

A Touch of Earth

by Colin P. Davies

He'd said he was a writer and at first I'd considered that fact just cause to decline his company. But he was insistent, and clever. There was the coffee shop encounter and the accident with the dog in hydroponics, the botulism scare and the missing mail from his mother. Within weeks, familiarity led to capitulation and we became friends.

Carol was not happy. She said Gunn smelled odd and, like all writers, lived in the border country between this universe and a far stranger one.

The children were not happy. They said he played with their toys.

As for myself, I was intrigued by the concepts of creation and free imagination, of writing something other than technical reports. I was an architect and worked from the approved book of patterns. Free imagination for me consisted of selection of wall colors and the choice of bidet. And anyway, writing fiction seemed like harmless fun.

Until, that is, the night of the carnival.

* * *

"Carnival? I've never heard anything so ridiculous." Carol climbed into the open-top minicab and slammed the door. She pressed her thumb to the dash credit-meter. "We don't have carnivals on Mars!"

"Gunn said it's a traveling carnival... been to Athens, Soloi... last call was Marineris, I think." I hoisted her bags over onto the back seat. God knew why she needed so much stuff. It wasn't as if she brought council business home — or, if she did, she kept it well hidden from me. "He said it's due here within days." She was only a goddamn councilor, and that for a ward of barely one hundred people.

"Oh well, if Gunn said it's coming then I'm convinced it must be coming. Even now, it must be zipping its way across a thousand kilometers of frozen, near-airless desert just to lay on a show for us... Grow up, Robert!" She leaned toward the dash. "City Hall, and make it for ten!" The cab eased forward.

I trotted after it. "He's got no reason to lie. I believe him."

"He's an Earthman, for God's sake! They're all liars. Even the children don't believe a word he says."

"They don't understand him."

"And they still believe in Martians."

I ran alongside the cab.

"But just say it turns out to be true, just say..." I snatched at my breath between words. "We could all go, couldn't we? Me, you and the children."

"Why?"

"It's different, that's why. Don't you want to do something different?"

“I mean, why would I want to go anywhere with you?”

I stopped running.

She stood and turned to glare back at me. “Look, Bob, I know you’re not politically minded and you’ve got the attention span of a narcoleptic two-year old, but there’s a crisis about to break. I need to concentrate on bigger things than a new trend in entertainment.”

Or your family, I thought. I’d had enough of her politics, of her pseudo-concern for the colonists. I knew what lurked behind those blue eyes. Yes, she was beautiful... long yellow hair, body like a stick, but she was a bitch.

I raced ahead and waved my hand in front of the cab. Immediately, emergency systems yanked the cab to a halt. Carol caught herself by grabbing the dash. I stepped in front.

She glared at me with years of distilled distaste. It was hard to believe she’d ever loved me. Politics had changed her. I’d much preferred her as a children’s entertainer.

I found I had no words to say.

She shook her head slowly. “Robert... don’t be ridiculous.”

I knew when I was beaten. I moved aside.

The cab continued two junctions up the oak-lined boulevard, then turned along the Corinthian colonnade that led into the business district. Carol didn’t glance back once.

Confused, and a little wounded, I stood for a moment longer. The sun was warm this morning. The translucent city-roof, the great tent, glowed pink. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine a summer day on Earth. How would it be? Warm breeze, birds exchanging gossip, the scent of cut grass... somewhere the insect song of a Sunday mower.

Gunn’s stories were full of such magic — made of memories of Earth, of this planet I’d never seen. Next time we met, I’d ask to borrow more of his books.

But perhaps Carol was right and Gunn was not good for me. My current project was already behind schedule and I was finding it harder to motivate myself. Even my IBM was starting to get sarcastic. The last time I’d sat at my desk, it had greeted me with “Hello, stranger!” And it’s voice had been a cruel imitation of Carol’s.

Stopping only to collect a white rose for my desk, I returned indoors. I needed to forget Gunn and his distractions and save my professional reputation... and possibly my marriage.

* * *

The carnival arrived at midnight.

A dust storm was building as the trucks emerged from the black desert. Through a viewport in the tent wall, I watched the approaching headlamps bob across the rocky terrain.

Excitement caused an odd unease in my stomach. Yes — excitement! An emotion I hadn’t experienced since the first night I’d taken Carol into my bedroom. She’d slipped from her clothes with unsettling artistry, causing a tremble in me so intense it set the bedside lamp rattling. And she’d disappointed me then, as so often.

I'd had a skinful, that was true. But I was capable. For Carol, though, things had to be just... right! Can't define, can't explain, know it when I trip over it! She got dressed; I got mad. She was sick of me; I was sick on her shoes.

