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A Princess of Earth

by Mike Resnick
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Science Fiction

Hugo Award Nominee

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When Lisa died I felt like my soul had been ripped out of my body, and what was left wasn't worth the powder to blow it to hell. To this day I don't even know what she died of; the doctors tried to tell me why she had collapsed and what had killed her, but I just tuned them out. She was dead and I would never talk to her or touch her again, never share a million unimportant things with her, and that was the only fact that mattered. I didn't even go to the funeral; I couldn't bear to look at her in her coffin.

I quit my job -- we'd been counting the days to my retirement so we could finally spend all our time together -- and I considered selling the house and moving to a smaller place, but in the end I couldn't do it. There was too much of her there, things I'd lose forever if I moved away.

I left her clothes in the closet, just the way they'd always been. Her hairbrush and her perfume and her lipstick remained on the vanity where she'd kept them neatly lined up. There was a painting of a New England landscape that I'd never liked much, but since she had loved it I left it hanging where it was. I had my favorite photos of her blown up and framed, and put them on every table and counter and shelf in the house.

I had no desire to be with other people, so I spent most of my days catching up on my reading. Well, let me amend that. I started a lot of books; I finished almost none of them. It was the same thing with movies: I'd rent a few, begin playing them, and usually turn them off within fifteen or twenty minutes. Friends would invite me out, I'd refuse, and after awhile they stopped calling. I barely noticed.

Winter came, a seemingly endless series of bleak days and frigid nights. It was the first time since I'd married Lisa that I didn't bring a Christmas tree home to decorate. There just didn't seem much sense to it. We'd never had any children, she wasn't there to share it, and I wasn't going to have any visitors.

As it turned out, I was wrong about the visitor: I spotted him maybe an hour before midnight, wandering naked across my backyard during the worst blizzard of the season.

At first I thought I was hallucinating. Five inches of snow had fallen, and the wind chill was something like ten below zero. I stared in disbelief for a full minute, and when he didn't disappear, I put on my coat, climbed into my boots, grabbed a blanket, and rushed outside. When I reached him he seemed half frozen. I threw the blanket around him and led him back into the house.

I rubbed his arms and legs vigorously with a towel, then sat him down in the kitchen and poured him some hot coffee. It took him a few minutes to stop shivering, but finally he reached out for the cup. He warmed his hands on it, then lifted it and took a sip.

"Thank you," he whispered hoarsely.

Once I was sure he wasn't going to die, I stood back and took a look at him. He was actually pretty good-looking now that his color was returning. He might have been thirty, maybe a couple of years older. Lean body, dark hair, gray eyes. A couple of scars, but I couldn't tell what they were from, or how fresh they were. They could have been from one of the wars in Iraq, or old sports injuries, or perhaps just the wind whipping frozen bushes against him a few minutes ago.

"Are you feeling better?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes, I'll be all right soon."

"What the hell were you doing out there without any clothes on?"

"Trying to get home," he said with an ironic smile.

"I haven't seen you around," I said. "Do you live near here?"

"No."

"Is there someone who can pick you up and take you there?"

He seemed about to answer me, then changed his mind and just shook his head.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"John." He took another swallow from the cup and made a face.

"Yeah, I know," I said. "The coffee's pretty awful. Lisa made it better."

"Lisa?"

"My wife," I said. "She died last year."

We were both silent for a couple of minutes, and I noticed still more color returning to his face.

"Where did you leave your clothes?" I asked.

"They're very far away."

"Just how far did you walk in this blizzard?"

"I don't know."

"Okay," I said in exasperation. "Who do I call -- the cops, the hospital, or the nearest asylum?"

"Don't call anyone," said John. "I'll be all right soon, and then I'll leave."

"Dressed like that? In this weather?"

He seemed surprised. "I'd forgotten. I guess I'll have to wait here until it's over. I'm sorry to impose, but..."

"What the hell," I said. "I've been alone a long time and I'm sure Lisa would say I could use a little company, even from a naked stranger. At any rate she wouldn't want me to throw you out in the cold on Christmas Eve." I stared at him. "I just hope you're not dangerous."

"Not to my friends."

"I figure pulling you out of the snow and giving you shelter qualifies as an act of friendship," I said. "Just what the hell were you doing out there, and what happened to your clothes?"

"It's a long story."

"It's a long night, and I've got nothing to do."

"All right," said John with a shrug. "I am a very old man; how old I do not know. Possibly I am a hundred, possibly more; but I can't tell because I have never aged as other men, nor do I remember any childhood."

