

STEPPENPFERD

BRIAN W. ALDISS

FROM A COSMOLOGICAL perspective, the sun was a solitary, isolated on the fringes of its galaxy. The supergiant belonged in spectral class K5. Seen more closely, it appeared as a dull smoky globe, a candle about to gutter out, the smoke consisting of myriads of particles dancing in the solar magnetism.

Despite its size, it was a cold thing, registering no more than 3,600 Degrees K. All about its girth, stretching far out along the plane of the ecliptic, a series of artificial spheres moved in attendance. Each of these spheres contained captive solar systems.

The species which brought the globes here over vast distances called themselves the Pentivanashenii, a word that eons ago had meant "those who once grazed." This species had cannibalized their own planets and gone forth into the great matrix of space, returning to their home star only to deliver their prizes into orbit.

Father Erik Predjin walked out of the dormitory into the early light. In a short while, the monastery bell would toll and his twelve monks and as many novices would rise and go into the chapel for First Devotions. Until then, the little world of the island was his. Or rather, God's.

The low damp cold came through the birches at him. Father Predjin shivered inside his habit. He relished the bite of dawn. With slow steps, he skirted the stack of adzed timbers designated for the re-roofing, the piled stones with their numbers painted on which would eventually form part of the rebuilt apse. Ever and again, he looked up at the fabric of the old building to which, with God's guidance and his own will, he was restoring spiritual life.

The monastery was still in poor condition. Some of its foundations dated from the reign of Olaf the Peaceful in the eleventh century. The main fabric was of later date, built when the Slav Wends had sought refuge on the island.

What Father Predjin most admired was the southern facade. The arched doorway was flanked by blind arcading with deeply stepped molded columns. These were weather-worn but intact.

"Here," Father Predjin often told the so-called tourists, "you may imagine the early monks trying to recreate the face of God in stone. He is grand, ready to allow entrance to all who come to him, but sometimes blind to our miseries. And by now perhaps the Almighty is worn down by the uncertain Earthly weather."

The tourists shuffled at this remark. Some looked upward, upward, where, hazily beyond the blue sky, the sweep of metal sphere could be seen.

The father felt some small extra contentment this morning. He made no attempt to account for it. Happiness was simply something that occurred in a well-regulated life. Of course, it was autumn, and he always liked autumn. Something about early autumn, when the leaves began to flee before a northern breeze and the clay shortened, gave an extra edge to existence. One was more aware of the great spirit which informed the natural world.

A cock crowed, celebrating the morning's freshness.

He turned his broad back on the ochre-painted building and walked down toward the shore by the paved path he had helped the brothers build. Here, he made his way along by the edge of the water. This meeting of the two elements of land and water was celebrated by a cascade of stones and pebbles. They had been shed from the flanks of retreating glaciers. Those mighty grindstones had polished them so that they lay glistening in the morning light, displaying, for those who cared to look, a variety of colors and origins. No less than the monastery, they were proof for the faithful of a guiding hand.

A dead fish lay silvery among the cobbles, the slight lap of the waves of the lake giving it a slight lifelike movement. Even in death, it had beauty.

Walking steadily, the father approached a small jetty. An old wooden pier extended a few meters into Lake Mannsjö, dripping water into its dark reflection. To this pier workers would come and, later, another boat with extra-galactic tourists. Directly across the water, no more than a kilometer away, was the mainland and the small town of Mannjer, from which the boats would arrive. A gray slice of pollution spread in a wedge from above the town, cutting across the black inverted image of mountains.

The father studied the mountains and the roofs of the town. How cunningly they resembled the real thing which once had been. He crossed himself. At least this little island had been preserved, for what reason he could not determine. Perhaps the day would come when all returned to normal -- if he persevered in prayer.

