

To The East, A Bright Star

by James Maxey

The author tells us, “If you google the name James Maxey, you’ll turn up a British attorney, a vice-president of a Missouri accounting firm, and a geeky guy in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, whose links lead to rants about comic books, circus freaks, and tequila.” The relevant James Maxey is the last one. His debut novel, the superhero adventure Nobody Gets the Girl, is available from Phobos Books. His first story for us takes a sharp look at the future, and lends a stark interpretation to the phrase...

A word of warning: there are brief scenes in this story that may be disturbing to some readers.

* * * *

There was a shark in the kitchen. The shark wasn’t huge, maybe four feet long, gliding across the linoleum toward the refrigerator. Tony stood motionless in the knee-deep water of the dining room. The Wolfman said that the only sharks that came this far in were bull sharks, which could live in either salt or fresh water, and were highly aggressive. Tony leaned forward cautiously and shut the door to the kitchen. He had known the exact time and date of his death for most of his adult life. With only hours to go, he wasn’t about to let the shark do something ironic.

Tony waded back to the living room. Here in the coolest part of the house, always shaded, he kept his most valuable possession in an ice-chest stashed beneath the stairs. He pulled away the wooden panel and retrieved the red plastic cooler. Inside was his cigar box, wrapped in plastic bags. He took the box, then grabbed one of the jugs of rainwater cooling in the corner and headed up the stairs to the bathroom. He climbed out the bathroom window onto the low sloping roof over the back porch.

Everything was damp from yesterday’s rain. He took out the silver case with his last three cigarettes. He went through five matches before he got one lit. He sucked down the stale smoke, while a tiny little voice in the back of his head chided him about his bad habits. Tony wished the tiny little voice would consult a calendar. It was a bit late to worry about cancer.

The sky shimmered with brilliant blue, not a cloud in it. The Wolfman had thought Tony was crazy to gamble on this day being clear. It had rained two hundred days the previous year. A decade ago a comet had hit Antarctica, melting half the ice cap, pumping countless tons of water vapor into the atmosphere. Cloudless skies were only a memory. And yet, in Tony’s imagination, the sky of the last day had always been crystal clear. It pleased him that reality and imagination overlapped at last.

A slight breeze set waves gently lapping at the tumbled roofs and walls that lay in all directions. This had been a nice old neighborhood, full of Victorian houses, before the earthquakes started. Now only a few homes stood, twisted and strangely

beautiful, half submerged in a shallow green ocean, surrounded by the salt-poisoned skeletons of trees still stretching toward that amazing blue sky.

“Here’s to a gorgeous day,” he said, raising his water jug toward the sun. He brought the jug to his lips and chugged down half a gallon, quickly, in careless gulps, with water running from the corners of his mouth, dripping down to soak his shirt. He no longer saw any point in being careful with fresh water. It felt good to be wasteful again.

His thirst sated, Tony capped the jug, walked to the edge of the roof, and dropped the water into his boat. He steadied himself, turned around, held his hands over his head, then flipped backward. He landed on his feet in the center of the aluminum skiff, his arms stretched for balance as the craft gently rocked.

“So what do you think, *Pop?*” he asked, imagining his father had been watching.

Tony knew exactly what Pop would think.

“The bit with the boat, just a gimmick,” Tony answered, his voice taking on a touch of an Italian accent. “And the back flip ... *sloppy*. The people want *form*.”

“Whatever,” Tony said, his voice once more his own. The old bastard never had a kind word for him. Or even a truthful one. Last year he’d met up with Pete Pyro the Fire King over at the Dixie.

“God Hell,” Pete had stammered when he finally recognized him. “Rico told me you’d gone and died of AIDS, Tony.”

Which had indicated to Tony that his father wasn’t open to the idea of eventual reconciliation. But what the hell. There are only so many days in a life. You can’t get around to everything.

Tony untied the rope and pushed the boat away from the house. Taking up oars, he maneuvered through the submerged streets. The sun beat down with a terrible force. It was two hours before sunset. Normally, he never went out during the day. When it wasn’t raining, it could reach higher than the old dial thermometer back at the house could measure, and it had marks to one hundred ten. But the whole show ended only an hour after dark, and it would take a little while to reach the old Dixie Hotel, the tallest building still standing downtown. From its roof, he’d be maybe sixty feet higher than he would have been back at his house. Not much, but there was something in him which still craved heights. The higher he could get, the better the show.

