

Distant Galaxies Colliding

a short story

by Gareth L Powell

It was a damp afternoon in November. Wet leaves blew down the narrow streets. I drank tea at a pavement café near the Seine while I waited for Candy to arrive. When she did, she was carrying a white cane and wearing a cheap pair of plastic sunglasses. She'd been mugged by a teenage gang on the streets of Hamburg. They'd stolen her camera and sprayed paint into her eyes.

She held onto my arm as we walked south on the Boulevard Saint Michel, toward my hotel. Pigeons and scraps of newspaper flapped around our feet. Behind us, the towers of Notre Dame grazed the sagging sky.

Paris, she said, smelled of neglect; it reminded her of Dublin, or London.

'Do you want to talk about it?' I asked, meaning Hamburg.

She squeezed my arm fiercely and her cheek brushed my shoulder. For half a second, we were off balance.

'Perhaps later,' she said.

I led her across the road and up the steps of my hotel. My room was on the fourth floor. When I opened the door, she dropped her cane and sat on the bed. There were a few possessions on the nightstand: my passport; a handful of coins; a magpie feather. She stirred them with her finger as I drew the curtains.

'I'm thinking of going back to the States,' she said. She rolled onto her back and began toying with the feather, dabbing it lightly against her nose.

I didn't reply; I didn't want her to go. The last few weeks without her had been almost unbearable.

'There's nothing left for me here,' she said.

I knelt beside her and touched the golden stubble on her scalp. It was rough, like Velcro.

'I'm here for you.'

Her arm fell to the bed. She dropped the feather and turned her head away.

There was something digging into my knee. It was a small hardback book. It must have fallen from her coat pocket. I picked it up; it was a copy of her latest collection of published photographs. The dust jacket was torn.

'When will you leave?' I asked.

She shrugged. Outside on the street, a siren wailed. At the lights, the taxis idled. We could hear their turbines ticking over.

'As soon as possible,' she said.

I first met Candy about a year ago, in one of those nameless bars that litter the waterfront around Canary

Wharf. My divorce had just come through and I was working freelance, writing articles for an online arts magazine. Candy was an up-and-coming American photographer, and I was supposed to be interviewing her. She wore too much jewellery and always seemed to be chewing something. When we shook hands, her fingers were cool, but her eyes were restless.

'Do you want to get something to eat?' she asked. It was around seven-thirty on a wet October evening and the place was crowded. I hadn't eaten since breakfast, so we drove over to Hammersmith, where I knew a quiet Moroccan restaurant. Inside, it smelled of incense and fried onions.

She showed me some samples of her work; pictures of street children and famine victims. They were very good, very poignant, but she seemed dissatisfied with them. When the food arrived, she spat her gum into a serviette.

'So,' she said, stirring the couscous on her plate, 'what do you want to know?'

I leaned forward.

'Just the facts,' I said.

She flashed a crooked smile. 'You want to know if I'm going to go home with you tonight, don't you?'

'I guess.'

She tilted her head. The cheap jewelled stud in her ear caught the candlelight. 'Are you always so forward?'

We ate in silence for a while, listening to the chef rattling pans in the kitchen. I'd opted for the chicken tagine. It was flavoured with pickled lemons and olives.

'I've just come out of a bad relationship,' I said.

'I know.' She covered my hand with her own. 'I can tell.'

The traffic outside was queued back from the flyover. We finished our meal and went back to my flat.

That first night, I left the lights off and the curtains open. I made coffee by the orange streetlight and watched her undress. The rain running down the window cast eerie underwater shadows on her pale skin.

Two weeks later we flew out to Greece, then Turkey. Her work carried her all over, and I tagged along when I could.

She was always restless, always ready to move on. She lived out of a rucksack, preferring to buy things when she needed them rather than weigh herself down.

That winter, she walked through Athens and Istanbul, her digital camera clicking furiously.

'I'm a professional tourist,' she said.

I remember sitting beneath a tree, beside a ruined temple, looking out at the Aegean. The water and sky were a matching blue, and the white sun burned above us. I'd been sifting through some of her downloaded images on my palmtop, but now the battery was running low.

