

Changes

Andrew Weiner

Born in Britain but now a Canadian citizen living in Toronto, Weiner has published short fiction in F&SF, Asimov's, Interzone and others, and has published an SF novel, Station Gehenna. He tells us that 'Changes' 'is part of a cycle which I've been writing backwards. Martha Nova and Robert Duke (identified, for some obscure reason, only as the "dancer") first appeared in Getting Near the End, a story about the end of the world published in a 1981 Ace anthology, Proteus. More recently, I wrote a novella called Seeing (recently sold to F&SF), which is a kind of prequel to Getting Near. "Changes", in turn, is a prequel to Seeing.'

No doubt the cycle will be finished any decade now; but 'Changes' stands in its own right as a seriously political speculative fiction story that works from the personal level to give a wider sense of a society shaking itself to pieces on an apocalyptic rollercoaster ride. It is all the more effective because of the beautifully quiet and transparent narrative, and the meticulous verisimilitude of its stadium rock backdrop, for which Andrew Weiner has drawn upon his experience as a freelance rock writer in the early seventies. 'I stopped because I figured I was getting too old,' he says, 'but I've since come back to the subject again and again in my fiction.'

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W

ell?' Sykes asked.

The tape was half-over. Duke had not said a word since it began. Now he looked up, shrugged. 'It's what I expected.'

'But you don't like it.'

'Liking it wasn't part of the deal.'

Another song began, perhaps the best thing Duke had written in years. Like all the others, Sykes had choked the life out of it.

'This is the new sound, Robert,' Sykes said. 'The old sounds are over. Finished.'

'So I've been told.'

Duke got up. He stared blankly for a moment at the walls of Sykes's office. They were blanketed with gold and platinum discs, Grammys, Producer of the Year Awards.

'I think I've heard enough,' he said.

'You'll thank me,' Sykes said, 'when this puts you back in the charts.'

'I'll never thank you.'

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Phil Maslow called when Duke was about to leave for the reception.

'It's been a while,' Maslow said.

'Too long,' Duke said. *Not long enough*, he thought.

They went back a lot of years, Duke and Maslow, back to the days when they had both been young folkies scuffling in the Village, surfing on Dylan's wave. They had played together, got drunk together, picked up women together. But their paths had long since diverged.

While Duke had hurtled into rock, Maslow had stayed pure. He was still playing in little clubs, still recording for tiny labels, still wearing his ideals on his sleeve. Maslow was in many ways a living reproach to what Duke had become.

'We're planning this evening,' Maslow told him. 'A rally for peace.'

Rumours of war were in the air. The Organisation of American States had issued a last warning to the Brazilian junta. It was understood that the US would spearhead the continental police action.

'Everyone will be there,' Maslow said. 'All the old crew.'

It'll be just like old times. Maslow was too cool to come out and say it. But he would be revelling in the desperate nostalgia of it all the same.

To Duke's relief, the dates clashed. 'Sorry. I'm going to be out on tour.'

'Couldn't you take a night off?' Maslow asked.

'Can't let the fans down.'

'Can't give up the big bucks, you mean. I don't know why I bother calling. You never come through.'

'I came through for your farmers, didn't I? And your Castroite refugees, and your Nicaraguan war vets . . .'

'Not in a while,' Maslow said. 'Not in a long time.'

Lately Duke had been laying off the benefits. He had been taking too much heat. First had come the drug bust. He had been clean nearly a year, but they had found traces all the same, and traces were all they needed. That one was still going through the courts.

Then they had hit him with the audit.

Maybe it was coincidence, but he didn't think so. Similar things were happening throughout the entertainment community.

'I'm under a lot of pressure, Phil. I've still got the IRS on my case.'

'The IRS?' Maslow hooted with laughter. 'What have you got to hide from the IRS?'

Plenty, Duke thought. Dubious tax shelters, off-shore deposits, suspected skimming, all the stuff that had gone down when he hadn't been watching closely. Millions in back taxes if the IRS really pushed it, millions that had long since slipped through his fingers. But he could not expect Maslow to sympathise. 'It doesn't matter,' he said. 'They want to get you, they get you.'