Except for the splash and creak of oars, the world was silent. It had been almost a year since he’d seen a bird, three weeks since he’d had to hide from a helicopter, and six days since the Wolfman had changed his mind and headed west. He’d gone in search of the government shelter near Black Mountain, with

hydroponic gardens, nuclear power, the works.

“I hear if you put all them tunnels end to end, they cover four hundred miles,” the Wolfman had said. “There’s room for one more.”

Tony shook his head. At best there were cold little cages for crazy people, or cripples, or junkies. The Wolfman was a little of all three. Tony missed him.

Ahead loomed the islands of rubble that marked the downtown. Rusted steel beams were tangled together in great heaps, and mirrored glass gleamed beneath the surface of the sea. The Dixie rose above all this, six stories of old red brick that had somehow survived the quakes, the flooding, and the terrible unending heat. A month ago, the Dixie had been a noisy place, a Mecca for those left behind by accident or choice. He and the Wolfman had come here often. They’d survived the last few years by scavenging, and the Dixie had been a place to trade canned goods and batteries for booze and fresh vegetables. Some old geezer named Doc had filled the upper floors of the Dixie with potted plants, and his horticultural prowess provided garden goodies all year round. Also, Doc had rigged up a distillery for fresh water, plus another for booze. He’d been king of his little world, one of the last bastions of the good life, while it lasted.

A month ago the helicopters had come and taken everyone, whether they wanted to go or not. They’d smashed the stills and tossed plants into the ocean and Tony still couldn’t see the sense in it. He and the Wolfman had steered clear of the place since, in case the helicopters came back. But now it would be safe. There would be no search and rescue at this late hour.

He tied off his boat on the east side, in the shade. A steady breeze was blowing in from the north now, taking the teeth out of the heat. He gulped thirstily from the water jug, then poured what was left over his face and hair. He pulled off his sweat-soaked shirt, and tossed it into the sea. He untied the tarp, and unfolded a fresh cotton shirt he’d saved for this occasion. He picked up his boombox, with its missing left speaker cover, and plugged in the fresh batteries he’d been saving. Over the years he’d traded away most of the CDs he’d found, keeping only a copy of *All Hail West Texas* by the Mountain Goats, a scratched-up double CD set of Mozart, and a K-Tel collection of disco hits. He still hadn’t made up his mind what he was going to play.

Finally, he unwrapped the four layers of trash bags from the humidor. The box’s contents would make all of his efforts worthwhile. He stepped through a window, into a shadowy room ankle-deep in brine. The Dixie moaned like a giant oboe as the wind rushed through the open windows.

The stairs creaked with each step. Emptied of its people, the Dixie seemed haunted. A place he associated with life and light now sat dark and dead, the air foul with rot. No doubt the place had moaned and creaked just as loudly on his past visits, but then the sounds were masked with laughter and talk and....

He stopped. Was the wind making that sound?

He climbed three more steps.

Crying. Someone was crying, somewhere above.

He crept up to the next landing. There was no doubt now.

“Hello?” he called out.

The crying stopped short.

“Hello?” he called again.

A woman began shouting, in a rapid, nearly unintelligible rush of syllables and sobs. He followed the sound, racing up two flights of stairs. He rushed past open doors, drawing nearer, until the woman’s voice was clearly coming from a door on his left. He almost stepped through, but caught himself, grabbing the doorframe. The room beyond had no floor, and was only a pit dropping all the way back down to the water.

Across the void of the floorless room was an open door, in which Esmerelda stood, naked and filthy and thin.

He couldn’t understand what she was saying. She was spitting out words between sobs, with a little laughter mixed in. Esmerelda was a fairly new arrival at the Dixie, having been traded to Doc a few months ago in exchange for a case of booze. When he’d seen her last, she’d been a shapely young thing, with sinister eyes. She’d looked like she hated everyone on Earth, and who could blame her? Now, she just looked terrified and hungry.

“Just hold on,” Tony said, studying the situation. The light was nearly gone. It looked like a twenty-foot drop, maybe more, into a real mess of jagged rubble.

“Stay calm,” he said. “I’ll be back.”

She screamed as he left the doorway.

He made it back to the boat in less than a minute. The water danced with black shadows and red flames. Night was moments away. He found his rope, and ran back up the stairs.

She waited in the far doorway, quiet now, and had found a sheet and draped it over her body. Her eyes were wide, glistening in the gloom.

“You’re real,” she said.

“I try,” said Tony.

She pulled the sheet tighter around her shoulders.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Soldiers came,” she said. “I hid. When it got quiet, I came out. The floor was gone.”

