



**The Pyramid of Amirah**  
Kelly, James Patrick

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## **About Kelly:**

James Patrick Kelly (born 1951 in Mineola, New York) is a Hugo- and Nebula-award winning American science fiction author who began publishing in the 1970s and remains to this day an important figure in the SF field.

Kelly made his first fiction sale in 1975, and has since been a major force in the science fiction field. He graduated magna cum laude from the University of Notre Dame in 1972, with a B.A. in English Literature. After graduating college, he worked as a full-time proposal writer until 1977. He attended the science fiction workshop, Clarion, twice; once in 1974 and again in 1976. Throughout the 1980s, he and friend John Kessel became involved in the humanist/cyberpunk debate. While Kessel and Kelly were both humanists, Kelly also wrote several cyberpunk-like stories, such as "The Prisoner of Chillon" (1985) and "Rat" (1986). His story "Solstice" (1985) was published in Bruce Sterling's seminal anthology *MirrorShades: The Cyberpunk Anthology*.

Kelly has been awarded several of science fiction's highest honors. He won the Hugo Award for his novelette "Think Like a Dinosaur" (1995) and again for his novelette "10<sup>16</sup> to 1" (1999). His 2005 novella, "Burn," won the 2006 Nebula Award. Other stories by him have won the Asimov's Reader's Poll and the SF Chronicle Award. He is frequently on the final ballot for the Nebula Award, the Locus Poll Award and the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award. He frequently teaches and participates in science fiction workshops, such as Clarion and The Sycamore Hill Writer's Workshop. He has served on the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts since 1998 and chaired the council in 2004.

He is a frequent contributor to Asimov's Science Fiction, and for the past several years has contributed a non-fiction column to Asimov's, "On the Net." He has had a story in the June issue of Asimov's for the past twenty years.

Most recently, his stand-alone novella, *Burn*, published by Tachyon Publications, won the 2006 Nebula Award for Best Novella.

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Sometimes Amirah thinks she can sense the weight of the pyramid that entombs her house. The huge limestone blocks seem to crush the air and squeeze light. When she carries the table lamp onto the porch and holds it up to the blank stone, shadows ooze across the rough-cut inner face. If she is in the right mood, they make cars and squirrels and flowers and Mom's face.

Time passes.

Amirah will never see the outside of her pyramid, but she likes to imagine different looks for it. It's like trying on new jeans. They said that the limestone would be cased in some kind of marble they called Rosa Portagallo. She hopes it will be like Betty's Pyramid, red as sunset, glossy as her fingernails. Are they setting it yet? Amirah thinks not. She can still hear the dull, distant chock as the believers lower each structural stone into place — twenty a day. Dust wisps from the cracks between the stones and settles through the thick air onto every horizontal surface of her house: the floor, Dad's desk, windowsills and the tops of the kitchen cabinets. Amirah doesn't mind; she goes over the entire house periodically with vacuum and rag. She wants to be ready when the meaning comes.

Time passes.

The only thing she really misses is the sun. Well, that isn't true. She misses her Mom and her Dad and her friends on the swim team, especially Janet. She and Janet offered themselves to the meaning at Blessed Finger Sanctuary on Janet's twelfth birthday. Neither of them expected to be chosen pyramid girl. They thought maybe they would be throwing flowers off a float in the Monkey Day parade or collecting door to door for the Lost Brothers. Janet shrieked with joy and hugged her when Mrs. Munro told them the news. If her friend hadn't held her up, Amirah might have collapsed.

Amirah keeps all the lights on, even when she goes to bed. She knows this is a waste of electricity, but it's easier to be brave when the house is bright. Besides, there is nobody to scold her now.

"Is there?" Amirah says, and then she walks into the kitchen to listen. Sometimes the house makes whispery noises when she talks to it. "Is there anyone here who cares what I do?" Her voice sounds like the hinges of the basement door.

Time passes.

They took all the clocks, and she has lost track of day and night. She sleeps when she is tired and eats when she is hungry. That's all there is to do, except wait for the meaning to come. Mom and Dad's bedroom is filled to the ceiling with cartons of Goody-goody Bars: Nut Raisin, Cherry Date, Chocolate Banana and Cinnamon Apple, which is not her favorite. Mrs. Munro said there were enough to last her for years. At first that was a comfort. Now Amirah tries not to think about it.

