

Terry Dowling

THE LAGAN FISHERS

In the first week of September, a lagan bloom appeared in the south meadow below Sam Cadrey's kitchen window, and that was the day it felt real at last.

Something glinting in the morning sunlight caught his eye as he stood making coffee-dislodged hubcap, plastic drum lid, discarded garbage bag, he couldn't be sure-something close to the road but definitely on his property. When he hurried down to see what it was, there was no mistaking the glossy quatrefoil of tartarine pushing up through the lucerne like an old bore cover made of fused glass. He kicked at the shell of opalescent stuff, beat on it a few times, then stood wondering how much his life would change.

Sam knew his rights. They couldn't take his farm back, he was sure of that. When that small container of mioflarin-MF-illegally buried in the Pyrenees had leaked in 2029, poisoning so much of Europe, then the rest of the world, he'd become that rare and wondrous thing, a true global hero: one of the twenty-two volunteers sent in to cap it, one of the five who had survived Site Zero and made it out again. Sam had freehold in perpetuity, and the World Court in Geneva had decreed that lagan blooms were land-title pure and simple. Sure, there were local magistrates, local ordinances and local prejudices to reckon with, but the Quarantine was officially over, the last of the embargoes lifted-both made a laughing stock by the sheer extent of the bloom outbreaks and their consistently benign nature. A disfigured, forty-nine-year-old MF veteran and widower on a UN life pension had recourse to legal aid as well. Looking down at the four-lobed curving hump of the bloom, Sam knew he was king of all that he surveyed and that, in all probability, his kingdom would be an alien domain for the next year or so.

Within fourteen minutes, orbiting spysats had logged it. Within forty, Mayor Catherine was in her living room with their local Alien Influences Officer, Ross Jimmins, to log the official registration, and a dozen lagan fishers were at the end of his drive waiting to bid for trawling rights. Protection agents and insurance reps were at his door too, offering assistance against the usual: everything from highly organized looters to salting by disgruntled neighbors. But Sam was a UN vet. Within the hour, there were two AIO lagan custodians at his front gate wearing blue arm-bands, and the usually strident hucksters pacing up and down the gravel drive had become unusually courteous.

"How soon before the hedges form?" Sam asked Mayor Catherine, sounding both cautious and eager, still not sure about the whole thing. Catherine was the closest thing to a rocket scientist Tilby had, a handsome, middle-aged woman with steel-grey hair, looking the perfect, latter-day *nasa-chik* in her navy-blue jumpsuit. The NASA look. The imprimatur of discipline and professional responsibility. Who would have thought?

"It's still three to four days," she said, taking the AIO notepad from Jimmins and adding her verification code. "Latest count, fourteen per cent of blooms don't hold. Remember that, Sam. They sink back."

"That's not many though," Ross Jimmins said, reassuring him, wishing Sam well with every puff on his lagan-dross day-pipe. The pipe was carved from lagan horn, a length of hollowed lattice from a "living" hedge. As well as the wonderful fragrance the slow-combusting dross gave off, somewhere between gardenia and the finest aromatic tobaccos of the previous four centuries, there was a welter of other positive side-effects, and the molecularly atrophying horn itself scattered its own immune-enhancing dusting of euphorines on the warm morning air.

"It is like some intelligence is behind it," Sam said, looking out through the big view window, and knew how inane it sounded coming from him, the Tilby Tiger, the great skeptic.

Catherine gave a wry smile. "It's good to have you back in the world. We lost you there for a while."

"At least Jeanie didn't see me like this." Sam had resolved he wouldn't say it, but there it was.

The Mayor looked off at the fields and hills, out to where a tiny orange bus was bringing more science students from the local high school to do a real-time, hands-on site study of early bloom effect. "Jeanie didn't and it's not what I meant, Sam." She changed her tone. "So, what are you going to do about it? Lease it out?"

Sam was grateful. "You think I should? Let them wall it off, rig up processing gantries? Put storage modules down there?" *Stop me seeing it*, he didn't add.

"Best way. Nothing is lost but spindrift through the flumes. You get the hedges; they get the lagan. There's no poaching and none of the hassles."