“Jesus. You’ve been trapped all this time?”

She looked down into the pit. He could barely understand her as she answered. “Doc said they would come for him. He said they’d kill me. I wasn’t important, like him. He told me he’d made traps.”

“Let’s get you out of there,” Tony said. “Catch.”

He tossed a coil of rope. She moved to catch it, but pulled her arms back as her sheet slipped. Fortunately, the rope landed in the room, and snagged on the floor’s jagged edge as it slid back.

“Okay,” he said. “Are you good at knots? I need you to tie that tightly to the sturdiest thing in the room.”

She slowly knelt and grabbed the rope, looking slightly dazed.

“Come on,” he said. “Time’s wasting. You gotta trust me.”

She disappeared into the room. Tony looked at his watch. This wasn’t how he’d planned to spend the evening. He should go on, leave her to her own devices. Except he hated people who thought like that, and now was a bad time to turn into someone he hated.

“It’s tied,” she said, reappearing.

Tony took up the slack, then yanked on the rope, putting his full weight on it. It felt solid from her end. He tugged the rope to a radiator pipe in the hall and tied his end, bracing his foot against the wall to pull it as taut as possible.

Then, without stopping to think about it, he stepped into the room, onto the rope, which sagged beneath him. He kept moving. Five six seven steps, and he was across, stepping into her room. Esmerelda stood there with her mouth open.

“Let’s hurry this up,” Tony said with a glance at his watch. He began to unbutton his shirt. Esmerelda backed away.

He held the shirt out to her.

“Wear this,” he said. “I don’t want to trip over that sheet when I carry you back.”

“C-carry me?”

“I’ve walked wires with both my sisters standing on my shoulders. We’ll make it.”

“You’re crazy,” she said.

“*Jesus*,” he said. “There isn’t time for discussion. The Tony Express leaves the station in one minute.” He placed the folded shirt on her shoulder, then turned around. “I won’t look.”

He studied the room she’d been trapped in. It was filled with flower pots and plastic tubs in which various green things were growing, some with little yellow blossoms. The room smelled like a sewer. There was a medicine cabinet on the wall, and pipes where the tub and sink had been. The rope was tied to the base of a shattered toilet, beside which sat a basin of clear water. Above this was a small window, through which he could see the night sky. He was on the wrong side of the building for the big show.

She touched his shoulder, lightly.

He turned. She wore his shirt now, which made her seem smaller, and there were tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Hey,” he said. “Don’t cry.”

“I don’t ... I don’t know if this is really happening. I’ve had ... I’ve been having *dreams*.”

“The Wolfman used to say, “Some dreams you gotta ride.” He pointed to his back. “Hop on.”

Tentatively, she wrapped her arms around his neck. She smelled earthy, and her skin felt oily and hot against his. He lifted her. She was light, all bones and skin.

“Don’t flinch,” he said, and stepped onto the rope. She flinched, tightening her grip on his throat, her legs clamping around his waist. He moved cautiously, his feet listening to the messages the rope was sending. It wasn’t good. Individual strands of the hemp were popping and snapping. The pipe he’d tied the rope to in the hall was pulling free of its braces. Move move move *move*.

“*Alley oop!*” • he cried, jumping forward. Esmerelda shrieked. He landed in the doorway and stumbled into the hall. He pried her arms off of his trachea. “We made it. It’s okay. It’s okay.”

She dropped from his back, trembling, laughing, crying.

“G-God. Oh God,” • she stammered. “I’m out. I’m out. I can still get to safety.”

“You’re as safe as you’re ever going to be,” he said.

“No!” she cried out. “Don’t you know? Don’t you know? How can you not know? There’s a comet that’s going to hit near here. A big one! We’ve only got until May 8 to get to!”

“That’s today,” he said. “We’ve got fifteen minutes.”

She turned pale. She placed a hand against the wall.

Tony grabbed his stuff and headed for the stairs.

“C’mon,” he said, racing up the steps two at a time.

Tony opened the door to the roof. The sky was black and silver, with a thin sliver of moon. A dozen comets streamed from the direction of the vanished sun. And to the east, a bright star, brighter than the moon, with a halo filling half the sky.

“Wow,” he said.

He looked back. Esmerelda was halfway up the stairs, looking at him.

“Come on,” he said. “You don’t want to miss this, do you? This is the kind of sky I dreamed about as a kid. A sky full of mysteries and wonders.”

