

Four Fables

by Peter S. Beagle

My father introduced me early on to George Ade's *Fables in Slang*; later, I discovered James Thurber's two books of *Fables for Our Time* on my own, and quite loved them.

"The Fable of the Moth" was first published in the 1960s, in Al Young's legendary little magazine *Love*, and owes something to Don Marquis' tales of Archy and Mehitabel. The other three fables in this set were written specifically for this collection. They tend to suggest a dark—even cynical—view of the human condition, but then it has always seemed to me that fables and fabulists mostly do that. Aesop was lynched, after all, according to Herodotus.

The Fable of the Moth

Once there was a young moth who did not believe that the proper end for all mothkind was a zish and a frizzle. Whenever he saw a friend or a cousin or a total stranger rushing to a rendezvous with a menorah or a Coleman stove, he could feel a bit of his heart blacken and crumble. One evening, he called all the moths of the world together and preached to them. "Consider the sweetness of the world," he cried passionately. "Consider the moon, consider wet grass, consider company. Consider glove linings, camel's hair coats, fur stoles, feather boas, consider the heartbreaking, lost-innocence flavor of cashmere. Life is good, and love is all that matters. Why will we seek death, why do we truly hunger for nothing but the hateful hug of the candle, the bitter kiss of the filament? Accidents of the universe we may be, but we are beautiful accidents and we must not live as though we were ugly. The flame is a cheat, and love is the only."

All the other moths wept. They pressed around him by the billions, railing him a saint and vowing to change their lives. "What the world needs now is love," they cried as one bug. But then the lights began to come on all over the world, for it was nearing dinnertime. Fires were kindled, gas rings burned blue, electric coils glowed red, floodlights and searchlights and flashlights and porch lights barked and creaked and blazed their mystery. And as one bug, as though nothing had been said, every moth at that historic assembly flew off on their nightly quest for cremation. The air sang with their eagerness.

"Come back! Come back!" called the poor moth, feeling his whole heart sizzle up this time. "What have I been telling you? I said that this was no way to live, that you must keep yourselves for love—and you knew the truth when you heard it. Why do you continue to embrace death when you know the truth?"

An old gypsy moth, her beauty ruined by a lifetime of singeing her-self against nothing but arc lights at night games, paused by him for a moment.

"Sonny, we couldn't agree with you more," she said. "Love is all that matters, and all that other stuff is as shadow. But there's just some-thing about a good fire."

Moral: Everybody knows better. That's the problem, not the answer.

The Fable of the Tyrannosaurus Rex

Once upon a very long ago, in a hot and steamy jungle, on an Earth that was mostly hot and steamy jungle, there lived a youngish *Tyrannosaurus Rex*. (Actually, we should probably refer to her as a *Tyrannosaurus Regina*, since she was a female, but never mind.) Not quite fully grown, she measured almost forty feet from nose to tail tip, weighed more than six tons, and had teeth the size of bananas. Although no intellectual, she was of a generally good-humored disposition, accepting with equanimity the fact that being as huge as she was meant that she was always hungry, except in her sleep. This, fortunately, she had been constructed to deal with.

Thanks to her size this Tyrannosaurus was, without a doubt, the queen of her late-Cretaceous world, which, in addition to great predators like herself, included the pack-hunting *Velociraptor*, the three-horned *Triceratops*, the *Iguanodon*, with its horse/duck face, and the long-necked, whiptailed *Alamosaurus*. But the world was populated also by assorted smaller animals—*much* smaller, most of them—distinguished from one another, as far as she was concerned, largely by their degree of quickness and crunchiness, and the amount of fur that was likely to get caught between her fangs. In fact, she rarely bothered to pursue them, since it generally cost her more in effort than the caloric intake was worth. She did eat them now and then, as we snap up potato chips or M&Ms, but never considered them anything like a real meal, or even so much as *hors d'oeuvres*. It was just a reflex, something to do.