"Stop," I said.

"What is it?"

"I don't know what game you're playing, but I've heard that before -- a long, long time ago. I don't know where, but I've heard it."

He shook his head. "No you haven't. But perhaps you've read it before."

I searched through my memory, mentally scanning the bookshelves of my youth -- and there I found it, right between The Wizard of Oz and King Solomon's Mines. "God, it's been close to half a century! I loved that book when I was growing up."

"Thank you," said John.

"What are you thanking me for?"

"I wrote it."

"Sure you did," I said. "I read the damned thing fifty years ago, and it was an old book then. Look at yourself in a mirror."

"Nevertheless."

Wonderful, I thought. Just what I needed on Christmas Eve. Other people get carolers; I get you. Aloud I said: "It wasn't written by a John. It was written by an Edgar."

"He published it. I wrote it."

"Sure," I said. "And your last name is Carter, right?"

"Yes, it is."

"I should have called the loony bin to begin with."

"They couldn't get here until morning," said John. "Trust me: you're perfectly safe."

"The assurances of a guy who walks around naked in a snowstorm and thinks he's John Carter of Mars aren't exactly coin of the realm," I said. The second I said it I kind of tensed and told myself I should be humoring him, that I was a sixty-four-year-old man with high blood pressure and worse cholesterol and he looked like a cruiserweight boxer. Then I realized that I didn't really care whether he killed me or not, that I'd just been going through the motions of living since Lisa had died, and I decided not to humor him after all. If he picked up a kitchen knife and ran me through, Warlord of Mars style, at least it would put an end to the aching loneliness that had been my constant companion for almost a year.

"So why do you think you're John Carter?" I asked him.

"Because I am."

"Why not Buck Rogers or Flash Gordon -- or the Scarlet Pimpernel for that matter?"

"Why aren't you Doc Savage or the Shadow?" he replied. "Or James Bond for that matter?"

"I never claimed to be a fictional character," I said.

"Neither did I. I am John Carter, formerly of Virginia, and I am trying to return to my princess."

"Stark naked in a blizzard?"

"My clothes do not survive the transition, and I am not responsible for the weather," he said.

"That's a reasonably rational explanation for a crazy man."

He stared at me. "The woman I love more than life itself is millions of miles from here. Is it so crazy to want to return to her?"

"No," I admitted. "It's not crazy to want to be with her. But it's crazy to think she's on Mars."

"Where do you think she is?" he asked.

"How the hell should I know?" I shot back. "But I know nothing's on Mars except a bunch of rocks. It's below zero in the summer, there's no oxygen, and if anything ever lived there, it died out fifty or sixty million years ago. What have you got to say to that?"

"I have spent close to a century on Barsoom. Perhaps it is some other world than the one you know as Mars. Perhaps when I traverse the void, I also traverse the eons. I'm not interested in explanations, only in results. As long as I can once again hold my incomparable princess in my arms, I'll leave the answers to the scientists and the philosophers."

"And the psychiatrists," I added.

He looked grimly amused. "So if you had your way, I would be locked away in an institution until they convinced me that the woman I love doesn't exist and that my entire life has been a meaningless fantasy. You strike me as a very unhappy man; would that make you happier?"

"I'm just a realistic man," I said. "When I was a kid, I wanted so badly to believe A Princess of Mars was true that I used to stand in my backyard every night and reach my hands out to Mars, just the way you did. I kept waiting to get whisked away from the mundane life I'd been living and transported to Barsoom." I paused. "It never happened. All I got from all that reaching was sore shoulders and a lot of teasing from friends who didn't read books."

"Perhaps you had no reason to go to Barsoom," he said. "You were a child, with your entire life ahead of you. I think that Barsoom can be very choosy about who it allows to visit."

"So now you're saying that a planet is sentient?"

"I have no idea if it is," replied John. "Do you know for an absolute fact that it isn't?"

I stared at him irritably. "You're better at this than I am," I said. "You sound so fucking reasonable. Of course, you've had a lot more practice."

"More practice at what?"

"Fooling people by sounding normal."

"More practice than you?"

"See?" I said. "That's what I mean. You've got an answer for everything, and if you don't, then you respond with a question that'll make me sound like a fool if I answer it. But I wasn't wandering around naked in a blizzard in the middle of the night, and I don't think I live on Mars."

"Do you feel better now?" he said.

"Not much," I admitted. "You want some more coffee?"

"Actually, what I'd like to do is walk around a little and get some life back in my limbs."

"Outside?"

He shook his head. "No, not outside."

