

In the Manner of Trees

Stephen Baxter

The port of the Richard P Feynman opened with a sigh, and the cool air of WhatAPlace wafted into Stoner's head. She walked down the ship's ramp and onto a belt of earth that had been scorched to a deep, black crispness by the Feynman's landing jets, and then further out to where the grass grew undisturbed.

Flowers curled around her boots. The sunlight, the breeze made her uniform feel stiff and formal.

Behind a bush there was a child: dirty, bald, naked, and with a swollen belly ...

"Oh, drink in that sun."

Stoner, startled, turned. Dryden and Wald, her two crew-members, had followed her out of the ship, and now Dryden, the life scientist, short and plump, was turning her round face up to the sun. "Isn't that great, after months of canned air?"

Stoner turned back to the bush. The child had gone; Stoner blinked, seeking to retrieve the afterimage.

Wald, the expedition's physical sciences specialist, pulled his thatch of red hair away from his forehead. "You can feel the peacefulness seep into you. WhatAPlace ... they named it well."

Stoner turned around slowly, appraising the area. The ship sat like a metal egg in a landscape shaped like an upturned hand; the "palm" was furred by clumps of bushes (no trees, she noticed), while rock formations a little further away, gleaming white in the pale sunlight, encircled the ship like curled fingers. Stoner was surrounded by a jumble of shapes and colours; there was a feeling of newness, of freshness, as if the land had only recently been assembled.

Wild flowers waved in the breeze.

Birds sang, almost in harmony.

Fluffy clouds scudded overhead.

Clouds, birds, flowers. Stoner hated planets like this; they were always the most dangerous kind. "Something's not right."

Wald sighed. "Like what, Captain?"

"I thought there was a child. Peeking out of that bush over there."

Dryden, hands on hips, studied her sceptically. "Come on, Captain; the WhatAPlace colony was lost five centuries ago, and we're the first ship to visit since. How could there be a child?"

Stoner closed her eyes and concentrated. "Definitely a human face," she said slowly. "Caucasian. Female, I guess, about five years old. No hair, no clothes, and with a swollen stomach—malnourished, perhaps."

Dryden snorted. "If this kid ever existed, how could she be malnourished? There's food in abundance." She pointed. "Those are multifruit bushes. From seed to fruit-bearing in a month. The region's covered in them."

Stoner, irritated, said frostily, "Are you implying I'm seeing things?"

Dryden's face bore its customary mocking frown. "Oh, come on, Stoner, lighten up."

Stoner swivelled a midwinter glare at her. "I'll lighten up when I have some answers."

"Answers to what?"

"Like what was it that scraped the first colony off the surface of this 'wonderful place'. Which is what we were sent to find out; remember?" She jabbed a finger at Dryden. "But for starters I'll settle for knowing why there are no trees. And why, if I was seeing things with that child, all the multi-bushes are stripped of fruit. Or hadn't you noticed that either?"

Dryden looked around, surprised.

"In the meantime," Stoner said, beckoning Wald, "we'll see if we can't find that kid. And we'll go armed at all times," she finished.

"For Christ's sake, Stoner," Dryden protested.

"At all times."

Wald, placid and accepting, slid to his feet.

They couldn't find the child. They found the site of the original colony, though.

The colony had been established in a clearing which covered ten acres. Lines in the ground, overgrown now, marked the sites of buildings. But the lines were crazed and broken; again Stoner had the odd impression that the landscape had been cracked apart, the pieces jumbled at random.

The colony's single ship, an old-fashioned GUTdrive intrasystem vessel, had been broken to pieces; creepers and clumps of flowers curled around slivers of hull-metal.

Stoner, standing amid the splayed-out corpse of the ship, shivered. "Whatever hit them, hit them hard and fast. They weren't given the chance to build again."

Wald wrapped his arms around his thin torso. "Well, that's one interpretation."

Stoner stared at him.

"Maybe they just ... blended in."

"What are you talking about, Wald?"

