

# POST TOAST

by  
SPIDER ROBINSON

Jake Stonebender, proprietor of Mary's Place (spiritual successor to Callahan's Place), has been making music with Zoey and Fast Eddie for over an hour, and his fingers are shot. "Tom," he calls out to the man behind the stick, "Bring me a double!"

Tom Hauptman grins. "Sure thing, Boss," he says. Then, oddly, he turns on his heel and leaves the room, walks through the bead curtain into the back – into Jake and Zoey's living quarters. Jake stares after him in puzzlement.

A moment later Tom emerges with a companion. Tall, unreasonably thin, long of hair and reasonably sanitary of beard, thick glasses, Beatle boots, otherwise clad in an odd mixture of L.L. Bean and The Gap, with long fingers, a splendid guitar around his neck and a vaguely alarming gleam in his eye. He is, in short, a reasonable facsimile of Jake.

"You DID ask for a double," Tom says, straightfaced, and the bar bursts into thunderous laughter and applause.

"Spider Robinson!" Jake cries. "By da t'underin' Jesus, it's good to see you, mate!"

"Right back at you, bro," says Spider. "Hi Zoey. Hi, Eddy -- Doc -- Drink -- everybody..."

There is a merry rumble of welcome. "What brings you back to Long Island, pal?" Long-Drink McGonnigle calls out. "If you don't mind my asking," he adds hastily, as Fast Eddie stirs on his piano stool.

"I came to give you all a speech, and a toast, and a song," Spider says solemnly, and a respectful silence falls. Tom Hauptman is already pouring the Bushmills 1608. Spider takes it, walks around the bar and strides up to the chalk line on the floor, faces the crackling hearth. He holds up his shot and looks through it at the fire for a long moment, seems lost in thought. Then he lowers it, untasted, and turns to the assembled witnesses.

"As most of you know," he says, "I come from what Admiral Bob calls a different 'fiction' -- a different dimension, a different reality -- than this one. My reality is adjacent to and congruent to and very similar to yours, but different. For example, in the 1996 that I come from, the Beatles just put out two new singles."

(rumbles of astonishment and profound envy from all sides)

"With help from Mike Callahan, I visit this fiction once every few years, and get Jake there stoned, and transmute what he tells me about you into stories that I publish as science fiction back in my own fiction. I get to support a family without owning a necktie, and Jake gets the free reefer and someone to listen to him talk: like breastfeeding, the relationship is mutually satisfactory, so much that it has endured for two dozen years.

"So in my fiction, there are a lot of people who have the preposterous idea that I INVENTED all of you, that you are all just figments and figwoments of my imagination. To be honest, I haven't done much to dissuade them -- because anybody who could think up people like YOU rummies would have to be one hell of a story-teller."

(sounds of raucous agreement from the patrons)

"Well, I recently learned that, to humble me, God created yet another fiction, which is adjacent and congruent and similar to my own, yet different -- called USENET -- and in THAT fiction, some people seem to have the idea that Spider Robinson is a fictional character THEY invented. They're apparently engaged in rewriting me as I speak, patting me into shape. I only recently got the word: some of them hipped me, and kept it up 'till I finally heard them.

"I'm not complaining: it serves me right. Talk about poetic justice! And they're not even doing a bad job, so far, if you ask me: they actually make me sound pretty interesting. Did you know, for instance, that Robert Heinlein once saved my life? I hadn't..."

"But I didn't come here to boast. I came here to tell you all that the seed you used me to plant in my

fiction has metastasized...to another.

"The denizens of this world called USENET, see, were kind of like Jubal Harshaw's proverbial editor and his soup. Having invented a sci-fi writer named Spider, they decided they liked some of his stories enough to make them real. So, 7 or 8 years ago, they did.

"That's right, jadies and gentlemen: they whipped up their own Callahan's Place, out of thin air! It's called alt.callahans..."

(a ROAR of astonishment and confusion and glee and outrage and disbelief...which finally morphs into a long rolling wave of laughter...followed by another...and another)

"Now, I know what many of you want to hear about. You want me to tell you all the countless little ways their Callahan's Place is different from the one you lot used to drink in, and from Mary's Place here. And there are a lot of differences, and maybe we can talk about them another time. But the things I want to tell you first -- the most important things -- are the ways their Callahan's Place is LIKE yours."