One afternoon, however, almost absent-mindedly, she pinned a tiny creature to earth under her left foot. It saved itself from being crushed only by wriggling frantically into the space between two of her toes, while simultaneously avoiding the rending claws in which they ended. As the Tyrannosaurus bent her head daintily to snatch it up, she heard a minus-cule cry, "Wait! Wait! I have a very important message for you!"

The Tyrannosaurus—an innocent in many ways—had never had a personal message in her life, and the notion was an exciting one. Her forearms were small and weak, compared to her immense hind legs, but she was able to grip the nondescript little animal and lift him fifteen feet up, where she held him nose to nose, his beady red-brown eyes meeting her huge yellow ones with their long slit pupils. "Be quick," she advised him, "for I am hungry, and where there's one of you, there's usually a whole lot, like zucchini. What was the message you wanted to give me?"

The creature, if somewhat slow of action, atoned for this failing by thinking far faster than any dinosaur. "A large asteroid is about to crash into the Earth," it chirped brightly back at the Tyrannosaurus. "So if you happen to be nursing any unacted desires, now would be the time. To act them out, I

mean," it added, realizing that the Tyrannosaurus was blink-ing in puzzlement at him. "It'll happen next Thursday."

"Asteroid," the Tyrannosaurus pondered. "What is an asteroid?" Before the little creature she held could answer, she asked, "Come to think of it, what's Thursday?"

"An asteroid is a rock," the animal informed her. "A big rock up in the sky, drifting through space. This one is about half the size of that mountain on the horizon, the one visible over the trees, and it's heading straight for us, and nothing can stop it. You and most other life on Earth are doomed."

"My goodness," said the Tyrannosaurus. "I'm certainly glad you told me about this." After a thoughtful moment, she inquired, "What does it all mean?"

"For you and most of your kind, absolute annihilation," the animal piped cheerfully. "For mine—evolution."

"I'm not very good with big words," the Tyrannosaurus said apologet-ically. "If you could..."

"You'll all be gone," the little creature said. "When the asteroid crashes into the Earth, it will raise a vast cloud of dust and debris that will circle the planet for years, cutting off all sunlight. You dinosaurs won't be able to survive the drastic change in the climate—you'll mostly vanish within a couple of generations. Then—just as when the fall of great trees makes room at last for the small ones struggling in their shadow—then we mammals will take our rightful place in the returning sun." Observing what it took to be a stricken expression on the Tyrannosaurus's yard-wide face, it added, "I'm really sorry. I just thought you should know."

"And your sort," the Tyrannosaurus ventured, "you will ... evolute?"

"*Evolve*," the creature corrected her. "That means to change over time into something quite different in size or shape, or in your very nature, from what you were originally. My friend Max, for instance—smaller than I am right now—Max is going to evolve into a horse, if you'll believe it. And Louise, who came out of the sea with the rest of us, in the beginning—Louise is planning to go back there and become a whale. A blue whale, I think she said. It'll take millions of years, of course, but she's never in a hurry, Louise. And me—" Here it preened itself as grandly as anyone possibly can in the grasp of a Tyrannosaurus Rex, fifteen feet in the air. "Me, I'm a sort of shrew or something right now, but I'm on my way to being a mammal with just two legs that will write books and fight wars, and won't believe in evolution. How cool is that?"

"And me?" the Tyrannosaurus asked, rather wistfully. "Everything will be changing—everyone will be turning into something else. Don't my relatives and I get to evolve at all?"

"You won't. But there's a bigger picture," the shrew reassured her. "It will take a good while, but some of your kind are going to fly, my dear. Those

of your descendants who survive will find their scales turn-ing gradually to feathers; their mighty jaws will in time become a highly adaptable beak, and they'll learn to build nests and sing songs. And hunt bugs."

"Well," said the Tyrannosaurus. "I can't say I follow all of this, but I guess it's better than being anni ... annihil ... what you said. But where does this Thursday come into it? What exactly is a Thursday?"