"Captain, look around. This is a near-optimal world. Stable seasons. No native pathogens." Wald indicated the multibushes, the terrestrial grasses which carpeted the colony site. "Earth vegetation has taken hold as vigorously as you could hope for. I think the settlers let their colony decay, and simply moved out into the landscape."

"And the smashed-open ship?" Stoner said coldly.

Wald shrugged. "I think the colonists did that themselves. Maybe they never wanted to leave. Maybe they were happy here. Captain, you're too ready to see disaster and threat in everything."

There was a rustling, a scampering of feet like a small animal's.

"You heard that?" Stoner hissed.

"Yes. I wonder if—Captain." Wald pointed. "Look."

At the edge of the colony clearing, about a hundred yards away, a small, brown figure plucked fruit from a bush, crammed it into a wide mouth.

Stoner held herself as still as she could, barely daring to breathe.

The child, bare, filthy, bald, forced fruit into her mouth, scarcely chewing before swallowing. Her legs seemed disproportionately long and slim, enabling her to reach right over the bush.

"Well, at least we know why the bushes are stripped bare," Wald whispered. "It's as if she's starving. And look. Her belly's swollen."

"Yes, but it doesn't make sense. Look at the fat around her legs, her backside. And isn't that belly a little low for malnutrition?"

Wald nodded. He said slowly, "She doesn't look more than five ... but it's almost as if she's pregnant —"

The child straightened up, startled like a deer. For a crystalline instant she looked directly at Stoner and Wald; her face was round, smooth and empty, her eyes the blue of the sky.

Then she turned and bounded away among the bushes.

"Come on; we have to catch her!" Stoner hurled herself across the metal-strewn meadow; she heard Wald panting close behind her. Within a few seconds Stoner reached the edge of clearing; the flat leaves of multibushes scraped at her uniformed legs, and the long, damp grass seemed to pluck at her feet, tiring her rapidly.

The little girl raced through a thicket, screaming like a bird; and from the thicket a shock of children burst and scattered. None looked older than five, but even the youngest scurried over the ground faster than Stoner could run.

The children swarmed over the landscape away from Stoner and Wald, disappearing from sight.

Stoner gave up. She stopped and bent over, resting her hands on her knees, and sucked in the spring-like air of WhatAPlace. Wald drew up beside her and flopped to the ground, strands of red hair plastered by sweat against his forehead.

"We've lost them," Wald said.

"Yeah." Stoner's heart was pumping, making it difficult to speak. "What did you make of them?"

Wald nodded. "Human. No doubt about that. Ordinary-looking children."

"Well, reasonably." Stoner straightened up and scowled. "All of a type, with those long legs and bald heads. All girls; did you notice that?"

"It was hard to tell."

"From toddlers up to five-year-olds, I'd say. And a lot of them with those strange, swollen tummies."

"Not all of them," Wald said.

"I think we've opened up more questions than we've answered. Like, where are the older girls? And the little boys?"

"... And the grown-ups," Wald murmured.

"You still think this is some rustic idyll, Wald?" Stoner peered around the empty landscape, her eyes narrow. Somehow it looked different, from the new position they had reached. "Wald ..."

"What is it?"

"That rock formation over there." She pointed.

"What about it?"

"... Is that in the same place as it was earlier?"

Wald snorted, an uncharacteristic noise that reminded Stoner of Dryden. "How could it have moved?"

"I don't know." Stoner bit her lip. "The light looks different."

Wald studied the outcropping of white rock indifferently for a few seconds, then turned his smooth face up to the sun and closed his eyes.

Stoner felt a surge of impatience. "You're supposed to be the geologist. Check it out," she snapped. "But first let's get back to the ship. We need to think of a way to catch those kids."

For three WhatAPlace days they hunted the children over the grassy landscape, without success.

In the end, Dryden set a trap. The life scientist used the ship's galley to synthesize highly spiced foods, and had them scattered in little packets around a clear stretch of grass a quarter mile from the ship. There was melon laced with ginger and sugar, and mushrooms baked in garlic vinegar ... Stoner couldn't help nibbling from the packets as she laid them around the clearing.