"You representing anybody?" Sam asked. He'd always been a wary and even harsh critic where the lagan

was concerned. It had always been someone else's experience, the reality of others, thus easy to comment on. This had changed him-what was the quaint old *fin-de-siècle* saying?-had made it "up close and personal."

"I had a dozen phone calls before I left the office, but no. Hope you believe it, Sam."

"Ross?"

"Eight calls. Nope."

Sam needed to believe them. They were his friends. They'd been with him when Jeanie died. He needed to brave it out. "Cat, I want to see it. I've gone revisionist *pro tem*, okay? If it's alien invasion, let's have it. I *want* hedges to form. I want them stretching along the road all the way to town. People should be able to poach stuff. Break bits off."

Cat answered right on cue. This was an area of major personal concern. "A lot of wildcat lagan owners agree with you. I've always said it. Keep the cartels out."

"I've got control, right?"

She gave a little frown. "Your property, Sam."

"What about outside options?"

"Some control. It's an official thing. What's on your mind?"

"I want it all hands-on. No remotes. None of those little science doovers. No aerostats."

"That's tricky, Sam," she said. "It's standard nowadays. Every general access unit means a thousand global onlines and probably a thousand research facilities. A fortune from sponsors to you. Even if you could close 'em out, you'd just get thousands more people coming in. You don't want that."

"Then only for part of the day. Only in the afternoon. Say, 1300 till sundown. None at night. Can we do that?"

"We can try," Jimmins said and keyed in the request, waited less than a minute, nodded. "You've got it for now, flagged for renegotiation later. Bless your MF, Sam. You'll get rogues slipping in, but we'll put up a burn field. Fry 'em in the sky."

Cat nodded, confirming how easy it was going to be. "They'll stop when they lose a few. So, what will you do?"

Talking the talk was easy, Sam found. "I'll fish it myself. See what comes up."

"Great idea. Can we help?"

It all happened quickly once the Mayor and Jimmins left. The waiting fishers at the gate drove off the moment they learned Sam was going to wildcat it himself, all but one, the craggy-looking, grey-haired older man perched on the bonnet of his truck. When Sam went down to quiz him on why he stayed, he saw that it was Howard Dombey, the proprietor of the Lifeways produce market on the far side of Tilby. He was a part-time lagan fisher, and people said he did some lagan brokering as well.

"It's Howard Dombey, isn't it?" Sam said.

"Right on, Mr. Cadrey. Like to help if you're a mind." His idioms were straight from Life Studies Online, all very PC, optimally relaxing, maximally community building.

Sam found himself matching them. "Doing it myself. And it's Sam."

"Like to help just the same, Sam. Don't figure profit margins too well anymore. Just like working with it. Seeing it come to."

"Why?"

Howard Dombey shrugged, going with the role beautifully. "Just do. Watching the spin. Seeing it all flicky-flashy with lagan, pretty as the day. Give me five per cent and I'll do the scut work. Give me ten and I'll fence the bounty you clear as well. Save you the grief."

"There'll be slow days, Howard."

"Counting on it. At my age, they're the ones I like."

They made quite a team-a vet skeptic with a face ruined by MF, a town mayor looking like a shuttle-butt spaceways groupie from the nineties, a pipe-smoking AIO officer, and a small-time entrepreneur who did the culture-speak of mid-twentieth rural USA.

They started early each morning and left off around 1300, with Howard often as not staying on at the sorting trays till sunset when the last of the afternoon's tek and spec groups had gone-whichever AIO officials were rostered for that day's site check.

It was funny how much of an unspoken routine it all was. By the time Sam had disengaged the perimeter sensors and AIO alarms around 0700, the four of them were there, ready to set off in pairs, carefully locating the newbies and keying spot and spec codes into notepads for their own constantly updating operations program and the AIO global master.

It was on a spell during one of these start-up checks, after Sam had pointed to a perfect cloudform lagan building on one of the hedges, that Howard told him about the name.

"You know what lagan originally was?"

Sam just stared; it seemed such an odd question. "I thought it was named after the river in that old Irish song. You know, *My Lagan Love*. They're always playing it."