"Fine," I said, getting up. "It's not as big or as stately as a Martian palace, but I'll give you the chef's tour."

He got to his feet, adjusted the blanket around himself, and fell into step behind me. I led him into the living room, then stopped.

"Are you still cold?"

"A little."

"I think I'll light a fire," I said. "I haven't used the damned fireplace all winter. I might as well get my money's worth."

"It's not necessary," he said. "I'll be all right."

"It's no bother," I said, opening the screen and tossing a couple of logs onto the grate. "Look around while I'm doing it."

"You're not afraid I might rob you?"

"Have you got any pockets to put your loot in?" I asked.

He smiled at that. "I guess it's my good luck that I'm not a thief."

I spent the next couple of minutes positioning the kindling and starting the fire. I don't know which rooms he'd seen, but he was just returning when I straightened up.

"You must have loved her very much," he said. "You've turned the house into a shrine to her."

"Whether you're John Carter or merely think you're John Carter, you should be able to understand what I felt."

"How long has she been gone?"

"She died last February," I said, then added bitterly: "On Valentine's Day."

"She was a lovely woman."

"Most people just get older," I said. "She got more beautiful every day. To me, anyway."

"I know."

"How could you know? You never met her, never saw her."

"I know because my princess grows more beautiful with every passing moment. When you are truly in love, your princess always grows more beautiful."

"And if she's Barsoomian, she stays young for a thousand years, give or take," I said, remembering the book.

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps? Don't you know?"

"Does it really make a difference, as long as she remains young and beautiful in my eyes?"

"That's pretty philosophical for a guy who thinks he makes his living lopping off heads with a longsword," I said.

"I want nothing more than to live in peace," he replied, sitting in the armchair that was closest to the fire. "I resent every second that I am away from my Dejah Thoris."

"I envy you," I said.

"I thought I was supposed to be insane," he said wryly.

"You are. It makes no difference. Whether your Dejah Thoris is real or whether she's a figment of a deranged mind, you believe she exists and that you're going to join her. My Lisa is dead; I'll never see her again."

He made no reply, but simply stared at me.

"You may be as crazy as a loon," I continued, seating myself on the sofa, "but you're convinced you're going to see your Princess of Mars. I'd give up every last vestige of sanity if I could believe, even for a minute, that I would see my Princess of Earth one more time."

"I admire your courage," said John.

"Courage?" I repeated, surprised.

"If my princess were to die, I would have no desire to live another day, even another moment, without her."

"It has nothing to do with a desire to live."

"Then what is it?"

I shrugged. "Instinct. Inertia. I don't know. I certainly haven't enjoyed being alive the past year."

"And yet you have not ended it."

"Maybe it's not courage at all," I said. "Maybe it's cowardice."

"Or maybe there is a reason."

"For living? I can't give you one."

"Then perhaps it was Fate that I should appear at your house."

"You didn't magically appear," I said. "You walked here from wherever it was you left your clothes."

"No," he said, shaking his head firmly. "One moment I was strolling through the gardens of my palace in Helium, hand in hand with my princess, and the next I was standing in your yard, without my harness or my weapons. I tried to return, but I couldn't see Barsoom through the swirling snow, and if I can't see it I can't reach out to it."

"You've got a smooth answer for everything," I said wearily. "I'll bet you ace all your Rorschach tests, too."

"You know all your neighbors," said John. "Have you ever seen me before? How far do you think a naked man could get in this blizzard? Have the police come by to warn you of an escaped madman?"

"It's a terrible night to be out, even for the police, and you seem like a harmless enough madman," I replied.

"Now who has the smooth answer?"

"Okay, fine -- you're John Carter, and Dejah Thoris is up there somewhere waiting for you, and it was Fate that brought you here, and tomorrow morning a very worried man won't show up looking for his missing cousin or brother."

"You have my books," he said. "Some of them anyway. I saw them on a shelf in your study. Use them. Ask me anything you want."

"What would that prove? There's probably a thousand kids who can recite them word for word."

"Then I guess we'll spend the night in silence."

"No," I said. "I'll ask you some questions -- but the answers won't be in the books."

"Fine."

"All right," I said. "How can you be so smitten with a woman who was hatched from an egg?"

"How can you love a woman of Irish or Polish or Brazilian descent?" he asked. "How can you love a black woman, or a red one, or a white one? How can you love a Christian or a Jew? I love my princess because of what she is, not what she might have been." He paused. "Why are you smiling?"

"I was thinking that we're growing a perceptive crop of madmen this year."