Before dawn the three of them lay down in clumps of grass, surrounding the baited area. Stoner hefted an ultrasonic pistol—it was set to stun—and tried to ignore the food scents, the cool grassy dampness which seeped through the fabric of her uniform.

Just before dawn—at a moment when the sky shone brighter than the land—a girl looked around a bush.

Stoner held her breath.

The girl's head whipped this way and that, her eyes as bright as the sky, her mouth open. She was tall and slim. She crept forward on gazelle legs, leaving glowing prints in the dew. Now two more children, smaller, one with swollen and pendulous stomach, stole after the first.

The girls fell on the food packets, burying their faces in synthesised fruit; the soft liquid sounds of their feeding carried to Stoner.

She raised her pistol, sighted on the temple of the nearest child, and fired. The girl slumped forward, as if falling quietly asleep. The other children looked up briefly, their mouths smeared with spices from Earth. Then they too fell into the grass, their eyes sliding upwards.

They named the children, arbitrarily, Paula, Petra and Pamela. Paula was the first, tallest girl; Petra was the one with the swollen belly. They all seemed aged between four and five Earth years, and were superficially alike, with their long legs, low, bald brows and wide blue eyes. But Stoner and the rest soon learned to tell them apart.

They confined the children to a cabin of the ship. They turned the walls transparent so that the girls would not feel imprisoned; but the strange environment clearly disturbed the girls, and they alternated between huddling together at the centre of their cabin, eyes moist and staring, and scampering around the floor, wailing and bouncing from the walls.

They were voraciously hungry.

While Dryden worked in her lab with skin and smear samples, Stoner and Wald brought the children food: basketfuls of multi-fruit, whatever the ship's galley could turn out. Stoner watched Pamela ram a synthetic peach into her mouth, whole; she could see it progress unchewed down the child's throat. It was like watching a snake feed. After a few hours there were bits of food, skins, pits and other debris—and urine and excrement—scattered like a carpet over the floor, and Stoner, despairing of keeping the children clean in any conventional sense, set up a regime of sluicing out the cage-cabin twice a day.

Stoner and Wald spent frustrating hours talking to the children, reading to them, showing them Virtuals. The girls enjoyed the Virtuals, as long as the flow of food to mouth wasn't interrupted; but as soon as the images disappeared the children would resume their restless wanderings around the cage.

The children never seemed to sleep.

After two days of this Stoner stood with Wald, wearily watching the girls through the clear cabin wall. Petra seemed in distress; she was lying in a foetal position, curled around a pile of fruit she was forcing into her mouth, and she stroked her distended belly in dismay. "Do you think she's hurt?" Stoner asked.

"Maybe. It's hard to tell. They're more like animals than people; they seem to respond instinctively, and then only to basic stimuli. Pain, hunger."

"But they're undoubtedly human."

"Oh, yes. But with inhuman appetites," Wald said. "They must eat their bodyweight in food every day."

"I guess that's right." Stoner studied Petra with concern. "Maybe some of our food has hurt her."

Wald shrugged. "It's more likely that she ran into a wall, isn't it? They don't seem to remember where the walls are, even after colliding with them a dozen times."

"No." Stoner ran a hand over the smooth outer surface of the cabin wall. "Remind me to reset the texture later, to something softer. And maybe I'll program in some kind of colour coding. I don't want them to feel they're in a cage, but I don't want them hurting themselves either." She touched Wald's shoulder. "Come on. I think they've enough food for a few minutes. Let's get some air."

Outside the Feynman the sun was dipping towards the horizon. The hollow in which the ship rested was a pool of darkening shadows, although the encircling fingers of rock still shone with sunlight. "So," said Stoner, "how's your hypothesis of a sylvan paradise coming along?"

Wald scuffed at the grass with the toe of his boot. "I don't understand the children," he admitted. "But I'm not convinced they're unhappy. Perhaps we should release them. Dryden is going to find out all she needs from the samples she's taken already."

