

MICHAEL LIBLING

SITTERS

*

"Sitters" marks Michael Libling's second sale to F&SF, but it is his first appearance in the magazine. Why are we publishing the second before the first? Well, because we're saving the first for our annual baseball issue in a few months.

*

For nearly twenty years, Michael has made his living by writing nonfiction, promotion, and advertising copy. His first fiction sale was to a British anthology.

*

About the story, he writes, "As parents, my wife and I always tended to hold our daughters' hands a little tighter whenever we would see [the posters of missing children that appear in test stops along the Interstates]. And then one day, I began to wonder: with seemingly so many missing children reported, what if some of these disappearances had no earthy rationale?"

Some things you need to keep to yourself. Sometimes, it is wiser just to go with the flow. It is certainly safer.

"Daddy," she said, "there's a clicking in my head. Click, click. Click, click."

The way the kid was flailing about in the water, shrieking and carrying on, our first thought was shark attack. That's what most everybody else seemed to think, too, because anyone who had been in the water was now on shore, gaping, pointing and cataloguing revolting details to pass on to friends and relatives.

We stashed our tuna sandwiches and cranberry sodas back in the cooler, dipped celery sticks into the cheese dip to tide us over, and trotted up to join the crowd to watch the girl get eaten by the shark.

Usually, I would wonder how anyone could wade, let alone swim, in these frigid Maine waters, but this day the waves wrapped themselves easily round my ankles and withered warmly between my toes. Perhaps something had pushed the Gulf Stream waters off course. There were no reports of approaching hurricanes; then again, you never know.

"Her name is Annie," said Rachel, between crunches of her celery. "We were playing Frisbee together." Kath and I held our daughter's hands a little tighter.

A woman, panicking as only a mother might, splashed into the surf, heels kicking, arms stroking the air, reaching for a dive that was taking too long to come. A lifeguard caught her chest-high loverly eager, I thought), and his partner helped drag the woman back to safety. Her screeching alternated with

her
daughter's, filling any stray patches of silence the ocean failed to claim.
The
combination reminded me of gulls wrestling over fries and battered shrimp
tails
at the canteen trash can. It was then I realized there were no gulls about,
save
for a trio hovering quietly in an almost wait-and-see mode at the far end of
the
beach where the new cottages begin, right above Paul Blankenship's, as a
matter
of fact.

"I think if it were a shark, she would've been gone by now," said the
lifeguard
with the better tan.

The other lifeguard agreed. "Don't see any dorsal fin or blood in the water
neither."

"I say we go then," said the first.

"Yup," said the second.

But they did not budge. They stood staring along with everyone else. I thought
of taking action, but it did not go beyond that.

Then Rachel said, "Look, there's Mommy." And the next thing I know, my wife
and
the girl's mother have grabbed a rubber dinghy and bounded into the surf.
Before
I could summon enough wind to call Kath back, they were off and rowing. As
luck
would have it, an outgoing wave shot them right to their quarry, almost
knocking
the poor kid over, but she managed to keep her balance as she stumbled to
deeper
waters, armpit-high now.

Kath extended her oar and the girl grabbed on. A short struggle, a couple of
heaves, and they hoisted her aboard.

The crowd applauded. The lifeguards frowned.

Kath rowed frantically as the surf reluctantly tossed them back to shore.

The lifeguards tried to restrain the crowd as the two women carried the girl
onto the beach. The girl and her mother wore the same rainbow-striped bathing
suits.

"Give her air," the tanned lifeguard shouted. "Somebody call for an
ambulance."

"I'll begin the CPR," said the other.

But the girl's mother blocked their way. "Touch her, and I'll scratch your
eyes
out," she warned.

"Or worse," added Kath, brandishing an oar.

"But we have authority here," the lifeguards blustered with no trace of authority.

Kath was on her knees, smoothing the girl's dark brown hair. Her head was propped upon Kath's thighs, her body rigid, eyes open but frozen dead-ahead, her chin tucked into the hollow of her neck. Rachel and I sidled closer, sheepish, the way people tend to be when they have an inside connection to the center of attention, proud, yet embarrassed.

"Is she very badly bitten?" I asked quietly.

Kath did not take my lead. She spoke for all to hear. "From what I can see, there are no bites. I don't think there ever was a shark."