"Most people think that. No. It's from the language of shipwreck. Flotsam, jetsam and lagan. Flotsam is wreckage that floats when a ship goes down. Jetsam is what's thrown overboard to lighten her. Jetsam when it's jettisoned, see. If it floats, it's flotsam. If it sinks, it's lagan. A lot of valuable stuff was marked with buoys so they could retrieve it later. There were salvage wars over it. Deliberate wrecking, especially on the coast of Cornwall and around the Scillies. Lights set during storms to lure ships onto rocks. Lamps tied to the horns of cows-'horn beacons' they called 'em. Whole families involved. Whole communities."

"So why that name now? Lagan?"

"Some scientist came up with it. These are floats from somewhere else, aren't they? Buoys poking through. Lines leading down to stuff."

"I've never heard this."

Howard looked at him as if to say: *You've been out of it for quite a while.*

"Lots of folks haven't. But it's true. We get whatever comes up from the 'seabed.' "

"But-"

"Okay, don't say it! There's no line. No seabed. It's how the whole thing goes-first the shelltop like yours last week, then the bounty is hauled up."

"But it's not *down* is it, Howard? And it isn't *hauled up*. Words hide it. Tidy it up too much."

"Okay, but they help us live with it."

"And hide it. How's the weather? How's the lagan? Geologists and seismologists doing their tests all the time, finding nothing. No pressure variables under the caps. None of the expected physics. It's all so PC."

"See my point, Sam. The blooms link to somewhere else, somewhere out of sight, to something worth waiting for. Stuff comes up; you get the hedges with bits of lagan in them like fish in a net. At the very least, you get chunks of molybdenum and diamond-S and those funny little spindles of-what're those new words?-crowfenter and harleybine? Now and then there's the gold and silver."

"But no Nobel Prizes yet."

"What? Oh, right. No, no Nobel Prizes in those hedges so far. No real answers."

"See, there's another word. Hedges."

"They follow roads and field lines, Sam. That's what hedges do. Hedges is what they are."

"Hides it, Howie."

"Hasn't stopped you."

Which was too close to the truth and too soon in their friendship right then, so they both gladly changed the subject. It was made easier by Mayor Catherine dumping her sample bag on the sorting table.

"New tally," she said. "Eighty-two viable. Sixteen fallow."

Howard keyed the totals into his notepad. "Sounds right. Everyone gets twenty percent that are empty."

"Looted?" Sam asked.

"Don't see how. Just empty. Nothing when the hedges form. Air pockets."

Sam kept at it. "Looted elsewhere?"

Howard watched him for a few moments. "Hadn't thought of that. Looted on the other side. You better watch 'im, Cat. Sounds like we got ourselves a new rocket scientist."

Howard knew well enough to take up a sample bag then and set off for the hedges.

By the end of the fifth week, their four major branchings had become seven, and what started as an ordinary watchtower lofting on one of them swelled, brachiated and buttressed first into a classic "salisbury point," then-over another twenty days-a full-blown "chartres crown," finally a true "notre dame." It meant endless media fly-bys, countless tek visits, even more busloads of tourists and school groups, but so few blooms became cathedral that Sam couldn't blame them. It was the appropriate response. He would have been worried if there hadn't been the extra attention, though it made it harder to live with what his world was becoming. Having the lagan was one thing; now it was becoming too strikingly alien.

Again it was genial, friendly Howard who triggered the next outburst, dumping his bag on the sorting table, then coming over to stand with his newfound friend to admire the towering structure.

"How about it, Sam? A cathedral. Makes you believe in the mirroring, don't it?"

"What's that, Howie?" The word mirror often caught him like that. The Tilby Tiger lived in a house without mirrors. (But full of reflections, he sometimes quipped on better days, making the tired old joke.)

"The online spiel. That it's mimicry. Skeuomorphism. The lagan sees clouds; it tries to make clouds. Sees trees and roads, does its best to give trees and roads."

"You believe that?"

Howard shrugged. "Makes sense. Has a certain appeal. This stuff pushes through, looks around, imitates what it sees."

"Sees! Sees! Sees! Where the hell has my bloom *seen* a cathedral, Howard, tell me that!"

Again Howard shrugged. "Dunno. It goes into the sky; it blows in the air; it feels the sun and gets in among the flowers. Maybe ancient cathedrals were just imitations of high places too. Maybe other lagan blooms have seen cathedrals and pass on the knowledge. Anyway, Sam, I figure why resist what's as natural as what nature's already doin'. Why resist it? Why do you?"