"Do they make rotten puns there?" Doc Webster calls.

"Do dey make music dere?" Fast Eddie asks.

"Do they drink there?" Long-Drink bellows.

"Do they smash their glasses in the fireplace?" Tommy Janssen asks, and the rumble of the crowd indicates that he has come closest so far to a good question.

"None of that is really important," Jake Stonebender says, meeting Spider's eye. "What about the IMPORTANT stuff, Spider? Did they get THAT right?"

The room falls silent.

Slowly, enjoying the suspense, Spider lets his poker face relax into a crooked smile.

"As far as I can tell, they DID, Jake. At alt.callahans they believe that shared pain is diminished, and that shared joy is increased, just like here. They believe that a snoopy question merits a mild concussion. They help the ones that hurt and make merry with the ones that don't."

(stunned silence in Mary's Place)

"They care about one another, there, 24-7. They don't make any magical claims, but they seem to have compassion by the carload, and they value kindness over hipness. And they use a system of communication that's startlingly like the telepathy you folks are shooting for here. Oh, there's a social disease rampant in their world with a horrid symptom called 'flaming' -- but they suffer far less from it than just about anywhere else in their fiction. First-time visitors are not called the 'n-word' there, for instance, as is customary elsewhere. Just like here, alt.callahans seems to be a place where it's All Right To Be Bright, where it's All Right To Be Dull, where it's all right to be any damn thing at all except a pain in the ass. You know the Invisible Protective Shield around this place? The magic force field that keeps out the bikers and dealers and predators and drinking alcoholics and kids looking to raise hell? Well, they've got one too, called a Sysop.

"And yes, they make exceedingly rotten puns there. And some splendid music. And they tell toxic jokes. Don't tell anybody, but I've already pinched a couple."

Doc Webster clears his throat. "Uh...how big a joint are we talking about, Spiderman?"

Spider grins. "Nobody knows. This USENET fiction is a truly weird universe, a snake's orgy of nodes and channels and webs and threads, and as far as I know there is no truly accurate census, and alt.callahans runs all through it like kudzu...and branches off from there to ANOTHER fiction called -- you won't believe this one! -- The Web. But the best guess I heard was, well in excess of 61,000 people are regular patrons. It's said to be in the top one percent of bars there, by size, and furthermore to be damn near the only one in the top two percent that doesn't have topless bottomless waitresses and a live donkey show. THIS Callahan's Place probably couldn't be destroyed by FIFTY nukes, all going off at once."

(a vast collective intake of breath nearly extinguishes the fire in the hearth)

"Put it this way," Spider says. "In January of 1995 -- their 1995 -- these people exchanged more words than I have written about you bozos in two dozen years of doing so for my living. Six and a half MEGABYTES."

"What kind of words?" Jake asks.

Spider nods. "Good question. I reached into a pile of their traffic at random and pulled out a message. Someone I didn't know was talking to someone else I didn't know, who was in the end stage of leukemia. He said, 'You are about to go on a wonderful journey through space and time with Mike Callahan and the gang.' He said, 'I envy you the trip.' He said, 'Save me a seat by the hearth, my friend...' He...I...it was..." Spider falls silent. His jaw muscles ripple, and he pokes around behind his glasses with a knuckle. "Five deaths, so far," he manages. "And some births... and God knows how many weddings..." He shakes his head. "And some of the WORST goddam jokes I ever..."

"Hully fuckin Jesus Christ, WE DONE IT!" Fast Eddie cries.

"We broke the membrane," Suzy Maser murmurs, thunderstruck.

"Through the Looking Glass..." her co-wife Suzi breathes.

"Spider's right," Doc Webster rumbles. "We've metastasized."

"We're loose among the fictions," Long-Drink McGonnigle says with most uncharacteristic sobriety. "We're fucking literally out of this world!"

"All that pain diminishing," Zoey says softly.

"All dat joy increasin," Fast Eddie adds just as softly.

Jake, with the air of someone quoting scripture, says, "'God,' he cries, dying on Mars, 'we made it!'" and everyone in the room (recognizing the tagline of a Theodore Sturgeon story famous in nearly every fiction) nods.