Now I watched as, one by one, the garishly decorated vehicles roared through the vast airlock and rumbled into the city. Images of gathering children squabbled across the flank of one truck. Another carried a colorfully fictive comic strip of the first Mars landing. Here and there, a well-placed holo-image gave the unnerving impression of distant vistas within the substance of the trucks. I was impressed.

Gunn had brought me here, dragged me all too easily away from my work. That's not to say that I'd totally jettisoned that infamous Martian skepticism, born of a legacy of disappointment. I realised now that, even to the moment when the first headlamp had pierced the desert gloom, I'd doubted him. Now I was high on wonder. I'd read about these things in Gunn's stories, but I'd never truly *believed*.

The trucks lined up parallel by Visa Control — twelve wide, dusty, thick-tracked vehicles, each four times taller than me, in red, green, purple, pink... strung out like bunting on Mars Day.

Out of the trucks spilled the travelers. An odd bunch; some short, some tall, and all *fat*. Their build revealed them to be visitors. You couldn't get that bulky on Mars gravity and city rations. With that insight I realised Gunn's fragility. I'd been viewing him as a fellow Martian, not an emaciated Earthman.

He was ahead of me as we crossed to where the travelers were gathering. "I'm looking for an old friend," he said, as he peered into the chattering crowd of offworlders.

"You know these people?"

"I know Captain Winter. We go back a long long way."

A grey-bearded face pushed out of the crowd. "All the way to Earth!" The man laughed. They embraced with genuine warmth. "Who's your skinny friend?"

Gunn released himself. "This is Bob."

A strong hand attempted to crush my fingers into a homogeneous mush of flesh and bone.

"Bob is an architect."

That threw me. I hadn't realised my occupation held the slightest interest for Gunn. I nursed my hand.

"Ah ha... ." Captain Winter's eyes widened. "You're still hanging on to that dream."

Gunn clasped my shoulder. "If I lose that... I'll have lost everything."

* * *

"You were out late last night." Carol threw back the shower curtain, taking me by surprise. "Got a woman? Should I be jealous?"

I turned off the hot spray of recycled water and rubbed at my eyes. "I didn't know you cared." I watched the bubbles track towards the drain and disappear into the tanks below the house. I'd be drinking that water tomorrow.

Carol held up the towel for me — an unexpected friendly act. Was this a truce in our undeclared war? I accepted the offering and stepped out.

“I hear your carnival arrived last night,” she said.

I smiled smugly. “Figment of my imagination.”

Carol released a grin. “All right, all right. I can be wrong occasionally. Were you with Gunn, the writer?”

“He took me to meet an old friend.”

She followed me into the bedroom. “So Gunn is involved with the carnival?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

“How far would you go?”

I peeked out past the window blind. Ian and Maria were playing out in the back yard — *I am my own grandfather*, or some other equally grotesque time paradox game.

I sat on the bed and draped the towel carefully across my lap. “That’s a lot of questions.”

“I’m just curious.” She took a band from the dressing table and tugged her hair into a pony tail, then tidied up the result via the mirror. “It’s an unusual event... and these are unusual times.”

“You see a connection?”

“No... . No connection. How could there be?”

“Another question?”

I reached around Carol to open a drawer. She moved aside.

“When are they open for business?” she said.

“This evening. The trucks are moving to the west shore of the city lake. They need water for some of their sideshows... are we taking the kids?”

“What exactly are they selling at these sideshows?”

“Something you wouldn’t understand. Gunn told me about it. *Nostalgia and magic. A touch of old and a touch of strange. A touch of Earth.* Gunn’s words... not mine. The theme is the home planet. The sense of things being lost, like the beauty of the changing seasons.”

“We have seasons.”

I shook my head. There was no point trying to explain to her. “As I said, nostalgia.”

“Nostalgia is a sickness,” Carol said. “It’s not good to have people getting sentimental about Earth when our leaders are in the process of severing ties. Mars is about to break free.” Her voice rose. “The Colonial Governor is at present under house arrest.”

“And what’s that got to do with me?” I pulled a sweatshirt from the drawer.

“You’re an idiot, Robert. You can’t see what’s going on... or you don’t care.” She kicked the drawer shut. “The people can’t be distracted right now. They must be single-minded.”

“Ah... the people. The people are anything but a single mind.”

“That’s why *we* have to think for them.”

I laughed. “And you called *me* an idiot!” I turned my back and pulled my sweatshirt on over my head. Behind me, the door slammed.

