet, assorted packets of tea, and a sack with everything from her two bathroom drawers in it. “Will I be able to get Pantene Pro-V conditioning shampoo there?”

“Take a sample with you,” he said. “They’ll synthesize it. You might find you like the local product more.”

Her little jewelry box, with its few bits of gold and silver and the small diamond ring her father had given her for her sixteenth birthday; her camera and three rolls of outdated film; a stuffed teddy bear a boy had won for her at a carnival when she was fourteen; the six diaries she had actually written in scattershot across the years.

Sally studied her possessions. “It’s pathetic, isn’t it?”

“It’s perfect,” he said. He took a small copper device out of a pocket in his pantsuit, held it up in front of his eye as though it were a camera, and clicked something. Her whole collection of life glowed and shrank until it could all fit into a quart-size Ziploc bag. He took out a quart-sized Ziploc bag and dropped all her things inside it, then sealed it shut.

“Ba-ba-but —”

He handed her the bag. “Hang onto this. When you get to your new posting, they’ll have an enlarging ray there. Don’t worry about breaking anything. Shrinks and protects.”

HE WAS WAITING when she stepped out of the shuttle onto the sparkling green pavement of the terminal. He had three stumpy legs and six or eight tentacular arms, and his head was covered with a forest of thinner, longer tentacles that rose and pointed their sucker-dotted tips toward her. Two of his eyes lit up when he saw her; the other five shifted color. She didn’t yet know what this meant.

For a moment she stood, hugging herself and shivering, even though the air was dense, damp, and warm. She had learned his language and customs through

sleep induction on the journey here, but she didn't want to chance the first word. What if she got it wrong?

“You're everything I dreamed of,” he said.

She smiled. Then wondered if that was an acceptable expression here. Then took the next six steps toward him and stood quietly while he folded his arms around her.

“Natomis,” she said. His name.

Just tell me that you're not the next Norm, she thought.

He lifted her and walked, stump stump stump, out of the terminal, carrying her above his head like a trophy. Others' head tentacles turned to study her, and she heard a flow of subsonics in the air around her —men language, which she had not been taught. She watched colors shift across her new man's skin, wondered if they were pride-sign colors. Sometimes he turned her this way and that in front of another of his kind, and the subsonics intensified.

She smiled and smiled without showing teeth, and listened for the whish of the next knife flying through air.