

A Birth

by Carrie Richerson

Carrie Richerson lives in Austin, Texas, that fermentation vat of SF writerly talent. She likes to set her stories under the big sky of her adopted republic where anything, even change, seems possible. She's been laboring in the short fiction field for a number of years now; this is her first story for Asimov's.

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He is so very pink, this new father-to-be.

So pink and scrubbed-looking, young and nervous.

I don't know if he is more nervous because he is waiting for news of his wife and child, or if it is because I am sitting here, waiting with him, the tension of my dislike thick in the air.

He sits rigidly upright in the worn plastic chair. His hands rest on his knees, he faces the far wall as though he were determined to be taken for a piece of furniture himself, a part of the landscape. Occasionally he will dare a look at me sideways, out of one of those large, liquid brown eyes of his, the ones that are set too far apart in his long, narrow face. He doesn't move his head at all, but I know that his attention never wavers from me. Whenever I shift, making my chair creak, or when I uncross my legs and cross them again the other way, the tips of his too-large ears, the ones set too high on his head, twitch. The comparison is unavoidable.

My daughter married a jackass.

I glance at the clock, knowing it will hardly have changed since the last time I looked. 3:48 A.M. It was a long labor, and the doctors shooed us out of Diana's room and into this bleak waiting area when it looked as if she was finally ready for delivery. Most fathers these days get to be right there for the birth, hold their wives' hands and listen to them grunt and yell, but the docs are taking no chances with this birth. Suits me just fine. There's something indecent about a man wanting to watch such women's work.

I look down from the clock to see that my hand has clenched on the brim of my hat again, crushing the straw and mangling the rolled edge. It'll have to be re-blocked after this night, if it can be saved at all. Maybe I should just get a new one, to celebrate the birth. Get a tiny little hat for the tyke, too. Start him out right as a cowboy. Or a cowgirl.

I watch my fingers twist and crease the brim. My hand is as brown and leathery as the rawhide band that circles the crown on my Stetson. My knuckles are lumpy with arthritis; the skin is webbed with tiny cracks grimed with dirt that no soap can remove. The south Texas sun burns all the moisture out of a man. Maybe all the softness, too. Years under that sun, in the saddle day in and out, working the ranch and trying to make it pay, struggling through droughts and market busts and high

taxes to preserve something real to pass on to my children. My one child. My daughter.

Who married this jackass.

He rolls that eye at me again and I give him a hard predator's glare right back. The hot pink shade of his hide looks like the sun has done a job on him already, but otherwise he seems too soft, too *wet*, to be a rancher. What was my daughter thinking?

The ears twitch. Jackass.

There's no one better with the cows, though. No one faster at spotting jimson weed in a pasture, or determining the exact moment to take the herd off a pasture where rain after a long drought has made the johnson-grass form toxic levels of prussic acid. And that long nose of his is good for something besides looking ridiculous: I swear he's diagnosed a cow with haemophilus infection just by smelling its breath, and more than once he's sniffed out a bad shipment of fescue hay and saved my cows from nitrate poisoning.

I watch him sometimes, in the dew-wet dawns and the gathering dusk, as he wanders among the cows, greeting each one by name. (I run two thousand head of Santa Gertrudis and eight hundred head of improved Charolais, and he's named every one.) His bright pink hands are a shocking contrast to the dark red Santa Gertrudis and the creamy Charolais as he runs them over the cows' hides, checking for bots and ticks. He squats to check their manure for worms without the slightest flicker of disgust. He sings to them in his soft little whispery voice. When I sent the yearlings north to the feedlots this spring, he cried.

The cows don't roll the whites of their eyes at him and shuffle away, as they do when I or the other cowhands walk among them. No, they lean in to him, rubbing against his shoulder in solidarity, nosing at those narrow pink hands to scratch behind their ears. I've seen my 2,200-pound Charolais bull follow him around the paddock like a puppy.

I think it's because he smells like them. Like a herbivore.

Like prey.

The air-conditioning sighs a cold, disinfected breeze. The clock ticks. My chair creaks. My son-in-law's ears twitch.

We wait.

* * * *

A few nights ago, before Diana's labor began, I took my coffee and my prenatal anxieties out to the porch after dinner. I like to sit on the steps with the lights off and watch the stars in their grave dance across the sky as I plan the next day's work. That evening's weather report had noted a tropical depression forming in the

Gulf two hundred miles southeast of Brownsville. If we were going to have a tropical storm or hurricane in the next week, the herds would have to be moved away from the creeks, and all the hay would have to be covered with tarps. I wanted to make sure I had thought of everything that would need to be done by the time I talked over the day's schedule with my foreman over breakfast.