In the dressing table mirror, I was smiling.

* * *

The carnival opened for business at sunset and the crowd, at first thin and curious, quickly swelled until rivers of men, women and children flowed between the trucks.

I arrived late and alone and was swept on the currents beneath strings of colored lamps and ghostly flights of pale illusory owls. Country dancing music tugged at my feet while, high above us, the dust storm composed a chorus of whispers as it played across the tent skin. I’d arranged to meet Gunn at the gold truck, the sideshow called Illinois Morning.

I finally reached our rendezvous an hour before midnight. Gunn was waiting and quickly ushered me up the steps, past the attendant, and into the truck. Out of the night and into... a summer’s morning. I was stunned into immobility.

A short distance in front of us, two boys sat on the grassy bank of a narrow river, their makeshift fishing rods held high. Blue sky and a cornfield horizon. A static sun. I spun around — 360 degree panorama. Where was the entrance we’d just walked through... the electronic curtain that had whispered across my skin like the teasing of warm breath?

“Don’t worry.” Gunn held my elbow. “It’s unnerving at first. Just hold onto the fact that it’s all illusion. A technical trick. Anti-noise shuts out the real world.”

I laughed as the tension uncoiled from my spine. “It’s incredible... so peaceful. I can hear insects. And the river, it smells.”

“And the breeze is warm.”

I held up my hand. “Yes... the breeze.”

“The entrance is behind us, between those ancient signposts.”

I regretted not bringing Carol and the children. I should have tried harder to convince her. Surely even she would be impressed, moved, by this magic — even if only by the technology.

One of the boys scrambled to his feet and ran up to me. He held out his small hand. “Hi there, mister.”

I reached out and my fingers passed through his hand. I shuddered, almost afraid. The boy jeered and ran back to his pal.

“Remember it’s all an illusion,” Gunn said.

“But I was sure he could see me. He knew I was here.”

“It’s interactive.”

“It’s... .” I searched for the right word to pin down these curdling emotions that had me lightheaded and... happy. “Wonderful.”

Cautiously I tried walking along the dried mud path that ran beside the river. It held my weight and I became bolder, walked further.

“I can’t see the borders either,” Gunn said. “But invisible hands will stop us from hurting ourselves.”

“Is all this accurate?”

“Meticulously. It’s so close to the real thing it hurts.”

I examined Gunn’s face, possibly for the first time. Beneath his unkempt white hair, his skin was scored with wrinkles. I wondered, could I count them to determine his age, like the rings of a tree? “Why did you come to Mars?” It seemed the obvious question. I wondered why I hadn’t asked it before. “You don’t belong on our planet. That much is plain.”

Gunn’s eyes narrowed, as though he was attempting to peer back across the decades. “I thought Mars had something I wanted. I was wrong.” Moisture gathered in his eyes. He blinked at me, then smiled. “God, was I wrong!”

I waited for him to tell me more, but he moved away, back towards the signposts.

“I think I’ve been here long enough,” he said.

I wasn’t sure which *here* he was referring to.

He stepped between the signposts and vanished.

Alone now in that Illinois morning, sadness swept over me. *So much has been lost*. It was Gunn’s regret, not mine. I shook myself free and followed him through the curtain.

I was met by screams and sirens. Men and women ran past me. Children were crying. Not far away, approaching between two trucks, I could see the black tunics and hard hats of a police troop.

“Bob! Quickly... this way.” Gunn was standing below me. He ran off. I leapt down the steps and followed, away from the police.

“You’d best get home,” he said as I caught up.

“What about you?”

“You’ve got more to lose.”

People came charging towards us. They arrived like a wave... mindless, unstoppable. A woman barged me into a red truck. My head thumped against the plasteel side.

“Bob... down to the lake. Come on!”

Gunn dragged me around the cab of the red truck and down a short grassy slope and into the path of half a dozen troopers. We turned and, deaf to commands to halt, dived back behind the truck. Whips cracked their charges on empty air.

“Where the Hell to now?” I yelled at Gunn as we squeezed into the confused crowd. I couldn’t help feeling he’d got me into all this. “The police are everywhere. They must have sent the entire battalion.”

“They’re scared,” he said.

“They are scared?”

“In here!” Gunn bounded up six steps and into a truck. He was quick on his feet for his apparent age. I went after him. As I passed through the curtain, the outside world was silenced and I became aware, for the first time, of the sheer volume of terror that had filled the night air.