On the water margin of the island lay old oil drums and remains of military equipment. The island had, until five years ago, been commandeered by the military for their own purposes. Father Predjin had erased most of the reminders of that occupation, the graffiti in the chapel, the bullet holes in the walls, the shattered trees. He was slow to permit these last military remains to be cleared. Something told him the old rusty landing craft should remain where it was, half sunk in the waters of the lake. Now that it had ceased to function, it was not out of harmony with its surroundings. Besides, no harm was done in reminding both brothers and the alien visitors of past follies -- and the present uncertain nature of the world. Of the world and, he added to himself, of the whole solar system, now encased in that enormous sphere and transported.... He knew not where.

Somewhere far beyond the galaxy. But not beyond the reach of God?

He breathed deeply, pleased by the lap-lap-lap of the waters of the lake. He could look west from his little island -- the Lord's and his -- to what had been Norway and a distant railway line. He could look east to the mountains of what had been Sweden. Lake Mannsjo lay across the border between the two countries. Indeed, the imaginary line of the border, as projected by rulers plied in Oslo and Stockholm ministerial offices, cut across the Isle of Mannsjo and, indeed, right through the old monastery itself. Hence its long occupation by the military, when territorial opinions had differed and the two Scandinavian countries had been at loggerheads.

Why had they quarreled? Why had they not imagined...well...the unimaginable?

HE KNEW the skimpy silver birches growing among the stones on the shore, knew one from the next: was amused to think of some as Norwegian, some as Swedish. He touched them as he went by. The mist-moistened papery bark was pleasing to his hand.

Now that the military had left, the only invaders of Mannsjo were those tourists. Father Predjin had to pretend to encourage their visits. A small boat brought them over, a boat which left Mannjer on the mainland promptly every summer morning, five days a week, and permitted the beings two hours ashore. In that time, the tourists were free to wander or pretend to worship. And the novices, selling them food and drink and crucifixes, made a little money to help with the restoration fund.

The father watched the boat coming across the water and the grotesque horse-like beings slowly taking on human shape and affecting human clothing.

August was fading from the calendar. Soon there would be no more tourists. Mannsjo was less than five degrees south of the Arctic Circle. No tourists came in the long dark winter. They copied everything that had once been, including behavior.

"I shall not miss them," said the father, under his breath, looking toward the distant shore. "We shall work through the winter as if nothing has happened." He recognized that he would miss women visitors especially. Although he had taken the vow of chastity many years previously, God still permitted him to rejoice at the sight of young women, their flowing hair, their figures, their long legs, the sound of their voices. Not one of the order -- not even pretty young novice Sankal -- could match the qualities of women. Antelope qualities. But of course an illusion; in reality there were seven black ungainly limbs behind every deceiving pair of neat legs.

The beings entered his mind. He knew it. Sometimes he sensed them there, like mice behind the paneling of his room.

He turned his face toward the east, closing his eyes to drink in the light. His countenance was lean and tanned. It was the face of a serious man who liked to laugh. His eyes were generally a gray-blue, and the scrutiny he turned on his fellowmen was enquiring but friendly: perhaps more enquiring than open: like shelves of books in a library, whose spines promise much but reveal little of

their contents. It had been said by those with whom Father Predjin had negotiated for the purchase of the island that he confided in no one, probably not even his God.

His black hair, as yet no more than flecked by gray, was cut in pudding basin fashion. He was clean-shaven. About his lips played a sort of genial determination; his general demeanor also suggested determination. In his unself-conscious way, Erik Predjin did not realize how greatly his good looks had eased his way through life, rendering that determination less frequently exercised than would otherwise have been the case.

He thought of a woman's face he had once known, asking himself, Why were not men happier? Had not men and women been set on Earth to make one another happy? Was it because humanity had failed in some dramatic way that this extraordinary swarm of beings had descended, to wipe out almost everything once regarded as permanent?

How is it that the world was so full of sin that it was necessary to destroy it? Now those who sequestered themselves on Mannsjo would continue to do Him reverence. Attempt in their frailty to do Him reverence. To save the world and restore it to what once it was, and make it whole and happy again. "Without sin."