Stoner frowned, squinting at the rocks. "Maybe," she said absently. "But we still haven't got close to the big questions. Like, why haven't we found anybody over the age of five? ... Wald, did you check out those rocks, as I asked you?"

Wald's face was impassive. "Sure."

"And what did you find?" Stoner snapped.

"I filed my report," Wald said. "Do you want me to recite it? What can I tell you? Those are plutonic formations—coarse igneous rocks, formed at great depths in the crust. Captain, rocks are rocks. The details are in the log."

"Look at that formation over there," said Stoner, frustrated. "The one shaped like an outstretched hand. Doesn't that look different to you?"

"How?"

Stoner stared at the formation, unsure. Weren't the shadows a little sharper, more severe? "Wald, have we got a log image of the area when we landed?"

"Sure."

"Will you check it out? I think—"

"Wald! Captain! I think you'd better get in here." Dryden's voice, from within the ship, was sharp but controlled.

Stoner turned and ran, her hand on the ultra pistol at her waist. "What is it? What's happened?"

They found Dryden inside the children's cabin, squatting amid food debris with tightly folded arms. The other two children, Pamela and Paula, scurried nervously around the walls, cramming fruit into their mouths; Petra, pale, shivering, sat close to Dryden. Surgical instruments lay scattered over a cleared area on the floor. There was blood on Dryden's bare forearms, her instruments; and blood was sprinkled over Petra's feet and calves.

Stoner stood in the doorway, staring. "What the hell's happened?"

Dryden looked up, her eyes wide and moist. She opened up her arms. A baby, pink, slim, shining

with amniotic fluid, lay cradled there, kicking feebly. "It's Petra," Dryden said quietly. "She's given birth."

The new child—they called her Patricia—grew fast. After a day she was crawling, after two days walking: unsteady as a foal, but already competing with the rest for fruit. Petra, the four-year-old mother, tried to feed the child fragments of food, but, though Dryden stemmed an initial haemorrhage, Petra weakened steadily. Soon she lay in a corner of the cabin, able to feed only on the food the crew members brought to her.

Dryden emerged from the cabin and stood with the others, wiping her hands. "There's nothing I can do for her. It has to be something in the food we supplied. I'm restricting the others to multifruit from now on."

Stoner rubbed her temples. It was all happening too fast; there didn't seem time to think it through. "Parthenogenesis?"

Dryden shrugged. "That's what we saw. That's what my studies of them show, too. We thought they were girls. They're not; they're closer to hermaphrodites, with a full complement of human reproductive equipment contained in each little body. I estimate they'd be fertile about the age of two, and able to—ah, bud—twice a year thereafter, for as long as they live. Guess what." She faced them impassively. "Pamela and Paula are pregnant now, too."

"Now we know why they are so hungry all the time," Wald said wonderingly, his face pressed to the clear wall of the cabin.

"Why, Dryden?" Stoner demanded.

"Why what?"

"Why did the original colonists build their kids this way? So they could breed like—what, like rats? What's the point?"

Dryden stared at the children, her round face drawn and empty; all her cynicism and sharpness, Stoner thought, seemed to have been knocked out of her by this experience. "I don't know. I still don't know enough about their biology. For instance, they've clearly adapted to the conditions here, in the hundreds of their generations since the abandonment of the colony. See the long legs, the baldness—the reduction in intelligence."

"Yeah." Stoner scowled. "But how can natural selection be occurring in a population of hermaphrodites?"

"Dryden." Wald's voice was deep, troubled. "Look at Petra." Something about the stillness of Petra, the awkward way she lay on the rubbish-strewn floor, told Stoner without room for doubt that the brief life had gone out of the child-woman. Stoner was surprised to find a morsel of grief in her heart.

"I'll see what I can do for her," Dryden said.

Stoner held Dryden's arm. "No. Look at the others. I think we should watch what happens."

The other girls, including the baby, had gathered around Petra's still form; even forsaking food they muzzled and snuffed at Petra, and pulled at the limp limbs. They were smiling, vacantly.