Time passes.

Amirah's pyramid is the first in the Tri-City area. They said it would be twenty meters tall. She had worked it out afterwards that twenty meters was almost seventy feet. Mom said that if the meaning had first come to Memphis, Tennessee instead of Memphis, Egypt, then maybe everything would have been in American instead of metric. Dad had laughed at that and said then Elvis would have been the First Brother. Mom didn't like him making fun of the meaning. If she wanted to laugh, she would have him tell one of the Holy Jokes.

"What's the first law of religion?" Amirah says in her best imitation of Dad's voice.

"For every religion, there exists an equal and opposite religion," she says in Mom's voice.

"What's the second law of religion?" says Dad's voice.

"They're both wrong." Mom always laughs at that.

The silence goes all breathy, like Amirah is holding seashells up to both ears. "I don't get it," she says.

She can't hear building sounds anymore. The dust has stopped falling.

Time passes.

When Amirah was seven, her parents took her to Boston to visit Betty's Pyramid. The bus driver said that the believers had torn down a hundred and fifty houses to make room for it. Amirah could feel Betty long before she could see her pyramid; Mom said the meaning was very strong in Boston.

Amirah didn't understand much about the meaning back then. While the bus was stopped at a light, she had a vision of her heart swelling up inside her like a balloon and lifting her out the window and into the bluest part of the sky where she could see everything there was to see. The whole bus was feeling Betty by then. Dad told the Holy Joke about the chicken and the Bible in a loud voice and soon everyone was laughing so hard that the bus driver had to pull over. She and Mom and Dad

walked the last three blocks and the way Amirah remembered it, her feet only touched the ground a couple of times. The pyramid was huge in a way that no skyscraper could ever be. She heard Dad tell Mom it was more like geography than architecture. Amirah was going to ask him what that meant, only she realized that she knew because Betty knew. The marble of Betty's pyramid was incredibly smooth but it was cold to the touch. Amirah spread the fingers of both hands against it and thought very hard about Betty.

"Are you there, Betty?" Amirah sits up in bed. "What's it like?" All the lights are on in the house. "Betty?" Amirah can't sleep because her stomach hurts. She gets up and goes to the bathroom to pee. When she wipes herself, there is a pinkish stain on the toilet paper.

Time passes.

Amirah also misses Juicy Fruit gum and Onion Taste Tots and 3DV and music. She hasn't seen her shows since Dad shut the door behind him and led Mom down the front walk. Neither of them looked back, but she thought Mom might have been crying. Did Mom have doubts? This still bothers Amirah. She wonders what Janet is listening to these days on her earstone. Have the Stiffies released any new songs? When Amirah sings, she practically has to scream or else the pyramid swallows her voice.

"Go, go away, go-go away from me.

Had fun, we're done, whyo-why can't you see?"

Whenever she finishes a Goody-goody bar, she throws the wrapper out the front door. The walk has long since been covered. In the darkness, the wrappers look like fallen leaves.

Time passes.

Both Janet and Amirah had been trying to get Han Biletnikov to notice them before Amirah became pyramid girl. Han had wiry red hair and freckles and played midfield on the soccer team. He was the first boy in their school to wear his pants inside out. On her last day in school, there had been an assembly in her honor and Han had come to the stage and told a Holy Joke about her.

Amirah cups her hands to make her voice sound like it's coming out of a microphone. "What did Amirah say to the guy at the hot dog stand?"

She twists her head to one side to give the audience response. "I don't know, what?"

Han speaks again into the microphone. "Make me one with everything." She can see him now, even though she is sitting at the kitchen table with a glass of water and an unopened Cherry Date Goody-goody bar in front of her. His cheeks are flushed as she strides across the stage to him. He isn't expecting her to do this. The believers go quiet as if someone has thrown a blanket over them. She holds out her hand to shake his and he stares at it. When their eyes finally meet, she can see his awe; she's turned into President Huong, or maybe Billy Tiger, the forward for the Boston Flash. His hand is warm, a little sweaty. Her fingertips brush the hollow of his palm.