Because, Sam wanted to say. Just because. Then, needing reasons, needing reason, gave himself: There's my face, there's the other MF impairment, my infertility, there's Jeanie lost (not MF-related, no, but more old sayings covered it: "collateral damage," "friendly fire"). This is too new, too fast, too change-everything insistent. For someone keeping someone lost as alive as possible in what had *been*, simply *been* for them-views, routines, sugars in coffee, favorite songs, the spending of days, the very form and nature of days-how dare this brutal new lagan change it so. As Jeanie-bright, as Jeanie-fresh as Sam tried to make it, the lagan more than anything was always saying *that* time has gone. Jeanie is gone. Let them go.

Sam found himself trying so hard. Jeanie would have loved the lagan, arranged picnics, invited friends. Jeanie would have liked Howard and the others getting together, liked the little-kid thrill of them bringing in the bounty-grown-ups acting like kids acting like grown-ups.

But try as he might, Sam always found himself on both sides of it, and his words kept coming out a bit crazy. He couldn't help himself.

"Look at what's happened. First the MF outbreak in '29, then the lagan five years later."

"They're not related," Howard said. "It's not cause and effect."

"Maybe. Experts in nineteenth century London didn't see the connection between smog and tuberculosis either."

"Between what and what?"

Sam was careful not to smile. For all his smarts, Howard was an aging child of the times, a true citizen of the age, lots of compartmentalized knowledge, but no true overview. He knew all about shipwrecks and 1930s Hudson locomotives and Napoleon Bonaparte and vintage CD-ROM games, but lacked the larger cultural horizon for such things. For him the old term PC still meant "Politically Correct" not "Pre-Copernican," though who remembered Copernicus these days, or Giordano Bruno, or William Tyndale, or the Library at Alexandria or, well, the economic conditions that had led to horn beacons and shipwrecking and the original lagan, all the other things that were lost? Things eroded, worn smooth and featureless by too much time.

It sobered him having Howard to measure himself by. It brought him back, made him remember to be smarter. Kinder. Set him in the present as much as anything could.

"But Howie, what if it's real lagan? In the shipwreck sense?"

"What, marked with a buoy?"

"Or sent up as a buoy."

"What! Why do you say that?"

"I have no idea. Just should be said, I guess."

At 0140 on 15th October, Sam woke and lay there in the dark, listening to the wind stir in the dream hedges. He was surprised that he could sleep at all, that he didn't wake more often. It was almost as if the southing and other hedge sounds were deliberately there to lull the lagan-blessed. Like the dross, the spindrift, the honey-balm, it too was benign. The hedges breathing, thriving, being whatever they were.

Even as he drowsed, settled back towards sleep, that slipping, dimming thought made Sam rouse himself, leave his bed and go out onto the verandah. Of course it was deliberate. Look at how everyone accepted the phenomenon now, built it into their lives.

Sam regarded the fields picked out by the half-phase spring moon. He smelled the honey-balm wind that blew up from the hedgerows and made himself listen to the "croisie," not just hear it-that mysterious, oscillating tone produced by nearly all lagan blooms, a barely-there, modulating drone set with what one moment sounded for all the world like someone shaking an old spray can, the next jingling bangles together on a waving arm. Never enough to annoy or intrude. Oh no. Not the croisie. Lulling. A welcome and welcoming thing. Always better than words made it seem. Something that would be missed like birdsong and insect chorus when the bloom ended and the hedges were left to dry out and rattle and fall to slow dust on the ordinary wind.

Sam left the verandah and walked down to the road. The hedges stretched away like screens of coral in the moonlight or, better yet, like frames, nets and trellises of moonlight, all ashimmer-all "flicky-flashy" as Howard would say-yes, like blanched coral or weathered bone robbed of their day colors but releasing a flickering, deep, inner light, an almost-glow. Better still-fretted cloudforms, heat-locked, night-locked, calcined, turned to salt like Lot's wife, turned to stone by the face of this world meeting the Gorgon-stare of some other.

The croisie murmured. The honey-balm blew. Spindrift lofted and feather-danced in the bright dark. The air smelled wonderful.

