

Giant Land

by Jeffrey Ford

Once a giant kept three people in a birdcage. It was made of twigs from the trees of Giant Land and it hung in the corner of his kitchen over the rotisserie. Steam was always rising and sometimes sparks would jump up and set the people's clothes on fire. They thought they might be dreaming, but still they frantically slapped at the flames with their coats to smother them.

He had taken them at night, two men and a woman—snatched their cars right off the interstate and put them in a burlap sac. By sunrise he had made his way back up the mountain unseen. He took them, wriggling like earthworms, out of their cars and put them in the birdcage. Every day he fed them bowls of grease soup, potatoes and chocolate. When they got fat enough, he intended to eat them. One night when the woman was sleeping and the Giant was puttering around his kitchen, the two men in the cage called him over. The Giant was not averse to speaking with his captives; most times he was even civil. "Yes, gentlemen," he said in a whisper that blew back their hair.

"Isn't she a beauty?" the tall one said, pointing to the sleeping woman.

The Giant stared hard and eventually smiled.

"We can set it up so that she'll be willing to marry you in exchange for our freedom."

"How will you work such a miracle?" asked the Giant.

"We'll talk you up for a couple of weeks," said the man with white hair, "make you seem like a prince."

"You've got two weeks," said the Giant. As soon as the woman awoke, they started to work on her. "You've got to say one thing for that giant . . ." "It must be pretty satisfying to be a giant . . ." "Did you see him punch that goat . . .?" "His gold could sink a fleet of ships."

Every time the tall man and the man with white hair got on the subject of the giant, though, the woman would say, "I don't care, I hate that bastard." She was always at the bars screaming at him, "You're a big loaf of shit."

The giant would watch her body tense against the wooden bars, smile, and go about his business. In the mornings, after a breakfast of calf kidney pie, he'd count his gold. At midday, he'd dress in a tweed suit, take his tall hat and cane, the handle knob of which was a fossilized human head polished to a shine, and go out to work, selling magic beans door to door. He'd sent for the beans from an ad in the back of a magazine, and they were purported to grow into enormous stalks that reached the clouds. In the evenings, he'd play opera records—arias sung by the giantess, Ybila, Diva of the Dog Spine—and the people in the cage would hear the melancholic strains of music wafting down the hallway from some other room in the house accompanied by titanic, mournful sobs.

The two men said everything they could think of to convince the woman the Giant wasn't so bad—even that they thought of him as a kind of father figure. But the sneer never came off the woman's face. The days slipped by and they could feel themselves getting heavier. When they perspired, the sweat rolled from their pores, thick and amber like motor oil. They all had to take off their clothes because they had outgrown them. The Giant often poked their stomachs and thighs with the long, sharp fingernail of his pinky. These jabs reminded the men that their two weeks was almost up. On the night before the Giant was prepared to eat them for breakfast, the two men cornered the woman against the bars of the cage and threatened her. "The only way we're all going to live is if you agree to marry the Giant," the man with the white hair told her. The tall man wrapped his long fingers around her throat. "If you don't agree, I'll kill you right now," he said. The woman spat in the tall man's face, and he started to choke her. The man with the white hair punched her flabby stomach. Finally, they dropped her

on the floor of the cage. "Yes or no?" they asked one at a time. She nodded. The Giant came in wearing a bib that morning. "Well, well," he said in a thundering voice. "Am I to have a meal or a marriage?" The two men looked over at the woman. She smiled at them.

"Will you be my wife?" the Giant asked, retrieving a monocle from his vest pocket. As she stepped forward, he eyed her up and down.