Cobbles crunched under his sandals. Hugging his body against the cold, he turned away from the water, up another path which climbed round a giant boulder. Here in a sheltered dell, hens clucked. Here were gardens where the Order grew vegetables-- potatoes especially -- and herbs, and kept bees. All barely enough to sustain the company, but the Abbot mightily approved of frugality. As the father walked among them, casting an expert gaze over the crops, the monastery bell started to toll. Without quickening his pace, he went on, under the apple trees, to his newly repaired church.

He said aloud as he went, clasping his hands together, "Thank you, O Lord, for another of your wonderful days through which we may live. And bless my fellow workers, that they also may taste your joy."

After the morning prayers came breakfast. Homemade bread, fish fresh from the lake, well water. Enough to fill the belly.

Shortly after ten in the morning, Father Predjin and two of the brothers went down to the quay to meet the morning boat bringing the workers from Mannjer. The workers were voluntary labor. They appeared to include not only Scandinavians but men, mainly young, from other parts of Europe, together with a Japanese who had come to visit Mannsjo as a tourist two years ago and had stayed. While he was awaiting novitiate status, he lodged in Mannjer with a crippled woman.

Oh, they all had their stories. But he had seen them from his window, when they thought no one was looking, revert into that lumpish shape with those great trailing hands, seven-fingered, gray in color.

This was the father's secret: since he knew that these beings were asymmetrical,

and not symmetrical, or nearly so, as were human beings, he understood that God had turned his countenance from them. In consequence, they were evil.

The monks welcomed the fake workers and blessed them. They were then directed to the tasks of the day. Few needed much instruction. Plasterers, carpenters, and stonemasons carried on as previously.

Should I allow such alien and god-hating beings to participate in the construction of God's edifice.* Will He curse us all for permitting this error?

Now a little urgency was added to the workers' usual businesslike manner; winter was coming. Over the drum of the main dome an almost flat tiled roof was being installed, closing it against the elements. There was no money at present for a copper-clad dome it was hoped for, provided funds were forthcoming.

When the father had seen that all were employed, he returned to the main building and climbed a twisting stair to his office on the third floor. It was a narrow room, lit by two round windows and furnished with little more than an old worm-eaten desk and a couple of rickety chairs. A Crucifix hung on the whitewashed wall behind the desk.

One of the novices came up to talk to Father Predjin about the question of heating in the winter. The problem arose every year at this time. As usual it remained unresolved.

Immediately next came Sankal. He must have been waiting on the stairs outside the door.

His Father gestured to him to take a seat, but the young man preferred to stand.

Sankal stood twisting his hands about his rough-woven habit, shy as ever but with the air of a young man who has something important to say and looks only for an opening.

"You wish to leave the order?" Father Predjin said, laughing to show he was joking and merely offering the chance for a response.

Julius Sankal was a pale and pretty youth with a down on his upper lip. Like many of the other novices in Mannsjo, he had been given refuge by Predjin because the rest of the globe was disappearing.

In those days, Predjin had stood by his church and looked up at the night sky, to see the stars disappear as the sphere encased them bit by bit. And, as surely, the world was disappearing, bit by bit, to be replaced by a cheap replica-- perhaps a replica without mass, to facilitate transport. Such things could only be speculated upon, with a burdened sense of one's ignorance and fear.

Sankal had arrived at Mannjer in the snow. And later had stolen a boat in order to cross to the island, to throw himself on the mercy of the ruinous monastery, and of its master. Now he had the job of baking the monastery's bread.

"Perhaps it is necessary I leave," the youth said. He stood with downcast eyes. Father Predjin waited, hands resting, lightly clasped, on the scarred top of his desk. "You see...I cannot explain. I am come to a wrong belief, father. Very much have I prayed, but I am come to a wrong belief."

"As you are aware, Julius, you are permitted to hold any one of a number of religious beliefs here. The first important thing is to believe in a God, until you come to see the true God. Thus we light a tiny light in a world utterly lost and full of darkness. If you leave you go into a damned world of illusion."

The sound of hammering echoed from above them. New beams were going into the roof of the apse.

