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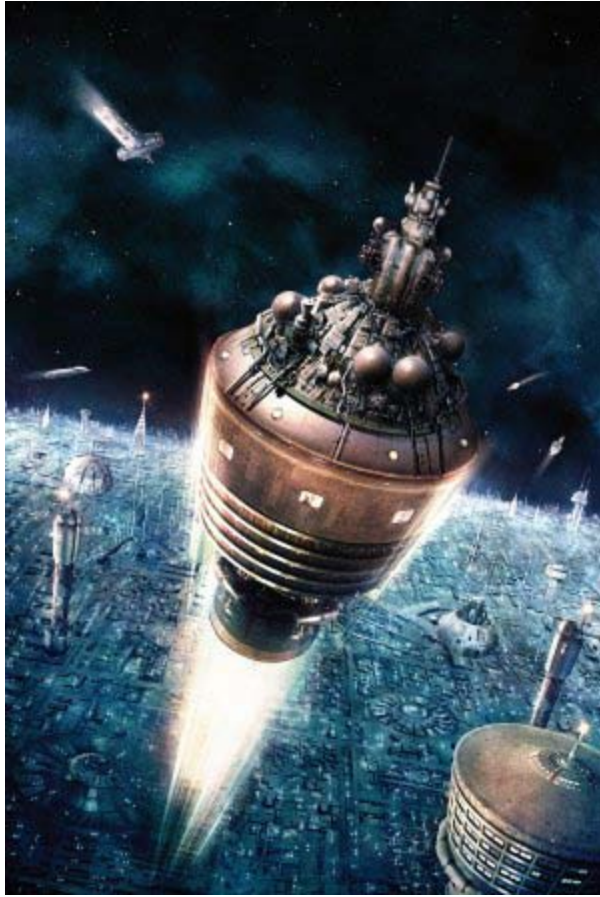
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Tabloid Reporter to the Stars

by Eric James Stone



Artwork by Tomislav Tikulin

When I was fired after ten years as a science reporter for the *New York Times*, the editor told me I'd never get a job with a decent paper again. He was right, at first: no one wanted to hire a reporter who had taken bribes to write a series of articles about a non-existent technology in order to inflate the value of a company being used in a stock swindle -- even if I had managed to get off without serving time.

And that's the only reason I took the job with the *Midnight Observer* tabloid. They didn't care that I'd made up a news story -- they were impressed that I'd managed to write something that had fooled experts for over a year. So began my new career under the pseudonym of Dr. Lance Jorgensen. The doctorate was phony, of course, and I never did decide what it was in. I worked that gig for three years before I caught the break that let me get back into real journalism.

When the United Nations Space Agency decided to hold a lottery to choose a reporter to travel on board the first interstellar ship, they set strict qualifications: a college degree in journalism, at least five years of experience as a science reporter, and current employment with a periodical or news show with circulation or viewership of at least one million.

Technically, I qualified. So I entered. And a random number generator on an UNSA computer picked my number.

Less than five minutes after UNSA announced the crew of the *Starfarer I*, including yours truly as the only journalist, the calls began. The first was from my old editor at the *Times*. He wanted me back on an exclusive basis -- I could name my own price. I'll admit I was bitter: I told him my price was full ownership of the paper, and that I'd fire him as soon as I had it. He sputtered; I hung up.

By the end of that week, I had a TV deal with CNN and a print/web deal with the *Washington Post*. And so, without a gram of regret, Dr. Lance Jorgensen gave the *Midnight Observer* his two weeks' notice. I was once again Lawrence Jensen, science reporter.

A lot of journalists squawked that I didn't deserve to be on the mission because of my scrape with the law, even if I had managed to avoid a conviction by turning state's evidence. But the rules were on my side for a change: my degree from the Columbia School of Journalism, my experience at the *Times*, and the *Midnight Observer's* seven-million-plus circulation fit the letter, if not the spirit, of the rules. Despite their fervent wishes, I made it through spaceflight training without a hitch, and proudly boarded the *Starfarer* as the world looked on.

This mission was my chance for redemption. I'd made one big mistake, and I planned to make up for it with accurate, well-written science reporting that made the wonders of space travel understandable to everyone. I had loved science since I was a kid; if I'd had the brains to do the math I might have chosen a career as a scientist instead of a reporter. Reporting this mission was my dream job, and I was determined not to mess things up.