She stood just to the side of the cage door and said, "I'd rather marry a slug." The monocle fell out of the Giant's eye. The men started for the woman. The Giant gave a shrill cry of anguish and then smashed his hand through the cage door, grabbing the two just before they reached the woman. He ate the right leg of the man with white hair; blood raining down to sizzle and pop on the coals beneath the rotisserie. The screams were like the screams of dying mice in the enormous kitchen. When the woman saw the Giant eat the head of the tall man, she jumped out of the hole in the cage and fell on the slab of cow that was turning on the spit. As it span, she raced across its slick surface, her feet burning with each step, and then leaped clear of the coals below, landing on the cobblestone floor. The Giant, still munching, tried to stomp her, but even with all her new weight she was too quick for him. He started after her as she made for the huge door of the kitchen. Not too far down the hallway lined with boars' heads, he scooped her up in his bloody hand. He did not eat her, though; he put her in his pocket and left his house.

Down the lane he went until he came to a cottage. He knocked on the door and another giant answered.

"Come in," said the second giant, whose head was that of a parrot and whose fingers were flexible as if made of rubber.

The Giant took the woman out of his pocket and held her at eye level. "Do you want her?" he asked. "I'm stuffed." After thinking for a moment the second giant said, "Let's juice her." They took her into the parrot-headed giant's kitchen, where he made his potions and medicines, and turned the juicer on. The Giant dangled her over the opening, the stainless steel blade whirring below, and said, "Goodbye. I think I could have loved you."

At the last instant, the woman said, "I will marry whichever one of you can beat the other in a fight."

The giants looked at each other and nodded. They put her in a glass box on the coffee table, latched the lid, and went to fetch their weapons. An hour later, in a clearing in the forest, the glass box holding the woman sat on a tree stump in full view of the battleground. The parrot-headed giant held a chrome steel pole with a pointed tip that glinted in the sun. Sea green feathers at the back of his neck ruffled, his orange bird eyes twitched up and down, his black tongue played with the lower tip of his beak. The Giant held a club with spikes he had somehow made into a torch.

A leaf fell from a nearby tree and that was the sign to begin. They locked in combat, steel jabbing knee joints and fire raging across a feathered skull. Mighty squawks and groans filled the clearing. Strips of flesh, spurts of blood, singed feathers and blue down as soft as a dream of water flew from them, littering the forest floor. It ended when the parrot-headed giant drove his beak into the heart of the other combatant and killed him. By that time, though, his head was irreparably charred. He staggered backward, gave one insignificant squawk, and fell dead. The woman remained trapped in the glass box, growing thin and watching the flies as big as pigs come to feast on the remains of the giants. Birds of prey swooped down to tear off hunks of flesh from the corpses. A crow came along one day and, after eating the giants' eyes, snatched the glass box in its talons and flew off. The bird flew higher and higher, past the blue sky and into the night above, singing a birdsong that rattled the glass of the box. Out past Mars and Jupiter, it flew with ease. The woman in the box marveled at the stars and the sight of other worlds. Then a sun exploded and the shock waves engulfed the bird and the woman in oblivion. When she woke, the woman found herself in a kitchen on her knees. "What happened?" her husband asked as he leaned over to help her up. "Nothing," she said,

"nothing."

"You've got to go to the doctor," said her husband, helping her into a chair. "Tomorrow," she promised. She finished making the dinner and the family sat down to eat. She discovered that she had made chicken and stuffing and corn. When the dinner was finished and the coffee was served, she turned to her husband and said, "What's my name?" He was about to reply, but then he looked off into the distance as if he had forgotten the question. She, herself, could not remember his.

"What's my name?" she asked each of the children, but each of them shrugged and shook their heads. Only then did she notice how unfamiliar the floral wallpaper was and the fact that there were two cats instead of the usual one. What little she remembered was scattered and incoherent, but it was a near certainty she had not yet been married. She laughed to cover her fear. Her husband and the children laughed too. As soon as she could, she cleared the dishes and announced that she was taking the garbage out. She walked past her family watching television in the living room with the sagging plastic bag in her hand and said, "Be right in." As soon as she got outside and closed the door behind her, she dropped the bag and ran.

Before the night was over, she managed to find an unlocked car someone had left their keys in. She fled town and headed out on the interstate. When she finally came to a stop, it was only because the ocean lapped the sand in front of the car. She got out and wandered up the beach.