With a sudden, soundless explosion, Petra's body burst.

Stoner gasped and took an involuntary step back.

At first the skin blackened and splintered away, and then the deeper layers, the tissue, organs and bones. There was no blood, nothing to indicate that this shell had so recently been a human body. The

three girls pulled at the fragmenting body, causing it to shatter faster, and soon it was as if they were playing in a mound of autumn leaves; the girls rubbed the blackened stuff over their skin and into their mouths and hair, laughing out loud.

It was the first time Stoner had heard laughter on WhatAPlace.

Stoner sat with Wald at the foot of the ship's ramp. The sun, at its noon high, bathed Stoner's limbs with a warmth from which she shrank.

Grass lapped tranquilly about a fist-shaped swelling of rock directly ahead of her. The formation seemed close enough now for her to see every niche, every crevice. She stared suspiciously at it.

Dryden emerged from the ship, wiping her hands on a towel. She threw herself to the ground and turned her round face up to the warmth of the sky. "Well, at least we know how genetic material is passed on," she said.

Stoner wrapped her arms around her knees. "Through the disintegration?"

"You said they breed like rats," Dryden said. "Maybe. But they die like bacteria. A bacterium, on death, bursts, releasing a cloud of DNA into the air. Others, of the same and related species, are able to absorb the genetic material directly. That's how the cells of the WhatAPlace children behave. And as a consequence evolution, selection happens rapidly; there's a wide variety of genetic material available for new generations, just floating in the air. You know, it's not completely without parallel, in mythology. Once, warriors would drink the blood of slain heroes, hoping to absorb their strengths ... And it's an efficient way to go about reproduction."

Stoner scowled. "Is it?"

"Sure. None of the messy, uncertain, limited business we have to put up with."

Wald rested his head against the hull. "In the manner of trees," he said dreamily.

Stoner's mind was following a lot of unpleasant tracks. And she couldn't take her eyes off the rocks. The grass was stirring around the base of the fist formation, now. She snapped, "What?"

"I don't think I'd like to live without sex," Wald said. "But someone, in the nineteenth century I think, once asked if it wouldn't be better if humans propagated in the manner of trees. Wouldn't there be less suffering?"

Stoner shook her head irritably. "Let's put together what we've got. The stranded colonists, before their final disappearance, turned their children into baby factories. Fertile at the age of two. No need for sex; tiny gestation periods; no nursing dependency. Dryden, why do bacteria need to breed so efficiently?"

"So that the species can survive, in a desperately hostile environment," Dryden murmured. "An environment in which individuals have to breed fast. Before they are destroyed." She looked around, bemused, at the sunny face of WhatAPlace. "Is this a place where humans must breed like bacteria, in order to survive?"

A shadow fell across Stoner's face, cast by the rock outcropping ahead of her. Could the sun be dipping already?

... But it was only noon.

There was a tremor in the earth.

Stoner turned to Wald. "'Rocks are rocks'," she said bitterly. "What the hell was that, Wald?"

Wald was sitting up. "If it's any consolation, think I've figured out why there are no trees," he said.

Stoner stared at the fist-shaped rock formation. The turf around its base was being torn, now, like ice parting before the prow of an icebreaker: the rock was cruising towards them, through the earth.

The fingers of rock around the ship were closing. The three humans stared at each other wildly, the pieces of the puzzle moving around in their heads.

"It must happen every couple of months," Wald said. "Something old and plutonic, something vast, emerges from the ground. The surface is torn to pieces. The bushes have time to reestablish, but the trees can't grow quickly enough ..."

"Just like the kids don't have time to grow to adults before they have to breed ... so the colonists, before they were crushed, turned them into bacteria." Stoner scrambled to her feet; the ground shook violently now, as if to throw them off. "I think we should get out of here."

The ship lifted, gleaming in the sunlight like a jewel. The sunlit half of the world was a storm of rock, churning water and shattered turf. Shadows a thousand feet long raced across the land. Everywhere humans swarmed, millions of them, screaming and dying and breeding.