The noise almost drowned Sankal's response, which came quietly but firmly.

"Father, I am a shy person, you know it. Yet am I at maturity. Always have many inward thoughts. Now those thoughts move like a stream to this wrong belief." He hung his head.

Predjin stood, so that he dominated the youth. His expression was grave and sympathetic. "Look at me, son, and do not be ashamed. All our lives are filled with such hammering as we hear now. It is the sound of an enormous material world breaking in on us. We must not heed it. This wrong belief must make you miserable."

"Father, I have respects for your theology. But maybe what is wrong belief is right for me. No, I mean...Is hard to say it. To arrive at a clear belief -- it's good, is it? -- even if the belief is wrong. Then maybe is not wrong after all. Is instead good."

With the merest hint of impatience, Father Predjin said, "I don't understand your reasoning, Julius. Can we not pull out this wrong belief from your mind, like a rotten tooth?"

Sankal looked up at his mentor defiantly. He showed clenched fists, white-knuckled above the desk.

"My belief is that this island has not been made -- made by God. It also is an illusion, made by God's terrible Adversary."

"That's nothing more than non-belief."

It came out defiantly: "No, no. I believe the Evil Ones made our place where we live. Our goodness itself is an illusion. I have proof it is so."

Thinking deeply before he replied, Father Predjin said, "Let us suppose for an instant that we are living on an island made by these frightful beings who now possess the solar system, so that all is illusion. But yet Goodness is not an illusion. Goodness is never an illusion, wherever found. Evil is the illusion..."

Even as he spoke, he imagined he saw something furtive and evil in the eyes of the youth standing before him.

Father Predjin studied Sankal carefully before asking, "And have you come suddenly to your conclusion?"

"Yes. No. I realize I have always felt like this way. I just did not know it. I've always been running, have I? Only coming here -- well, you gave me time for thinking. I realize the world is evil, and it gets worse. Because the Devil rules it. We always spoke of the devil in our family. Well, now he has come in this horse-like shape to overwhelm us."

"What is this proof you speak of?"

Sankal jumped up, to face the father angrily. "It's in me, in the scars on my mind and on my body since I am a boy. The Devil does not have to knock to come in. He is inside already."

After a pause, the father sat down again, and crossed himself. He said, "You must be very unhappy to believe such a thing. That is not belief as we understand it, but sickness. Sit down, Julius, and let me tell you something. For if you seriously believe what you say, then you must leave us. Your home will be in the world of illusion."

"I know that." The youth looked defiant, but seated himself on the rickety chair. The hammering above continued.

"I was just discussing with someone how we were going to keep warm in the coming winter," the father said, conversationally. "When first I arrived on the island with two companions, we managed somehow to survive the long winter. This building was then in a terrible condition, with half the roof missing. We had no electricity and could not have afforded it had it been available.

"We burnt logs, which we chopped from fallen trees. Mannsjowas then more wooded than now it is. We lived virtually in two rooms on the ground floor. We lived off fish and little else. Occasionally, the kind people of Mannjer would skate across the ice to bring us warm clothes, bread, and aquavit. Otherwise, we prayed and we worked and we fasted.

"Those were happy days. God was with us. He rejoices in scarcity.

"As the years have passed, we have become more sophisticated. At first we made do with candles. Then with oil lamps and oil heaters. We are now reconnected to the electricity supply from Mannjer. Somehow it still works. Now we have to prepare for a longer darker winter, the winter of Unbelief."

"I do not understand what you hope for," Sankal said. "This little piece of the past is lost somewhere outside the galaxy, where God--where your God has never been heard of."

"They hear of him now. "The priest spoke very firmly. "The so-called tourists hear of him. The so-called workers labor on his behalf. As long as the evil does not enter into us, we do the Lord's work, wherever in the universe we happen to be."

Sankal gave a shrug. He looked over one shoulder. "The Devil can get to you, because he owns all -- every thing in the world he made."