What a wondrous thing, he thought. What a special time. If only Jeanie were here to see it. The different world. The dream-hedges and lagan. The spindrift dancing along the road and across the fields. His own MF legacies too, though she wouldn't have cared.

There are enough children in the world, she would've said. Who needs more than six in ten to be fertile anyway? The world is the birthright, not people. It doesn't need more people. Hasn't for more than a century. Can't have too many people or people stop caring for each other. Only common sense.

She would never have mentioned his face-or perhaps only to quip: "My Tiger. You were always too handsome anyway."

She would have made it-easier.

Sam watched the ghostly palisades in their warps and woofs, their herringbones and revetments, found himself counting visible towerheads till he reached the riot of the notre dame. Then he shut his eyes and listened to the ever-shifting, ever-the-same voice of the croisie and tried to find, beyond it, the rush of the old night wind in the real-trees. He could, he was sure he could, anchoring himself in the other, larger, older world by it.

But he wouldn't let it take his thoughts from Jeanie. No. He kept her there in the questing-most vividly by adding to the list of things he would have said to her, imagining what she might have said to him. Like how you did start to count your life more and more as doors closed to you, that was a Jeanie line. How it took the MF pandemic damaging much of the genetic viability first of Europe, then Africa and Asia, on and on, to close some important doors for everyone, to unite the world, make them finally destroy the old weapons. The destroyable ones.

Jeanie would have put her spin on it. Her spindrift.

Sam grinned at the night. More language from the sea. More shipwreck talk. Spindrift blew along the road, the skeins and eddies of spores and hedge-dust, the "moonsilk," the "flit," the "dross"-there were so many names-but, whatever it was, all safely moribund, *sufficiently* chemically inert, they said, though still finely, subtly psychoactive just by being there. Had to be. Part of the night. This night. His.

Theirs. Jeanie keenly there. His lagan love. Still.

Sam breathed in the bounty, filled his lungs with all the changed nature. Howard was right. Blooms and hedges. Lagan. Watchtowers, thunderheads, cathedrals and hutches. So much better than crystalline molecular skeuomorphs with key attributes of long-chain polymer-calcinite hybrids or whatever they were touting in the net journals.

Then the cathedral sighed, the only word for it. A single falling note swelled against the croisie, a distinct sad trailing-away sound that left the alien lagan-tone, the honey-balm and the night-wind beyond like a strange silence when it had gone.

From the cathedral?

Sam accepted that it was, knowing that almost all the logged lagan anomalies were around the big cloudform and cathedral loftings. The hutches and nestings, the basements and even stranger sub-basements were always silent, but the loftings sometimes belled and breathed and sounded like this, like great whales of strangeness making their song.

The mikes would have tracked it. Nearby stats had to be homing in, risking burn. Tomorrow there'd be extra flybys and spec groups.

Sam walked closer to the looming thirty-meter structure, looked up into the interstices of the triple spire, the converging, just-now braiding salisbury points, then down to where the portal and narthex would be in a true cathedral. He began a circuit. There was only the croisie now and the distant wind if you listened for it.

There were no doors in the logged salisburys, chartres and notre dames. There were outcroppings like porches and lintels, but no doors, no chambers. The loftings were always solid lagan.

But here was a door-rather a shadowing, a doorness beneath such an outcropping, a cleft between buttress swellings that held darkness like one.

Why now? Why mine? Sam thought, but came back, Jeanie-wise, with: Why not? If not now, when?

Still he resisted. He'd finally-mostly-accepted the lagan. He'd welcomed the wealth, but mainly the companionship the lagan had brought, a new set of reasons for people doing things together. But he wanted nothing more, no additional complications. Another old *fin-de-siècle* saying from Life Studies covered it: "not on my watch."

Had to be-ready, the words came, bewildering him till he realized they answered his two unspoken questions.

A sentient, talking, telepathic cathedral? It was too much. It was bathos.

But it made him move in under the overhang, the lip of the porch, whatever it was, made him step into the darkness.

He found her there, found her by the darkness lightening around her; the final corner of the narthex, apse or niche ghost-lighting this latest, incredible lagan gift.