The day we launched, the *Midnight Observer* ran a cover story claiming that I had been selected for this mission because while working undercover for them I had already met the aliens the *Starfarer* would encounter, and they had requested that I serve as Earth's ambassador. They had even 'shopped a picture of me shaking hands with a stereotypical short, gray, bald, bulge-headed alien.

During all two hundred and twenty-three days of hyperspace travel, my crewmates refused to let me live that down.

Fortunately, when we found the aliens, they didn't look anything like that picture.

* * *

The theory behind hyperspace travel involves several dimensions beyond the usual four we humans can perceive. The mathematical formulas involved in actually making a hyperspace drive work surpass the understanding of the unenhanced human brain. But what the formulas and the theory don't mention is that traveling by hyperspace is beautiful. The harsh radiation that fills the hyperspatial void becomes a kaleidoscope of infinite variety as it washes upon our magnetic shields.

* * *

Observations from Hubble III had indicated the possibility of a planet with an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere in this system, and now that we had arrived, our on-board telescopes had confirmed that the fourth planet had such an atmosphere. I had just finished my third column for this week's homelink, explaining about non-equilibrium gasses and why this meant there was life of some sort on the planet, when Singh began pounding on my cabin door.

"Hey, Ambassador, you in there?"

I didn't dignify that by responding.

"Come on, Jensen, open up. I've got a scoop for you."

Narinder Singh was one of *Starfarer's* xenobiologists, and until we actually got down on the ground, he didn't have much to do except make guesses based on the limited data our telescopes could gather. So it was unlikely that he had anything important. Besides, since I was the only reporter on board, there wasn't anyone who could scoop me. But I said, "Come in," anyway.

He opened the hatch and came in. "Look at these." He shoved a handful of eight-by-ten photos in front of my face.

I took the photos and began leafing through them. They showed a thin sunlit crescent of planet, which I assumed to be Aurora, the planet with the good atmosphere. "So, it's nighttime on half the planet. Excuse me while I call my editor and tell him to stop the presses."

"No, look closer at the nighttime side. Over here." He pointed to a region along the equator near the edge of the darkness.

Peering at the photo, I noticed that there were a dozen or so little clumps of bright spots. "You think these are the lights of cities?"

"Yes. There's a civilization on that planet. And I want you to remember I came to you with this discovery first."

I looked over at the column I had just finished. I could rewrite a bit to mention Singh's speculations, with plenty of caveats. But it still seemed a little too flimsy -- and the whole situation with the *Midnight Observer* story made me leery of anything involving aliens. "Yeah, I'll remember, if it turns out to be anything. It's probably volcanoes or forest fires or something. Did you run this by Khadil?" Iqrit Khadil was our geologist. "I mean, if it's really a civilization down there, how come there's no radio traffic?"

"Maybe they haven't developed radio yet. Or maybe they've moved beyond it. But I'm telling you, this is it: a sentient species with at least rudimentary civilization."

"Look, if you can get Khadil to agree that those are not volcanoes or any other geological phenomenon within the next half hour, I'll put your speculations in today's column. Otherwise, you'll have to wait till next week, which might be better, anyway, since by then there might be more evidence one way or the other."

He grabbed the photos back. "I know what I know. I'll talk to Khadil."

* * *

Now that the Starfarer is out of hyperspace, normal radio transmissions would take over one hundred and thirty years to travel to Earth, making direct two-way communication impossible. So the Starfarer's designers came up with a solution. When we arrived in this solar system, our ship split into two modules. The Hyperspace Module (HM) and two members of the crew remain in the outer system, where they can make the jump to hyperspace, while the Orbital Module (OM) heads in toward the planets with the rest of the crew. We send all our data -- including this column -- to the HM.

It takes six days for the nuclear reactor on the HM to store enough power in the capacitors for the jump to hyperspace. So once a week, they make the jump and send a radio signal to a ship in hyperspace near Earth. Instead of one hundred and thirty years, the signal only takes eighteen hours to travel to Earth. The receiving ship then returns to normal space and transmits the data to UNSA headquarters on Earth, which sends my columns to the Washington Post, who deliver it to your doorstep.