The summer night's air was thick with the buzz of cicadas and the scents of sun-heated grass and cow manure. I could hear a few cows lowing restlessly, and, far off, the 9:05 freight out of Alice, bound for Benavides, Laredo, and Monterrey, Mexico. From around the corner on the south porch came the sounds of good-natured taunts and laughter that signaled the nightly poker game run by my ranch foreman, Juan Solis, with Matt, Sonny, and Pablo. Luis had brought out his twelve-string and was serenading them softly with sad Spanish love songs. The new hire, Juan Bautista, lounged dejectedly on the porch rail at the corner and sipped at a bottle of beer. No doubt he had just been told he was too junior to sit in the game.

Juan Solis had asked me to hire Juan Bautista because he was the son of a cousin who had passed away recently and the boy had dropped out of school to support his mother, but I knew Juan Solis wouldn't have asked if the boy weren't capable. He had worked hard that day, working the cows with the ease of one who had been minding cattle since he was old enough to sit on a horse. Which was probably the case. In this part of Texas, unless you want to hoof it down to the Rio Grande valley and spend your days stooped over hoeing onions, or ship out for three-week stints as a roustabout on an oil rig in the Gulf, there isn't much else but ranch work. And though I may keep vaccination records and breeding histories on a computer now, and we use pickup trucks in addition to the horses, the essential relationship between man and cow hasn't changed since humans first learned to be herders.

The boy had behaved well over dinner, too. He knew enough to scrape off his boots and wash his hands before sitting at table; he listened much and said little, which indicated a bit of sense; and though he was obviously both fascinated by and wary of my son-in-law, he held his tongue and didn't stare overmuch.

Through it all, Diana's husband sat placidly chewing his roasted grains and vegetables with those big, square, white teeth of his. He is inordinately fond of spinach, and now cook serves it at every dinner. I can't abide the stuff myself, it's too much like eating the cows' hay, but some of the cowhands have developed a liking for it. And Diana, of course, always offers me the serving bowl, with an innocent tone in her voice and a spark in her eye.

After dinner, my son-in-law had helped Diana up from the table and off to bed. She moved ponderously, cradling her great belly with both hands. I remembered how Maria's temper, at this point in her pregnancy, had become as fiery as her favorite *chiles rojas*. Diana, in contrast, seemed subdued, past patience and well into resignation, filled with a weary disgust for her condition.

Her husband came out onto the porch and settled into a rocking chair in the deep shadows, next to the house wall. He explained once that it's not that he minds the night so much, he just doesn't like to be out under that star-filled sky. Just as well. I didn't have to pretend to carry on a conversation with him.

I saw Juan Bautista turn to look when the screen door closed. He slid off the porch rail and disappeared in the direction of the game. I could hear a murmur of voices, but not what was being discussed. Then I heard the screen door on the south side of the house slam.

A few minutes passed. The stars twinkled in silence, the rocking chair squeaked in slow rhythm, cicadas shrilled, a train's diesel engine chugged almost too low to hear, and Luis picked out a melody that Maria used to sing to Diana when she was small.

Then the south porch screen door slammed again, and Juan Bautista came around the corner. His boot heels rapped smartly against the mesquite porch planks as he strode toward me. In the light that leaked around the corner from the south porch, I could see that two beer bottles dangled from his left hand; he cradled something lumpy in his right.

I was afraid he was going to try to be sociable, but he nodded respectfully to me on the steps and kept going until he reached the figure in the rocker. The squeaking stopped.

Juan Bautista said, "*Buenas noches, amigo*. My cousin, Juan Solis—" he shrugged in the direction of the game, "he says you like plantains."

A voice from the shadows said, "I do."

"He said you like to eat them raw?" Juan Bautista sounded skeptical.

"Yes. I do like them like that."

Juan Bautista offered a small bunch of the fruit and didn't flinch as the eight-fingered hand reached out of the dimness to take it. The boy hooked a chair closer with the toe of his boot and straddled it. "*Cerveza?*"

"Thank you."

I heard two soft pops, then the *tink, tink* of bottle caps hitting the porch boards.

Juan took a long swig of his beer. "My cousin says you don't mind talking about the place you came from. I'd like to hear about your home, *por favor*."

fLaar finished one plantain and began to peel another. "All right."