Later that day, she found a small deserted shack of a house on a dune overlooking the ocean. It had a fireplace and chimney, two warped glass windows that faced the surf and comfortable furniture fashioned from the bones of whales, the cartilage of giant manta rays. There was a parlor, a bedroom and a kitchen. The absence of a bathroom was made up for by a roofless wooden outhouse at the bottom of the dune, hidden amidst brambles and tall sea grass. She wasted no time but on that first day began to put the small house in order. Creating a broom from a stick of driftwood and sea grass, she proceeded to thoroughly sweep the place free of spider webs and sand.

Mounted on the wall in the bedroom, she found an old fishing rig with thick, string line, a reel that used no bale, and a heavy, treble hooked lure made to appear like a silver bait fish moving through the water. In the late afternoon, she took this pole down to the shore and cast out toward the setting sun. Twice the string snarled, and twice she patiently unraveled it. She cast and reeled in, cast and reeled in, and not until night had descended and the moon had begun to rise did she feel a tug at the end of the line. That sudden resistance told her she would survive.

Her first fish, with human eyes, thick lips, and a top fin like a lady's fan, glinted in the moonlight as she reeled it onto the sand. It wheezed horribly, drowning in the atmosphere, and rolled its eyes up to look into hers. She could feel it silently pleading with her to spare its life. Although it pained her to watch it die, there was nothing else she could do as her hunger had made her weak and desperate. She took her catch home, and then scoured the dunes for driftwood. The sticks of wood, she formed into a teepee, and then filled the pyramid inside with balled up pages from a yellowed newspaper she'd discovered while cleaning the house. In her jeans, she'd been carrying a cigarette lighter that she put to use, sparking a fire to life. It burned bright orange in the night, embers drifting high up into the darkness.

The fish tasted of saffron and renewed her strength. That night, in the whale bone bed, she wondered where she had come upon the cigarette lighter and if it was a link to her true past. When she fell asleep, she dreamed of the fish. It lay next to her in the bed and with its wheezing, dying voice, told her that when the giant had kidnapped her, she had been running away.

"From what?" she asked.

"From the little people," said the fish. It grew wings then and lifted into the air to fly in circles above her head.

She woke suddenly to find a bat flying in the same circles above her. Rolling off the bed, she crawled to where she had left the homemade broom. Once it was in her grip, she felt some courage. She swiped the air frantically, chasing the bat into the parlor. While continuing to swing the broom with one hand, she managed to open the front door and the intruder flew past her into the night. She did not go back to bed but stepped onto the dune. The breeze moved through the grass and the ocean lapped the shore in the moonlight. She contemplated her dream and briefly recalled an apartment in a city, a burning candle, an aria on the stereo, a broken wine bottle, the hands of a clock, a suitcase. Then crumbs of moments, the inconsequential debris of separate days, followed in a trail through her memory only to end in the gullet of a giant.

Many useful and marvelous things washed up after storms, and she walked the beach each morning to collect this bounty. Candles, kegs of grog, the horned, triple-socket skull of some unknown beast, a mirror from China whose stamped tin back held the image of a dragon, mangoes, clothes made of vines from jungle towns half a world away, and a brown bottle, smelling of medicine, sealed with wax, ferrying one ringed finger and a message that read—*HELP!* She slipped the ruby ring on her own finger and buried the rest. Once she found a knife that never dulled, once a leather-bound book wrapped in oil cloth and titled *The Grammar of Constellations*. She read through its soggy pages at night by the glow of a candle while the creepers sang in the dunes.

Throughout the remainder of the summer and into the early autumn, she swam every day in the ocean. Her health slowly returned through a combination of this vigorous exercise and her simple diet of fish, clams, and berries from the nearby woods. Time itself, withered, came apart at the seams and was carried away on the tide. In the perfect calm of long afternoons, she sat at the water's edge and let her imagination blossom, following incredible story lines suggested by the items she found while beach combing. For the most part, she went without clothing, and her skin bronzed. Her hair grew long and wild. The muscles of her arms and legs took on sleek definition. Whereas earlier she had kept the dragon mirror face down on the windowsill of her bedroom, by the time the geese flew south in formation, she had mounted it on the wall in order to see herself each morning. Not knowing her name, she told her reflection her name would be *Anna*.