'You wouldn't have let them scare you in the old days.'

It was true enough. But in the old days he had had less to lose. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Maybe next time.'

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The reception was to promote his forthcoming tour, which would in turn promote a record that he hated. But he would go along with it, the way he had gone along every step of the way. Increasingly, these days, he felt as though he were sleepwalking through his own life.

When his record company had proposed Sykes as producer, he had initially resisted.

'I've heard what he does,' he told his manager. 'He's not going to do it to me.'

'It's your call,' his manager said. 'You can cut it your way. They'll still release it. But they'll bury it.'

'Like they did the last two.'

'They've lost faith in you, Robert. They can't sell your kind of music any more. But Sykes is very hot right now. They think he can turn things around for you. And they're willing to spend some serious money on that bet. Advertising, tour support, the works.'

A few years ago, Duke would have told the record company what to do with their ace Eurosynth producer and their serious tour support. But in those days his ego had been much larger: like his record sales, like his net worth. He had gone along.

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During the cab ride to the reception, one of Duke's old anti-war songs began to play on the radio. It took him half a verse to recognise it. He felt no connection with the singer. The singer's voice burned with rage, as though he believed what he was singing. But Duke knew it to be an impersonation.

Even back then, he had never known whether what he was singing was true, whether he believed it. He had simply soaked it all in, everything going on around him: anger at the never-ending war, fear and hatred of the authorities, the marches and the protests, the songs other people sang and the way they sang them, the rhythms of the street and the rhythms on the radio. He had soaked it all in like some kind of sponge. And then he had squeezed it out again, in those songs that sounded so true and so fine.

And maybe the songs *had* been true. True to their time, at least.

Once, Duke had believed himself author of his own success, master of his own destiny. His ego had swelled until it threatened to engulf the world. Only much later had he come to recognise that for all his energy and talent and ambition, all his courage and daring, he had been only an instrument of his times.

Now the times had moved on past him. But he could live with that. Or so he liked to believe. 'You play the cards you're dealt,' he would say, cultivating a philosophical attitude that he did not yet wear altogether comfortably.

Now the cards had dealt him Sykes, the tour, the press reception. And Martha Nova.

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'Who the hell,' Duke had asked, on hearing the news of his new support act, 'is Martha Nova?'

His record company had sent over a bunch of clippings and a rough cut of her upcoming album.

The clippings were mostly from arcane magazines and text services that advertised power crystals and holograms of the Face On Mars. They were wildly enthusiastic, describing Martha Nova as some modern-day amalgam of Joan of Arc, Nostradamus, Bob Dylan and Laurie Anderson.

She had come out of nowhere, or the nearest equivalent, some backwoods Canadian town with an unpronounceable name. In the photographs, she looked blonde and bland, although there was something strangely knowing about her eyes.

His record company had decreed this unlikely match-up. They were anxious to break Martha Nova out of the New Age Music ghetto. They hoped to catch a ride on his supposed coat-tails to the broader rock audience.

It was with a sense of dread that he played her tape. It was a preview of 'Gaian Songs', an album that would shortly soar up the charts without any help from him.

Duke had not known that it would do that. God knows, he was no expert on the charts. But he had known that she was something special all the same.

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They met at the press reception.

'I used to have a poster of you on my wall when I was fifteen,' she told him. 'I thought you were great. And I still do. That's why I jumped at the chance to do this tour.'

Her manager, Abe Levett, was standing at her elbow during this exchange, scowling. Now that Martha's record had broken big all by itself, Levett was unhappy to see his client locked in as Duke's support act. He had tried to renegotiate, demanding a share of the gate, but Duke's management had stood firm.

'Martha,' Levett said, tugging at Martha's sleeve. 'The *Post* guy is waiting.'

Martha squeezed Duke's hand. 'I'm really looking forward to this,' she said. 'It's like a dream come true.'