"Thursday—" began the shrew, but found itself at a disadvantage in trying to explain the arbitrary concept of days, weeks, months and years to a beast who understood nothing beyond sunrise and sunset, light and dark, sun and moon. He said finally, "Thursday will happen three sleeps from now."

"Oh, *three* sleeps!" the Tyrannosaurus cried in great relief. "You should have said—I thought it was *two*! Well, there's plenty of time, then," and she promptly gulped down the shrew in one bite.

Savory, she thought. Nice crunch, too. But then again, there's that hair. They'd be better without the hair.

Turning away, she caught the scent of a nearby triceratops on the wind, and was about to start in that new and tempting direction when she was hit squarely on the back of the neck by the asteroid, blazing from its descent through the atmosphere. As advertised, its impact killed her and wiped out most of the dinosaurs in a very short while, at least by geological standards. The shrew had simply miscalculated the asteroid's arrival time—which is hardly a surprise, as he didn't really have a good grasp on Thursdays, either.

*Moral: Gemini, Virgo, Aries or Taurus,
knowing our future tends to bore us,
just like that poor Tyrannosaurus.*

The Fable of the Ostrich

Once upon a time, in a remote corner of Africa, there was a young ostrich who refused to put his head in the sand at the slightest sign of danger. He strolled around unafraid, even when lions were near, cheer-fully mocking his parents, his relations, and all his friends, every one of whom believed absolutely that their only safety lay in blind immobility. "It makes you invisible, foolish boy!" his father was forever shouting at him in vain. "You can't see the lion—the lion can't see you! What part of Q..E.D. don't you understand?"

"But the lion *always* sees us!" the ostrich would retort, equally exas-perated. "What do you think happened to Uncle Julius? Cousin Hilda? Cousin Wilbraham? What good did hiding their stupid heads do them?"

"Oh," his father said. "Them. Well." He looked slightly embarrassed, which is hard for an ostrich. "Yes," he said. "Well, it's obvious, they moved. You mustn't *move*, not so much as a tail feather, that's half of it right there.

Head out of sight and hold still, it's foolproof. Do you think your mother and I would still be here if it weren't foolproof?"

"The only thing foolproof," the young ostrich replied disdainfully, "is the fact that we can outrun lions—if we see them in time, which we can't do with our heads in the sand. That, and the fact that we can kick a lion into another time zone—which we also can't do—"

"Enough!" His father swatted at him with a wing, but missed. "We are ostriches, not eagles, and we have a heritage to maintain. Head out of sight and hold still—that's our legacy to you, and one day you'll thank me for it. Go away now. You're upsetting your mother."

So the young ostrich went away, angry and unconvinced. He attempted to enlist others to his cause, but not one disciple joined him in challenging this first and deepest-rooted of ostrich traditions. "You may very well be right," his friends told him, "we wouldn't be a bit surprised to see you vindicated one day. But right now there's a big, hungry-looking lion prowling over there, and if you'll excuse us..."

And they would hurry off to shove their heads deep into the cool-est, softest patch of sand they could find, leaving their feathered rumps to cope with the consequences. Which suited lions well enough, on the whole, but deeply distressed the young ostrich. He continued doing everything he could to persuade other birds to change their behavior, but consistently met with such failure that he was cast down into utter despair.

It was then that he went to the Eldest Lion.

The pilgrimage across the wide savannas was a hard and perilous one, taking the young ostrich several days, even on his powerful naked legs. He would never have dared such a thing, of course, if the Eldest Lion had not long since grown toothless, mangy and cripplingly arthritic. His heavy claws were blunt and useless, more of his once-black mane fell out every time he shook his head, and he survived entirely on the loyalty of two lionesses who hunted for him, and who snarled away all challengers to his feeble rule. But he was known for a wisdom most lions rarely live long enough to achieve, and the young ostrich felt that his counsel was worth the risk of approaching him in his den. Being very young, he also felt quick enough on his feet to take the chance.