"You will make yourself ill believing that. Such beliefs were once held by the Cathars and Bogomils. They perished. What I am trying to tell you is that it is easy to mistake the danger we are in -- the more than mortal danger -- for the work of the Devil. There is no Devil. There is merely a desertion of God, which in itself is extremely painful in many spiritual ways. You are missing God's peace."

From under his brows, Sankal shot Predjin a look of mischievous hatred. "I certainly am! So I wish to leave."

The hammering above them ceased. They heard the footsteps of the workers overhead.

Father Predjin cleared his throat. "Julius, there is evil in men, in all of us, yes."

Sankal's shouted interruption: "And in the horse-devils who did such a thing in the world!"

The priest flinched but continued. "We must regard what has happened to be part of God's strategy of free will. We can still choose between good and evil. We have the gift of life, however hard that life may be, and in it we must choose. If you go from here, you cannot come back."

They looked at each other across the wormy old desk. Outside, beyond the round windows, a watery sun had risen from behind the eastern mountains.

"I want you to stay and help us in the struggle, Julian," the father said. "For your sake. We can get another baker. Another soul is a different matter."

Again Sankal gave a cunning look askance.

"Are you afraid my hideous belief will spread among the other people in the monastery?"

"Oh yes," said Father Predjin. "Yes, I am. Leprosy is contagious."

WHEN THE YOUTH had left, almost before his footsteps had faded from the winding wooden stair, Father Predjin hitched up his cassock and planted his knees on the worn boards of the floor. He clasped his hands together. He bowed his head.

Now there was no sound, the workmen having finished their hammering except for a tiny flutter such as a heart might make; a butterfly flew against a window pane,

unable to comprehend what held it back from freedom.

The father repeated a prayer mantra until his consciousness stilled and sank away into the depths of a greater mind. His lips ceased to move. Gradually, the scripts appeared, curling, uncurling, twisting about themselves in a three dimensional Sanskrit. There was about this lettering a sense of benediction, as if the messages they conveyed were ones of good will; but in no way could the messages be interpreted, unless they were themselves the message, saying that life is a gift and an obligation, but containing a further meaning which must remain forever elusive.

The scripts were in a color, as they writhed and elaborated themselves, like gold, and often appeared indistinct against a sandy background.

With cerebral activity almost dormant, there was no way in which intelligence could be focused on any kind of interpretation. Nor could a finite judgment be arrived at. Labyrinthine changes taking place continually would have defied such attempts. For the scripts turned on themselves like snakes, now forming a kind of tangle upon the vellum of neural vacancy. Ascenders rose upward, creating panels across which tails wavered back and forth, creating within them polychrome branches or tuft-like abstractions from twigs of amaranth.

The elaboration continued. Color increased. Large loops created a complex motorway of lettering and filled themselves with two contrasting arrangements of superimposed spiral scrolls in lapis blue with carmine accents. The entanglement spread, orderly in its growth and replication.

Now the entire design, which seemed to stretch infinitely, was either receding or pressing closer, transforming into a musical noise. That noise became more random, more like the flutter of wings against glass. As the scripts faded, as consciousness became a slowly inflowing tide, the fluttering took on a more sinister tone.

Soon -- intolerably soon -- breaking the mood of transcendent calm the fluttering was a thundering of inscrutable nature. It was like a sound of hooves, as though a large animal was attempting clumsily to mount impossible stairs. Blundering -- but brutishly set upon success.

Father Predjin came to himself. Time had passed. Cloud obscured the sky in the pupil-less eye of the round window. The butterfly lay exhausted on the sill. Still the infernal noise continued. It was as if a stallion was endeavoring to climb the wooden twisting stair from below.

He rose to his feet. "Sankal?" he asked, in a whisper.

The father ran to the door and set his back against it, clenching the skin of his cheeks back in terror, exposing his two rows of teeth.

Sweat burst like tears from his brow.

"Save me, sweet heavenly Father, save me, damn you! I'm all you've got!"

Still the great beast came on, the full power of Pentivanashenii behind it.