He liked the way she was unafraid to say something so corny: *A dream come true*. Of course, for all her poise, she was still very young. Only a few years older than his own daughter, who he would look up when the tour reached Washington, if he could summon the nerve.

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At the stadium, Duke found the members of his band sitting around watching the widescreen in the bar. Bombers were taking flight.

'It's started?'

Roscoe, the bass player, nodded. 'Bye bye Brazil,' he said, anticipating tomorrow's newsheet headlines.

'Christ,' Duke said. 'Again.'

He stood for a moment, staring at the news of the latest war. It made him feel edgy, aroused, disgusted, sad. He looked away. 'We still got a show to do,' he said.

'But maybe not an audience.' Roscoe grinned, showing the gaps in his teeth. 'Tough to compete with a war.' Roscoe was already comfortably

drunk. But that would not, Duke knew, stop him from holding down the beat.

Roscoe relished failure, defeat, disappointment, his own and other people's. He had seen plenty of both. He had been in a band that had topped the world's charts, and in another that had been big in Europe. Now he was lucky to have a paying gig.

It would delight Roscoe to start the tour playing to an empty house. 'This business is dying,' he would tell them, over and over again. And Roscoe was dying right along with it. At the bar, coughing up blood as he drank, he boasted about his doctor's warnings. Another year, tops, if he kept this up. Which of course he would.

Once, hesitantly, Duke had suggested taking Roscoe to a meeting of his recovery group. Roscoe, naturally, had scoffed. 'I get my higher power,' he said, 'straight from the bottle.'

Duke had not pushed the point. A few years ago, he might have said something similar. Even now, even though the group had done so much to help him clean up, he didn't buy the rhetoric except as metaphor.

Nor could he bring himself to condemn Roscoe. He didn't use any more, and he hardly drank, but he did not deny others the right to use what they needed. He had used many things in his time, and learned something from all of them. If he was clean now, it was only because he could no longer handle other ways of being.

'We'll have an audience,' he said. 'Don't worry about that.'

He had seen them as he drove into the stadium, thousands of kids, lining up hours in advance. He should have been pleased, but in fact he was disturbed. This was not the crowd he usually drew. His fans were older, scruffier. Many of these kids looked barely into their teens. Children, really.

Martha's children.

Embarrassing if he were right. Embarrassing to be out-drawn by his own support act. But it was probably true. Martha's album now stood at the top of the charts while his own languished in the lower reaches. If anything, it was selling worse than its immediate predecessors.

'They've come to see the flying nun,' Roscoe said. 'Come to get blessed before they get drafted.'

Duke suppressed a grin. There *was* something a bit saintly about Martha. From a distance, anyway. So pale, so blonde, so not-quite-here.

‘Martha’s okay, once you get to know her.’

He hoped to get to know her better.

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There was a journalist from *TimeNet* waiting to interview him in his dressing room. But the journalist didn’t want to talk about Duke. After a few perfunctory questions, he zeroed in on what really interested him.

‘You think it’s true, what they say about Martha Nova?’

‘I don’t know. What do they say?’

‘That she can see the future.’

Duke blinked in surprise. Now that he thought about it, there had been something about Martha’s supposed psychic powers in the articles he had paged through. But he had not taken it any more seriously than the advertisements for Mayan Apocalypse Calendars and *I Ching* software.

‘I think Martha is very talented. But she’s not *that* talented.’

‘They’re saying she predicted the war.’

‘Who? Who is saying that?’

‘Her fans. Apparently she laid it all out on a cut on her last album.’

Duke made an impatient gesture. ‘You’re not telling me you *believe* that?’

‘It’s good copy.’

Duke rubbed his eyes. He felt exhausted already, as though anticipating the next two gruelling months on the road. Once, the prospect of a tour had filled him with energy. And what did not come naturally could always be induced artificially.

‘Why are you wasting your time with this bullshit? Why don’t you talk

about the music? Her music is real nice.'

'Martha Nova,' the journalist said, 'is a lot more than just *music*.'