Standing within a conversational distance of the Eldest Lion's lair, he called to him politely, until the great, shaggy—and distinctly smelly—beast shambled to the cave entrance to demand, "What does my lunch want of me? I must ask you, of your kindness, lunch, to come just a little closer. My hearing is not what it was—alas, what is? A little closer, only."

The young ostrich replied courteously, without taking a further step, "I thank you for the invitation, mightiest of lords, but I am only a humble and rather unsightly fowl, unworthy even to set foot on your royal shadow. Sir, Eldest, I have come a far journey to ask you a single simple question, after which I promise to retire to the midden-heap my folk call home and presume no more upon your grace." His mother had always placed much

stress on the importance of manners.

The Eldest Lion squinted at him through cataract-fogged eyes, mum-bling to himself. "Talks nicely, for a lunch. Nobody speaks properly any-more." Raising his deep, ragged voice, he inquired, "I will grant your request, civilized lunch. What wisdom will you have of me?"

For a moment the words he had come such a distance to say stuck in the young ostrich's throat (it is not true that ostriches can swallow and digest anything); but then they came tumbling out of him in one frantic burst. "Can you lions see us when we bury our heads in the sand? Are we really invisible? Because I don't think we are."

It seemed to the young ostrich that the Eldest Lion—most likely due to senility—had not understood the question at all. He blinked and sneezed and snorted, and the ostrich thought he even drooled, just a tri-fle. Only after some time did the ostrich realize that the Eldest Lion was, after his fashion, laughing.

"Invisible?" the ancient feline rumbled. "*Invisible?* Your stupidity is a legend among my people. We tell each other ostrich jokes as we sprawl in the sun after a kill, drowsily blowing away the feathers. Even the tiniest cub—even an ancestor like myself, half-blind and three-quarters dead—even we marvel at the existence of a creature so idiotic as to believe that hiding its head could keep it safe. We regard you as the gods' gift to our own idiots, the ones who can't learn to hunt anything else, and would surely starve but for you."

His laughter turned into a fusillade of spluttering coughs, and the young ostrich began to move cautiously away, because a lion's cough does not always signify illness, no matter how old he is. But the Eldest Lion called him back, grunting, "Wait a bit, my good lunch, I enjoy chat-ting with you. It's certainly a change from trying to make conversation with people whose jaws are occupied chewing my food for me. If you have other questions for me—though I dare not hope that a second could possibly be as foolish as that first—then, by all means, ask away." He lay down heavily, with his paws crossed in front of him, so as to appear less threatening.

"I have only one further question, great lord," the young ostrich ventured, "but I ask it with all my heart. If you were an ostrich—" here he had to pause for a time, because the Eldest Lion had gone into an even more tumultuous coughing spasm, waving him silent until he could control himself. "Tell me, if you were an ostrich, how would you conceal yourself from such as yourself? Lions, leopards, packs of hyenas and wild dogs ... what would be your tactic?" He held his breath, waiting for the answer.

"It is extremely difficult for me to conceive of such an eventuality," the Eldest Lion replied grandly, "but one thing seems obvious, even to some-one at the very top of the food chain. To bury your head while continuing to expose your entire body strikes me as the height of absurdity—"

"Exactly what I've been telling them and telling them!" the young ostrich

broke in excitedly.

The Eldest Lion gave him a look no less imperious and menacing for being rheumy. "I ate the last person who interrupted me," he remarked to the air.

The ostrich apologized humbly, and the Eldest Lion continued, "As I was saying, the truly creative approach would be to reverse the policy, to keep the body hidden, leaving only the head visible—and thus, I might add, much better able to survey the situation." He paused for a moment, and then added thoughtfully, "I will confide to you, naive lunch, that we lions are not nearly as crafty as you plainly suppose. We are creatures of habit, of routine, as indeed are most animals. Faced with an ostrich head sticking out of the sand, any lion would blink, shake his own head, and seek a meal somewhere else. I can assure you of this."