The disappointment in the crowd was evident. Both Kath and I winced.

"Then what was all the commotion about?" I asked, my voice still low. Kath shrugged.

The girl's mother moved her hands to her hips. Her voice shook. "You weren't playing wolf again, were you, Annie? You wouldn't put me through --"

Annie shook her head. "No, mommy," she sobbed, and pointed to her stomach.

"What is it, honey?"

"It's still there," she cried, the tears intensifying.

The woman knelt beside her daughter, apprehension rising as she peeked under the swimsuit. The crowd stepped back.

"My god!" she said, covering her mouth. "Annie! Poor Annie."

"What is it?" Kath gulped, leaning lower for a better view.

"What is it?" I echoed, not certain I really wanted to know.

The woman slipped the straps of the swimsuit from her daughter's shoulders and gingerly peeled the top down to the girl's waist.

I turned my head to the side, watching with one eye. I advised Rachel to do the same, but she ignored me, as bold as her mother.

Like most, I was expecting a bloody cavity of shredded flesh, but instead, there on the girl's belly, shimmering innocent and silver in the noonday sunshine, mouth resting contentedly in her navel, lay a fish. No more than seven or eight inches in length, it seemed barely alive, gills pulsating ever so slowly.

As the realization spread, people began to giggle. Some returned to the water, others to their towels, lunches and tubes of sun-block.

"A bloody fish," groaned one of the lifeguards. "How the heck did it get under there? Never seen anything like that."

"Could be a baby shark, couldn't it?"

"I think it's a herring," a local suggested. The fishing lures in his hat enhanced his credibility.

An elderly lady, beer can trembling in left hand, tried to make Annie feel better: "What a pretty girl you are. And a very good fisherman, too. Have your mother fry that up with a little milk and flour, some butter and lemon juice."

"Didn't know these waters had herrings," said a woman with sunglasses on her head.

"I like herring, especially the tidbits in wine sauce with onions," said somebody else.

But the girl's mother was neither swayed nor impressed. "I don't care what it is," she declared, and swatted the fish with the back of her hand. It glanced off my knee and dropped to the sand at my feet.

I jumped back. "Jesus!" I said, brushing imaginary scales from my leg.

"Hi, Annie." Rachel curled her fingers into a tiny wave. "Want the rest of my celery stick? It's got cheese dip on it."

No one bothered to examine the herring. Except for a hungry gull that glided in from nowhere.

"There's a click in my head, Daddy," Rachel reported at bedtime.

"Again?"

"Uh-huh. But more like a clock this time. Tick, tock, tick, tock."

"Well, Mommy brought you to the doctor and he said it was nothing. Sometimes things like this happen when we get excited. And this has been an exciting day for you -- for all of us."

"Especially Annie." Rachel nodded.

I tucked her in, and met Kath on the porch.

"Care for a blackberry cooler?" she asked.

I smiled. "Make it a double."

* * *

When we first started coming to Goose Breakers -- six years before, just after Rachel was born-- the closest gym was way up in Portland, so I got into the habit of jogging to Cape Beckon and back each morning after sunrise. (Well, to be honest, I walk more than I jog.) Although a gym finally opened in Cheterbunk, summer before last, I felt the fee for tourists was out of line and stuck with the jogging. Besides, who in their right mind would make time for stair-climbers while on vacation? There was also the daily chat and mug of coffee with Paul Blankenship to consider.

Paul was an orthodontist from Buffalo who wrote novels on the side. He had

published four, and had given me copies of the last three. Occasionally, he promised to dig out his first for me, but never did, and I made a point of not reminding him. I tried reading each, but after slogging through the early chapters, resorted to skimming and scanning.

An alcoholic stockbroker, obsessed with a schizophrenic tollbooth attendant and former nun, discovers he is the bastard great-grandson of post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin and his life is forever altered.

A Mohawk discus thrower and Olympic hopeful, the one-time foster child of a renegade Amish family, becomes infatuated with a Romanian diving coach who, on page 92 of the 564 page opus, learns she has multiple sclerosis -- a crisis which leads to their shared quest to climb Mexico's Popocatepetl and discover the mystic truths that dwell therein.

A Buffalo hematologist abandons his career and family to paint urchins in the streets of Cuzco, Peru, eventually losing his way and his sanity in the alleys of Machu Picchu.

