

THE WISDOM OF OLD EARTH

by Michael Swanwick

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Judith Seize-the-Day was, quite simply, the best of her kind. Many another had aspired to the clarity of posthuman thought, and several might claim some rude mastery of its essentials, but she alone came to understand it as completely as any offworlder.

Such understanding did not come easily. The human mind is slow to generalize and even slower to integrate. It lacks the quicksilver apprehension of the posthuman. The simplest truth must be repeated often to imprint even the most primitive understanding of what comes naturally and without effort to the space-faring children of humanity. Judith had grown up in Pole Star City, where the shuttles slant down through the zone of permanent depletion in order to avoid further damage to the fragile ozone layer, and thus from child-hood had associated extensively with the highly evolved. It was only natural that as a woman she would elect to turn her back on her own brutish kind and strive to bootstrap-herself into a higher order.

Yet even then she was like an ape trying to pass as a philosopher. For all her laborious ponderings, she did not yet comprehend the core wisdom of posthumanity, which was that thought and action must be as one. Being a human, how-ever, when she did comprehend, she understood it more deeply and thoroughly than the posthumans themselves. As a Canadian, she could tap into the ancient and chthonic wis-doms of her race. Where her thought went, the civilized mind could not follow.

It would be expecting too much of such a woman that she would entirely hide her contempt for her own kind. She cursed the two trollish Ninglanders who were sweating and chopping a way through the lush tangles of kudzu, and drove them onward with the lash of her tongue.

"Unevolved bastard pigs!" she spat. "Inbred degener-ates! If you ever want to get home to molest your dogs and baby sisters again, you'll put your backs into it!"

The larger of the creatures looked back at her with an angry gleam in his eye, and his knuckles whitened on the hilt of his machete. She only grinned humorlessly, and parted the holster of her *ankh*. Such weapons were rarely allowed humans. Her possession of it was a mark of the great respect in which she was held.

The brute returned to his labor.

It was deepest winter, and the jungle tracts of what had once been the mid-Atlantic coastlands were traversable. Traversable, that is, if one had a good guide. Judith was among the best. She had brought her party alive to the Flying Hills of southern Pennsylvania, and not many could have done that. Her client had come in search of the fabled bell of liberty, which many another party had sought in vain. She did not believe he would find it either. But that did not concern her.

All that concerned her was their survival.

So she cursed and drove the savage Ninglanders before her, until all at once they broke through the vines and brush out of shadow and into a clearing.

All three stood unmoving for an instant, staring out over the clumps and hillocks of grass that covered the foundations of what had once been factories, perhaps, or workers' housing, gasoline

distribution stations, grist mills, shopping malls. . . . Even the skyline was uneven. Mystery beckoned from every ambiguous lump.

It was almost noon. They had been walking since sun-down.

Judith slipped on her goggles and scanned the gray skies for navigation satellites. She found three radar beacons within range. A utility accepted their input and calculated

her position: less than a hundred miles from Philadelphia. They'd made more distance than she'd expected. The empathic function mapped for her the locations of her party: three, including herself, then one, then two, then one, strung over a mile and a half of trail. That was wrong.

Very wrong indeed.

"Pop the tents," she ordered, letting the goggles fall around her neck. "Stay out of the food."

The Ninglanders dropped their packs. One lifted a refrigeration stick over his head like a spear and slammed it into the ground. A wash of cool air swept over them all. His lips curled with pleasure, revealing broken yellow teeth.

She knew that if she lingered, she would not be able to face the oppressive jungle heat again. So, turning, Judith strode back the way she'd come. Rats scattered at her approach, disappearing into hot green shadow.

The first of her party she encountered was Harry Work-to-Death. His face was pale and he shivered uncontrollably. But he kept walking, because to stop was to die. They passed each other without a word. Judith doubted he would live out the trip. He had picked up something after their disastrous spill in the Hudson. There were opiates enough in what survived of the medical kit to put him out of his misery, but she did not make him the offer.

She could not bring herself to.

Half a mile later came Leeza Child-of-Scorn and Maria Triumph-of-the-Will, chattering and laughing together. They stopped when they saw her. Judith raised her *ankh* in the air, and shook it so that they could feel its aura scrape ever so lightly against their nervous systems.

"Where is the offworlder?" The women shrank from her anger. "You abandoned him. You *dared*. Did you think you could get away with it? You were fools if you did!"

Wheedlingly, Leeza said, "The sky man knew he was endangering the rest of us, so he asked to be left behind." She and Maria were full-blooded Canadians, like Judith, free of the taint of Southern genes. They had been hired for their intelligence, and intelligence they had—a low sort of animal cunning that made them dangerously unreliable when the going got hard. "He insisted."

"It was very noble of him," Maria said piously.