* * *

By the time the OM reached planetary orbit five days later, all the evidence pointed to a developing civilization on Aurora, so I decided it was a good thing I'd included Singh's speculations in my column. We didn't know what the reaction from Earth was yet -- the HM was still charging its capacitors for its weekly jump into hyperspace to transmit our reports and download communications from home. But first contact with an alien species, which had always been considered only a slight possibility, transformed our mission from one of simple exploration into something far greater. I'd already written and rewritten and disregarded several columns about the meaning of all this. It was probably the biggest news story ever; I was writing history, and I wanted to get the words right.

I wasn't the only one. Commander Inez Gutierrez de la Peña, who was in overall command of our mission, commended me in my quarters in the middle of the night. The next morning most of the crew would be taking the Landing Module down to an isolated island in the middle of Aurora's larger ocean, and she would take the first human step on a planet outside our solar system. She wanted my opinion on what she would say upon taking that step.

I was flattered, but feigned irritation out of habit. "It's two in the morning. How'd you know I wasn't sleeping?"

"I checked the power consumption in your quarters and could tell the lights and your computer were on." UNSA hadn't picked Gutierrez by lottery; she knew this ship six ways from zero.

"OK. Tell me what you've got so far."

She hesitated a moment. "It's no 'One small step,' but . . . 'Humanity has always been a race of explorers. Though in the past we have not always lived up to our aspirations, letting fear and exploitation rule our encounters with the unknown, today on this new world we have a chance --"

"Blah blah blah. Are you looking to write a pamphlet on social responsibility or do you want to say something that will still be quoted a thousand years from now?"

"I was thinking that putting the event in its historical context --"

"Leave that to the historians and people like me. What you need is a sound bite. Short. To the point, yet something that recalls the dreams of our first ancestors who looked up at the stars and wondered what lay beyond them."

On my com screen, her face nodded. "I see what you mean. You going to be up a while longer?"

"Yeah. Call me when you come up with something."

I may not have sounded very respectful, but Commander Gutierrez had my respect. Not only was she almost irritatingly competent at her job, but out of the thirty-seven other members of the crew, she was the only one who had never called me "Ambassador."

It took her six more tries over the next three hours before I thought she had it about right.

The next morning, precisely on schedule, she climbed down the ladder outside the LM's airlock. We could hear her steady breathing over her spacesuit's com system. When she reached the bottom and took that first step onto Aurora's soil, her voice came in loud and clear.

"Today humanity walks among the stars. Where will we walk tomorrow?"

As those of us on board the LM clapped and cheered, I felt twin twinges of pride and jealousy. Every word I had ever written would be long forgotten, and still those words would be remembered. They were not mine, but at least I had helped shape them.

I took my little shares of immortality wherever I could.

* * *

Like the generation who as children saw the Wright Brothers fly and as adults saw man walk on the moon, or those who watched the latter as children and lived to see the first colony on Mars, we are witnesses to the dawn of a new age of humanity. Who knows how far we will go, following the footsteps of Commander Gutierrez?

* * *

Our landing spot's isolation allowed the biologists to analyze the native life with the least risk of contaminating the planetary biosphere. Seven days after landing, I got a chance to take a five-minute walk around the island. Aurora's light gravity -- seventy-eight percent of Earth's -- gave a spring to my step despite the weight of the spacesuit.

I daydreamed of spotting something significant during my walk, a scientific discovery of my own that I could reveal to a waiting world, but in the end all that I had discovered for myself was the sensation of walking beneath an aquamarine sky and looking up at a sun that seemed too blue and too small.

As far as important discoveries went, I had to settle for the daily breakthroughs of the biologists. The biggest one was the fact that life on Aurora was not based on DNA, but rather on a previously unknown nucleic acid molecule with a hexagonal cross-section. A few days later came the finding that the protein building-blocks of Auroran life consisted of twenty-two amino acids instead of just twenty.

Exciting and heady information though these details might be for the fraction of Earth's population who were molecular biologists, I needed a subject that would grab the average reader's attention. That meant either danger or sex or both -- suitably phrased for the *Washington Post*, of course. I abandoned my half-written amino acid column and went down to the biolab to wheedle something worth writing about out of the biologists.

Singh was in the middle of something delicate and didn't have time to talk, but RachelZalberg said she could spare a few minutes while she waited for some test results.