* * * *

"If you point one of your most powerful telescopes at the group of stars you

call *La Virgen* and look to the left of the bright star you call *Spica*—but much farther away—you will just be able to see a small, yellow star: a star very similar to this one you call *El Sol*. The telescope would not be able to show you, but that star had planets, eight of them. On one of those planets, the fourth from its sun, life evolved.

“From space that planet looked more gray and brown than your blue and green Earth; it was a little less dense than your Earth and therefore its gravity a little less than here; the atmosphere had a slightly different mix of gases, and the oceans a different mix of salts, but you would have been able to breathe the air and drink the fresh water safely. I think you would have found it pleasant. I think you would have found it beautiful.

“That star’s spectrum of light was a little different than your sun’s, and the gases in the planet’s atmosphere scattered and absorbed that light differently, so the chemicals that evolved in plants to turn that light into food were different also. On my planet, the vegetation was mostly red rather than this Earth’s green. All the shades of red, from pink to scarlet, and from bronze to almost purple.

“That planet had mountains, with tall peaks covered in snow year-round. There were deep crimson jungles and great rivers and deserts and lakes. But the most beautiful areas were the vast plains of pink and rust grasses, dotted with rocky hills and small forests of trees with leaves the color of blood.

“Here in Texas you have a mythical beast, the jackalope—yes?” Juan Bautista snorted and slapped his knee. fLaar continued, “Without a smile you tell newcomers it is a cross between a jackrabbit and an antelope. Well, imagine a real animal that looks like a cross between your jackrabbit and a baboon—you have seen pictures of a baboon?”

Juan Bautista nodded.

“Like the jackrabbit, this animal had large ears and a large nose, to hear and smell predators that might sneak up through the tall grass. Like the jackrabbit and the baboon, this animal could sit up on its haunches, even stand on its hind legs for short periods, to look over those tall grasses. Like the baboon, it lived in troops of twenty to two hundred individuals. These were well-organized social groups, with leaders, scouts, nursemaids, defenders, and food gatherers. This animal even had a rudimentary language, several octets of vocalizations and signs that could be used to express surprisingly complex concepts. And like the baboon, it was intelligent enough to learn to use simple tools to acquire food or defend itself.

“Our studies indicated this was a peaceful and cooperative animal. When different troops encountered one another in their wanderings across the plains, they did not fight—they traded. They mingled together for days or weeks, sharing knowledge, like where the best nut trees or the tastiest grasses or the sweetest springs were to be found, and skills, like how to use a pair of stones to crack the

hardest nuts, or how to carry a supply of seeds in a hollow gourd. And when the troops parted again and went off in opposite directions, some members of each would have switched troops, forming new kinships. So, in time, genetics and knowledge were spread over the entire species.

“This was the animal that was the ancestor of the vRel.”

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I let fLaar’s story fade into a background drone. I had heard or read all of this before. When the vRel first showed up, I was as fascinated and alarmed as everyone else on Earth, but the vRel did everything they could to convince humans they were neither hoax nor invader. As soon as their spaceship neared the orbit of the moon, they began broadcasting their peaceful intentions in every major Earth language. They followed up by dumping all of their knowledge and history, all their science and culture, their medicine and their mathematics, directly into the world-wide computer network.

In return all they asked was refuge. And they made their appeal not to the governments of the world, but to the people directly, *all* of the people, simultaneously.

Most of us were content to read about them in newspapers and take advantage of the advancements in science and medicine that their knowledge promised. But some daring souls responded to the vRel plea with invitations. “Come down and live with us,” they said. They wanted to know the vRel “up close and personal,” as it were.

If I had had any idea Diana was one such...

The first I knew of her plan was when I answered a knock on the front door one evening to find a hideously pink alien carrying a small satchel of his personal effects standing on the welcome mat. “Hello, I am fLaar. Miss Diana Murchison invited me,” he said, sticking out that strange hand. How do you shake a hand that has two thumbs?

That was two years ago, and, as God is my witness, if I had known just how *personal* Diana intended her sponsorship of fLaar to be—well, I’d have run him off the porch with my shotgun.