She would never be beautiful, if *she* were even the right word. The eyes were too large, the face too

pinched, the ears and nose too small, like something half-made, a maquette, a Y99 Japanese *animé* figure, a stylized, waxy, Roswell mannequin. The naked body too doll-smooth, too androgynous, with not even rudimentary genitalia or breasts that he could tell, yet somehow clearly not meant to be a child.

He knew who she was meant to be.

"You're not Jeanie." He had to say it.

No. It sounded in his mind.

"You're something like her. A bit."

"It was your thoughts there." Spoken words this time. The creature enunciated them so carefully, seemed to agonize over each one, fiercely concentrating, being so careful. Could it be, did he imagine it or was there perspiration on the forehead, the sheen of stress or panic? "I know-Jeanie."

"You do!"

The mannequin frowned, desperately confused, clearly alarmed if the twisting of the face were any indication. "It was there. There. The anchor?" The final word was a question.

"Ah." Sam felt hope vanish, felt fascination empty out and drain away, then refill from what truly, simply was on this strangest, most magical night.

"Who are you?" he said, gentler, easier now. "What are you?"

"Yours?" Again, it was almost a question. This creature seemed in shock, far more troubled than he was, but a shock almost of rapture as well as panic. At the wonder of being here. Being lost, bereft, but here. Somewhere. Anywhere.

Sam couldn't help himself. He stepped back, did so again and again, moved out of the chamber, out from under the porch. He had to anchor himself too. He looked around at the night, at the rising laganform looming over him, at the spread of coral barricades sweeping away in the vivid dark. No wonder they called them dream hedges. He saw it all now. Others had had these visitations. That's what the official Alien Influence spec groups were *really* looking for. Motile manifestations. Lifesign. The cathedrals were concentrations for hiding passengers, for delivering them into this world.

What to do? Tell the others? Share this latest, strangest, most important discovery-not the word!-this benefice, this gift? The orbitals were nightsighted, but Sam and this creature, this *Kyrie*?-the name was just there-*Kyrie!*-just was, were *in* the lagan, with the croisie at full song and the honey-balm strengthening, both caught in the richest rush of spindrift he'd seen in weeks, with the most vivid runs of ghost-light making the hedges all flicky-flashy. Flickers of lagan dance, lagan blush. Semaphores of dream. The tides of this other sea bringing up its bounty.

He made himself go back into that darkness. He had to. It was a chance, a chance for something. He barely understood, but he *knew*.

"Kyrie?" He named it. Named her. What else could he do?

She was standing out from the chamber wall, just standing there naked and waiting.

"Kyrie?" he said again, then gave her his dressing gown, moved in and draped it about her shoulders. How could he not?

Before he quite knew he was doing so, he was leading her out into the night, holding her, steadying her. She walked stiff-legged, with a strange and stilted gait, new to walking, new to everything, but flesh-warm and trembling under his hands. She was hurting, panicking, desperately trying to do as he did. Sam guided her up the path and into the house. It was all so unreal, yet so natural. It was just what you did, what was needed.

Because it seemed right, because he needed it, Sam put her in Jeanie's room, in Jeanie's bed, in the room and bed Jeanie had used in her final days before hospitalization was necessary and she had gone away forever. He did that and more. Though he balked at it, he couldn't help himself. He left the photos and quik-sims of Jeanie he'd put there when she'd left, made himself do that, hating it, needing it, needing it knowing what this brand-new Kyrie was trying to become.

She was still there the next morning and, yes, hateful and wonderful both, there did seem more of Jeanie in the drawn, minimalist face. Did he imagine it? Yearn for it too much? Was it the light of day playing up the tiniest hint?

Sam felt like a ghoulish, like something cruel and perverse when he brought in more pictures of Jeanie and set them on the sideboard, even put one in the en suite.

It was mainly curiosity, he kept telling himself. But need too, though too dimly considered to be allowed as such. He just had to see.

No one had observed their meeting. Or, rather, no queries came, no AIO agents, no officials quizzing him about an overheard conversation, about a late-night lagan-gift from the cathedral. It seemed that the lagan had masked it; the croisie had damped it down; the honey-balm had blurred the words to nothing-perhaps their intended function all along. Misleading. Deceiving. Hiding the passengers. Working to let this happen privately, secretly. Who could say?