Suddenly a spontaneous ovation occurs, a consensual roar of joy and glee and hope and pride that rocks the rafters, shakes the walls, rattles the glasses behind the bar and makes a cloud of sawdust rise from the floor. People fall on each other and hug and laugh and sob and pound each other's back and pour beer over one another.

Jake and Tom were off the mark the instant it began, from sheer instinct, and barely in time: as the blizzard of empty glasses begins to fall on the fireplace, they are busy passing out full ones.

Which reminds everybody that Spider said he has a toast to make. Which reminds them that maybe Spider has more on his mind than just making them feel good. Slowly, hesitantly, the noise dwindles, until the room is more or less silent again.

"So," Zoey says, "how do YOU feel about all this, Spider? If you don't mind my asking?"

"Well," Spider says slowly, "I came here tonight because I didn't know the answer to that myself. I figured one of you would probably ask me sooner or later, and I know I can't lie to one of you, so I expected to get my answer here...and I have. The answer is, it beats the living shit out of me."

"What do you THINK of the joint?" Long-Drink asks.

"Dunno, Drink. I've never been there in my life."

"Jump back!" the Drink says. "Why not?"

"Well, basically, you need a good Fiction-Twister to get there. A Fiction-Twister is a highly evolved descendant of the typewriter, and the one I own after twenty-three years of writing science fiction for a living just isn't powerful enough to pierce the membrane, as the Doc puts it. I couldn't get to USENET if I walked all day. The data I was given about alt.callahans amount to a time-lapse film of a couple of years that takes half an hour to watch: you can't evaluate a place on evidence like that."

"But what's your first impression?" Zoey prods. "How does it make you FEEL?"

Spider is slow to answer. Slowly it dawns on those present that for the first time in memory, Spider Robinson is having difficulty finding the right words.

"I feel," he says finally, "like a man who's just learned that he has a grown son he never knew existed, by a lady long-forgotten...no, a whole HERD of grown children, with grown grandchildren with kids of their own. He can't claim the privileges of paternity, because he only meant to entertain the lady, and he wasn't there when the diapers were full, or the tuition was due -- but nonetheless he feels warm and proud, whether he has any real right to or not."

Jake and Zoey exchange a glance. "I...put it this way: I feel less useless than usual, lately."

"Does it bother you that some of them don't seem to know you from Adam's off ox -- or care?" Merry Moore asks.

Spider grins. "That part fucking DELIGHTS me. The only kind of church I'd be willing to duck into

to get out of a driving rain would be one where some of the congregation are a little vague on the Prophet's actual name, and it's all right to call him an asshole out loud, but the goddam DOCTRINE itself somehow got preserved. I would rather those people remember 'Shared pain is lessened; shared joy is increased; thus do we refute entropy' than remember the name of the first idiot to say it. My interest in being worshipped approaches zero...from BENEATH." He looks thoughtful, and sights through his untouched drink at the dancing flames again. "I admit I do feel just a tad like Moses, camped outside a suburb of the Promised Land, watching his name get misspelled in the history books." Suddenly he giggles and lowers his glass, rescued as always by his sense of humour. "Then again, that happens in my OWN books, sometimes."

"Hell, Spider," Jake says, "I got an idea. You say somebody there hipped you to the place. So you can send them a letter, right?"

"Yeah, sort of. I can e-mail folks who can pass the file through the membrane."

"So why don't you write and tell them all about your next Tor Books hardcover about us, CALLAHAN'S LEGACY? You know, the one about the night Buck Rogers walked in and started setting hundred dollar bills on fire. Or tell 'em about the hardcover omnibus of your first three Callahan books that Tor will bring out shortly after that. Hell, tell them about the complete list of your books posted in the Compuserve SFLit Forum. If that many people bought a book or two apiece, you could afford a better Ficton-Twister, right?"

Spider shrugs. "I'd like to, Jake. For one thing, I hear there's some confusion over there about the NON-Callahanian book that just came out, the Baen paperback called DEATHKILLER; I'd like to tell them it's a combined reissue of 2 related out-of-print novels called MINDKILLER and TIME PRESSURE, slightly revised and updated; and I'd love to explain to them how the story "God Is An Iron" originally grew to become the former of those, and why both books BELONG together; and I'd like to let them know that I'm presently working on a third novel in that ficton called LIFEHOUSE. I could mention the computer- game version of Callahan's Place coming soon for PC and Mac from Legend Entertainment. I might even remind them that anyone in the world who wants to bother can, for less than the cost of a single hardcover, become a nonattending member of the World SF Convention, and nominate and vote for the annual Hugo Award, thereby strongly influencing the course of modern sf and the income of the winning writers...and that even a man with three Hugos could always use a few more. (Ask my friend Harlan.) But there are two problems...