I supposed he was a good writer; the paperbacks were oversized and overpriced, and looked nothing like a Clancy or a Grisham. Of course, I never told him that his style was beyond me and that Clancy and Grisham were, at least, readable.

"I straighten the teeth of people who do not smile and I write books that people do not buy," he once told me.

"They're wonderful stories," I lied.

"But if the artist is unappreciated, is that his failure or his audience's?"

I tended to shrug a lot around Paul.

On the other hand, I enjoyed his company and conversation. I often told him he should be narrating documentaries. I also know he looked forward to my two-week stay that usually landed in the middle of his six, especially since his wife and daughters had thrown him out. Last vacation, he had brought along their grounds, a pretty young dental assistant with long black hair and lips in a permanent pucker, but she had since left him, too. It was just as well, she was quite a distraction. As Kath had said, "Laurel doesn't wear clothes, she wears invitations."

Every morning as long as it wasn't raining I'd catch Paul on my way up the beach, and wave as I trotted by. It was his cue to put on the coffee. By the time I returned, a hot mug would be waiting for me on the patio, usually with a couple of muffins, if he remembered to pick any up. (When his wife was still with him, they would be homemade. Big dry, unswallowable, brown things that somehow came to life with coffee.) We'd chat till about eight-fifteen, he'd give me a cinnamon candy stick for Rachel, and then I'd head back to the cottage to start breakfast for her and Kath. It was a comforting routine. As I was soon to be reminded, however, routines are easily demolished.

It was the day after the fish-in-Annie's-swimsuit incident. As I rounded Ripple Rock near the pier at Cape Beckon, slowing from sluggish jog to listless walk, a dark streak of something shot across the path in front of me; a shadow cut loose from an unseen entity. I broke stride, stubbing my toe on a knob of half-buried driftwood, and fell to one knee. Whatever it was landed several feet to my left. I caught my breath, picked myself up, sighed, and hesitantly limped over for a closer look.

Talk about coincidences. It was my second suicidal herring in two days. I'd heard of whales pulling stunts like this, but never fish. I glanced cautiously out to sea, just to make sure no whale was following. I made a mental note to call the Coast Guard. This was something a marine biologist might want to investigate. The thought made perfect sense. Then.

It flopped about in the sand, sucking air through desperate gills. I considered saving its life, tossing it back to the sea, but could not bring myself to touch it. For all I knew, this suicide thing could be contagious, and I might end up throwing myself into the sea, or into traffic, or something. So I left the herring to gasp and bake in the dawn's early light.

I was late getting to Paul's, but my coffee was waiting for me as usual on the arm of the old wooden garden chair. The chairs and patio table were all that remained from the shack that had previously stood on the site. Everything else about the place was new, in a rustic, countryish sort of way.

"I'm here," I shouted up the knoll toward the screen door, assuming Paul was fetching the muffins. The coffee was still hot.

On the arm of the chair, Paul's seat, a fat paperback lay open. It was Gravity's Rainbow by Thomas Pynchon. I thumbed through it for a bit, lost Paul's place, and hurriedly set it back on the arm, hoping he wouldn't notice until after I was gone. Clearly, another book I would never get into.

This wasn't like Paul. He had kept me waiting only once before, the morning alter he'd downed a bucket of bad clams at Mary Salt's Lobster Pound. I had rushed off to the pharmacy in Cheterbunk to get him some Fowler's Strawberry Extract, but they were out of stock, so I brought him a cardboard bucket of white rice from the Great Wall Care. "You okay in there?" I called.

The reply was a sickening scream that pierced the base of my spine and drop-kicked my stomach into my mouth. The mug shattered on the patio as I leaped from the chair. I whirled about to face the house, my heart pounding, my throat dry. Something was moving on the ground behind the shrubs at the top of the knoll. I took two steps back. "Paul?" I said hopefully. "Is that you?"

The patio lies roughly a hundred feet from the ocean at the base of the knoll behind Paul's house. (The knoll is a bulldozed bastardization of the dunes Goose Breakers is famous for. It runs the entire length of the new development.) From

the back door of the house, pastel paving stones lead to five stone steps cut into the knoll, and these lead down to the patio. At the top edge of the slope, on either side of the steps, a short, bushy hedge runs the width of the house, turning at the perimeter of the property line and running up toward the road.