In mid-autumn, just before the ocean became far too cold for swimming, she woke one morning and looked out to sea. There, on a sandbar that had formed overnight, only a hundred yards from shore, lay what remained of a large, wooden sailing ship. Without a second thought, she dove into the waves and swam out to it. As she drew closer, she could see that it had an enormous hole in its side. The hulking craft listed, its tall, cracked mast angled against the horizon. By the time she reached the sandbar, the tide had receded and the majority of the hull was visible above the water line. She entered the craft through its gaping wound.

Save for the wide beam of daylight that entered, focused like a spotlight, it was dark inside the wooden giant. The boards creaked with every wavelet that rolled beneath it, and crabs scurried here and there over the sodden goods of the hold. Coming upon a passageway that led above, she leaned to her side and scabbled up a set of steps to reach a middle deck. She found the galley there, and rows of bunks for the missing sailors. Just beyond the sailor's quarters she discovered what appeared to be the captain's cabin. A globe, a compass, charts, piles of books, lay scattered about as if a miniature typhoon had been loosed in the small compartment.

She looked around for things that might be useful back at her home. In her search, she came upon the captain's log. She opened it in the middle and began to read by the light that slipped in from a small hole in the deck above. The first thing she learned was the name of the ship—the *Lonreat*, which hailed from a place called Neerly. She flipped then to the last entry and read:

I have sent the men off on the lifeboats, for the ship is rapidly taking in water through a hole suffered by way of the dragon-headed cannons of the pirate junk Jade Bloom. They engaged us in battle as we sailed southward on our return trip from trading in Giant Land. The only thing that saved us from certain death was a sudden storm that distracted our pursuer's intentions from that of battle to merely saving their own lives. Perhaps we were cursed by our unusual cargo, the great crystal ball containing the severed head of Mar-el-Mar, or perhaps normal men were never really meant to engage in commerce with giants. From the sound of the winds up on deck, it is a good bet I will never get a chance to figure it out.

*My only hope is that some of my men will survive the storm. I go now to strap myself to the wheel. There may be a chance that I can beach the *Lonreat* somewhere. I have given myself a reminder to thank God if I should survive this calamity and return to Neerly. I would mark the time here, but unfortunately I lost my watch in our fray with the pirates.*

Anna skipped back through the pages. In the middle of the log, she read an account of the captain and his crew, when in Giant Land, being entertained by the diva, Ybila. They had to climb all day, up the side of a mountain, to a high ridge known as the Dog Spine, and there in an amphitheatre hewn from solid rock, under the stars, the graceful behemoth sang an aria titled *What Is My Name?* The captain attests that her voice had a sweetly melancholic affect upon his men, and they were plunged into a state not dissimilar to that of the reveler upon opium. *I thought back through my life—the journeys, the people, the places, the joy and sorrow—and discovered a vast ocean inside of me,* he wrote.

Up on the main deck, beneath the tattered shreds of sails flapping in the breeze, she came upon the skeletal remains of the captain. He was lashed to the ship's wheel by a leather belt, still standing upright in a pose that suggested he was scanning the horizon. She thought it a shame that he did not know that he had finally found a place to beach the ship. He wore a jacket with golden designs stitched above the pockets, a hat, and tall boots. Tied around his left index finger was a length of royal blue thread, no doubt a reminder to thank the Almighty. Anna, beset by the tragic end of the good captain, fled the ship by diving headlong into the rising tide. The next morning, the *Lonreat* had vanished.

In winter, the night skies were clear, and she read their grammar. The icy prose told her she was only dreaming that she was asleep and dreaming and that really she was awake in a dream of reality made actual by the ocean, and the stars, and the wind in the dunes. She didn't really understand but felt in her heart it was true. Then, one night, a star fell, trailing a fiery veil, and slipped into the ocean with a distinct fizzle. A wisp of smoke curled up around the milky moon. This radically changed the grammar of the constellations and made the old rules false, initiating a wicked freeze.