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From backstage, Duke watched Martha's act.

There was, he thought, something about the blonde young woman in the long white dress with the ethereal voice, almost walled in by banks of synthesisers yet somehow soaring above them, painting crystalline pictures of one world about to end and another about to dawn. Something indefinable, yet extraordinary.

As Martha sang, the arena itself seemed transformed, becoming part church and part carnival. It was as if a field of energy pulsed from the stage, enveloping the audience, incorporating it into her act. The kids were laughing, crying, singing, dancing, sitting in rapt attention, hugging their neighbours.

She had the magic, he thought, as he had once. Although hers was much more powerful.

He noticed Abe Levett standing beside him, apparently equally transfixed.

'She's wonderful,' he said.

Levett's face hardened. 'You bet your fucking life she's wonderful. You ought to bow down and kiss the fucking stage she stands on.'

Now Martha was winding up her act. 'You've got a great treat in store,' she told the crowd, as they begged for more. 'A chance to see a living legend, the fabulous Robert Duke.'

Duke wondered when he had made the transition to living legend. It must have come at some point after his records stopped selling.

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The war news was playing on the clock radio when they got back to his hotel room after the show. OAS troops claimed control of key installations in Brasilia.

'Will it ever end?' he asked, as he flipped it off.

'Oh yeah,' Martha said. 'One day it ends. All the wars end.' Her voice was quiet, dreamy.

'In a thousand years, maybe.'

'It won't be that long. Not nearly that long before the wars stop. Before everything stops.'

'Stops?' He frowned. 'How do you mean, stops?'

She gestured with her arms, as though to take in the hotel room, the city that surrounded it. 'All of this. This way of living. There will be no more of it. Everything will change.'

'Just like that?' He snapped his fingers. 'Suddenly, a better world?'

'Maybe a better one. Hopefully a better one.'

'You're a dreamer, Martha.'

'Oh yes. Yes I am.'

She sounded, he couldn't help but notice, a lot like his daughter.

'Love and peace,' he said. 'We already tried that.'

'That was when the change started. Soon, we'll finish it.'

He shook his head briefly. 'I hope you're right.'

There had been a time when he would have mocked her naïveté, done his best to make her feel foolish. There had been a time when he treated most people that way, particularly those who had somehow crossed him. And Martha, however unintentionally, had crossed him up in spades.

Better to play to empty houses than to watch half the audience walk out before you started your set. And probably he had been lucky that so many remained, whether out of politeness or sheer inertia. The remnants had applauded dutifully, even calling him back for a ritual encore. But they were not his people. There was no energy in the room. He had sounded hollow even to himself.

'One last dance,' he had told his band, when he called them together to rehearse for this tour. With the country in the shape it was in, with the problems in so many cities, the riots and the strikes and the on-again off-again curfews, they had all understood that this could be one of the last big tours. 'One last chance to dance.'

But now it seemed that he would not be granted even that much. He had sleepwalked his way into disaster.

Once, he would have raged at the situation. He would have blamed his manager, the promoter, the record company, the radio programmers. And he would have taken his anger out on Martha.

But somehow he could not get mad at Martha, or even envy her success. He was only embarrassed, and she was obviously embarrassed for him. After the show, she had gone out of her way to be solicitous, supportive, admiring. And when he asked her to come back to his hotel room, she had agreed readily.

He wondered now, as she sat down next to him on the bed, whether she was about to fuck him out of pity. But he did not wonder that hard.

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Duke found Roscoe sitting in the airport bar, poring over a text print-out of the *World Inquirer*, shaking with laughter.

'What's so funny?'

'Earthquake,' Roscoe said. 'Our Lady Madonna is calling for an earthquake in San Francisco. Also a major fire in Seattle. And chances are good that Atlantis will rise from the sea any day now.'

'She said that?'

'In her songs,' Roscoe said. 'As divined by three leading Martha Nova interpreters.'

'Amazing,' Duke said. 'Amazing what people will believe.'

