

The Black Heart
Patrick O'Leary

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Patrick O'Leary (people.mw.mediaone.net/patri10629/newindex.html) lives in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. He works as Associate Creative Director at an advertising agency in the Detroit area. He is a widely published poet, and an SF and fantasy novelist (Door Number Three, 1995, and The Gift, 1997). His new novel, The Impossible Bird, about alien invasion, death and resurrection, and brotherly love, came out at the beginning of 2002. In the late 1990s he began to publish short fiction. Some of his stories and poems are collected in Other Voices, Other Doors (2000).

This story, full of memorable images, appeared at SciFiction, the online fiction site that became the highest-paying fiction market in the fantasy field in 2001 and published a number of fine stories. This will be the first appearance in print for "The Black Heart," which is O'Leary's best story to date. A war between good and evil begins and ends in that most mundane of transitional spaces, the airport. O'Leary plays interesting games with reader identification: The character with whom we identify shifts over the course of the story.

So. His flight was delayed and he was reading *Fortune* in the gate area, waiting for word on the plane. First it was minor repairs. Then it was de-icing. Then there was backup over La Guardia. His luggage checked, his seat reserved, his stuffed black briefcase lying on the empty seat beside him. The snow streaming down like stars in hyperspace. So he was stuck with the stink that surrounded him, affronted his nostrils so that he did most of his breathing under his mustache. Baked pretzels, hot dogs, frozen yogurt, pizza, coffee, disinfectant. And the rank travelers dressed for the blizzard, sweating in their seats, checking their watches, calling on the grimy stainless steel pay phones. He could never get used to them – the layers of human scent and body grease, the aftermath of burps and yawns, the excretion of people in stress, late, detoured, waiting – that useless human ritual which always brought out the unmistakable tang of mortality, the final departure, the denied knowledge that they were about to embark on something alien: flight, hurtling themselves 600 miles per hour through the air. And all it took was one lightning strike, one undertrained mechanic, one drunk pilot, one careless flight controller and they were going down, they were going to decorate the skin of the planet like bugs on your windshield.

They knew it. No wonder they stank.

Reviewing an executive summary of Tiger Woods' endorsements, he sensed a presence standing beside him, a shadow seen out of the corner of his eye. Then he heard the unmistakable sound of a blackjack card being snapped down on formica. He saw her as she moved away: a small round woman with short black hair, waddling from marooned traveler to traveler, laying down her card beside each. A card with a red eye on the back. She had set it on his briefcase.

These people. Foreigners begging. Hari Krishnas with their orange robes and foul incense. Chipper Filipino nurses in starched white uniforms, like the one over there, standing in the middle of the concourse, like a rock in a river, holding out a white can marked with a red cross. These presences. A business associate who had introduced him to the delight of distilled spirits had put it well. "They remind me of the nuns in grade school. Even their postures made you feel guilty. I always wanna say: 'Hey! Sister! I'm not starving anybody here. If they're orphans maybe momma should have kept her legs crossed.' "

Well, exactly. Maybe Momma Should Have Kept Her Legs Crossed.

But, on the other hand, he never begrudged the act of giving. For all appearances he was a remarkably generous man. He always emptied the filthy change out of his pockets, grateful to be rid of the odor. PR. Goodwill. Cover. But he never made eye-contact and he never responded to their staged gratitude. He knew it was theater. And he relished the swell of silent respect around him as the travelers pretended not to notice his munificence. Some with guilt and resentment. He could almost smell those, too.

And these card sharks. He could recite their spiels by heart. He didn't even have to read her card. "I am a deaf person. I am an exchange student. I am an immigrant from Peru. This is a whistle. A compass. A holy card. Any donation will be gratefully accepted. Would be most appreciated. Would be so helpful. God bless you! God Bless America! God Love you." God, evidently, was everywhere the needy were.

Most airports had regulations against this sort of soliciting in public spaces. Rules they announced repeatedly. But you couldn't count on them. This was after all, America. Now in Frankfurt they had it down. Floors you could watch yourself in if you so chose. Armed militia with molded plastic sub machine guns and perfect uniforms. Trams that rode like clockwork. Toilets and sinks so clean you could eat off them. Not America. They let anybody in their terminals. Even hustlers passing for passengers en route until they could zero in on their marks. The thing to do was to ignore them and sooner or later they'd retrieve their clichés, vacate your space and take their smells to the next gate of suckers.