* * * *

The scientists say it is not really possible to compare vRel and human history because time gets muddled over such great distances. Damned if I understand what they are talking about. To me it just seems clear that the vRel had a head start on humans in the civilization game. According to what I’ve read, the vRel were mastering tool-making and learning to use fire while the ancestors of humans were still nesting in trees. When we were learning to use big sticks to bash animals and each other over the head, the vRel were inventing agriculture, pottery, and weaving. While humans built the Pyramids and waged wars of conquest, the vRel built great

cities and waged war on disease and age. fLaar may look young, but he is older than I like to contemplate. Thanks to vRel medicine, my arthritis is yielding to treatment, the spot my doctor found on my lung last year has cleared up, and, barring accident, I will almost certainly live to see the twenty-second century. Diana and her child will live longer yet.

And while humans were proving their world was indeed round, the vRel had already explored their own solar system and were looking outward to the stars.

* * * *

Some wistful note in fLaar's voice drew me back to his narrative. "We knew it would take many years for ships to travel to even the nearest stars, but by that time we had extended our lifetimes many times over our ancestors', and we are patient by nature. We could imagine no greater project than to search out other intelligent life and exchange knowledge. But then our scientists made two discoveries that would forever change us as a people."

"*¿Qué?*" asked Juan Bautista.

"First, they developed a way to shorten the travel time by shortening the distance, as though one could make a fold in the fabric of space itself and bring two places that are far apart, close together for just an instant. The limitation of the speed of electromagnetic radiation became irrelevant. Hundreds, even thousands of years could be trimmed from a journey.

"That discovery overjoyed us, and we immediately began to fit the spaceships we had begun to build with new engines to take advantage of this technology.

"The second discovery followed hard up on the first, but brought grief instead of gladness. Our astronomers announced our sun had developed a subtle instability, one that would cause its violent destruction in the near future. We had a few hands of years, maybe only two octets, before our beloved planet, our entire system, would be incinerated.

"The news was staggering, but we quickly realized now we had even more reason to travel to the stars. Somewhere out there must be a new home for our race. Every vRel threw itself into the common task. We built enormous fleets of starships, holding thousands of individuals apiece, and launched them outward in different directions to find a place of refuge.

"Whichever fleet found a likely planet would send one ship back as a messenger, and all future refugees would know the path to our new home. Other messengers could be sent to find the other fleets and share the news with them.

"But no messengers ever came bringing news of a new home.

"So we continued to build fleets of ships and send our population outward with only hope to guide us. We had always been careful stewards of our planet's

resources, treating her with the respect one owes one's mother, but now we despoiled her without remorse. We gouged great pits into her surface as we mined for ores, poisoned our air with the fumes from our smelters, stained our seas and lakes black with waste. Entire cities were emptied and their buildings ripped apart for metals and ceramics for our ships, and the populace of those cities put on those ships and sent away. And when our own planet's resources grew too low to sustain our frantic construction, we plundered the other planets in our system for material.

"Millions of vRel left. Millions more decided their love of our home was too great to allow them to leave. They chose to stay and share our planet's fate. I was one who would have stayed. I was only sixteen when my turn came to leave, in the twelfth great migration. I loved my home very much, but my entire family, hundreds of individuals, had voted to go, and I could not bear to be parted from them.

"When we left, our sun had already begun to take on an ugly mottled appearance that could be seen in full daylight; its face was blotched with enormous sunspots and flares. It was clear the end was not far away. My last view of my home, from orbit, was of a planet raped and scarred, already dying. I do not know how many more of the vRel left after we did. Those who chose to stay until the end must have wept for the destruction we left behind.

"Our fleet numbered just over two hundred ships, containing three-quarters of a million vRel. We charted a path not taken by earlier fleets and set out for the nearest likely star. It had no planets, so we jumped again. And again.

"We surveyed thousands of stars, with thousands of planets. We found frozen balls of methane and ammonia ice like your planet Pluto, massive giants of incredible gravity and swirling, toxic gases like your Jupiter, and half-molten rocks like your Mercury. But never did we find a planet suitable for our new home.

"After many disappointments, the fleet split, then split again and again as factions differed over what course to take through a galaxy of hundreds of billions of stars. We lost some ships to accidents, like the *naFisk*, which, without warning, blew apart into fragments no larger than my hand. We found no survivors and we never learned the cause. Other ships were lost to madness or hopelessness, like the *dRanoth*, when its crew opened its hatches to space. I lost my last clan sister when the *dRanoth* died.

"At the last only my ship, the *kRovv*, remained. For almost a thousand years we had wandered in a drunkard's stagger across the galaxy. I think we were close to ending ourselves as those on the *dRanoth* had—and then, out of all that emptiness, we detected a whisper of a pattern in the electromagnetic spectrum, and followed it here, to your planet.