'Amazing hype,' Roscoe said. 'Priceless, really. I mean, how do you compete with a gimmick like that?'

'You don't,' Duke said. 'You don't compete.'

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Levett was reading the same article on the airplane. His smile was gleeful.

Duke sat beside him. 'Why don't you stop this bullshit before it gets out of hand?'

'Stop it?' Levett echoed. 'Why would I want to do that? I do everything I can to encourage this stuff. It can only add to the mystique. Martha Nova, prophet of a new age for humankind. You can't buy that kind of publicity.'

'And what happens when Atlantis doesn't rise from the sea?'

'Who's going to remember the details?' Levett said. 'What they're going to remember is the mystique.'

'No wonder this business is dying. With people like you running it.'

'You got that wrong, Duke,' Levett said. '*You're* the one who's dying. A little harder every night. Talk about a glutton for punishment. How much more humiliation can you take?'

'I don't know,' Duke said. 'I really don't know.'

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His daughter, Lilith, came to see him after the show in Washington. She was living nearby, in a commune in West Virginia. He had arranged a block of tickets for Lilith and her friends - her family, she called them.

Maybe they were her family now. He hoped it was a happier family than the one she had been raised in. But on his only visit to her new home, standing in the mud surrounded by squawking chickens and screaming children, looking at the windmills and the satellite dishes and the sheet metal shacks and the biospheres, listening to the constant droning New Age muzak everywhere, he had felt like a man from Mars.

They were some sort of cult, Lilith's new family, some kind of technohippy-survivalist-religious cult. They were waiting, she told him, for the world to end. And to begin again. Meanwhile they prepared themselves for the changes to come.

Better, he tried to tell himself, a cultist than a junkie and semi-pro hooker. Better a live daughter you couldn't hold a conversation with than a dead one you couldn't talk to at all. But somehow it was not that much better.

'Great show, dad,' Lilith said, kissing him on the cheek.

Her new politeness was disconcerting. It almost made him wish for the old days, when she had spent her nights out on the Strip watching the metal bands, when she would come home only to change her clothes and curse him as a hopeless dinosaur. At least she had been honest with him, back then.

'You hear from your mother?' he asked.

'She called me a few weeks ago from Paris. Sounded good. Doing some power shopping.'

He wondered, sometimes, how he could have made such a mistake as to marry Janine. And how they could have compounded that mistake by having Lilith. It had been at a time in his life when mistakes had come easily to him.

Lilith had brought a friend with her, a gawky young man she introduced as Judd. 'Thank you for inviting us, Mr Duke,' he said. 'It was great. My parents used to play your records all the time. They'll be knocked out when I tell them about this.'

'And how did you like Martha?'

Judd's face lit up. 'Oh, she's fabulous. We've been listening to her for years. When Lilith told us she'd got tickets...' He trailed off at Lilith's warning glance.

Afterward, Duke took them to meet Martha. They stood dumbstruck.

'I thought they were sweet,' Martha said, when they had gone home.

'Yeah,' Duke said. 'Like molasses.'

Seeing his daughter had depressed him. At least that much hadn't changed.

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Levett's phone call woke them in the middle of the night.

'I need to talk to Martha,' he told Duke. 'We've got a serious problem.'

After Martha had gone downstairs to confer with her manager, Duke flipped through the cable news stations. The big story of the night came from Seattle. A fire starting in a downtown department store had run out of control, consuming ten city blocks. Casualties were already into the hundreds, property damage into the hundreds of millions. Arson was suspected.

And then, over the footage of the flames, they played one of Martha's songs: *City's burning, we're all burning, flames rise high, rise high/In the window teddy's burning, wishes he could fly/City's burning, we're all burning, reaching for the sky.*

Duke recognised the song. It was called, for no obvious reason, 'Seattle Song'.

The picture cut back to the studio, where the newscaster spelled it out. Not only had Martha apparently forecast the fire, she had pinpointed its location. According to Fire Department investigators, the locus of the fire was a pre-Christmas window display of children's toys. The display had included a giant teddy bear, dressed as a fairy with wings. Fairy teddy bears were a popular item this Christmas season.