"First, they might take all that for an attempt to 'post a commercial message on USENET.' This violates a stringent ficton-wide taboo, roughly equivalent to defecating in public after ingesting a prune stew, and punishable by 'public flaming' (which I will not describe, but I hear it's worse than public phlegming) and 'spamming' (enough said).

"And second of all, even if they WANT to hear about that stuff... suppose I DID clear enough to buy myself a Ficton-Twister that'll run System 7, and a whole new whack of compatible software...pardon me, I mean, 'enough magic'...why, if that happened, I'd feel obliged to visit alt.callahans with my new rig and say thanks, and then they'd all know my interworld address. Have you ever tried to answer mail from 61,000 people?"

(a rumble of apprehension as the magnitude of Spider's problem begins to dawn)

"Even if one percent of 'em were interested enough to bother," he goes on, "that's enough man-hours to eat up all the profit 61,000 sales would bring in, right there. Say I only hear from one TENTH of one percent, and not one of those is a chump: 61 interesting letters a day. The nicest form-response I could design would disappoint or offend many of them -- and that's not even the problem.

"The problem is that I would LOVE to answer each one personally and at length, spend every waking minute of every working day chatting with friendly strangers who believe that shared pain is lessened and shared joy is increased, who like to swap compassion and villainous puns, who tolerate the weird, who help each other through real life and real death...and who in many cases happen to be familiar with and/or friendly toward my lifework. I had a friend once named Milligram Mulligan -- surely dead, by now -- who said that the first time he heard the TERM 'speed freak,' before he had any idea what that lifestyle entailed, he knew It Was Him. Well, the drug alt.callahans was designed to mate perfectly with

my own endorphin receptors. I can easily see myself disappearing up my own anus, (virtually) partying away the hours...

"...and never publishing another fucking word. Not the Callahan/Lady Sally/Mary's Place stuff, and not the other fifty percent of what I write, alone and with Jeanne, which is just as good and just as important to me -- and hopefully to some percentage of the literate public.

"Even worse, the problem is not limited to USENET. My sister-in-law Dolly tells me ANOTHER Callahan's Place, smaller but just as cool, recently coalesced in a fiction called AOL...

"I hear the Siren call, and my heart aches to heed it...but I have a family to feed, and rent to pay, and debt to service, and a deep primordial completely eco-irresponsible compulsion not to rest until the last tree on my earth has been hacked down, sliced into strips, and stained with graffiti of my composition. Gaea forgive me..."

"I'm a vegetarian, myself," Long-Drink remarks. "I don't give a damn about animals." He grins sadistically. "But I HATE plants..."

Ignoring him magnificently, Jake says, "Then there's only one thing to do, Spider."

Spider looks alert. (One of his better impressions.)

Zoey says it for her old man. "You gotta write them one long letter, with no return address. You gotta tell 'em that you love 'em and that you're grateful to 'em and that you wish 'em all well. Tell 'em they make you feel proud and humble and awed and gratified all at the same time, and make sure they know they're never gonna be far from your thoughts as long as you live...and maybe ask 'em while they're busy rewriting you to remember that you always tried to be kind to your characters."

(sustained rumble of agreement, at which Spider blushes)

"And you gotta tell them," Tanya Latimer says, "that WE love them, too, and that we thank them for making us all feel just a little bit less superfluous...for making us feel that all our struggles and trials have been WORTH something, have MEANT something...even if it's only to people in another world. I don't know about anybody else here, but I -- " She catches herself. "No, I DO know about everybody else here. We're all gonna sleep GOOD tonight..."

(louder rumble of agreement)

"You have to tell them everything you just told us," Doc Webster said, "and make them a quick toast or two...and then tap-dance out the door and go back to work."

(rumble graduates to table-thumping)

"He's right," Jake calls. "Hell, you don't visit US more than every other year or so, and you're always gone as soon as you fill up a floppy. And God knows you're always welcome when you do show. You're the kind of pal, it's okay if a few years slip by."