He helped her become human.

It was hard to work in the hedges in the days that followed, so hard to chat and make small-talk knowing that she was up in the house with the books and the sims, learning his world, learning to be human, eating and drinking mechanically but unassisted now, if without evident pleasure, being imprinted. Becoming. The only word for it.

They saw that he was distracted, took it as an allowable relapse by their MF recluse, the famous Tilby Tiger. Becoming was an appropriate word for Sam too. Though he made himself work at doing and saying the right things, remaining courteous and pleasant, it was like doing the compulsory Life Studies modules all over again, all those mandatory realtime, facetime *têtes* and citizenship dialogues for getting along. Comfortable handles for the myriad, net-blanded, online, PC global villagers. Words, words and words. Sam hated it but managed.

He had Jeanie back in a way he hadn't expected. Like a flower moving with the sun or a weathervane aligning with the wind, he just found himself responding to what was natural in his life. Kyrie was of *this* time, *this* place, *this* moment, but with something of Jeanie, just as the old song had it. *My Lagan Love* indeed.

Sam cherished the old words anew, and sang them as he worked in the hedgerows below her window.

*"Where Lagan stream sings lullaby
There blows a lily fair;
The twilight gleam is in her eye,
The night is on her hair.
And, like a love-sick lenanshee,
She hath my heart in thrall;
Nor life I owe, nor liberty,
For Love is lord of all.*

*And often when the beetle's horn
Hath lulled the eve to sleep,
I steal unto her shielding lorn
And thro' the dooring peep.
There on the cricket's singing stone
She spares the bog wood fire.
And hums in sad sweet undertone
The song of heart's desire."*

But Sam remained the skeptic too, was determined not to become some one-eyed Love's Fool. Even as he guided Kyrie, added more photos, ran the holos, he tried to fit this visitation into the science of lagan.

It was a cycle, a pendulum swing. One moment he'd be sitting with his alien maquette in her window-shaded room, singleminded, determined, perversely searching for new traces of Jeanie. The next, he was touring the online lagan sites-scanning everything from hard science briefs to the wildest theories, desperately seeking anything that might give a clue.

There was so much material, mostly claims of the "I know someone who knows someone" variety, and Sam was tempted to go the exophilia route and see the World Government muddying up the informational waters, hiding the pearls of truth under the detritus.

Finally, inevitably, he went back to his bower-bird friend, brought up the subject during a morning tour of the hedges.

"Howie, official findings aside, you ever hear of anything found alive in the lagan?"

"Apart from the lagan itself? Nothing above the microbial."

"But unofficial."

"Well, the rumors are endless. People keep claiming things; the UN keeps saying it's reckless exophilia. And I tell myself, Sam, if something was found, how could they keep a lid on it? I mean, statistically, there'd be so many visitations, passengers, whatever, word would get out."

"What if people are hiding them?"

Howie shook his head. "Doesn't follow. Someone somewhere would go for the gold and the glory instead, bypass the authorities and go to the media direct. You'd only need one."

Sam didn't press it too closely, didn't say: unless they were loved ones. Returnees. Things of the heart. He kept it casual, made it seem that he was just-what was Howie's saying?-shooting the breeze.

"Ever meet anyone who claims to have seen someone?"

"Sure. Bancroft, but he's always claiming one thing or another about the lagan. Sally Joule's neighbor, Corben, had a stroke, but she won't buy it. Reckons the lagan did it to him because he discovered something."

"Would he mind if I visited?"

"Probably not. I know Corben. He's two counties over, an hour's drive or more. But I go sit with him

sometimes. Talk's ninety-eight per cent one-sided these days, but that's okay. And you've got things in common. He wildcatted his field too, just as you've done. I can take you out."

Ben Corben seemed pleased to see them. At least he tracked their approach from his easy chair on the front porch and gave a lopsided smile when Howie greeted him and introduced Sam. He couldn't speak well anymore, and took ages to answer the same question Sam had put to Howie: had he ever heard of anything found alive in the lagan.

"Sum-thin," Corben managed. "Stor-ees."

And that was it for a time. The live-in nurse served afternoon tea, helped Corben with his teacup and scones.

Which was fine, Sam found. It gave him time to look out over Corben's lapsed domain, let him see what his own bloom would one day become.