"Bury the body, not the head! Yes ... yes ... oh, yes!" The young ostrich was actually dancing with delight, which is a rare thing to see, and even the Eldest Lion's wise, weary, wicked eyes widened at the sight. "Thank you, sir—sir, thank you! What a wonder, imagine—you, a lion, have changed the course of ostrich history!" About to race off, he hesitated briefly, saying, "Sir, I would gladly let you devour me, out of gratitude for this revelation, but then there would be no one to carry the word back to my people, and that would be unforgivable of me. I trust you understand my dilemma?"

"Yes, yes, oh, yes," the Eldest Lion replied in grumbling mimicry. "Go away now. I see my lionesses coming home, bringing me a much tastier meal than gristly shanks and dusty feathers. Go away, silly lunch."

The two lionesses were indeed returning, and the young ostrich evaded their interest, not by burying any part of himself in the sand or elsewhere, but by taking to his heels and striding away at his best speed. He ran nearly all the way home, so excited and exalted he was by the inspiration he carried. Nor did he stop to rest, once he arrived, but immediately began spreading the words of wisdom that he had received from the Eldest Lion. "The *body*, not the head! All these generations, and we've been doing it all wrong! It's the *body* we bury, not the head!" He became an evangel of the new strategy, traveling tirelessly to proclaim his message to any and every ostrich who would listen. "It's the *body*, not the head!"

Some time afterward, one of the Eldest Lion's lionesses, who had been away visiting family, reported noticing a number of ostriches who, upon sighting her, promptly dug themselves down into the sand until only their heads, perched atop mounds of earth, remained visible, gazing down at her out of round, solemn eyes. "You've never seen anything like it," she told him. "They looked like fuzzy cabbages with beaks."

The Eldest Lion stared at her, wide-eyed as one of the ostriches. "They bought it?" he growled in disbelief. "Oh, you're kidding. They really ... with their heads *really* sticking up? All of them?"

"Every one that *I* saw," the lioness replied. "I never laughed so much in my life."

"They bought it," the Eldest Lion repeated dazedly. "Well, I certainly hope you ate a couple at least, to teach them ... well, to teach them some-thing." He was seriously confused.

But the lioness shook her head. "I told you, I was laughing too hard even to think about eating." The Eldest Lion retired to the darkest corner of his cave and lay down. He said nothing further then, but the two lionesses heard him muttering in the night, over and over, "Who knew? Who knew?"

And from that day to this, unique to that region of Africa, all ostriches respond to peril by burying themselves instantly, leaving only their heads in view. No trick works every time; but considering that predators are almost invariably reduced to helpless, hysterical laughter at the ridiculous sight—lions have a tendency to ruptures, leopards to actual heart attacks—the record of survival is truly remarkable.

Moral: Stupidity always wins, as long as it's stupid enough.

The Fable of the Octopus

Once, deep down under the sea, down with the starfish and the sting rays and the conger eels, there lived an octopus who wanted to see God.

Octopi are among the most intelligent creatures in the sea, and shyly thoughtful as well, and this particular octopus spent a great deal of time in profound pondering and wondering. Often, curled on the deck of the sunken ship where he laired, he would allow perfectly edible prey to swim or scuttle by, while he silently questioned the *here* and the *now*, the *if* and the *then*, and—most especially—the *may* and the *might* and the *why*. Even among his family and friends, such rumination was considered somewhat excessive, but it was his way, and it suited him. He planned eventually to write a book of some sort, employing his own ink for the purpose. It was to be called *Concerns of a Cephalopod*, or possibly *Mollusc Meditations*.

