



* * * *

The City in Morning

by Carrie Richerson

“The City in Morning” was first published in *Bending the Landscape: Science Fiction*, The Overlook Press, 1998.

Author’s Note: “I’ve been told often that landscape appears as a character all its own in most of my stories. Well, here I certainly made the City a character. Also, Mileva Maric, a Serb mathematician who was Albert Einstein’s first wife (and may have helped him with his theories; his letters to her refer to “our work on relative motion”), quantum physics, and the watershed political event of my generation.”

* * * *

TODAY, for the first time in weeks, the fog has lifted from the valley below and the city’s towers rise like silver and gold blades above the river’s bright blue swath. I stand in my garden, the morning’s icy dew soaking through my sneakers, surrounded by a vegetable certainty, and feel a familiar attraction. It has been a long time since I visited the city.

I pick a blushing pair of McIntoshes for my basket, then gather the last of the tomatoes. The green ones I will fry or pickle, but the last of the vine-ripened ones are dense, scarlet globes of infinite possibility, like Baby Bangs waiting to happen. My

teeth tear through the tender skin of one, and ruby juice explodes over my lips and trickles down through my beard. I am still picking seeds out of my chin hairs as I return to the house.

As I slice a tomato onto Donald's plate and freshen his coffee, he does not look up from the newspaper, but he is aware of my every move and his hand unerringly finds mine as I put his cup down. A quick squeeze and release, a smile of thanks, meant for me but directed at the newspaper.

I sit in the chair across from his and push the remains of my breakfast around on my plate. "It looks like it's going to be a nice day," I offer. Donald hums a question mark without lifting his eyes from the page. I will get his full attention when I say or do something that requires it, not before. I am not offended. I smile at the long, dark hair that spills unbound down his cheek and hides all but the profile of his long nose from me. I know the morning ritual; I find it comforting. After so many years together it is not necessary for us to speak aloud to say much.

I drain my cup and examine the sediments at the bottom. I wonder if coffee grounds can be used, like tea leaves, to tell the future. If so, is it a determinate one, or only one of many possible? A decision crystallizes, even as I realize I made it minutes ago. "I thought I might go into the city today. Is there anything you need?"

My voice is a shade too casual. For a moment longer Donald does not raise his head, but I see his nostril flare with a deep, silent breath. Then he looks at me at last, fastens his liquid, dark eyes upon my face and examines it as though memorizing every detail. He raises his hand, the strong, callused artist's fingers starting to reach for mine, then changes his mind and sweeps the hair back from his face instead. He wants to ask me not to go. I wait. His lips thin with the effort to hold back the words, but he does not ask. He knows that I would refuse his request, and then my refusal would lie like a dead thing between us, here at the table, at night in bed.

Finally he looks away from my sympathetic, unhelpful gaze. "Some pastels," he says, so softly that I have to strain to hear. "I'm almost out." He is sad, proud, a little angry, a little ashamed. He stares out the window and plays with his hair as I rinse my plate. I stop behind him on my way out of the room, gather the hair from his fingers and wind it into a loose braid. He does not move when I kiss the top of his head or when I leave the room, and when I walk to my truck a short time later, he is already at work in his studio. Through the window I can see him frowning fiercely over his latest drawing. There is a broad smear of something dark, charcoal or ink, down one cheek.

I follow gravity's curve down the mountainside and through foothills tawny like the flanks of patient beasts until I merge with the valley highway. Half a dozen miles later I leave the traffic behind as I take the exit that leads to the city. The truck speeds up, as though it too feels the force of attraction increase as the distance decreases.

The wide ribbon of concrete beneath my tires is still smooth, but weeds and wildflowers are beginning to encroach from the edges. The suburbs and housing developments that used to sprawl from the city's margins have been overgrown by a dense forest. Tree trunks sprout through broken roofs; mounds of kudzu blur the outlines of walls. At one point a stray beam of sunlight seems to ignite a pillar of flame. I look more closely, to see a skeletal chimney wound about with the blaze of trumpet vine in full bloom.