"I'll give you something to be noble about if you don't turn around and lead me back to where you left him." She holstered her *ankh*, but did not lock it down. "Now!" With blows of her fists, she forced them down the trail. Judith was short, stocky, all muscle. She drove them before her like the curs that they were.

The offworlder lay in the weeds where he had been dropped, one leg twisted at an odd angle. The litter that Judith had lashed together for him had been flung into the bushes.

His clothes were bedraggled, and the netting had pulled away from his collar. But weak as he was, he smiled to see her. "I knew you would return for me." His hands fluttered up in a gesture indicating absolute confidence. "So I was careful to avoid moving. The fracture will have to be reset. But that's well within your capabilities, I'm sure."

"I haven't lost a client yet." Judith unlaced his splint and carefully straightened the leg. Posthumans, spending so much of their time in microgravity environments, were significantly less robust than their ancestral stock. Their bones broke easily. Yet when she reset the femur and tied up the splint again with lengths of nylon cord, he didn't make a sound. His kind had conscious control over their endorphin production. Judith checked his neck for ticks and chiggers, then tucked in his netting. "Be more careful with this. There are a lot of ugly diseases loose out here."

"My immune system is stronger than you'd suspect. If the rest of me were as strong, I wouldn't be holding you back like this."

As a rule, she liked the posthuman women better than their men. The men were hothouse

flowers—flighty, elliptical, full of fancies and elaboration. Their beauty was the beauty of a statue; all sculptured features and chill affect. The off-worlder, however, was not like that. His look was direct. He was as solid and straightforward as a woman.

"While I was lying here, I almost prayed for a rescue party."

To God, she thought he meant. Then saw how his eyes lifted briefly, involuntarily, to the clouds and the satellites beyond. Much that for humans required machines, a post-human could accomplish with precisely tailored neural implants.

"They would've turned you down." This Judith knew for a fact. Her mother, Ellen To-the-Manner-Born, had died in the jungles of Wisconsin, eaten away with gangrene and cursing the wardens over an open circuit.

"Yes, of course, one life is nothing compared to the health of the planet." His mouth twisted wryly. "Yet still, I confess I was tempted."

"Put him back in the litter," she told the women. "Carry him gently." In the Quebecois dialect, which she was certain her client did not know, she added, "Do this again, and I'll kill you."

She lagged behind, letting the others advance out of sight, so she could think. In theory she could simply keep the party together. In practice, the women could not both carry the off-worlder and keep up with the men. And if she did not stay with the Ninglanders, they would not work. There were only so many days of winter left. Speed was essential.

An unexpected peal of laughter floated back to her, then silence.

Wearily, she trudged on. Already they had forgotten her, and her *ankh*. Almost she could envy them. Her responsibilities weighed heavily upon her. She had not laughed since the Hudson.

According to her goggles, there was a supply cache in Philadelphia. Once there, they could go back on full rations again.

The tents were bright mushrooms in the clearing. Work-to-Death lay dying within one of them. The women had gone off with the men into the bush. Even in this ungodly heat and humidity, they were unable or unwilling to curb their bestial lusts.

Judith sat outside with the offworlder, the refrigeration stick turned up just enough to take the edge off the afternoon heat. To get him talking, she asked, "Why did you come to Earth? There is nothing here worth all your suffering. Were I you, I'd've turned back long ago."

For a long moment, the offworlder struggled to gear down his complex thoughts into terms Judith could comprehend. At last he said, "Consider evolution. Things do not evolve from lower states to higher, as the ancients believed, with their charts that began with a fish crawling up upon the land and progressed on to mammals, apes, Neanderthals, and finally men. Rather, an organism evolves to fit its environment. An ape cannot live in the ocean. A human cannot brachiate. Each thrives in its own niche.

"Now consider posthumanity. Our environment is entirely artificial—floating cities, the Martian subsurface, the Venusian and Jovian bubbles. Such habitats require social integration of a high order. A human could survive within them, possibly, but she would not thrive. Our surround is self-defined, and therefore within it we are the pinnacle of evolution."

As he spoke, his hands twitched with the suppressed urge to amplify and clarify his words with the secondary emotive language offworlders employed in parallel with the spoken. Thinking, of course, that she did not savvy hand-sign. But as her facility with it was minimal, Judith did not enlighten him.

"Now imagine a being with more-than-human strength and greater-than-posthuman intellect. Such a creature would be at a disadvantage in the posthuman environment. She would be an evolutionary dead end. How then could she get any sense of herself, what she could do, and what she could not?"

"How does all apply to you personally?"

"I wanted to find the measure of myself, not as a product of an environment that caters to my strengths and coddles my weaknesses. I wanted to discover what I am in the natural state."

"You won't find the natural state here. We're living in the aftermath."