About three months into the hyperspace flight, I'd made a pass at Rachel. She'd shot me down in no uncertain terms. Asking her about alien sex was definitely not the right place to start, so I focused on danger. "Since life here on Aurora is so different, how likely is it that there is some sort of disease organism that our immune system can't handle?"

She waved a hand dismissively. "Most disease organisms have trouble crossing the species barrier. Genetically, you're closer to an elm tree than to anything here, and you don't have to worry about Dutch elm disease. Our biochemistry is so different, the Auroran equivalents of bacteria and viruses wouldn't be able to reproduce inside us, assuming they even managed to survive at all."

That ruled out the danger angle, but since she'd brought up the subject of reproduction . . . "How do the animals here reproduce?"

She surprised me by grinning. "You will not believe how different it is. It's very exciting. I haven't had a chance to write this up yet, but I will before the next homelink. Just be sure to credit me with the discovery when you talk about it in your column."

"Of course." I leaned forward.

"Our initial examination showed that all the life here is asexual: There are no divisions between male and female."

"I know what asexual means." It meant *biologist* exciting, not *reader* exciting.

"We are isolated here, so it may not hold true for the whole planet, but for now it's all we have. Some of the life here reproduces by budding, essentially splitting off a little clone of itself. However, that doesn't account for the genetic diversity we've seen within species. And then we caught some of our lab specimens being naughty."

"Naughty? I thought they didn't have sex."

"Not exactly. One of our furry slugs -- we haven't come up with a scientific name for it, yet -- ate another one. Swallowed it whole."

"Cannibalism?" Maybe there was something here after all.

"Reproduction. After a few hours, that slug's skin hardened into a sort of cocoon. Two days later the cocoon cracked, and out came four smaller furry slugs. And each of the four is genetically different, with two-thirds of the genetic material from one slug, one-third from the other. Two slugs died and four were born."

It was good enough for one of those more-things-in-heaven-and-earth-than-are-dreamt-of-in-your-philosophy columns. I even got some footage of the new furry slugs for my CNN commentary.

I had the biologists to thank for the other highlight of that week. Coupled with the chemists' analysis of the atmosphere which showed there were no threatening toxins, the biologists' report that there was no significant disease threat meant we were authorized to go outside without spacesuits, and breathe fresh air for the first time since we'd left Earth almost nine months before.

I jumped at the chance to be one of the first group to breathe the unfiltered air of another planet. The airlock door hissed open. I took a deep breath, and gagged on an aroma reminiscent of wet dirty socks.

That footage did not make it into my CNN commentary.

* * *

Opponents of contact with the Auroran civilization point to the tragic experiences of indigenous societies on Earth after contact with more technologically advanced societies. Indeed, the histories of Native American tribes, Australian aborigines, Native Siberians and many others prove that such contact can be disastrous. But isn't the whole point of learning from history the idea that we can do better? If humanity could not progress, if we were forever destined to remain the same barbaric species that came out of the caves, then we would not even be debating this issue: we would be out conquering the Aurorans to use them as slave labor. Yes, our past demands that we proceed with caution, but our future demands that we proceed.

Perhaps the approval from UNSA would have come anyway, although I like to think my columns in favor of contact with the Aurorans had some effect. Our supplies limited us to only six months on the planet before we would have to begin the return journey to Earth, but we would be able to spend the last two of those months near an Auroran city.

We had refilled our fuel tanks by using electricity from our nuclear power plant to derive hydrogen and oxygen from seawater, and we would need to do so again before leaving, so we selected a coastal city as our destination and began our suborbital flight toward first contact.

"How you think they look?" asked Gianni Cacciatore, our climatologist, a few minutes after we launched. "If they are gray humanoids with bulging heads, they greet you as an old friend, *ehi, paesano?*"

There was Italian ancestry on my mother's side, so he'd taken to calling me *paesano*, countryman. At least it was better than Ambassador. I couldn't avoid talking to him, since we were strapped into seats next to each other for the duration of the flight. "Look, that Ambassador thing is getting about as old as someone asking you to go do something about the weather instead of just talking about it."

He thought a moment, then laughed. "*Buffo*. But what you think? I want to say, you are the only that knows something of the research of everyone. You have the grand picture."