Eventually I emerge from the woods to the bank of the river, and park my truck at the end of the bridge. Only a handful of other vehicles are parked here today; some look like they have stood in the same spot for a long time. I heft my knapsack and stride out onto the great span. The concrete deck is pocked and crumbling, revealing twisted wads of corroded reinforcing steel. Beneath my hand the suspension cable is shaggy with rust; as I touch it a flake wider than my spread fingers, as thin as paper, breaks loose and slides riverward. I catch it on my fingertips. The colors are savage: reds like dried blood, space-dark blacks, yellows like bile. The city has given me my first present of the day. Donald will like the colors. I wrap the sheet carefully in my bandanna and sandwich it between the pages of my notebook.

A century and a half ago, when the city was established on what was then the frontier, its founders built on this spit of land between loops of the Kaddo for defense. It was a wise policy; throughout the bloody pacification campaigns, the city was never overrun by hostiles. As the city grew and became a center of commerce and industry, bridges for automobiles and the railroad, engineering marvels in steel and stone, reduced to insignificance the Kaddo's breadth and swift current. Now this is the only bridge into the city that still stands. Two others were washed away in the great floods of six years ago; a third bowed slowly to age until its span subsided under the waters without even a rusty squeal last summer. To the east the Kaddo is trying to cut itself a new channel across the base of the city's narrow land isthmus; soon the city's peninsula will be reduced to an island.

The bridge deposits me in the manufacturing district, what the city's residents used to call the Nail of the finger of land thrust out into the Kaddo. I walk past silent warehouses, the echoing caverns of machine shops. Once these proud foundries spoke the iron prose of industry and craft. Now all are shuttered, blind and sad. I peek inside one cavernous doorway. Indefinite, rusted shapes, a soft litter of crumbling papers sifting across the floor. Beside me a giant hook begins to sway slightly on its chains to some breeze I cannot feel. I move on quickly to the financial district.

From a distance, the city's sky-vaulting towers glow in the sunlight, but up close it is possible to see the rampant decay. I skirt sharp puddles of broken glass at the base of each tower. The city's skin is flaking off, bit by bit—a monstrous leprosy. Will a pane come plummeting earthward even as I stand here, to slice me in half or porcupine my body with exploding splinters? A shiver of delighted

apprehension worms through me.

Content to let the city reveal its mysteries at its own pace, I wander for hours through its silent precincts. In front of one office building I find an Italianate fountain hanging upside down in mid-air. It is filled with rose bushes, each covered with blooms of all hues of the spectrum, all growing earnestly downward as though it were the most natural thing in the world. The shadowed ground offers no clues, but when I walk beneath the fountain I feel the warmth of the sun on my face and feel dizzyingly inverted, until I exit smiling on the other side.

On one street I pass a cinema whose dusty marquee for years has advertised “Thurs: Mourning Becomes Electra.” Now the letters have been cleaned and rearranged to promote a triple bill of “Rebecca,” “The Sting,” and “Rumours.” From the open vestibule doors wafts the buttery smell of fresh popcorn.

And in front of a crumbling apartment complex taken over by a troop of macaques, I watch a grizzled female solemnly demonstrating the six simple machines to the attentive tribe. In the cracked dirt of a flowerbed a youngling is idly tracing a diagram of Pythagoras’s theorem.

Later, turning onto a boulevard, I find that all the pavement has been replaced by lush, emerald grass. Hundreds of impossibly white sheep look up, all at once, and stop chewing to stare at me. In the center of the flock someone (something?), too tall to be human, too bright to see clearly, unfolds itself and stands, and looks at me—and that burning gaze punches a hole through the air to where I stand and knocks me to my knees, and I know that if I do not cover my face RIGHT NOW I will surely die, and so I cover it, but oh!—how I wish I had looked back! And when I uncover my eyes again, there is only pavement, and broken buildings, and waste.

There are few signs of human visitation. Once a yellowing newspaper hurls itself over a curb and grapples with my feet. As it tumbles away I recognize a picture from last month’s crisis in the Far East. And once, turning a corner, I spot a figure striding away from me, two blocks down. I shout and wave; he or she stops, looks back, and lifts an arm in greeting, then turns the corner. When I reach the same corner, moments later, there is no one in sight.

Eventually I come, as all pilgrims must, to the edge of the great plaza at the city’s heart. Above the plaza a flock of pigeons, silent except for the rattle of their wings, ceaselessly circles, never landing. A young man who looks to be in his late twenties is sitting shirtless on the sun-warmed curb and tossing a pebble from hand to hand. He bears the Equations of Universal Love tattooed into the skin of his back. For a moment I let my eyes caress the muscular curve of trapezius and deltoid, and my groin twinges with a familiar longing for Donald, but it is the Equations that compel me closer. Reflexively I try to solve them, but, as always, I cannot make the math work. I drop down beside the boy to rest my weary legs and catch my breath.