He gestured to one of Lisa's photos. "I take it she had nothing in common with you."

"She had everything in common with me," I said. "Except heritage and religion and upbringing. Odd, isn't it?"

"Why should it be?" he asked. "I never thought it was odd to love a Martian woman."

"I suppose if you can believe there are people on Mars, even people who have hatched from eggs, it's easy enough to believe you love one of them."

"Why do you feel it's so insane to believe in a better world, a world of grace and chivalry, of manners and nobility? And why should I not love the most perfect woman that world has to offer? Would it not be mad to feel otherwise? Once you met your princess, would it have been rational to cast her aside?"

"We're not talking about my princess," I said irritably.

"We are talking about love."

"Lots of people fall in love. No one else has had to go to Mars because of it."

"And now we are talking about the sacrifices one makes for love." He smiled ruefully. "For example, here I am, in the middle of the night, forty million miles from my princess, with a man who thinks I belong in an asylum."

"Why did you come back from Mars, then?" I asked.

"It was not an act of volition." He paused, as if remembering. "The first time it happened, I thought the Almighty must be testing me as He had tested Job. I spent ten long years here before I could return."

"And you never once questioned if it had really happened?"

"The ancient cities, the dead sea bottoms, the battles, the fierce green-skinned warriors, I could have imagined them. But I could never have imagined my love for my princess; it remained with me every minute of every day -- the sound of her voice, the feel of her skin, the scent of her hair. No, I could not have invented that."

"It must have been a comfort during your exile," I said.

"A comfort and a torture," he replied. "To look up in the sky every day and know that she and the son I had never seen were so unthinkably far away."

"But you never doubted?"

"Never," he said. "I still remember the last words I wrote: 'I believe that they are waiting for me, and something tells me I shall soon know.'"

"True or not, at least you could believe it," I said. "You didn't watch your princess die in front of you."

He stared at me, as if trying to decide what to say next. Finally he spoke. "I have died many times, and if Providence wills it, I shall die again tomorrow."

"What are you talking about?"

"Only my consciousness can traverse the void between worlds," he said. "My body remains behind, a lifeless hulk."

"And it doesn't decay or rot, it just waits for you to return?" I said sarcastically.

"I can't explain it," he said. "I can only take advantage of it."

"And this is supposed to comfort me -- that a madman who thinks he's John Carter is hinting that my Lisa might somehow be alive on Mars?"

"It would comfort me," he said.

"Yeah, but you're crazy."

"Is it crazy to think she might have done what I did?"

"Absolutely," I said.

"If you had a terminal disease, would it be crazy to seek out every quack in the world who thought he could cure it rather than to sit around passively waiting to die?"

"So now you're a quack instead of a madman?"

"No," he said. "I'm just a man who is less afraid of death than of losing his princess."

"Bully for you," I said. "I've already lost mine."

"For ten months. I lost mine for ten years."

"There's a difference," I pointed out. "Mine's dead; yours wasn't."

"There's another difference," he replied. "I had the courage to find mine."

"Mine isn't lost. I know exactly where she is."

He shook his head. "You know where the unimportant part of her is."

I sighed deeply. "I'd settle for your madness if I had your faith."

"You don't need faith. You only need the courage to believe, not that something is true, but that it is possible."

"Courage is for Warlords," I replied, "not for sixty-four-year-old widowers."

"Every man has untapped wells of courage," he said. "Maybe your princess is not on Barsoom. Maybe there is no Barsoom, and I am every bit as crazy as you think I am. Are you really content to accept things as they are, or have you the courage to hope that I'm right?"

"Of course I hope you're right," I said irritably. "So what?"

"Hope leads to belief, and belief leads to action."

"It leads to the funny farm."

He looked at me, a sad expression on his face. "Was your princess perfect?"

"In every way," I said promptly.

"And did she love you?"

I saw his next question coming, but I couldn't help answering him. "Yes."

"Could a perfect princess have loved a coward or a madman?" he said.

"Enough!" I snapped. "It's been hard enough staying sane these last ten months. Then you come along and make the alternative sound too attractive. I can't spend the rest of my life thinking that I'll somehow find a way to see her again!"

"Why not?"

At first I thought he was kidding. Then I saw that he wasn't.

"Aside from the fact that it's crazy, if I bought into it I wouldn't accomplish a damned thing."

"What are you accomplishing now?" he asked.

"Nothing," I admitted, suddenly deflated. "I get up each morning and all I do is wait for the day to drag to a close so I can go to sleep and not see her face in front of me until I wake up again."