The ocean turned to ice, and she ventured out among the crystal waves beneath a perfect blue sky, wrapped in all her garments: those made of vine; the brocaded, paisley shawl, obviously from the closet of a long dead queen; the Sherpa's cap; and seal skin boots. Up and over, up and over, she went, exploring. Three hundred yards from shore, she found a wooden crate, the top missing. Lying in it was a human figure made of wax—an elegant woman, naked, with a wig of chestnut horse-hair and delicate, tattooed eyebrows, lashes and pubic hair.

Over a period of days, while the water remained solid, she pushed that crate to shore. She stood the wax woman outside her house, afraid the figure would melt in the heat from her fireplace. She called her new companion The Lady of Fashion and visited with her daily. From her collection of sea treasures, she dressed her in a violet shift and put dried flowers in her hair, a corn-cob pipe in her mouth, and adorned her with a pendant of rarest malachite. At first they merely gossiped, but before long, The Lady of Fashion told her story.

"I was made by a giant doll maker to stand in the parlor of a giant child's dolls' house at the front window, staring out at my two wax children while they sat, one at either end of a see-saw. Maxwell was ever in the ascent, his arms thrown out wide, a smile on his face, while Chloe dropped, every second, toward the ground. I understood I had a husband, but I never

saw him. His voice would come up from the basement where he was working on some infernal project. And you know, weeks went by and I stared. What was my choice?

"Then, one night, in her play, the mischievous giant child picked me up and laid me down on the bed in the master bedroom. A few moments later, she laid my husband down on top of me. She turned off the lights, and left us there, perhaps in hopes of us making love and eventually siring another wax child. I only saw my husband briefly before the room went dark. He was a handsome man with a beard and long black hair. 'I'm sorry to be crushing you,' he said.

"Do you feel any excitement?' I asked.

"No,' he said, 'I'm made of wax. But I have been devising a plan for your escape.'

"How is it you can move and make noise in the basement, but I can not stir even so much as a finger?' I asked.

"That noise you hear is coming out of my head. Through very hard thinking I have created a machine made of thoughts that will cast an aura of desirability around you that no giant can ignore,' he said.

"What about our children?' I asked.

"My dear, can't you tell they are not real? They are merely dolls, no more than stylized balls of ear wax.'

"Why are you doing this?' I asked.

"No more,' he said. 'I must think.'

"His mind sent up a racket then, a pounding, as if the headboard was rhythmically slamming the wall, and grunts and groans and protracted sighs. It must have been a marvelous invention. Eventually I fell asleep, and somewhere through the night, perhaps in my dreams, perhaps not, I felt something warm and inconsequential move between my legs.

"Two days later, a parrot-headed giant came to the giant girl's house, traveling door to door, selling heart medicine in brown bottles. The girl's father went to fetch his money pouch, leaving the salesman alone in the room where the dolls' house stood. By then I had been placed back in the parlor by the front window. Upon seeing me looking out, the bird-headed giant opened the front door and stuck his rubbery fingers into my home. He grabbed me, and hid me in his pocket just before the girl's father returned.

"Parrot Head left town immediately and traveled to another place where there was an open air market. He sold me for five gold coins to a bearded giant who was a magician. This magician, Mar-el-Mar, took me down the street and put me in the middle of a chessboard atop a table. I was barely as big as the pieces. In a loud voice, he called all those in the market place to come and witness a miracle. When the rabble had assembled, he pushed back the sleeves of his dark robe and cast a spell beginning with the word *Wendatamu* . . . Instantly, I came to life.

"The crowd of giants gasped, and the noise was deafening to me. I put my hands to my ears. Life, life, life was a strange, beautiful experience, being able to move, to breathe. My wax became flesh, and I heard myself scream, but just as suddenly as that sweet condition came to me, it was taken away. The Giant King's personal guard pushed through the masses and seized the magician. Right on the spot, they knelt him down in the street. The captain of the guard announced that the magician was guilty of practicing the dark arts. Mar-el-Mar spat on the cobblestones and said, 'May the king's wife flee his kingdom and lose herself in the world.' My dear, they chopped his head off, and the life went out of me.