They cut, now, to the vid used to promote Martha's 'Seattle Song', an impressionistic piece which cross-cut several times to the image of a burning teddy bear. A teddy bear with wings.

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There was a press conference the next morning. Martha asked Duke to accompany her. She looked pale, shaken.

At first Levett handled the questions, while Martha sat beside Duke, holding his hand.

'You think the song is a prophecy?' Levett said. 'That's crazy. It's just a song.'

'But it's about Seattle.'

'Martha used to live in Seattle. One day she saw a fire, and she wrote a song. It's history, not prophecy.'

'But it even mentions the teddy bear.'

'The teddy bear is a nice little image, that's all.'

'I'd like to hear that from Martha Nova.' Duke recognised the journalist from *TimeNet*.

'Martha never talks about her songs,' Levett said.

'We have a right to know,' the journalist said. 'Whether this thing came to her in a dream, or something. Or whether it's some psycho fan making her songs come true . . .'

Uproar in the room. Levett bellowed to be heard. 'You print that, we sue. The Seattle cops are investigating the store owner. They're not looking for a fan.'

Now Martha was rising to her feet. 'It's okay, Abe,' she said. 'Let me talk to them.'

The room grew hushed.

'Well, Ms Nova,' the man from *TimeNet* asked. 'Did you see the Seattle fire in a dream?'

'No. I didn't dream it.'

'Then where did the song come from?'

'It just came tome.'

'When you lived in Seattle?'

'Yes.'

'And you saw a fire?'

She seemed to hesitate. 'I saw several fires in Seattle.'

'What about San Francisco?' another journalist demanded.

'What about it?'

'They're saying you've predicted an earthquake in San Francisco.'

'I don't make predictions. I write songs.'

'Would you be worried if you lived in San Francisco?'

'Would I be worried? I can't answer that.'

'Don't you think you have a responsibility to warn people?'

Martha turned, if anything, a shade paler. 'My responsibility is to sing.'

'What about the end of the world?' asked a woman from a local TV station.

'I'm sorry?'

'Isn't that what you've been trying to tell us? Your biggest prediction of all? That we're getting near the end?'

'Getting Near the End'. Another cut from the album, Duke hadn't thought about what it meant until now.

Levett was signalling frantically to Martha, but she ignored him. 'I believe that, yes. I've never made any secret of it. We are getting near the end of something. You just have to look around you: the wars, the pollution, the poverty, the violence. Our world is nearly over.'

Renewed uproar. Levett grabbed the microphone away from Martha. 'That's all, folks,' he said. 'That's more than enough.'

Tears were streaming down Martha's face.

'What about you, Mr Duke?' the man from *TimeNet* asked. 'Do you think Ms Nova is psychic?'

Duke took the microphone. 'It's like my daddy always told me,' he said. 'If people could really see the future, there wouldn't be bookies.'

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Following the Seattle fire, the tour took on the aspect of a circus. There were media people everywhere now: waiting at airports, camping out in hotel lobbies, crowding the backstage area at the stadiums. And more of Martha's fans in every city, many more than even the largest venues could accommodate. Thronging in the streets outside the hotel, spilling out of the parking lots around the stadium. And chanting, always. Chanting Martha's songs.

Nova Children, the media had started to call them. As *TimeNet* put it, in their cover story, 'She forecasts the end. And the children listen.'

Duke was opening the show now. It seemed the only sensible thing to do. He had also instructed his manager that Martha should receive equal billing, and an equal share of the gate.

Even then, it was hard slogging. Every night they made the set shorter, acquiescing to the obvious impatience of Martha's fans. 'We're going down, man,' Roscoe would tell him. 'We're hanging by our fingertips.'

Roscoe's drinking was getting even more extreme, so that some nights he no longer held the beat. Or perhaps he no longer cared to.