Esmerelda shook her head and turned, but didn’t leave.

Tony shrugged. What did it matter if she didn’t watch? He thought it strange, but then, everybody always thought *he* was strange, so who was he to judge? He’d planned to be alone anyway. But now that he had an audience, he was overcome with the need to talk.

“When I was ten, Mom bought me a telescope to see it,” he said. “The brown star, I mean. Way out there, beyond Pluto. It wasn’t much to look at. Scientists got all worked up, talking about how fast it was moving, where it had come from, where it was going, and all the damage it was doing by altering the orbits of comets. But in the telescope, it just hung there, a boring coffee-colored dot.”

Tony sat down, his back against a chimney, the humidor in his lap.

“It’s an exciting time to be alive, don’t you think?”

She didn’t answer.

Tony opened the humidor, revealing the syringe. He lifted it, and looked at the sky through the fluid-filled glass. It swirled with dreams and memories.

“You know how kids want to run away and join the circus?”

She didn’t answer. He wasn’t sure she could hear him.

“It works the other way around, too. My folks, my older sisters, they were the Flying Fiorentinos, Aerialists Extraordinaire! Pop had big plans for me, being the first son. He had me training for the high wire while I was still in diapers.”

Tony ran his finger along the old scars on his arm. “When I was about fifteen, the circus got a new snake lady, Satanica. Twice my age, but open-minded. She was

a junkie. Wasn't long before I was hooked, too. You can handle snakes while you're in the haze. Hell, the snakes like it. But junk and the high wire don't mix that well. So, Pop got Satanica busted. I ran off that night to visit her in jail. Never got to see her. But I never went back to the circus."

Against the bright sky, the waves of heat from the roof shimmered and danced. Tony sighed.

"I hate my Pop. He never gave a damn about me. I was just part of his act. A *prop* or something."

He looked back at the stairs. Esmerelda sat in the doorway, her back to him. She had her face pressed against her knees, her arms locked tightly around her shins. He readied the needle. The star of the east blazed bright now, casting shadows. If his watch was right, and he'd taken a lot of care over the years to see that it was, and if the astronomers were right, and their track record through all this had been pretty good, there were nine minutes, forty seconds left.

"Three years ago, I got off the junk," he said, tying the thick rubber tube around his arm. "But I made sure I'd have one last dose. Because the best moments of my life were spent floating on junk, curled up in the arms of my snake woman. That's what I want to take with me. How 'bout you? How do you want to spend the rest of your life?"

Esmerelda spoke, her voice tense and angry. "At least you were born *before* they found the rogue star. My folks *knew*. And they brought me into the world anyway."

"Some people didn't believe," said Tony, closing his hand tightly around a wad of tissues, watching his veins rise. "And some people hoped for the best."

"They said *God* would take us away," she murmured. She wrapped her hair around her fists as she talked. She looked at him, her eyes flashing in sharp little slits. "I *tried*. I *can't* believe in God. How could *they*? How could *anyone*?"

"My Mom believed," said Tony, placing the needle against his skin. "Probably will to the last second. If she's even still alive."

"I *killed* mine," she said.

"What?" Tony moved the needle away from his arm.

"My parents. On my thirteenth birthday. I slit their throats as they slept. The night the comet hit the moon."

"Jesus."

"I *should* have killed *myself*."

Tony sighed, and opened his hand. "Come here."

She shook her head.

“I think you need this more than I do,” he said, holding the syringe toward her.

Her eyes fixed on it. She wiped her cheeks.

“It will help you,” he said. “You still have a few minutes left.”

She rolled to her knees, and crawled toward him, keeping her eyes fixed on the roof.

“Here,” he said, meeting her halfway, pushing up her sleeve.

He’d only used a needle on another person once before, long ago. But the skill came back easily enough. She gasped as he pushed the plunger in.

“Now breathe deep,” he said.

It worked quickly, like he remembered. He rolled her over onto his lap, and she opened her eyes to the dance of the comets. He watched her as she watched the sky, for the longest time. He dared not look at his watch. If he didn’t look at the watch, time would stand still. Eternities could be hidden between seconds. At last, she smiled.

“Mysteries,” she whispered. “And *wonders*.”

Tony lay back, lit a cigarette on the first try, and looked at the dark spaces between the comets. The black shapes curled like vast snakes. He recalled the boombox. He’d forgotten to play the music. But things don’t always go as planned. A lifetime of practice won’t keep the wire from snapping. When you fall, you relax, and let the net catch you.

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