It was a good question, actually. Our only pictures of the Auroran cities came from the Orbital Module, and its orbit was too high up to show individual Aurorans as anything more than a few pixels. In order to avoid any possible contamination, our initial landing site had intentionally been far from any sign of Auroran civilization. So none of us knew what an actual Auroran looked like. I'd discussed the issue with the biologists but hadn't written it up because it was pure speculation.

"Well, based on the animals we've discovered so far, the Aurorans are probably bilaterally symmetrical, although it could be quadrilateral. Since they have a civilization, they must be tool users, which means they must have something like our arms and hands, though it could be tentacles with claws for all we really know. They must have a way of getting around, so legs are probable, but we can't really know how many. Or maybe they move like snakes or snails." I sighed. "What I'm basically trying to say is that there are so many possibilities that we haven't got a really good idea of what they will look like, but they probably will not look as much like us as the stupid fake alien in that photo does."

He nodded. "*Interessante*."

I shifted the conversation to some of the unusual things he had discovered about Aurora's climate and thus kept myself occupied until our pilot, Zhao Xia, announced that we should prepare for a jolt when she activated the engines to slow us for landing.

The LM's cabin was mostly silent as we watched the ground grow ever closer on our screens. When we touched down, there was some clapping and cheering, though not as much as there had been the first time we landed.

Commander Gutierrez's firm voice came over the intercom. "I'm sure the Aurorans nearby must have seen us coming, and some of them will probably arrive soon. Those who were chosen for the first contact party please prepare to exit the ship."

I had demanded to be included in the party, and Gutierrez had refused. Although it seemed unlikely, there was no way to be sure the Aurorans would not react with xenophobic violence, so she had decided to send only two people: Singh, because of his xenobiological expertise, and Tinochika Murerwa, because prior to becoming an astrophysicist he had seen combat while serving in the U.N. Special Forces.

My arguments in favor of freedom of the press did not persuade her, but I made enough of a fuss that her superiors on Earth had ordered her to include me. I don't know why they overrode her; I suspect the real reason had nothing to do with freedom of the press and everything to do with the fact that the United States shouldered forty percent of the cost of this mission, and U.S. politicians wanted an American involved in the biggest news to come out of it. It didn't matter why -- I was in.

Singh, Murerwa and I gathered our equipment and entered the airlock. As the pressure equalized, I said, "Good luck, Singh," because he was the one in command of our little party.

"Thanks."

We climbed down the ladder and started preparing for our hosts to arrive and greet their unexpected visitors.

Murerwa looked over his shoulder at the videocam I was setting up on a tripod. He let out a deep bass laugh. "Planning to get a picture of yourself shaking hands with a real alien?"

"Yes." Somehow I felt that getting a real picture would be my compensation for all the grief I'd taken over the fake one.

After a very long five minutes, something came over a small ridge east of us. As it got closer, I began to make out details of its physiology. It looked like a scaly brown headless camel with four tentacles instead of a neck. As it got closer, I could see a wide opening between the top and bottom pairs of tentacles that I presumed to be its mouth.

It stopped about ten meters away from us. It wasn't very large; although it certainly weighed more than me, the hump on its back only came up to about the middle of my chest. As if responding to that thought, the hump rose a few inches on a thick stalk, and the creature seemed to stare at us out of two glossy blue-black openings on the front of the hump.

Singh said something in Hindi that I didn't understand.

"Is it one of the Aurorans or just an animal?" I asked.

"I think it's sentient. It's wearing something like a tool-belt around one of its forelegs."

Now that he pointed it out, I saw the belt, which appeared to be made of a thick woven fabric. And one of the tools was undoubtedly a hammer, even if I wasn't sure what the rest were.

We stared at him while he stared at us. Now we knew what an Auroran looked like.

Or rather, we thought we did until more creatures began coming over the hill. Some came on four legs, some on two. I was fairly sure I saw one with eight. Some had tentacles; others had jointed arms with hand-like appendages. All had scaly skins, but some had patches of fur that appeared to be part of their bodies, not clothing, and all had heads similar to the hump on the first one, though it didn't seem to be in the same place on the different anatomies. Some were bilaterally symmetrical, but some were not -- I spotted one that had anemone-like tendrils on one side and a crab-like pincer on the other. And of the fifty or more arrivals, there didn't appear to be more than a handful that looked like they belonged to the same species.