“It happened right over there,” he says without preamble, catching the stone in

one hand and pointing with the other to the fountain at the plaza's center. "I saw it." He looks at me sidelong, to see if I believe him.

Next to this youth, I feel ancient, though I am scarcely past forty. I wonder what he thinks of my receding hairline and my advancing paunch. I peer at him over my bifocals and wonder if he expects me to make a pass, but I am hungrier for his history than for his body. "Tell me," I say.

"I was four years old. My father put me on his shoulders so I could see over the crowd. The people were so thick in the plaza, her escort couldn't make a path to the hall where she was to address the delegates. So she stood up on the rim of the fountain and gave her speech right there.

"I can't remember everything she said. Oh, it's in the history books, but I mean the sound, the feel of the words. I was too young. Mostly I was fascinated by the way her long, white hair blew in the wind, until she grabbed it and held it back, and by the way she wasn't pretty, not the way we all thought she was on TV. There were wrinkles on her cheeks and smile lines around her eyes, and frown lines in her forehead. But she was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, other than my mother. I wanted so much to tell her I loved her.

"Maybe she knew. She was looking straight into my eyes when the shot hit her. I saw that bloody hole grow in among the frown lines, and half her head come spraying off the back, before I even heard the shot. Before any of us heard the shot. I turned my head, and the guy who did was right next to us. I could have reached out and touched him. Could have reached out and knocked the gun down if I had just seen it in time. I pointed at him and screamed 'Here he is!' The crowd just went wild. By the time the police fought their way through to him, there wasn't a piece of him larger than my hand.

"And no one could look his neighbor in the eye. I couldn't even look at my dad. Everyone just turned and walked home, like we were sleepwalking."

I nod my acknowledgement of the young man's story, and he hands me the egg-shaped pebble. I feel the warmth his hands have given to the smooth surface as it nestles into my palm. Absently I begin to roll the stone between my fingers, just as he did, as I tell my own story.

I was far from the plaza on the day the Speaker was killed. And older than this young man; I was a sophomore in high school. School had not been let out for the day, but most teachers had planned a special lesson to tie in with the Speaker's visit to the city. In history class we had reviewed the dangerous superpower jockeying and countless brushwars of the last twenty years. In economics we talked about the once-routine famines in undeveloped countries, and the cycles of inflation and recession that had stifled the march toward prosperity for all. And in government class we discussed the traditional causes of revolution and anarchy: poverty, powerlessness, racism, classism.

I was in physics class when the Speaker's motorcade whisked her through city streets lined with cheering crowds. My teacher, a stern but fair man responsible for drilling the mysteries of quantum mechanics into his wide-eyed charges, set that day aside for an introduction to the Speaker's revolutionary work, the brilliant Unified Theory of the Propositions for Peace and Justice. Outside the open window a glorious May morning burned blue and yellow; birds sang as though their music re-created the world each moment. As I watched my teacher copy the Theorem for Prosperity on the blackboard, I could begin to understand the magnitude of the miracle this woman—"Dr. Mileva" to her devoted students; known to the rest of an adoring world by the media's punning sobriquet "The Speaker for Life"—had fashioned. No more war, no more poverty, no more suffering. The keys to the conquest of disease, disaster, even perhaps death itself, had been revealed in these elegant mathematics.

I was not there in the plaza to see how the Speaker laughingly gave up her attempt to cross to the auditorium and climbed up on the fountain instead. Later I watched the films, saw her haul her husband Albert up beside her. (A famous physicist in his own right, but she had built upon his work and surpassed it.) Saw how they had come to resemble each other so much over the years, an old married couple, the same wild white hair and sad-merry-wise eyes. Saw him beam at her in fond pride as she began to address the crowd.

I've never been able to watch the films all the way to the end.

My teacher was halfway through his proof when some motion we could not feel, some sound we could not hear, rippled through the classroom. We looked at one another in confusion. The teacher turned back to the board. But he frowned at the line he had just written, erased it, started again, frowned at that, erased again, stepped back with a look of bafflement. The mathematics simply would not resolve. The theorem was unprovable.