"No," he agreed. "The natural state is lost, shattered like an eggshell. Even if—when—we finally manage to restore it, gather up all the shards and glue them together, it will no longer be natural, but something we have decided to maintain and preserve, like a garden. It will be only an extension of our

culture."

"Nature is dead," Judith said. It was a concept she had picked up from other posthumans.

His teeth flashed with pleasure at her quick apprehension. "Indeed. Even off Earth, where conditions are more extreme, its effects are muted by technology. I suspect that nature can only exist where our all-devouring culture has not yet reached. Still... here on Earth, in the regions where all but the simplest technologies are prohibited, and it's still possible to suffer pain and even death.... This is as close to an authentic state as can be achieved." He patted the ground by his side. "The past is palpable here, century upon century, and under that the strength of the soil." His hands involuntarily leapt. *This is so difficult*, they said. *This language is so clumsy*. "I am afraid I have not expressed myself very well."

He smiled apologetically then, and she saw how exhausted he was. But still she could not resist asking, "What is it like, to think as you do?" It was a question that she had asked many times, of many posthumans. Many answers had she received, and no two of them alike.

The offworlder's face grew very still. At last he said, "Lao-tzu put it best. The way that can be named is not the true way. The name that can be spoken is not the eternal name.' The higher thought is ineffable, a mystery that can be experienced but never explained."

His arms and shoulders moved in a gesture that was the evolved descendant of a shrug. His weariness was palpable.

"You need rest," she said, and, standing, "let me help you into your tent."

"Dearest Judith. What would I ever do without you?"

Ever so slightly, she flushed.

The next sundown, their maps, though recently downloaded, proved to be incomplete. The improbably named Skookle River had wandered, throwing off swamps that her goggles' topographical functions could not distinguish from solid land. For two nights the party struggled southward, moving far to the west and then back again so many times that Judith would have been entirely lost without the navsats.

Then the rains began.

There was no choice but to leave the offworlder behind. Neither he nor Harry Work-to-Death could travel under such conditions. Judith put Maria and Leeza in charge of them both. After a few choice words of warning, she left them her spare goggles and instructions to break camp and follow as soon as the rains let up.

"Why do you treat us like dogs?" a Ninglander asked her when they were underway again. The rain poured down over his plastic poncho.

"Because you are no better than dogs."

He puffed himself up. "I am large and shapely. I have a fine mustache. I can give you many orgasms."

His comrade was pretending not to listen. But it was obvious to Judith that the two men had a bet going as to whether she could be seduced or not.

"Not without my participation."

Insulted, he thumped his chest. Water droplets flew. "I am as good as any of your Canadian men!"

"Yes," she agreed, "unhappily, that's true."

When the rains finally let up, Judith had just crested a small hillock that her topographies identified as an outlier of the Welsh Mountains. Spread out before her was a broad expanse of overgrown twenty-first-century ruins. She did not bother accessing the city's name. In her experience, all lost cities were alike; she didn't care if she never saw another. "Take ten," she said, and the Ninglanders shrugged out of their packs.

Idly, she donned her goggles to make sure that Leeza and Maria were breaking camp, as they had been instructed to do.

And screamed with rage.

The goggles Judith had left behind had been hung, unused, upon the flap-pole of one of the tents. Though the two women did not know it, it was slaved to hers, and she could spy upon their actions. She kept her goggles on all the way back to their camp.

When she arrived, they were sitting by their refrigeration stick, surrounded by the discarded wrappings of half the party's food and all of its opiates. The stick was turned up so high that the grass about it was white with frost. Already there was an inch of ash at its tip.

Harry Work-to-Death lay on the ground by the women, grinning loopily, face frozen to the stick. Dead.

Outside the circle, only partially visible to the goggles, lay the offworlder, still strapped to his litter. He chuckled and sang to himself. The women had been generous with the drugs.

"Pathetic weakling," Child-of-Scorn said to the off-worlder, "I don't know why you didn't drown in the rain. But I am going to leave you out in the heat until you are dead, and then I am going to piss on your corpse."

"I am not going to wait," Triumph-of-the-Will bragged. She tried to stand and could not. "In just—just a moment!"

The whoops of laughter died as Judith strode into the camp. The Ninglanders stumbled to a halt behind her, and stood looking uncertainly from her to the women and back. In their simple way, they were shocked by what they saw.

Judith went to the offworlder and slapped him hard to get his attention. He gazed up confusedly at the patch she held up before his face.

"This is a detoxifier. It's going to remove those drugs from your system. Unfortunately, as a side effect, it will also depress your endorphin production. I'm afraid this is going to hurt."

She locked it onto his arm, and then said to the Ninglanders, "Take him up the trail. I'll be along."

They obeyed. The offworlder screamed once as the detoxifier took effect, and then fell silent again. Judith turned to the traitors. "You chose to disobey me. Very well. I can use the extra food."