Inside the truck I discovered another carnival — not like this gathering of trucks beneath a Martian tent, but a genuine carnival, one lifted right out of Gunn’s stories. There were rides, shooting galleries, candy and carousels, laughing and cheering. Somewhere nearby a calliope played. It was nighttime under the sky of Earth and I knew that bright crescent was the moon.

Gunn gestured and, once again, I was in his tracks.

“There’s one thing here that is real,” he said. He led me to a rotating carousel — a marvelously intricate piece of nostalgia. As it passed him, he slapped the leg of one of the white horses. The carousel began to slow. “Let’s get to the middle and lie low.”

We stayed there for an hour as the carousel alternately rotated and stopped. Occasional ghost-visitors clambered on and off its beautiful animals. No one entered through the curtain — here disguised as a door into a shabby caravan. The carnival illusion continued around us: the excited chatter of the crowd, the smell of fried onions, children running and laughing. It became difficult to convince myself it was all fake, and I felt foolish huddled up on the ride.

We talked little at first; just speculation about the reason for the police raid. But Gunn was reticent and I found myself doing most of the talking.

In spite of my conviction that he was not telling me everything, or perhaps because of that, I got to asking him why it was so important that I was an architect.

“It’s just a dream,” he told me. “A mad eccentric vision.”

“And you need me?”

“Right now I’m not in a position to need anyone — I mean from a financial position. My money is tied up on Earth... unpaid royalties. That sort of thing.”

“So you’ve got money?”

“It’s not cheap getting to Mars.”

“And now you can’t afford to go back?”

“I may not want to go back... yet.” He glanced around at the illusion that surrounded us. “What I can see is the possibility of making this real, this holographic, imitation Earth.”

“The terraforming project began decades ago. In time... .”

“I’m not immortal. I want to enjoy it in this life, not haunt it from the next. No... I’m talking about a theme park. A new independent tented city in which just about every memory of Earth would be genuine. You could touch it ... taste it. You could live there. The only illusions would be horizons and sky.”

“Very ambitious, and totally beyond my capabilities,” I said.

“I’ll need a team, not a Frank Lloyd Wright.”

“It would be cheaper to take a return flight to Earth.”

“That wouldn’t help a Mars-born boy like you. You’re not young anymore. That gray’s not just fashion. It would be tough enough now for *me*, but the higher gravity of Earth would cripple *you*. Yet we all need a touch of Earth. It’s what makes us human.”

“You’re beginning to sound like Carol. Different words, but the tone is the same.”

“Perhaps you’ve never felt anything deeply enough.”

I wasn’t sure if I should be insulted by that, but then I considered it could be the truth.

We fell into silence. The carousel continued to turn and stop, turn and stop.

Finally, as we once more came to a halt, Gunn crawled under the horses and fell to the grass. I was right behind him. We lay a while as the ground continued to spin below us.

When we could stand, we approached the caravan — the exit curtain. I grabbed Gunn’s sleeve to hold him back. “The police...”

“We can’t stay here for ever,” he said. Then he stepped through the curtain.

After a moment, and a final look around at the beauty of Earth, I followed.

Some way from the steps, Gunn was in the firm grip of two troopers. Closer to me, more police waited, whips poised. And at the foot of the steps, hand raised to accuse me, stood Carol.

* * *

The chaise longue was out of place in the bare interrogation room. An attempt to unsettle the unfortunate visitor, no doubt — an impression strengthened by the blood-red upholstery.

I was sitting uncomfortably on the edge, guessing at what would happen now that they’d brought me from the cell, when Carol came in. The door was locked behind her.

She stood well away from me and stared, as though I was a stranger, and a strange one at that. I rose from my seat and stepped forward. She retreated. Apparently she’d determined a safe defensive distance, just as this last year she’d cultivated an emotional distance between us.

“There’s the question of the children,” she said.

Despite myself, I felt a boot land squarely in my stomach. “You know, you look a lot like my wife... but she had a heart... and she wasn’t in the secret police... at least I didn’t...”

She cut in, “You’ve made things more difficult than they need to be.”

“For you? I couldn’t give a damn.”

“Your eccentricities are...”

“I’m an architect!”

“...and your bloodymindedness...”

“What does that mean?”

She turned to converse with the wall. I watched her breath surging slow and deep into her body. Then she looked at me again. "I can't live in the same house with you anymore."

"Just tell me when I can leave here."

"When exactly you will get out of here, Robert, is a decision for the Mayor. I've pleaded emotional immaturity on your behalf."

"You're a gem."

"I've got my feet screwed to the ground and my eyes fixed on the future. You, Robert, are a dreamer. Of course, I knew that when I first met you, but at the time I thought it quite endearing."