It was then that a choked voice I scarcely recognized as the principal's made the announcement over the loudspeaker. I remember as if it were yesterday the shocked looks on my classmates' faces, and how my teacher burst into tears. I remember how empty I felt, how I wandered in a daze for hours after school let out early, how I came home at last to a silent, stricken house in a silent, stricken neighborhood.

But I cannot remember the mathematics.

I turn to the young man as I make this last point. There is no one there. Perhaps there never was. The egg-shaped pebble grows cold in my hand. I place it carefully upon the curb. Above my head the pigeons, frightened into eternal flight by a single gunshot twenty-five years ago, orbit like the cosmic detritus of a planetary cataclysm.

I stand and look across the paving stones at the fountain. I trust the city with

my life; I do not trust the city at all. It is, I suppose, very like one's relationship with God. Or quantum theory.

I step forward onto the first paver. Beneath my foot the solid rock turns to the consistency of porridge and I sink to the depth of my calf. I hold still, try not to panic. After a minute the porridge pushes my foot out and firms up again. It could as easily have turned back to stone with my foot still inside.

I step, and the next paver tilts underfoot, rotating to slam into my ankle. The pain brings tears to my eyes and I stumble. The city is punishing me, making me hurt as it has hurt for so long. I want to curse but I don't dare.

Eventually I am able to shuffle forward. Perhaps the city has tired of tormenting me. Then, as my foot descends toward the next paver, it disappears. There is nothing there to take my weight, only a sky-reflecting void. Like God, I think, and do the only thing I can: I accept, accept the blankness beneath my descending foot, the reflective void at the heart of the universe. I am all acceptance, open and unrefusing. And my foot shocks down onto the solidity of stone, rising to meet it like a great fish through dark water.

There are no more tests. I make it to the long-dormant fountain and sit down on the rim. On the concrete beside me, amid pale, rusty stains, sits a box of drawing pastels. The silken-smooth sides of the chalks gleam in the morning sunlight like the cheeks of the apples I leave in their place. Like the tears on my own cheeks as I weep, here in the only place where I can cry.

On some of my trips into the city I have crossed paths with a psychiatrist, someone who is as fascinated by this place as I am. He has made the city his study, and it is his diagnosis that the city is suffering from a traumatic psychosis, induced by the paroxysm of violence it witnessed on the day of the assassination. It feels both responsible and helpless, and has avoided resolving the conflict by retreating into delusions, delusions powerful enough it can even make its few visitors share them. He wants to cure the city of its "antisocial behaviors" so its residents can return and take up normal life again.

The psychiatrist is a very dangerous man. He cannot, he *must not*, succeed.

These manifestations are not delusions. They are as real as the world we once knew and have had taken from us. On a bright spring day a quarter-century ago we lost our fixed observer, the one who, by observing, had created our existence from an infinity of possibilities. Morality—like time, mass, and distance—became relative; the future, highly uncertain. Now, instead of the calculus of compassion, we are left with Albert's calculations of destruction. Instead of peace and justice, prosperity and brotherhood, we have wars and rumors of wars, terrorism, voodoo economics, conspiracy theories.

Hope died that day in the plaza, a vision of a future worth having. But in some Diracian universe it still exists, free of grief and shame, and the city, like a quantum

computer operating on a vast Hilbert space, sorts through the infinite possibilities, looking for the right one. And I, who for twenty-five years have been neither dead nor alive, neither particle nor wave—I wait for the city to make the mathematics work again, to collapse the wave function and provide me with its one, true solution.

Halfway across the crumbling bridge, I walk out of the city's frozen spring mourning into the chill gloom of an autumn evening. I take away a box of pastels and a flake of metal that even now I can hear pinging to dust in my knapsack. And a longing, like entropy's arrow, lodged too near to my heart.

Someday I will slip across its Schwarzschild radius and give myself completely to the depths of the city's singularity. My truck will grow a layer of rust at the end of the bridge, and I will disappear over the event horizon that defined my generation. Donald will stare into the blazing heart of the valley until his eyes burn and tear, but all his love will not be able to pull me back.

The city will not have to reach far to claim me. I am already one of its ghosts.

* * * *

EPILOGUE: In his brilliant work *The City and the Conscience of a World*, the noted psychiatrist Bernard Hanks reports finding the following graffito inscribed in pastel chalk on the side of one of the city's buildings:

Joke making the rounds at a convention of quantum physicists:

Q: Have you got Copenhagen in a can?

A: Open it and find out.