"Only three thousand vRel, of all the millions who left vRelhome, made it here. But for all our persistence, I do not think there are enough of us left to continue as a people."

Juan Bautista drank off the last of his beer and carefully set the bottle down beside his boot. He seemed unwilling to break the silence that had fallen. Finally fLaar spoke again. “Somewhere there may be a thousand planets where vRel have found homes, but I do not think so. Space is vast, vaster than you can imagine. And more barren. And lonelier. You humans are welcome to our technology, to whatever you may find among the stars. We are old and tired. We never want to look upon the stars again.”

Last fall Diana took fLaar to the McDonald Observatory in west Texas to view his home star through one of the telescopes there. She explained to me that it is still visible, even though it was destroyed almost a thousand years ago, because it takes the light so long to travel to Earth. fLaar came back weeping, and did not leave his room for days.

I checked my watch: 9:50. Almost time. I looked to the west, where Venus glowed like a silver concho nailed to the sky. I wondered what it would be like to be a thousand years old. What if I could have been present to see all the changes that had taken place over the last thousand years of human history? How amazing that would have been. But fLaar wasn't witness to a thousand years of vRel history—just a thousand years of boredom and frustration and despair.

And now there were only three thousand vRel. Only a few more than all the cattle I run. And if I didn't breed out my bulls, and stock fresh cows from time to time, my herds would decline, become inbred and sickly. Eventually a parasite or a disease would sweep through and wipe them all out.

In the sky, a handspan to the right of Venus, a new light suddenly flared gold. Swiftly it climbed across the sky like a falling star in reverse, then winked out at the zenith. The vRel spaceship, refitted for a human crew of six hundred forty men and women and renamed *Discovery*, had just departed Earth's neighborhood on its first journey of exploration.

I threw the last of my cold coffee into the grass and stood up. “We have an early morning, gentlemen. Juan Bautista, mind your empties.”

“*Si, señor.*” He gathered up the bottles and turned to go, then turned back to fLaar. “*Gracias, señor,*” he said. “I am sorry for your loss. We have a beautiful planet, too. I hope you will be happy here.”

He left. I stood looking at fLaar in the dimness for a moment longer. I could just see the gleam of his huge eyes looking back at me. I went inside to bed. I don't know when fLaar turned in.

* * * *

A nurse sticks her head into the waiting room and says we can see Diana now. I'm down the hallway like a shot, fLaar and the nurse trotting just to stay in my wake. At the doorway to Diana's room, I stop so suddenly that fLaar plows into my back. He snorts and leaps away, the whites of his eyes showing, but I only have eyes

for my daughter.

Diana looks like she's been ridden hard. She's pale, except for the dark circles around her eyes, and the bright lights in the room gleam off a film of sweat on her skin. But she is triumphantly, glowingly happy. She looks up from the gurgling bundle in her arms and sends me a proud, fierce glare, and I nod in acknowledgment of this woman's work well done, this result of her daring vision and unbending will, the advances in genetics the vRel have brought us, and the doctors' patient engineering.

She hands the baby to the nurse, who puts it into my arms. The nurse is murmuring something about how they think it is a girl, but these matters are complicated among the vRel, so they are running some tests. I'm not listening; as soon as I look into the tiny face, I know I have a granddaughter.

She stares up at me with her mother's fierce blue eyes and I remember the first time Maria put our new daughter into my arms—and I am lost. The eyes are too large, but they are set in the front of the face. The skin seems too pink, but that could be from the birthing. The ears are large, but perhaps not too large. The hands are very narrow, but they have only five fingers apiece, fingers that try to curl around my massive, dirt-seamed one.

She is beautiful. She gives me a milky, toothless grin, and I know that someday her smile will break human and vRel hearts alike.

fLaar is still standing in the doorway, shifting nervously from foot to foot. I turn to him, and this time I do not give him a predator's toothy smile, but something more genuine—a sincere, if ironic, smile of welcome: welcome to the fathers' club, to dreams and midnight dreads, to toil and trouble, to pride and sorrow, to disasters survived and triumphs shared, and to the ultimate dismay of having your daughter marry a man you disapprove of. *Yes, all this will be yours.*

He is wary of the promise he sees in my eyes, though it is not me he has to worry about. "What ... what is it?" he whispers.

I put his daughter into his arms. "Something new," I say.

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