"I was whisked off the chess board and given to an old woman, who was ordered to throw me

into the furnace at the black smith's shop. This old woman went to the shop as she had been instructed, stood before the flames, but found she could not destroy me. Instead, she took me home and dressed me in the fine clothes of a doll she had bought long ago for a daughter, her only pregnancy, who had died soon after birth. She put me in a small box and then at midnight, went to the stream that runs along the southern border of that town. She sang me a lullaby, and with tears in her eyes, set me adrift down the waterway that led to the ocean."

"But what became of the dress the old woman had put you in?"

"I've been sailing so long, it rotted away, turning to mere threads. Pieces of royal blue thread litter the oceans of the world."

In the early days of the following summer, during an unusual heat wave, The Lady of Fashion melted. Amidst soundless shrieks of agony and pleas to Mar-el-Mar to spare her soul, she dripped away into an ugly puddle that eventually seeped into the sand. Nothing could be done to save her. The violet shift blew out to sea one bright and blustery afternoon. A beach rat stole the corn-cob pipe, and all that was left was the pendant of malachite lying on the sand to mark the presence of a missing confidante. Anna wept bitterly at the loss of her friend.

To the south lay the ocean. To the north, over a few hundred yards of sand and then a line of boulders, lay the woods. To the east, at some definite distance, but she was not sure how far, sat a rusted car, if it had not already been washed out to sea, and a path to the interstate. To the west, though, lay nothing but dunes, an immeasurable vista of rolling sand hills, some cresting in the far distance to magnificent heights. She decided one day a year or so after the demise of her wax friend that a journey might be just the thing to drive off her grief and loneliness.

She set out, due west, early one morning, carrying a knotted silk kerchief with enough dried fishes and berries to last an overnight visit. At first, she did not take to the dunes, but made her way along the shore in order to save her strength, the better to climb in amongst the hills when she was farther from home. She found the act of walking, of simply moving, curative, and she covered a great distance before the sun began its descent. In the late afternoon, she turned toward the dunes and began to explore them.

Just before nightfall, she came to the base of a dune so tall, she could not see the top from where she stood. It came to her then that the challenge its ascent presented is what she had been looking for. Before beginning, she sat down and had some dinner to rebuild her strength, but as darkness came, she started up the slope. The stars were resilient that night in there beauty, and she felt as though she were climbing toward them. The wind was mercifully cool.

As she drew close to the top, she could feel beneath her that the sand was giving way to rock, and when she crested the peak the moon was there, hanging low in the sky, having been blocked from her view all evening. In its pale light, she made out that she stood on the edge of a kind of ridge that snaked like a path to the east. She followed this path, and soon there was no sign of sand or sound of the ocean in the distance. Mountain ranges lay on either side.

As she went along through this strange place, she heard from up ahead a noise not unlike a woman sobbing. The sound grew to near deafening proportions. Then Anna came to an obstruction in the middle of her path; a giant boulder with a strange growth, some kind of long stringy moss, like hair, covering the top of it. The mournful vibration seemed to originate from within this huge formation. She stepped forward and placed her hand upon it, and when she did, she realized it was not a rock at all.

Stepping quickly backward, she saw two cracks form in the mass and open wide. She soon recognized they were eyes. What she had mistaken for a boulder was in actuality the head of a giant. Anna froze with fear, remembering her imprisonment in the bird cage. The giant, a female, looked up and saw her standing upon the path. The sobbing ceased abruptly.

"Hello," said the giant, pulling herself up to rest on her elbows. She wiped the tears from her eyes.

"I'm sorry to have awakened you," said Anna, hoping she would not be eaten.

A simple conversation ensued, and she soon learned she had nothing to fear, for this was the giant Ybila, and the path she had been traveling was the famed Dog Spine.