She drew her *ankh*.

Child-of-Scorn clenched her fists angrily. "So could we! Half-rations so your little pet could eat his fill. Work us to death carrying him about. You think I'm *stupid*. I'm not stupid. I know what you want with him."

"He's the client. He pays the bills."

"What are you to him but an ugly little ape? He'd sooner fuck a cow than you!"

Triumph-of-the-Will fell over laughing. "A cow!" she cried. "A fuh-fucking cow! Moo!"

Child-of-Scorn's eyes blazed. "You know what the sky people call the likes of you and me? Mud-women! Sometimes they come to the cribs outside Pole Star City to get good and dirty. But they always wash off and go back to their nice clean habitats afterward. Five minutes after he climbs back into the sky, he'll have forgotten your name."

"Moooo! Moooo!"

"You cannot make me angry," Judith said, "for you are only animals."

"I am not an animal!" Child-of-Scorn shook her fist at Judith. "I refuse to be treated like one."

"One does not blame an animal for being what it is. But neither does one trust an animal that has proved unreliable. You were given two chances."

"If I'm an animal, then what does that make *you*? Huh? What the fuck does that make *you*, goddamnit?" The woman's face was red with rage. Her friend stared blankly up at her from the ground.

"Animals," Judith said through gritted teeth, "should be killed without emotion."

She fired twice.

With her party thus diminished, Judith could not hope to return to Canada afoot. But there were abundant ruins nearby, and they were a virtual reservoir of chemical poisons from the days when humans ruled the Earth. If she set the *ankh* to its hottest setting, she could start a blaze that would set off a hundred alarms in Pole Star City. The wardens would have to come to contain it. She would be imprisoned, of course, but her client would live.

Then Judith heard the thunder of engines.

High in the sky, a great light appeared, so bright it was haloed with black. She held up a hand to lessen the intensity and saw within the dazzle a small dark speck. A shuttle, falling from orbit.

She ran crashing through the brush as hard and fast as she could. Nightmarish minutes later, she

topped a small rise and found the Ninglanders standing there, the offworlder between them. They were watching the shuttle come to a soft landing in the clearing its thrusters had burned in the vegetation.

"You summoned it," she accused the offworlder.

He looked up with tears in his eyes. The detoxifier had left him in a state of pitiless lucidity, with nothing to concentrate on but his own suffering. "I had to, yes." His voice was distant, his attention turned inward, on the neural device that allowed him to communicate with the ship's crew. "The pain—you can't imagine what it's like. How it feels."

A lifetime of lies roared in Judith's ears. Her mother had died for lack of the aid that came at this man's thought.

"I killed two women just now."

"Did you?" He looked away. "I'm sure you had good reasons. I'll have it listed as death by accident." Without his conscious volition, his hands moved, saying, *It's a trivial matter, let it be.*

A hatch opened in the shuttle's side. Slim figures clambered down, white med-kits on their belts. The offworlder smiled through his tears and stretched out welcoming arms to them.

Judith stepped back and into the shadow of his disregard. She was just another native now.

Two women were dead.

And her reasons for killing them mattered to no one.

She threw her head back and laughed, freely and without reserve. In that instant Judith Seize-the-Day was as fully and completely alive as any of the unworldly folk who walk the airless planets and work in the prosperous and incomprehensible habitats of deep space.

In that instant, had any been looking, she would have seemed not human at all.

DNA than humans? I could claim it means that they have more shapes available, not just tadpole and frog."

He stayed up reading and typing and did not take Laury on a date that night, or the next night, or any time the next two weeks. She grew angry and when she graduated with her MBA she volunteered for the Peace Corps and went off to balance books for a community improvement incorporation in Mexico. It was easy. She had free time to find a beach and let the students try to teach her wind surfing.

In a hotel bar on a beautiful beach she met a handsome man who owned the hotel. She moved into the hotel for a few years, remaining after the Peace Corps job was over, balancing his books and enjoying water sports in the day, and dancing and lovemaking with the handsome man at night. Her hair sunbleached a brighter blonde and her tan grew darker.

When the handsome man married a girl who had been chosen by his mother, Laury accepted his apology with an inscrutable smile, packed, wiped out all the hotel's financial records from the computer and shredded all the paper records, and caught a plane back to California.

She found out that Denny had been given another doctorate on his frog research and now had a bigger laboratory and some employees, and best of all he was still unmarried. She arrived at Denny's laboratory sure she looked more beautiful than ever.

"Honey, I'm back from Mexico," she called out to the back of a man in a green cap wearing Denny's favorite T-shirt.

The man turned and stood up tall. His face was shiny tan and very wide, his eyes were bright gold and very big, and his mouth stretched almost from ear to ear.

He was surprisingly attractive.

"I've never forgotten you," he said in a deep musical voice. "Kiss me again."

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