The scream came again and I started to calm. It was a seagull, scavenging busily behind the shrubs. I smiled foolishly, embarrassed that Paul might have seen my less than rational behavior. What was keeping him, anyway?

"Looks like I spilled my coffee," I said. "Better wear your sandals out here, Paul, I broke the mug." Where was he?

I started up the steps. The seagull ignored me as I paused at the top, but I could not ignore it. I began to gag. The gull was pecking at a dark ball of mucous, fleshy sinews dangling, the blood of whatever it was still wet. Then I noticed the screen of the door had been pushed in, and through the opening I saw Paul on his back on the kitchen floor.

Bile rose quickly, and I vomited on the Welcome Neighbor doormat beneath Paul's heels. Now, I knew what the gull had been eating. Paul's eyes had been plucked crudely from their sockets. His face was a mass of blood and black and blue. Broken teeth defiled his lips and chin. His nose was crushed flat and featureless. Suddenly, what I assumed to be the smell of death overwhelmed me. I staggered back toward the door, tripping through the open portal and onto my behind. It was from here I saw the fish.

It lay several feet beyond Paul's head, in the short hallway that connects the kitchen to the sitting room. And it sure as hell wasn't any damned herring. This was a big fish. Real big.

"I'd say we have ourselves a killer halibut, here," chuckled the investigating officer.

"Could only happen to a tourist," his sidekick smirked.

"Sometimes the ocean gets funny, upchucks every once in awhile. Unfortunately, this time, your buddy was the upchuckee."

It was a freak accident. That's all there was to it. Case closed.

I provided details on Paul's next of kin, but I thought it best to call Abby, his ex, on my own.

She hardly said a word until I'd finished.

"From the looks of it, Abby, he went quickly."

"A fish? You're telling me a fish?"

"I'm afraid so," I said. "A real flukey kind of thing."

"Scales of justice, no doubt," she said, with no trace of irony.

"We leave tomorrow," I told Kath. A week remained on the rental, but she did not protest. We were both shaken by Paul's death.

Around midnight, Rachel awoke from a bad dream. She called, "Mommy, Mommy." Both Kath and I rushed to her, but she looked right through me to Kath. "You're not my mommy," she said.

"Of course, I am, honey. It's me, Mommy."

"No," she insisted. "No, you're not."

At best, we slept uneasily, till a bullying wind and an intimidating thunder kept us up for good.

It was a bit past five when the rain began its assault, blasting in torrents down the sides of the house, obliterating the sunrise. The thunder had escalated to bombing raid as Kath ran to Rachel and I rushed from room to room closing windows. It didn't do much good. The wind drove water through the cracks of the frames, soaking the walls and floors as thoroughly as if I had not shut the windows at all. The view from every side was a watery blur, as if the house had been dropped behind a waterfall. The thought of a tidal wave surfaced, but I submerged it quickly. I stayed toward the center of the rooms, fearing the panes would crash in on me.

Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh.

Finally, I got back up to Kath. She sat on the edge of Rachel's bed, our daughter in her arms. The ceiling was leaking in several places, somehow missing the bed. "We'd better get downstairs," I said, breath short, words clipped. "I don't know what's going on out there, but it's not good." And, as if to confirm my words, the wind roared hungrily overhead, snapped its jaws down on the roof, and, with a violent cracking, wrenched the covering away. Then it came looking for us --shingles and nails flying. And fish. All kinds of fish. Sloshing and flipping and splashing. I tossed Rachel over my shoulder, Kath grabbed the door, and we dashed into the hall and down the stairs. In soggy pursuit, a river sluiced behind us.

Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh.

"The door frames," Kath pointed. "It's safest under the door frames." I'd thought that advice applied only to earthquakes, but I wasn't going to argue.

We squatted in the archway between the kitchen and dining room, and passed the time counting fish plunge down the staircase. They'd flop about for a spell, glance off furniture and walls, attempt to find deeper waters, and then just lie there. For Rachel's sake, the ever-resourceful Kath turned it into a game. "And that's a flounder. An ocean perch. Another flounder. A sea herring. Pollack, I think. . . ."