"Politics and maturity aren't necessarily mutually compatible. For instance, take yourself..."

She was silent a moment, then said calmly, "Let's stop bitching. We're only providing entertainment for the guys in surveillance. Let's talk about Gunn and his stories."

"You're hardly qualified."

"They're unhelpful... a nuisance. And more than that... subversive. His books circulate for high prices. The carnival is a manifestation of his poison."

I couldn't help laughing.

Her tone hardened. "We're trying to prepare the ground for a new order here. We want hope and grand futures, inspiring futures. Fiction must be uplifting... moral and beneficial. Optimistic. Otherwise it serves no purpose."

"You mean you want stories of the great days to come." I found myself growing angry on Gunn's behalf. "Some would call that propaganda."

"The last thing we need is Gunn stirring up nostalgia. It makes people feel cheated, as though something is missing."

"Something *is* missing!" I yelled. "How can you compare this dry desert wilderness to Earth? Where's the rivers, the meadows...? We must be crazy living here."

"You only prove my point."

I sat down again, somewhat confused by my outburst. "What now then?"

"For now, you go back to your cell." She knocked on the door. It swung open. "And in the morning I'll have a talk with my children."

* * *

When the two guards locked me back in the cell, I glanced at Gunn. He was sleeping. Being irritable and unable to settle — a part of me was still arguing with Carol — I went to the small solitary window that looked out over the city lake.

It was still night. That surprised me. I'd lost track of time. The brilliant guardian lamps at the top of the central support arm swept lazily about, pouring prying light into secret alleys, washing green parkland white, peering into bedrooms. The lake itself was evident by the wavering starfield of reflected promenade lanterns and the occasional sweep of a guardian beam.

My breath misted on the window.

“No bruises then?” Gunn was awake.

I turned my head and squinted into the brightness. “None that show.”

I think he understood.

It could be hours before daylight. Neither of us were able to sleep, so we talked. We talked about childhood adventures, family loved and lost, ambitions achieved and abandoned. The hope of youth and the frustration of adulthood. We talked about Earth. He told me his stories and, for a time, I lived on his planet.

I lay back on my hard bed and let his words transport me millions of kilometers through space, and soon the meaning of the words was unimportant; they became merely soothing sounds, comforting... .

I dreamed.

I was looking out through the cell window. It was morning, though the sky above the tent was dark and heavy. The lake surface was glass-calm. Then snow began to fall. Large flakes drifted within the tented city.

At first I searched for explanations — perhaps a freak drop in temperature outside the tent — then it didn’t seem to matter. I watched the flakes dancing down. Soon the lake shore, the copse of oaks, the concrete streets... all were white.

The lake was frozen.

I was in a silent winter heaven.

I was about to call to Gunn, to urge him to the window, when the snowflakes thinned and I saw something move down there by the lakeside.

It was a man, too far away to be seen clearly, walking slowly away through the thick snow. As I watched, he turned and waved. I knew that wave was for me. And I understood that it was goodbye.

I was awoken by rough hands dragging me from the bed. I was hauled upright. The room was brilliant and blinding.

“Check under the beds!” a voice yelled.

“I have checked!” Another voice.

“Then how...? Take this one along! There’s going to be some questions...”

* * *

Gunn has gone.

Carol insisted that he had escaped — somehow conjured his freedom in the middle of the night. The carnival also departed that night, and perhaps he went with them. She showed no great concern. He was gone, and that was all that mattered.

But I can’t escape the conviction that he was removed... Murdered. They wanted him out of the way. I guess I’ll never know the truth. Some things though are clear.

Carol and me... we'll never reconcile these differences. It would be easier to reconcile the governments of the two planets. I can't even bear to hear her broadcasts — she thinks she's entertaining children again.

Our children are with me — Carol's choice. She moved out last month.

I'm working again. Without the distractions I've actually improved on my initial targets. Finances are looking better. But I can't shake off Gunn's words or his world. I suspect now that he never truly believed in the theme park idea. I think he cultivated my friendship for another, more subtle reason.

Last night I started to write a story. Yes... I surprised myself. It was on impulse, but now I've had the taste I doubt I'll ever be able to quit. I was writing of strange things. Gunn's things.

Am I happy? In a way. The job's okay and the kids are great.

However, I want the impossible. I want to *return* to Earth — yet I've never set foot there and never can set foot there. The emotion is genuine and I curse Gunn for the gift.

So I will write of a past I never lived and of people I never loved and perhaps, in time, there will be those who wish to read my stories and together, through the magic of words, we will reach out and touch the Earth.

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