He felt the shadow again and looked up to see the short lady in black inspecting him. She held a fistful of cards. Black bangs. Nice round little body. Splendid black Polartec vest—a remarkable material which consisted of plastic milk jugs shredded, melted, extruded and buffed into a luxurious skin of felt. Black shirt and jeans. And Doc Martens on her feet—the soles were so thick they could have been moonboots, resting on the gray carpet in a Mandelbrot stain of salt.

"You didn't read my card," she said.

So. So not deaf then. He picked the card up. Her scent was remarkably inoffensive. She smelled, actually, like a bird. Not the pets who ate where they shat, but the wild ones. The way they gathered tears of moisture in their wings, tiny bubbles that with each stroke hoarded both body grease and soiled air until they had accrued enough weight to roll harmlessly away, leaving perfectly groomed spikes of feather. Cleanest animals alive, though no one else seemed to credit them for it. He twitched his black mustache to savor as he read: "I am a fortune teller. I will tell you your future. If you don't like it, you don't have to pay. Stella."

So that was her game. "Free, huh?"

She nodded. "If you don't like it."

He regarded the red eye on the back of the card. It reminded him of something. Staring at him like that. A famous book. He gave the card a sniff then reached over and set his heavy briefcase on his lap. He gestured for her to take the seat beside him, then with an open palm indicated the top of his briefcase. She laid out the playing cards crisply on the black polished hide—regular playing cards. A row of six.

She turned the first one over. An Ace of Spades. "You're stuck. You're not going anywhere tonight."

A voice on the intercom said, "Ladies and gentlemen, Flight 641 to New York La Guardia has been canceled." Groans throughout the gate area. "Should you wish to change your flight or destination..."

"So," he said. "So you read the board or got the word a few moments before everyone." Tedium, he thought.

She turned over the second card. King of Spades. "You're an important figure. You're on a lucrative assignment for your company."

Flattery, he thought. Well, his Italian briefcase, his Rolex, and his Vincini leather coat could have told her that. Pathetic, these con artists. Amateurs who couldn't survive a week in the business.

The third card. Queen of Spades. Three in a row, he thought. The verge of a pattern.

"Secrets are involved. You are—how do they say it?—incognito."

"That's supposed to impress me, Stella?"

Her eyes did not leave the cards. "I'm not in the impressions business, sir. Frankly, I couldn't care less."

Now that was interesting. Attitude or arrogance. Not something you expect in a low-level con. Perhaps she was a pro. The top of her head was speckled with melted snow as if she'd just stepped in from the storm. Tiny beads, each containing a rainbow.

The gate area swarmed with people filing out, dragging carryons with squeaking

wheels, talking into the cellphones. "You're not gonna believe this." "Friggin' Northwest." "I know, I know – but Charlie will have to handle it." "I need you to get me a room. Pronto." "What's her temperature? Put her on."

A satisfying void was imminent.

The fourth card. Ten of Spades. Her fat finger tapped it on his briefcase. He felt an unpleasant vibration on his thighs. Then she flipped over the fifth: Three of Spades. She hesitated, and turned the last. Two of Spades.

All Spades. Descending.

For a moment she looked up at him and he saw her eyes were brown but as close to black as he had ever seen. Her hands scooped up all the cards and evened out the edges. Definitely a pattern. Now he was curious. "All spades, eh?"

She unzipped the black pouch at her waist, put away the deck.

"You get a lot of that?"

She shook her head and loosed a fizz into the air. None of it landed on him.

"So. So what did the last cards say?"

She looked around the gate area, folded her hands over her pouch. "The storm will clear tomorrow."

"She could have told me that," he said, indicating the counter lady with a dip of his head. They were the only ones left at the gate. She and a beer-scented man who rested one elbow on the counter, watching her type, saying, "You call this *service*?" She replied, "Take a deep breath, sir, and let it out. You'll live longer."

He decided he would drink tonight. After he made the confirmation call. Sit on the end of his bed before the TV and drink tiny bottle after tiny bottle, as was his preference, until he'd fall back on the heavy bedspread. In the morning he would wake up in the same position and he would feel nothing in his legs. He liked that. He would sit and count the pile of empties littered at his feet until sensation returned to his lower extremities.