And that is where we stayed, until the winds relaxed, and the thunder and rain played out, and the water ceased to flow down our stairs. Our count, by the way, had reached forty-four, with flounder slightly ahead of herring in number.

Mindful that the worst might yet be on its way, we emerged warily into a hazy blue that passed for daylight -- the eye of a hurricane without the hurricane. Neighbors all along our stretch of beach were doing the same. Most in pajamas. Some in towels and underwear. The solitude surreal. The gawking natural. The humidity stifling.

Ours was the only house to lose a roof. As well, a support beam from the porch had been dislodged, denting the fender of our car. At this stage, all that mattered to me was that the engine revved and the wheels turned. We were getting away from Goose Breakers. Today.

"My god! Will you look at that!" a neighbor cried, and our attention skipped from house to beach. Dismay turned to awe.

Somehow, in the midst of the storm, someone had managed to get down to the beach. And in defiance of wind and rain and logic, this individual had carved a sand sculpture that rimmed the realm of impossibility. No sea serpent or moated castle, here. This was a woman. Ten or twelve or, maybe, fifteen feet high. A magnificent creation. A fragile beauty with sad eyes and a sadder smile. Strangely familiar eyes. Strangely familiar smile. Her hair caressed her shoulders and her dress skimmed the buckles of her sandals. She stood with arms outstretched, beckoning, beseeching.

"I want to go to her," said Rachel.

"You stay put," I ordered, reaching for her hand, securing her by the wrist.

"She reminds me of the statue of Jesus that overlooks Rio," Kath whispered.

"It makes no sense," I said. "How could it have survived the storm?"

"I want to go to her," Rachel repeated.

"Her hair." Kath swallowed. "I think her hair is moving."

"It's the wind," I said. "The wind is picking up again."

"No," Kath corrected. "It's more than the wind."

And, as the sand woman disintegrated before us, the grains of her being drawn outward to the sea, I was almost sure she had closed her eyes. Before us, a short dive and a half-dozen breaststrokes from the shore, three massive whirlpools churned, mutating to whirlwinds as they rose, humming kazoo-like as they climbed. Higher and higher, they spiraled, taking the sand woman with them, penetrating the muddy scud, on course for the sky itself.

"The middle one is so pretty," said Rachel. The words had barely left her lips

when lightning flashed within the center vortex, irradiating it from bottom to as high as we could see. As one bolt of lightning waned, another flashed alive, and another, and another, maintaining the towering spectacle of electrified and brilliant blue. "So pretty," Rachel said again. "So pretty. Like Mommy." I'd never heard of Nature pulling a stunt like this. It was the Fourth of July and New Year's Eve rolled into one. Here was a story we could bore friends with forever.

The whirlwind on the left was the first to collapse, dissipating as it toppled out to sea. The one on the right followed; collapsing parallel to shore, sending onlookers scurrying from their porches as waves rumbled up the dunes and over, perilously close to the homes.

The middle one continued to twirl, one spindle anchored to the ocean floor, one tethered to the sky. The faster it spun, the greater the intensity of the lightning within it. Then it, too, began to sway.

"It's going to fall this way," Kath said. "I know it's going to fall this way." She grabbed Rachel by the hand; they ran onto the beach and toward the dunes that front Comber's Inn. I had nothing to go by except Kath's instinct, but that was good enough for me. I could not, however, bring myself to leave the car behind. Where the hell were my keys?

I glanced up to see how far Kath and Rachel had run, but was blinded by the blue . . . engulfed by the blue . . . terrified by the blue . . . deafened by the blue. Sand swept into my eyes and coated my face. I could feel the pressure rising in my ears and I feared the roof of my head was about to blow off. I dropped to my knees and the blue grabbed me by the neck and smashed me face-first into the driveway. It relented momentarily, and I scrambled under the car as the vortex struck.

The house imploded, then exploded, in a watery conflagration.

The backwash spit me out from under the car and dragged me onto the beach. My knees were bloody. My arms were scraped. My face was cut. And fish were fighting for their lives all around me. So this was the smell of death I had experienced at Paul's house. So death smelled like fish.

Our cottage was driftwood. I thanked God it was a rental. I wished our car had been the same.

My wallet was gone, but a neighbor found Kath's money pouch at the side of her house sitting atop an abandoned lobster trap.

This was not my idea of a fun vacation.