'Do you know,' she said, 'that Earth is the only planet whose English name isn't derived from Greek or Roman mythology?'

I smiled. I closed the palmtop and lay back against the tree. The bark was gnarled and warm. Goats grazed among the fallen stones of the temple, and the air smelled faintly of dry grass and dung.

'What's that got to do with anything?'

She came over and sat beside me. She'd spent all morning looking around the temple, recording it all. She wore a white cotton dress with big, wooden buttons up the front.

'I don't know,' she said. She reached into her shoulder bag and pulled out the magazine she'd bought at the airport. There was an article in it about the old Hubble telescope; the accompanying picture showed two distant galaxies colliding.

'Look at that for a picture,' she said, using a fingernail to trace the dusty whorls of tortured stars.

'It's pretty,' I said.

Candy frowned. 'The light from these stars is a million years old,' she said. 'It's been travelling through space since before the dawn of civilisation, since before this temple was built.'

We looked around at the collapsed walls, the moss and lichen covering the scattered stones. They looked so much a part of the landscape that it was difficult to imagine the headland without them.

'It makes what I'm doing seem so bloody ephemeral.' She pushed her blonde hair back and dropped the magazine. When she looked across at me, her eyes were the same shade of green as the sunlight filtering through the leafy branches above.

'I like your pictures,' I said.

She ignored me. She rolled onto her front and put her chin on her fist.

'I could be doing so much more,' she said.

Despite her doubts, the pictures she took that day were startling. She had a knack for picking out details: a flower blooming from beneath a crumbled pillar; a crushed cola can glinting in the Mediterranean sun; a vapour trail above an ancient olive grove.

Many of those pictures wound up the collection that I now held in my hand. Kneeling beside the bed in that Parisian hotel, I flicked through the pages.

They were mostly pictures of collapsed and overgrown buildings, but there were a few pictures of the night sky, taken from various locations.

This wasn't just her latest collection of photographs, I realised sadly. It was also going to be her last.

When we'd originally arranged to meet in Paris, six weeks ago, she'd been hoping to visit the ESA headquarters. She'd wanted to use a deep range telescope for her next project. She'd wanted to find a way to make art out of science, to express how small and insignificant the universe made her feel.

Now, she wouldn't have the chance.

She'd never take another picture; there'd never be another collection. She'd have to find another way to

express herself.

She heard the rustle of glossy pages and her head turned toward the sound. Behind her sunglasses, I could see the white gauze dressings that covered her eyes.

'What are you reading?' she asked.

I lied; I said it was a guidebook.

She held a hand out to me. Her fingers were cold and dry.

'Open the curtains,' she whispered, 'and tell me what you see.'

I pulled myself up and pocketed the book.

'Why?'

She turned away and hugged the pillow to her chest. Her knees were drawn up and her feet were tangled in her skirt.

'Because I want my final image of Europe to be a good one,' she said.

She looked so frail and vulnerable, I couldn't refuse her. I stepped over to the window, pulled back the curtain, and began to describe the rooftops and softly-lit windows of the buildings across the street.

Candy, fumbling on the bedside table, managed to switch on the clock radio; gentle Cuban music filled the room, like cigarette smoke. A light rain began to fall. It was getting dark and the orange streetlights painted everything with their false colours, reminding me of that first night in Hammersmith, twelve short months before.

As I spoke, I thought of those kids in Hamburg, of what they'd done. Had they simply been trying to steal her camera, or did they blind her because they were jealous of the things she'd seen? In their vicious and brutal way, they'd taken far more from her than simply her sight, and I doubted if she'd ever fully recover.

'Can you see the stars?' she asked.

I said no.

A woman appeared below, framed in a café doorway. She lit a cigarette and turned up the collar of her raincoat. As she hurried up the street, the wet leaves snagged on her high heels. At the corner, she stopped to scratch her leg, where the impurities of her ankle chain irritated the skin.

I told Candy that it would have made a perfect picture. I felt her move up behind me. Her hands touched my shoulders.

'I guess that'll have to do, then,' she said.

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