"Why are you unhappy?" asked Anna. "I have heard you are a great singer."

"True," said the giant. "But I want desperately to escape this prison."

"You can't leave?"

"My husband, the magician, Mar-el-Mar, is a jealous man and has put a spell on me so that I cannot descend from this remote ridge. If anyone wants to see me perform, they must travel up the impossibly steep cliffs. He says he does not want me mingling freely with other giants, because he does not trust me, but I know the truth."

"What's that?" asked Anna.

"The art of my song, is more perfect than that of his magic. He's jealous, alright."

"Isn't there anything you can do?"

Here, Ybila gathered herself up into a sitting position, her legs crossed in front of her. She leaned low over Anna and whispered, "I have a plan. A traveling salesman found his way here one day when Mar-el-Mar was down in the world creating mischief. This giant was selling magic beans that when planted, sprout stalks that reach into the clouds where the giant giants live. Of course, my husband left me no money, but I used something else to pay for them. There is a type of royal blue thread found here and there floating willy-nilly atop the oceans of the world. It is highly prized, for it is said to give good luck in any enterprise. I had been given three very long strands of it by the human pirate captain of the junk *Jade Bloom*. He was so entranced by my voice when he traveled here to listen that he made a gift of them in admiration. These, I traded to the salesman. At first he was reluctant to take them, but then he said he had considered a foray into the world of men on a very special mission, and each of the three strands of blue thread might stand for one each of the items he wished to acquire there. The deal was made."

"Have you planted the beans?"

"Yes, but they take years to germinate. Then overnight they will shoot up suddenly into the clouds. All in a night. Mar-el-Mar has blocked me from descending, but I, as is only right considering my voice, will ascend."

"I've heard a recording of you," said Anna.

"So then you know."

Anna nodded.

Ybila took a deep breath and sang her signature song, *What Is My Name?* Anna lay back on the ground, staring at the stars and listened. The power of the giant's voice, the power of the meaning of the lyrics, moved around Anna like a strong breeze. Before the first stanza was finished, she was floating above the ground on a cushion of air. She flew back along the Dog Spine to the crest of the enormous dune, and then descended like a feather. As the last phrase ended, she was set gently down at the base, asleep, the ocean sounding in the distance.

On her journey back along the shore to her home the next day, she wondered if her meeting with Ybila had been real or merely a dream brought on by the exhaustion of attempting to climb the huge sand hill, for she had brief flashes of memory in which she would climb a few feet and then slide back to the base due to the drastic attitude of the slope. Her memory of the giant singer's sorrow was much realer, though, and she found she could easily banish any doubts of the journey by merely humming the tune she had heard.

In the evening of the day on which Anna accidentally knocked the mirror off the wall and cracked it, she met herself picking berries in the woods. A miasmatic phantom of exactly her met her beside the blackberry bramble. She bowed to herself as a tentative greeting, and she bowed back. The phantom did not speak, but could understand her words. She invited herself back to the shack, where she made a splendid dinner of eel in blackberry sauce. She and herself drank from the keg of grog. They wound up the music box and waltzed to its plinking crystal tune of *The Last Time I Saw Paris* as the tiny dancer at the contraption's center tirelessly pirouetted. When the creepers ceased their chorus, the two retired to the single bed. The next morning, well before sunrise, when even high summer is cool, the phantom departed, traveling a path that was the light of the moon, out across the ocean and back to her apartment in the city.

Years more passed in the small house by the ocean. No need to tell of her startling revelations concerning the metaphorical nature of humans in relation to the citizens of Giant Land or her study of the natural history of the dune rat, the sea gull, the feral dogs that came for scraps to her back door on autumn evenings. It is, of course, indecorous even to mention the petrified log, fallen among the willows, with one perfectly formed nub of a branch severed close to the trunk, that she rode now and then for self-gratification, but the scarring caused by her nails against this old log while she moved in the throes of passion, over time, etched a face in the smooth, gray wood. It was a bearded visage, and eventually she came to realize that it belonged to the necromancer, Mar-el-Mar.