The little fat woman was standing when he said, "Wait." He said, "You're holding back."

For a long minute she looked at him, then sighed and sat. "My Nana used to say it was a gift. But I don't know."

"A gift?"

"Second sight." A sad sad smile. "Since I was little I knew which of my friends was honest. Which would die. How they would die. It's a terrible gift."

"What spooked you?"

She looked sharply at him.

"I am a salesman, Stella. Like you, I make my living reading people." A very good living he might have added.

She sighed again and lifted her eyebrows. "You won't like it."

He shrugged. "Then I won't have to pay, will I?"

Her sadness puzzled him, but they were on familiar ground. He needed to know; she needed to live. It was like any negotiation. You knew when you had the upper hand. You recognized the moment and applied the necessary pressure. It all came down to need.

She held her palms open in her lap. A strangely helpless gesture. "You are due for a great reward. Accolades. I see...accolades. Speeches. Tributes. Honor."

He didn't need her to tell him that. He had cataloged his last sample two hours ago. She was beginning to bore him.

"But it's wrong," she said. "It's wrong."

"Success? What's unlikable about that?"

"I didn't say *unlikable*. I said 'wrong.' "

He tilted back his head and relished the clean fleece of her Polartec.

"Stop it," she said.

He met her eyes.

"Stop smelling me."

He smiled. "Last I checked my nose doesn't take orders from anyone. And it's a free country."

She grasped the armrest with both hands and leaned toward him. "It's a good planet, Sir. We have our share of problems. In many ways we haven't changed much for twelve thousand years."

Quite a shift of context. But he'd dealt with these loonies before. Perhaps she hadn't eaten lately. He smelled no food on her.

"Famine. War. Greed. Selfishness. I won't argue with you."

"We're not arguing," he said with a thin smile.

"But we have a spark. It is wrong for you to take that spark."

His hand slid slowly into the pocket of his coat where his fingers assured him the device was still operational. There was no cause for alarm. He was merely dealing with one of the many casualties of this wayward civilization.

"You don't need us. There are any number of uninhabited planets where you could gather samples."

Was it the hair? he wondered. The skin? No, it was a perfect husk. How could she have possibly...?

"Second sight," she said. "A few of us still have it. Something that hasn't been lost. Something that was once necessary. For survival."

He started buttoning his black leather coat. "You are a very strange woman. I suggest you see a doctor."

"There are options. So many options. Why take this planet when —"

"— My dear lady. I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about."

"That thing in your pocket..." He squeezed it then. "It won't save you."

He heard the crackle and the freeze. The snow had ceased to drift past the black window. The long fingernails of the gate lady stopped clacking along her keyboard. The man at the counter stopped oozing barley and oats.

But the small fat woman continued breathing. And talking.

"My card," she said. "You touched my card. Part of me is on you. It won't freeze either of us."

His knees cracked audibly as he stood and made his way out of the waiting area. Flight was an acceptable tactic but it shamed him to play this hand. He had been on thirty assignments and no one had ever come close to seeing him. He noted a wave of fatigue in several key joints and made the necessary adjustments.

Her footsteps paced him down the concourse, the soles smacking on the filthy tiles. He accelerated, closing in on the little Filipino woman in the phony white nurse's uniform, holding the white can with the red cross, her golden chubby cheeks frozen in the smile she served to donors.

The tiny woman's voice trailing him. "It's a resilient planet. If the humans don't stop you, the whales will. If the whales don't stop you, the birds will. And you'll have to conquer each of us, one species at a time."

The freeze terminated and the squat golden nurse saw his eyes, lost her smile and backed away. The reeking change jangled in her tin.

He whirled on the little woman then, and seeing they were almost alone under the flickering fluorescent lights, he stopped. The rank cloud of the nurse swam over his mustache and into his forebrain. Tacos. Canola oil. An altar candle. A child's diaper. A terrier's spoor. Diesel fuel. Hotel sheets. Camel cigarettes. He shuddered and glared at the miniature card shark who moved into the circle of scent. Oblivious, as they all were to the stench of this calamity, this third-rate planetoid of waste and sewage and sentient trash. All of it, of course, salvageable.