Being as reflective as he was, the octopus had never envisioned God in his own image. He had met a number of his legendary giant cousins, and found them vulgar, insensitive sorts, totally—and perhaps understandably—preoccupied with nourishing their vast bodies; utterly uninterested in speculation or abstract thought. As for his many natural predators—the hammerhead and tiger shark, the barracuda, the orca, the sea lion, the moray eel—he dismissed them all in turn as equally shallow, equally lacking in the least suggestion of the celestial, however competent they might be at winkling his kind out of their rocky lairs and devouring them. The octopus was no romantic, but it seemed to him that God must of necessity have a deeper appreciation than this of the eternal mystery of everything, and surely other interests besides mating and lunch. The orca offered to debate the point with him, from a safe distance, before an invited audience, but the octopus was also not a fool.

For a while he did consider the possibility that the wandering albatross might conceivably be God. This was an easy notion for an octopus to

entertain, since he glimpsed the albatross only when he occasionally slithered ashore in the twilight, to hunt the small crabs that scurried over the sand at that hour. He would look up then—difficult for an octopus—and sometimes catch sight of the great white wings, still as the clouds through which they slanted down the darkening sky. "So alone," he would think then. "So splendid, and so alone. What other words would suit the nature of divinity?"

But even the beauty and majesty of the albatross could never quite satisfy the octopus's spiritual hunger. It seemed to him that something else was essential to fulfilling his vision of God, and yet he had no word, no image, for what it should be. In time this came to trouble him to the point where he hardly ate or slept, but only brooded in his shipwreck den, concerning himself with no other question. His eight muscular arms themselves took sides in the matter, for each had its own opinion, and they often quarreled and wrestled with each other, which he hardly noticed. When anxious relatives came to visit, he most often hid from them, changing color to match wood or stone or shadow, as octopi will do. They were strangers to him; he no longer recognized any of them anymore.

Then, as suddenly as he himself might once have pounced out of darkness to seize a flatfish or a whelk, a grand new thought took hold of him. What if the old fisherman—the white-bearded one who sometimes rowed out to poke around his ship with a rusty trident when low tide exposed its barnacled hull and splintered masts—what if *he* might perhaps be God? He was poorly clad, beyond doubt, and permanently dirty, but there was a certain dignity about him all the same, and a bright imagination in his salt-reddened eyes that even the orca's eyes somehow lacked. More, he moved as easily on the waters as on land, both by day and night, seemingly not bound to prescribed sleeping and feeding hours like all other creatures. What if, after all the octopus's weary time of searching and wondering, God should have been searching for *him*?

Like every sea creature, the octopus knew that any human being holding any sharp object is a danger to everyone within reach, never to be trusted with body or soul. Nevertheless, he was helpless before his own curiosity; and the next time the fisherman came prowling out with the dawn tide, the octopus could not keep from climbing warily from the ship's keel ... to the rudder ... then to the broken, dangling taffrail, and clinging there to watch the old man prying and scraping under the hull, filling the rough-sewn waterproof bag at his belt with muddy mussels and the occasional long-necked clam. He was muddy to the waist himself, and smelled bad, but he hummed and grunted cheerfully as he toiled, and the octopus stared at him in great awe.

At last it became impossible for the octopus to hold his yearning at bay any longer. Taking his courage in all eight arms, he crawled all the way up onto the deck, fully exposed to the astonished gaze of the old fisherman. Haltingly, but clearly, he asked aloud, "Are you God?"

The fisherman's expression changed very slowly, passing from hard, patient resignation through dawning disbelief on the way to a kind of worn radiance. "No, my friend," he responded finally. "I am not God, no more

than you. But I think you and I are equally part of God as we stand here," and he swept his arm wide to take in all the slow, dark shiver of the sea as it breathed under the blue and silver morning. "Surely we two are not merely surrounded by this divine splendor—we both belong to it, we are of it, now and for always. How else should it be?"

"The sea," the octopus said slowly. "The sea..."

"And the land," said the fisherman. "And the sky. And the firelights glit-tering beyond the sky. All things taken together form the whole, includ-ing things like an octopus and an old man, who play their tiny parts and wonder."

"My thoughts and questions were too small ... I have lived in God all my life, and never known. Is this truly what you tell me?"