From the moment that she recognized the giant magician, he was ever in her thoughts. His enormous black robe flapped like the wings of a bat as he flitted from one end of her mind to another. She could find no peace from him, and she knew he meant to put a spell on her. Every time she tried to conceive of a plan to rid herself of him, his presence was there, in that part of her mind where the plan was being made, and he'd step on the spark of an idea and put it out.

One night while sitting in her parlor, the magician's voice boomed from her fireplace.

"Anna," he said.

"Leave me alone," she told him.

"Anna, I want to bring you to life."

"Why?"

"I have journeyed so long in the hold of your imagination, my head encased in a crystal globe, I need to be free."

"And how will your bringing me to life make this so?" she asked.

"It is impossible to explain, but a long, intricate series of events will follow your birth and after a century or two they lead to my being released."

"I am alive," she said.

"Tomorrow," said the voice, "you will find a small box in your beachcombing. It will be covered in mother-of-pearl. If you open it, you will find yourself back in your car on the interstate,

heading home."

"This is my home," she said.

"Someone waits for you there," said Mar-el-Mar. Then his voice went silent, and, soon after, she noticed him in her head, circling like a bat.

As the magician predicted, she found the box with the mother-of-pearl façade. She brought it home and laid it on the table in the parlor while all the time he whispered from inside her ear to open it. She was tempted, first in order to remember the past and secondly to put his persistent presence to rest, but she managed to stay away from it. Days passed, and it became more and more difficult for her to resist the urge to open the box. She knew he was slowly gaining control over her and would eventually have his way.

Then, a week later, the drowned captain's pocket watch that hung by its chain from the mantle in her tiny parlor, suddenly began to tick, and she knew, not in her head, where Mar-el-Mar could smother the notion, but in her heart, that something remarkable might happen. In her fishing that morning, she had no luck. Cast after cast was reeled in with an empty hook. On her last attempt, she did not bring in a fish, but knotted about the end of the hook was a length of the royal blue thread. She did not think about it, but picked it off, rolled it into a little pill and swallowed it.

As soon as the blue thread was inside her, Mar-el-Mar realized what she had done, but it was too late, for the single shred of lucky blue material made its way to her imagination and bound him like a fly in a spider's web.

All her thoughts circled in a slow grey twister behind her eyes as she set fire to the shack. With what energy she had left, she stumbled down to the ocean and waded out into the deep water. The waves rose over her and she drowned easily, without fear, like going to sleep. Her body sailed the currents of the Gulf Stream for years, her features more perfectly preserved than those of *The Lady of Fashion*. Of course, at one point, she was swallowed whole by a whale, and traveled in its gut for decades before being released when the creature finally died within the radius of the arctic circle. There was a season on an iceberg, a week long beaching on a crab infested atoll, the brief embrace of a kraken. And smooth sailing from pole to pole, tropic to sea to bay and back, while Mar-el-Mar, eyes rolled upward, watched from his crystal prison at the bottom of the world.

She was discovered, floating off the southern shore of The Woven Islands, by pirates of the junk *Jade Bloom*. They sold her for a small fortune in malachite to a giant who placed her in a glass box on a bed of dried violet petals. Since it was the most beautiful thing he owned, he would open the box at night before turning in and pray over it. He believed the odd curio brought him luck, and he told the other giants her name was Mother Paradise. In later years, when the crops of Giant Land failed in spring, as a kind of sacrifice and plea to her spirit, he cut off her ring finger, leaving the beautiful ruby intact, placed the jeweled digit in one of the small brown bottles that had held his heart medication along with a note that read—*Help!*, sealed the top with wax, and set it adrift on the ocean.

The End

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About the author

Jeffrey Ford has written lots of very good books and short stories. He has won things like the World Fantasy Award and the Hugo and one of his works, *Cosmology of the Wider World*, features enough talking animals to put Kipling to shame. *Giant Land* is taken from his collection *The Empire of Ice Cream* (Golden Gryphon Books)

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