Finally Howard brought them back to the question as if it hadn't been asked.

"Ever find anything out there, Corb? Anything alive?" He gestured at what remained of Corben's hedges, stripped and wasted now, the towers and barricades fallen, the basements collapsed in on themselves, just so many spike-fields, kite-frames and screens of wind-torn filigree, rattling and creaking and slowly falling to dust.

"No," Corben said, so so slowly, and his skewed face seemed curiously serene, alive with something known.

"It's important, Ben," Sam said. "It's just-it's really important. I've got hedges now. Never expected it. Never did. But I think something's out there. Calling at night." He didn't want to give too much away. And Howie had gone with it, bless him, hadn't swung about and said: hey, what's this? Good friend.

Corben blinked, looked out across the ruin of his own lagan field, now two years gone, so Howie had said.

Again Sam noticed the peace in the man, what may have been a result of the stroke or even some medication stupor, but seemed for all the world like uncaring serenity, as if he'd seen sufficient wonders and was content, as if-well, as if-

And there it was. Of course. Like Kyrie. Corben was like Kyrie. Slow and careful. Minimalist. Just like Kyrie. Of course.

It was all so obvious once Sam saw it like that. Back home, he removed the photos, sims and mirrors, left Kyrie to be what she-what "it" had tried to be all along. He saw what he thought to be relief in the maquette's suffering eyes as he removed the last of the distractions, then brought a chair and sat in front of it.

Finish your job, he thought, but didn't speak it. Finish being what you already are.

And Sam found it such a relief to sit there and let it happen. Kyrie had never tried to be Jeanie, had never been a gift from the lagan to ease a broken heart.

Not Kyrie. Cadrey.

Sam saw how he'd been: thinking of Jeanie by day, not thinking of her-blessedly forgetting her-at night when he slept. Escaping in dreams, his only true time of self. Swaying Kyrie this way and that in its Becoming-by day towards Jeanie, by night back towards its intended form all along.

Poor agonized thing. Here from somewhere else, now beautified by Jeanie-thought, now showing the ruin of his own MF tiger mask, coping, copying. Poor ugly, beautiful, languishing thing. Trying all the while.

Then, like looking through doors opened and aligned, he saw the rest. Its message, its purpose. I will be you to free you so you can have your turn. Moving on. Taking it with you.

What a clumsy, awkward method, Sam decided. What a flawed-no! What a natural and fitting way to do it, more like a plant in a garden, some wild and willful, wayward garden, some natural, blundering, questing thing, trying again and again to push through. Stitching it up. Linking the worlds.

What it was, never the issue. Only *that* it was.

He had to help. Do sittings. Leave photos of his red-demon, tiger-faced self (how the others would smile!), try not to think of Jeanie for now, just for now.

For Kyrie. Oh, the irony. So many times he stood before the mirrors and laughed, recalling that old story of desperate choice: the Lady or the Tiger. Well, now he played both parts-showing the Tiger but being *like* Jeanie for Kyrie.

Giving of himself. Giving self. Generous. The Lady *and* the Tiger.

Two weeks later, at brightest, deepest midnight, he stood before the notre dame, bathed in the honey-balm and the spindrift, letting the croisie take him, tune him, bring him in. They were all part of it-transition vectors, carrier modes.

Kyrie was in place back in the house, maimed, shaped, pathetic and wonderful both. Sam Cadrey enough. Would seem to have had a stroke when they found *him*. That would cover the slips, the gaffes and

desperate gracelessness. His friends would find, would impose, the bits of Sam Cadrey no time or training could provide. Friendship allowing, they would find him in what was left, never knowing it was all there was.

Sam looked around at his world, at the fullness of it, the last of it, then stepped into the narrow chamber.

The cathedral did what it had to do, blindly or knowing, who could say, but naturally.

Sam felt himself changing, becoming-why, whatever it needed him to be this time, using what was in the worlds. And as he rose, he had the words, unchanged in all that changing. *Nor life I know, nor liberty.* Had his self, his memories to be enough of self around. *For Love is lord of all.*

Sam held Jeanie to him, as firm and clear as he could make her, and rose from the troubled seabed to the swelling, different light of someone else's day.