(thumping becomes cheer)

Spider stands a little straighter, and for a moment looks both older and younger than 47. "Thank you, Jake. Thank you all. As it happens, your advice is exactly my plan." He produces a tape recorder from thin air. "All this is going to be transcribed and sent to alt.callahans, along with a sample chapter from CALLAHAN'S LEGACY. I just felt like it was time I connected you both, this fiction and that one, directly -- if only by proxy. It's a pity Solace is gone, or she could have put you in realtime contact. She was a fiction very much like USENET herself...well, anyway, the job is done, so the only thing left to do is make my toast, and then -- by way of thanking you and them for letting me pull on your coat-tail so long -- to play you all out with a song."

For the first time, he lifts his glass of Bushmill's, and every glass, mug, flask and jelly jar in the room rises in unison with it.

The silence is total.

"To all the Callahan's Places there ever were or ever will be," Spider Robinson says, "whatever they may be called -- and to all the merry maniacs and happy fools who are fortunate enough to stumble into one: may none of them arrive too late!" And he drains his 1608 in a single draught, and hurls his glass into the precise center of the hearth, where it explodes with a sound rather like a Macintosh booting up.

"TO ALL THE CALLAHAN'S PLACES!" everyone in the room choruses, and the fireplace begins to feel like Jupiter did when Shoemaker-Levy came to visit...

"Wait, one more," Spider calls. "To the guy who found a manuscript called 'The Guy With The Eyes' in the Analog slushpile back in 1972, and decided to buy it, and mentor its author -- to one of the best sf writers working today: Ben Bova, without whom all of this would not have been necessary..."

And another roar goes up from the throng. "TO BEN BOVA!"

And Spider, his hands both free now, slings his guitar back up into combat configuration. "Now I'll just sing you this quick one and go. Jeanne was out of town for a few weeks, and I missed her, so I wanted to write her a love song. The problem was, we've been married twenty years now: there just ISN'T any way to say 'I love you' that I haven't used already, often. So I produced a song called 'Belaboring The Obvious.'

He hits a bluesy A6 chord, and begins to sing...and one can't help but sense the words are more than a little apropos to Spider's situation in all THREE fictions:

## BELABORING THE OBVIOUS

by

Spider Robinson

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I want to tell you how I feel, love  
But it ain't exactly news  
Got no secrets to reveal love  
But I'm gonna say it anyway,  
'cause I'm alone and you're away  
I haven't got a blessed thing to lose...

(so here goes:)

Water ain't dry, the sky goes up high,  
And a booger makes pretty poor glue  
You can't herd cats, bacteria don't wear hats  
-- and I love you

Sugar ain't sour, bread's good with flour  
And murder's a mean thing to do  
Trees got wood, and fuckin' is pretty good  
-- and I love you

Yeah, I'm belaboring the obvious:  
You will have noticed all the good times  
This is as practical an exercise  
As taping twenty cents to my transmission  
so that any time I want to  
I can shift my pair o' dimes...

(but God knows:)

Goats don't vote, and iron don't float  
And a hippy don't turn down boo  
Dog bites man, the teacher don't understand  
-- and I love you

Sickness sucks, it's nice to have bucks

And the player on first base is Who  
Kids grow up, most fellows pee standing up  
-- and I love you

Guess I didn't need to say it  
Just a message that my heart sent  
And I kinda like the way it's  
More redundant than is absolutely  
necessary thanks to the Department  
of Redundancy Department...  
(Division of Unnecessary Repetition and Pointless Redundancy Division)

(I must lose:)

Fun is nice, you can't fry ice,  
And the money will always be due  
Bullshit stinks, and noone outsits the Sphinx  
-- and I love you

Livin' ain't bad, and dyin' is sad  
And little we know is true  
But that's our karma-- baby, you can bet the farm  
On this: I DO love you.

And with that, weeping with joy and giggling with sorrow, Spider vanishes back to what he calls reality (what a kidder, that guy), and to his best friend and co-author and oh yes, wife, Jeanne, and their sweet daughter Terri, and life goes on at Mary's Place.

And at alt.callahans, may their shadows be always bent at the elbow...

And in

-- Vancouver, B.C.  
24 March 1996