"And you consider this the rational behavior of a sane man?"

"Of a realistic man," I replied. "She's gone and she's not coming back."

"Reality is greatly overrated," he responded. "A realist sees silicon; a madman sees a machine that can think. A realist sees bread mold; a madman sees a drug that miraculously cures infection. A realist looks at the stars and asks, why bother? A madman looks at those same stars and asks, why not bother?" He paused and stared intently at me. "A realist would say, my princess is dead. A madman would say, John Carter found a way to overcome death, so why couldn't she?"

"I wish I could say that."

"But?" he said.

"I'm not a madman."

"I feel very sorry for you."

"I don't feel sorry for you," I replied.

"Oh? What do you feel?"

"Envy," I said. "They'll come by tonight or tomorrow or the next day to pick you up and take you back to wherever you wandered off from, and you will believe just as devoutly then as you do now. You'll know beyond any doubt that your princess is waiting for you. You'll spend your every waking moment trying to escape, trying to get back to Barsoom. You'll have belief and hope and purpose, which is a pretty impressive triumvirate. I wish I had any one of them."

"They're not unattainable."

"Maybe not to Warlords, but they are to aging widowers with bad knees and worse blood pressure," I said, getting to my feet. He looked at me curiously. "I've had enough craziness for one night," I told him. "I'm going to bed. You can sleep on the sofa if you want, but if I were you I'd leave before they came looking for me. If you go to the basement you'll find some clothes and an old pair of boots you can have, and you can take my coat from the hall closet."

"Thank you for your hospitality," he said as I walked to the staircase. "I'm sorry to have brought back painful memories of your princess."

"I cherish my memories," I replied. "Only the present is painful."

I climbed the stairs and lay down on the bed, still dressed, and fell asleep to visions of Lisa alive and smiling, as I did every night.

When I awoke in the morning and went downstairs he was gone. At first I thought he'd taken my advice and gotten a head start on his keepers -- but then I looked out the window and saw him, right where I'd spotted him the night before.

He was face-down in the snow, his arms stretched out in front of him, naked as the day he was born. I knew before I checked for a pulse that he was dead. I wish I could say that he had a happy smile on his face, but he didn't; he looked as cold and uncomfortable as when I'd first found him.

I called the police, who showed up within the hour and took him away. They told me they had no reports of any nutcases escaping from the local asylum.

I checked in with them a few times in the next week. They simply couldn't identify him. His fingerprints and DNA weren't on file anywhere, and he didn't match any missing persons descriptions. I'm not sure when they closed the file on him, but nobody showed up to claim the body and they finally planted him, with no name on his headstone, in the same cemetery where Lisa was buried.

I visited Lisa every day, as usual, and I started visiting John's grave as well. I don't know why. He'd gotten me thinking crazy, uncomfortable thoughts that I couldn't shake, blurring the line between wishes and possibilities, and I resented it. More to the point, I resented him: he died with the absolute knowledge that he would soon see his princess, while I lived with the absolute knowledge that I would never again see mine.

I couldn't help wondering which of us was truly the sane one -- the one who made reality conform by the sheer force of his belief, or the one who settled for old memories because he lacked the courage to try to create new ones.

As the days passed I found myself dwelling more and more on what John had said, turning it over in my mind again and again -- and then, on February 13, I read an item in the newspaper that tomorrow Mars would be closer to Earth than at any time in the next sixteen years.

I turned my computer on for the first time in months and verified the item on a couple of internet news services. I thought about it for awhile, and about John, and about Lisa. Then I phoned the Salvation Army and left a message on their answering device, giving them my address and telling them that I would leave the house unlocked and they were welcome to everything in it -- clothes, food, furniture, anything they wanted.

I've spent the past three hours writing these words, so that whoever reads them will know that what I am about to do I am doing willingly, even joyfully, and that far from giving in to depression I am, at long last, yielding to hope.

It's almost three in the morning. The snow stopped falling at midnight, the sky is clear, and Mars should come into view at any moment now. A few minutes ago I gathered my favorite photos of Lisa; they're lined up on the desk right beside me, and she seems more beautiful than ever.

Very soon I'll take off my clothes, fold them neatly on my desk chair, and walk out into the yard. Then

it's just a matter of spotting what I'm looking for. Is it Mars? Barsoom? Something else? It makes no difference. Only a realist sees things as they are, and it was John who showed me the limitations of reality -- and how could someone as perfect as my princess not transcend those limitations?

I believe she is waiting for me, and something tells me I shall soon know.

-- THE END --

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