I had anticipated that I might need to break a window, but it turned out to be easier than that. Although the back door to Paul's cottage had been boarded up, the nails did not extend into the jamb. It opened without resistance.

I sidestepped the bloodstains on the floor and snatched Paul's car keys from the Bertrand Russell cookie jar in the kitchen. I telephoned Abby to explain, but only her answering machine was home. I told it I'd get the car back as soon as possible.

I deposited our house keys with the rental agent.

"I'll speak to the owners about getting you a refund for your final week," she said.

"I don't care about a refund. But I'll let you know if my insurance doesn't cover the loss."

"Well, I hope you have a good policy. It was, you know, an act of God."

"An act of God? Yah," I said, "I suppose that's what you'd call it."

We managed to avoid the stringer for the Portland paper, and were on the road and headed home before noon. The Audi drove like a dream, but I wisely kept the thought to myself. Why spoil a good thing?

We caught our collective breath over a late lunch at the Pizza Hut in Concord.

As we left the parking lot, I thought I saw flames rising from the restaurant's roof. I readjusted the rear-view mirror and they vanished from sight.

We were no more than ten minutes back on the road when Rachel unbuckled her belt and dove for the steering wheel, the heel of her hand hammering the horn. I swerved into the oncoming lane, but, luckily, traffic was almost non-existent. The tires sprayed gravel as I skidded to a stop on the shoulder, rapping the rear fender off a Fresh Fruit Ahead sign.

"What in the hell -- ? My God, Rachel!" My hands were stuck to the wheel.

"What made you do that? Are you trying to kill us?"

"It's the alarm," she said.

"The what?"

"The alarm."

"You can't do that, honey, when Daddy's driving. We could be very badly hurt."

"No." She shook her head. "We won't be." Then she began to cry. "There's a whistle in my head. A whistle in my head. A whistle in my head."

Kath moved to the back seat to sit with her.

"I think we better get a second opinion on what's going on inside her, Kath. This is really starting to worry me."

"I'll make the appointment first thing tomorrow," she agreed, moving as close to Rachel as the seat belt would allow.

Bill & Wanda's, the track stop at the Hickam exit, is where it finally came together, or fell apart, depending on your point of view. Stopping here was one of our traditions -- breakfast on the way to Maine, supper on the return. It was less than ninety minutes from home.

We had missed the dinner rush, so the restaurant was fairly quiet. Two truckers chatted at the counter, polishing off key lime pie and downing bottomless cups of coffee. A couple with a teenage boy argued over menu choices. Two heavy-set older ladies, with yellow hair in ringlets and faces buried in orange pancake, munched on chicken fingers and sipped Bud Lites through straws.

We sat in a booth a couple of rows over from the window. I would have preferred to sit at the window, but the sun was too bright and the dead flies on the sill dulled appetites. I wanted to keep an eye on Paul's Audi. I could get away with the dented fender, claiming it was there when I picked it up, but anything else might not be so easy.

The waitress took our order -- grilled cheese for Rachel, taco salads and Buffalo wings for Kath and me -- and we settled back to wait.

Rachel played with the jukebox buttons and flipped the selection cards, not asking but obvious as to what she wanted. I dug three quarters out of my pocket -- 5 plays for 75 cents, and handed them over. She took them eagerly, punching in numbers at random. A-6. B-3. C-2. A-4. E-9.

"There's singing in my head," Rachel smiled, before a single note came through the speaker.

Kath and I smiled thinly at each other.

Patti Page came up first. She was dancing with her darling to the Tennessee Waltz when a freezer truck barreled into the parking lot, took out a row of gas pumps, bounded airborne off the rear of a flatbed and landed with its 24,000 Eskimo Pies smack atop the Audi.

There was no explosion. Just thick black smoke, rising over the scene. A small gusher danced where the gas pumps had been.

I looked at Kath, she looked at me and, together, we shut our eyes and bit our lower lips. What next? What next?

A kid in greasy overalls burst into the restaurant. "Everybody out of here. Ken says it's gonna blow. Get down to the gully out back. Hurry."

I didn't know who Ken was. I still don't. But I sensed he knew what he was talking about.

"This way," our waitress announced, flagging everyone toward the kitchen. "It's faster."