"Just so," the old man beamed. "Just so."

The octopus was speechless with joy. He stretched forth a tentative tentacle, and the fisherman took firm hold of it in his own rough hand. As they stood together, both of them equally enraptured by their newfound accord, the octopus asked shyly, "Do you suppose that God is aware that we are here, within It—part of It?"

"I have no idea," the fisherman replied placidly. "What matters is that we know."

There was a rough thump as the boat tilted suddenly starboard and nose down, its gentle rocking halted. The sea lowered, falling away from the boat in a great rush, exposing faded paint and barnacles to the air. Shifting gravel and rock clawed at the hull and rudder. The octopus, automatically exerting his suckers against the deck, was unmoved, but the fisherman went tumbling, and above and below and around them the world itself seemed to open a great mouth and draw breath ever more steadily toward the west.

"And that?" the octopus inquired. He pointed with a second tentacle toward the naked expanse of ocean floor over which the tide had with-drawn almost to the horizon—surest sign of an approaching tsunami. "Is that also part of God, like us?"

"I am afraid so," replied the old fisherman, braced now against the slanting rail. "Along with typhoons, stinging jellyfish, my wife's parents and really bad oysters. In such a case, I regard it as no sin to head for the high ground. The shore is far, true, but I was fast on my feet as a young man and this life has kept me fit. I will live, and buy another boat, and fish again."

"I wish you well," said the octopus, "but I am afraid my own options are somewhat more constrained. For escape I require the freedom of the deep sea, which is now entirely out of reach. No. God's great shrug will be here soon enough. I will watch it come, and when it arrives I will give it both our greetings."

"You'll be killed," said the fisherman.

The octopus was hardly equipped to smile, but the fisherman could hear one in his voice all the same. "I shall still be with God."

"That particular form of deep metaphysical appreciation will come to you soon enough without the help of fatalism or fifty-foot waves," said the fisherman, pulling the half-filled canvas bag from his belt. "Besides, our conversation has just begun."

Quick as the eels he was so good at catching, the fisherman slid over the rail and dropped to the exposed seabed. Once there he knelt down and pulled the open canvas bag back and forth through the silty, cross-cut shallows, losing his catch, but harvesting a full crop of seawater.

"Well? Are you coming?" the fisherman shouted up to the octopus. He held out the brimming bag exactly like the promise it was. "Time and tide, my many-armed friend. Time and tide!"

In the years that followed—and these were many, for the fisherman and the octopus did survive the tsunami, just—these two unlikely philosophers spent a great deal of time together. The fisherman found in the octopus a companion who shared all his interests, including Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard (whom the octopus found "a trifle nervous"), current events both above and below the water, and favorite kinds of fish. The octopus, in turn, learned more than he had ever imagined learning about the worlds of space and thought, and in time he even wrote his book. After suffering rejections from all the major publishing houses, it finally caught the attention of an editor at a Midwestern university press. That worthy, favoring the poetic over the literal, tacked *Eight Arms to Hold You* above the manuscript's original title—*Octopoidal Observations*—advertised the book as allegory, and watched it enjoy two and a half years on the New Age bestseller lists. Every three months he dutifully sent a royalty check and a forwarded packet of fan letters to a certain coastal post office box; and if the checks were never cashed, well, what business was it of his? Authors were eccentric—no one knew that better than he, as he said often.

The octopus's book found no underwater readership, of course, since in the ocean, just as on land, reviewers tend to be sharks. But the one-sidedness and anonymity of his fame never troubled him. When not visiting the fisherman, he was content to nibble on passing hermit crabs and drowse among the rocks in a favorite tide pool (his own sunken hulk having been smashed to as many flinders as the fisherman's old boat), thinking deeply, storing up questions and debating points to spring on his patient and honorable friend.

And he never asked if anyone or anything was God, not ever again. He didn't have to.

Moral: The best answer to any question? It's always a surprise.

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