'You play the cards you're dealt,' Duke would say, like a mantra. He wondered when he would begin to believe it.

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There was panic in San Francisco. People were selling their homes and possessions and heading for the hills.

'Make you feel good, Martha?' Duke asked, as he flipped off the hotel room screen.

She flinched from his sarcasm. 'No, it doesn't. But don't get angry with me, Robert. All I wanted to do was sing. I never claimed to be psychic'

'You've never denied it, either.'

'Would it make any difference if I did?'

Duke sighed. 'I guess not. Your fans will believe what they want to believe. Just as long as you don't start believing it yourself.'

'You don't have to worry about me.'

'But I do worry. I know what it's like, you see, all this craziness, what it can do to you. You start to believe what people are saying about you. You lose any sense of yourself.'

She touched his arm. 'Thank you for being concerned. But I know who I am, Robert. I know what I'm here for.'

He shook his head, puzzled. For all the time he had spent with Martha, all the talk and all the sex, he still did not feel that he really knew her. He enjoyed being with her, he admired her music, he found her both funny and profound. But finally she remained a mystery to him.

It was his fault, he thought. He was just too wrapped up in himself to really get close to Martha.

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Levett was staring down from the window of his hotel room at the street below. 'Unbelievable,' he said.

Duke followed his gaze. It was the usual scene. Thousands of the Children crowding the sidewalk, singing loud enough to be heard even through the thick glass of the window. The faces were too distant to see, but Duke knew they would all be wearing the same rapturous expression.

'I thought we were finished,' Levett said. 'When that psychic bit blew up in our faces. Some guy torches his own store, and suddenly Martha's the prophet of doom. And then, as if that wasn't bad enough, they had to drag in that end-of-the-world schtick ... I told Martha we should leave that song off the album. People don't want to hear about the end of the world. I mean, who wants to hear that?'

'Some people do,' Duke said, nodding toward the scene outside the window.

Levett nodded vigorously. 'That's what's so unbelievable. We came out of it stronger than ever. But I guess it shows you, when Abe Levett builds a star, he builds one to last.'

Levett, usually wound up tight as a clockspring, was in an unusually mellow mood tonight. Perhaps he had traded his uppers for downers. Or perhaps it was just that the end of the tour was in sight, without further misadventure, and that 'Gaian Songs' had just shipped double platinum.

‘How do you mean?’ Duke asked.

Levett pointed to his chest. ‘I did this, man. I pulled it off. Took Martha all the way.’

‘That’s not how it works.’

‘Listen, I’m not trying to take anything away from Martha. I worship the ground she walks on. But she couldn’t have done it without me.’

‘You didn’t make Martha. Even Martha didn’t make Martha.’

‘You’re telling me the fans did?’ Levett’s voice dripped with contempt. ‘All the wonderful little people out there?’

‘The times are making her. She’s saying something that people need to hear right now. You have to understand that, Abe, if you want to help her ride this wave.’

Levett shook his head. ‘No wonder you’re washed up. *The times are making her*. You start to think like that, you might as well roll over and die.’

‘Okay,’ Duke said. ‘You did it. You did it all. Now, was there something you wanted to talk about?’

‘Oh yeah. Yeah, there was.’ Levett crossed to the desk. ‘We’re going out on the road again after Christmas. Martha will be headlining. Twenty-eight dates in the south-western states. We were wondering if you’d like to come along and open for us.’

Duke stared at Levett in astonishment. ‘You want me to open for Martha?’

‘We still need a warm-up act. So why not the legendary Robert Duke?’

Duke could hear the sarcasm, but it was somehow perfunctory, as though Levett were deliberately restraining himself.

‘You’d be second on the bill,’ Levett said. ‘But we’d give you half the gate.’

‘Half the gate? The shape this business is in, you can have your pick

of any act, a lot cheaper than that.'

Levett nodded sadly.

'This is Martha's idea, isn't it?'