The yellow-haired ladies were the first to go, their chicken fingers and beers in hand. We moved to follow, but Rachel would not budge.

The lights flickered, then died. The buzz of a generator kicked in and emergency lights flashed on, but a moment later it droned to a halt. Outside, the sunset turned to gray, the murkiness flooding through the windows.

"This is no time to play games," I said.

Rachel huddled in the corner of the booth. "I'm listening to the singing," she said.

"There is no singing, Rachel. The power is off. Come," I ordered.

She slid onto the floor and under the booth.

"I'm warning you, Rachel. Either you come out right now or --"

Kath shot me a glance, and I backed off. Kath knelt beside the table. "The man said we have to get out of the restaurant right away, Rachel. It's very dangerous to stay in here. Please come out from under there."

"No," she said. "I'm listening to the singing."

"Cripes!" I slammed the table and dropped to one knee beside Kath. "Enough is enough. You get the hell out from under there or I'm going to give you a spanking you'll never forget." I had never laid a hand on her, I wasn't even sure if she knew what a spanking was.

Rachel shook her head, defiant. She skittered under the adjacent booth and out the other side. She stood, and then we saw that someone was standing beside her.

"Catch her," I shouted. "Please!" Two hands reached down and Rachel was lifted above our sightline.

As we rose, a blue glow filled the restaurant, sublimating the gray. I figured the generator had started up again.

"Thank you," Kath began to say, but the words froze in her throat. She grabbed my arm. My legs began to tremble; I gripped a table for support. My heart raced toward cardiac arrest.

It was the woman from the beach. The woman of sand. Except, this time, she was real, her proportions human and her fragility unearthly radiant. She cradled Rachel in her arms, their faces cheek to cheek. More than anything, it was the resemblance between the two that stunned us, that told us all we dared imagine.

"Simply look the other way," she said. "When you turn around, we will be gone. That is the way it always happens. It is the best way," she said, her voice as serene as her manner.

Kath held her ground. "There is no way I am going to look the other way. If you don't put her down and let her go, I'm screaming for help."

"I am sorry," she said. "But as a sitter, you should never become too attached to the children you care for."

Kath attempted to step forward, but could not advance. "I am not a sitter. I am her mother."

"No," she said, her words hewed in stone, the edges sharp. "I am her mother."

"I bore her."

"Yes. But it was my egg and my seed," the woman said.

"She's mine," Kath cried.

"No. You were only caring for her until she was of age to join me. The people of your world serve us well in this regard. You are among the finest sitters in the galaxy. But the time has come -- as the alarms have clearly indicated -- and she belongs with her own. She is fit to travel."

"Alarms?" I asked, my voice cracking.

"The storm, the truck crash, the sea creature that killed your friend, among other things," she explained, her regret sincere. "I am particularly sorry about your friend, but we have no control. It comes from within the child. Once the alarm begins to function, it continues until the reunion. It is the only effective method we have to find and reclaim our children. Of course, I thank you both, but can offer you nothing more than that. You had your years with her. Remember them. Think fondly of them. Now it is my turn to enjoy her. Now look the other way," she said again. "When you turn around, we will be gone. That is the way it always happens. It is the best way, believe me."

"Please, Rachel, come to Mommy," Kath pleaded, her tears flowing, me helplessly beside her.

"I am with Mommy," Rachel answered.

The blue retreated from the room, withdrawing from the ceiling, walls and floor, shrinking aura-like to envelop only Rachel and the woman. Kath reached out. Rachel's fingers curled into a tiny wave.

All that remained was the emptiness.

When they questioned us, we told them everything we knew. "A lady in blue stole our daughter."

Funny how incidents that once seemed insignificant take on a whole new meaning.

The first time Rachel saw Disney's Pinocchio, she started screeching when the Blue Fairy came on screen. "Mommy! Mommy!" For a long while after that, I teased Kath, calling her the Blue Fairy.

Kath and I hung together for a year or so, but it came to pass that we could no longer face the day or each other.

Sometimes, I see Rachel's picture on the posters of missing children. Recently, computers updated her photo to show how she might appear today. Seems she's looking more and more like her mother.

I guess Paul got to me more than I realized. I've taken to writing stories now. Like this one. And that's pretty much what everybody thinks they are. Stories.

It is certainly safer this way.