"Thank you," says Amirah.

Han doesn't say anything. He isn't there. Amirah unwraps the Goody-goody bar.

Time passes.

Amirah never gets used to having her period. She thinks she isn't doing it right. Mom never told her how it worked and she didn't leave pads or tampons or anything. Amirah wads toilet paper into her panties, which makes her feel like she's walking around with a sofa cushion between her legs. The menstrual blood smells like vinegar. She takes a lot of baths. Sometimes she touches herself as the water cools and then she feels better for a while.

Time passes.

Amirah wants to imagine herself kissing Han Biletnikov, but she can't. She keeps seeing Janet's lips on his, her tongue darting into his mouth. At least, that's how Janet said people kiss. She wonders if she would have better luck if she weren't in the kitchen. She climbs the stairs to her bedroom and opens the door. It's dark. The light has burned out. She pulls down the diffuser and unscrews the bulb. It's clear and about the size of a walnut. It says

*Sylvania 5000 lumens lifetime*

"Whose lifetime?" she says. The pile of Goody-goody wrappers on the front walk is taller than Dad. Amirah tries to think where there might be extra light bulbs. She pulls the entire house apart looking for them but she doesn't cry.

Time passes.

Amirah is practicing living in the dark. Well, it isn't entirely dark; she has left a light on in the hallway. But she is in the living room, staring out the picture window at nothing. The fireplace is gray on black; the

couch across the room swells in the darkness, soaking up gloom like a sponge.

There are eight light bulbs left. She carries one in Mom's old purse, protected by an enormous wad of toilet paper. The weight of the strap on her shoulder is as reassuring as a hug. Amirah misses hugs. She never puts the purse down.

Amirah notices that it is particularly dark at the corner where the walls and the ceiling meet. She gets out of Dad's reading chair, arms stretched before her. She is going to try to shut the door to the hallway. She doesn't know if she can; she has never done it before.

"Where was Moses when the lights went out?" she says.

No one answers, not even in her imagination. She fumbles for the doorknob.

"Where was Mohammed when the lights went out?" Her voice is shrinking.

As she eases the door shut, the hinges complain.

"Where was Amirah when the lights went out?"

The latch bolt snicks home but Amirah keeps pressing hard against the knob, then leans into the door with her shoulder. The darkness squeezes her; she can't breathe. A moan pops out of her mouth like a seed and she pivots suddenly, pressing her back against the door.

Something flickers next to the couch, low on the wall. A spark, blue as her dreams. It turns sapphire, cerulean, azure, indigo, all the colors that only poets and painters can see. The blue darts out of the electrical outlet like a tongue. She holds out her hands to navigate across the room to it and notices an answering glow, pale as mothers' milk, at her fingertips. Blue tongues are licking out of every plug in the living room and Amirah doesn't need to grope anymore. She can see everything, the couch, the fireplace, all the rooms of the house and through the pyramid walls into the city. It's one city now, not three.

Amirah raises her arms above her head because her hands are blindingly bright and she can see Dad with his new wife watching the Red Sox on 3DV. Someone has planted pink miniature roses on Mom's grave. Janet is looking into little Freddy Cobb's left ear with her otoscope and Han is having late lunch at Sandeens with a married imagineer named Shawna Russo and Mrs. Munro has dropped a stitch on the cap she is knitting for her great-grandson Matthias. At that moment everyone who Amirah sees, thousands of believers, tens of thousands, stop what they



are doing and turn to the pyramid, Amirah's pyramid, which has been finished for these seventeen years but has never meant anything to anyone until now. Some smile with recognition; a few clap. Others — most of them, Amirah realizes - are now walking toward her pyramid, to be close to her and caress the cold marble and know what she knows. The meaning is suddenly very strong in the city, like the perfume of lilacs or the suck of an infant at the breast or the whirr of a hummingbird.

"Amirah?" Betty opens the living room door. She is a beautiful young girl with gray hair and crow's feet around her sky blue eyes. "Are you there, Amirah?"

"Yes," says Amirah.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes," Amirah says. When she laughs, time stands still.

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