Levett looked uncomfortable. 'We've had our differences, Duke. But I'm not blind, I can see how Martha is around you. She's much looser, happier. I think - ' He coughed. 'I think it's a good idea. For you, too. Being associated with Martha certainly isn't hurting you.'

Duke was all over the newsheets and the gossip channels now, more famous as Martha's lover than he had ever been in his own right. Although it had done little for his record sales.

'I'm sorry, Abe,' he said. 'I can't do it. In a way, I'd like to. But I can't.'

'Word is, you could use the money.'

'I can always use money. But not this way.'

'I told her you wouldn't buy it,' Levett said. 'And I think she knew it, too. But she wanted me to try.'

Duke had expected Levett to be pleased with his refusal. Strangely, he looked crestfallen.

'You did try, Abe,' he said. 'You gave it your best shot.'

* * * *

They barely talked on the limousine ride out to the stadium. It was the last night of the tour. Martha sat with her eyes half-closed, as though viewing some inner vision.

'I spoke to Abe,' he said, finally.

'I know.'

I'm sorry, Martha. For me to keep on playing ... It would just be prolonging the agony. I don't want to do this any more. I've been on a treadmill half my life now, churning out albums and touring behind them, never stopping to wonder what I was doing. It's time for me to step off for a while.'

'You could still travel with me. Maybe do a few duets. That could be fun.'

'No,' he said. 'I couldn't. It's your tour, Martha. You don't need me dragging along behind you. And I have things I have to deal with. Some business stuff. And some personal stuff. I thought I would go visit my daughter for a few days, try and figure out what that's all about. . .'

'I think that's a good idea, Robert. It's just that I'd like you to come with me.'

'Look,' he said, 'maybe I'll hook up with you when you get to Houston. I've got some friends down there. Maybe I'll tag along with you for a few days.'

'That would be nice,' she said.

But her voice was cool, remote. She didn't believe him, he thought. Maybe she was right not to believe him.

'We didn't make any promises, Martha.'

'I know.'

'Anyway, we've still got tonight. These days, that's about as far ahead as I can plan.'

There would be an end-of-tour party that night for the musicians and crew.

'Yes,' she said. 'We've still got tonight.'

* * * *

News of the earthquake came through soon after he finished his set. A 7.5 on the Richter.

Out on the stage, Martha was singing. He put on his jacket and headed for the exit.

'Where you going?' Roscoe asked.

'Out,' he said. 'Out of here.'

'You're not staying for the party?'

'No.'

'Going to be a zoo, man,' Roscoe said, with some relish. 'A fucking zoo. Reporters are going to be screaming for blood.'

'I know.'

'You're going to leave Martha to face it by herself?'

'She'll handle it.'

Roscoe shook his head. 'What are you, spooked? You can't handle the fact that she's psychic?'

'She isn't psychic, Roscoe. That's bullshit.'

'Tell that to San Francisco.'

'Everyone knew there would be another earthquake one day.'

'And a fire in Seattle?'

'You're missing the point.'

'Am I? All I know is, you're blowing it.'

'Maybe.'

'She's something, Bobby. She's maybe the one.'

'The one?'

'The one you've been looking for,' Roscoe said, his face uncharacteristically solemn. 'All your useless life.'

'No,' he said. 'Or if she is, I'm not ready for her. I can't handle this right now.'

He motioned back towards the arena, where the cheers were sounding like barely muffled thunder.

'You're blowing it,' Roscoe said, again.

It was the last thing Duke heard as he left the stadium, the last thing he would remember Roscoe saying. Six months later, Roscoe would be dead.

* * * *

While waiting for his flight, he called Phil Maslow.

'I heard you're planning another benefit,' he said. 'I'd like to do it.'

'I'll see,' Maslow said. 'I'll see if I can fit you in.' He laughed about that for a while, and then he called his daughter.

In her dressing room, Martha waited for Duke.

She had known she would wait for him.

She had known he would not come.

She had known that she would cry.

But she would not cry yet. Not until Abe came to tell her that Duke had gone.

She brushed her hair and waited for Abe to knock on her door.

It would not be long now.

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