He smiled down at her tiny upturned face. "I have absorbed more worlds than you can imagine. I have traveled endless corridors of space and time. And I have *never*. Met anyone. Who can stop me."

"Then you've never met anyone with second sight."

He stuck his baby finger into his mouth, lubricated it and held it up before his eyes, between them. "With my smallest digit I could make you beg for death."

She clawed the deck of calling cards, the ones with the red eye – a flicking sound that recalled for him the forests of Anwardoli, the dry wind, the clattering leaves, the sweet smell of burning bone. A long assignment that had ended as they all had: in ownership. Preoccupied as he was with his current operational status and resolving several diagnostic concerns, he barely heard her cards. His arm ached, he noted, with a dawning puzzlement, as if his briefcase held not samples but shards of moon. This, admittedly, was not procedure.

She stopped shuffling. "It's called aging," she said. "It happens to most of us. It just happened quicker for you."

"Aging?" he asked. He had been briefed on the concept. A remote contingency. He noticed his mustache had acquired a measurable dampness.

"Entropy extended over a lifecycle. Accelerated, no doubt, by the vast expenditures you have imposed upon your husk." She smiled. "The booze didn't help either."

He grimaced, for he realized that he had indeed been neglecting the feeding ritual. Apart from fluids, he had not taken any of their rancid nourishment for days. But appetite had always been a low priority and he had shuffled it to a lower level. Frankly, the thought of another burned cow, boneless fish, bloated grain, mulched tuber almost made him gag.

"I am compensating," he said, feeling an odd swirl in his bile duct. He rolled one eyeball back in its socket, searching for the adrenal trigger. He found he could not beckon it.

She took his hand then as if he were a child. Led him gently to a row of plastic chairs. Each had its own TV. He found it was a great relief to sit. From a distance he was not familiar with he watched himself slumping in the narrow chair, and the little woman in black depositing coins into a slot imprinted with a pastry of stinking whorls.

"I cannot feel my legs," the man in black said.

"Hush," she said.

Then he caught his breath as he seemed to float above the both of them, seemed, in fact, to be watching from a surveillance camera high in the corner. Such tiny creatures, he thought. The dazed man below was watching the television. But the round black woman was staring up at him, addressing the ceiling.

"Make the call," she said. "Tell them: Hands Off Earth."

Rage swelled in him as she took the briefcase from his useless hands. He called down to her in his Voice of Triumph, but it did not fill the space around him as it had on other worlds, sending the sentients trembling. Words dribbled out of the paling man in black, barely audible above the gameshow and the clattering of the wheel, the applause and the cheers of the Burbank audience. "I am the Fourth Level Surrogate! I am 800 years old!"

"So young?" she said.

"You *Speck*." Spittle washed against the screen below. "I have swallowed solar systems! I have fathered fire!" The man burped. His tongue would no longer obey him.

"You have taken everything," she said softly. "And you have learned nothing."

He watched the man below engage the com: holding a thumb to his left eyeball and a palm to the pulsing screen. His message was necessarily abbreviated. There was no feeling below his waist.

When he was done he slurred, "In the place we go after death I will be a King."

She looked up at him with pity. "There is no place after death. Your bosses lied."

"Accolades," he whispered. "You said 'accolades.' "

"At your funeral."

The Filipino nurse was trotting over with a security guard who smelled of pastrami on rye. And pickle. Dill. Ontario. Last spring. After the first rain.

"It is the heart," she explained in a most ridiculous accent.

"Stroke," the guard said into his walkie talkie.

"Stroke!" the white man giggled.

So, he thought.

So they bowed over his body and, when their backs were to her, the scentless little woman looked up and gave him an impish wave. Then waddled away with his briefcase. All his inventory. All his artifacts. Allegheny coal. Mississippi mud. An auk feather. One negro toe. Forty-seven types of hair. A box of colored chalk. A baby tooth. The eye of a finch. And much else that was irreplaceable.

Useless now. Like this most inadequate husk. Like his mission. Like the scent of burned-out worlds he'd left in his wake. The blank face on the ace of spades. Pointing toward him. A black empty heart with a dagger in its belly.

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