As the crowd grew, they began singing to each other. At least that's what it sounded like to me; wordless tunes that harmonized rather than creating a cacophony.

Then one of them said some words, and the others silenced almost immediately.

"Did you catch what he said?" asked Singh.

"Sounded like 'Alla Beeth' to me," I answered.

A voice in the crowd repeated it, and suddenly all of them were chanting, "Alla Beeth."

They didn't stop chanting until the soldiers showed up. Their civilization might be very different from ours, but a sword still looks like a sword, even if it is strapped to the waist of a tentacled reptilian centaur.

The soldiers sang to the crowd, and the crowd quieted down, parting in the middle to allow the half-dozen soldiers through.

Their leader trotted forward through the buffer zone the crowd had left around us, and stopped about two meters away. His wide, expressionless eyes looked at each of the three of us in turn. Then he edged sideways until he was standing in front of me. Slowly he drew his sword.

I bravely stood my ground to show the aliens that humans were not intimidated. Or else I was frightened into immobility. Either way, the result was the same.

The leader bent one of his forelegs and sort of knelt on one knee. He placed his sword on the ground, looked at me, and said, "Alla Beeth."

The crowd took up the chant once more.

Murerwa laughed again. "Looks like you've been chosen as the first ambassador to Aurora."

* * *

The failure to include a linguistics expert on this mission is not as unreasonable as critics of UNSA are claiming. The evidence showed a high likelihood of a planet with an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, but before the Starfarer arrived there was not a scintilla of evidence for a sentient, civilized lifeform in this system. Earth has had an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere for perhaps 1.5 billion years. The chances that an alien ship visiting Earth during that time would have had found humans are only a third of one percent. The chances it would find us civilized are less than half a thousandth of a percent.

* * *

Iqrit Khadil was the first to bring up religion. During a lull in mess hall conversation as the crew ate dinner the night of first contact, he said, "I do not think it can be merely coincidence that one of the two words we have heard these aliens speak is Allah."

"You can't be serious!" Rachel said.

"Why not? These primitives obviously seemed to think Jensen was a god, or a messenger sent by a god. And though they seem to communicate among themselves by singing, they knew to speak words to us. And one of those words was Allah."

Rachel's knuckles tightened around her fork. "All right, O wise one, then what does 'Beeth' mean?"

Khadil shrugged. "Maybe it means messenger. 'Allah Beeth,' messenger of Allah."

I almost said that if I was anyone's messenger, I was the *Washington Post's*, but several people began talking at once.

Rachel pounded the table with her fist until everyone turned to look at her. "First of all, we don't know how the words are divided, or even that it's more than one word, or even that it's a word at all. Maybe the first word is *Al*, but they're really just mispronouncing *El*, and so they're actually referring to the God of the Jews, not the God of Islam." She raised her voice over the beginnings of objections. "But coincidence is the most likely explanation. If we are going to speculate based on the idea that they spoke to us because they have seen humans before -- which I find hard to believe -- then there are other reasonable explanations. For example, they were trying to say the first two letters of the alphabet. Everyone here is familiar with the first two letters of the Greek alphabet: alpha, beta. In Hebrew, they are *aleph, bet*." She turned to Khadil. "What are they in Arabic?"

"*Alif, ba*." He nodded. "I spoke too soon. I was just excited to hear what sounded like 'Allah.' But it is most likely a coincidence."

During the rest of dinner I thought about what Khadil and Rachel had said. Coincidence. The possible meaning of the words didn't really matter to me. But if the Aurorans communicated through song, why did they have words to use with us? And why only two words?

I tried to avoid wondering why their leader had chosen me to bow to, but I wasn't very successful.

* * *

Imagine if eating an octopus in a certain way would allow you to grow tentacles on your body. Or if by eating a horse, you could replace your two human legs with four horse legs. According to Singh and Zalcberg's observations of our newfound friends, that is essentially what the Aurorans can do: manipulate their own bodies by absorbing an animal and using its genetic code to recreate some aspect of that animal's body. The wide variety of body shapes and parts among the Aurorans comes from deliberate change, not from their inherited genes.

* * *

Within a few days, the Aurorans remedied our failure to bring a linguistics expert by providing one of their own. His name was a short trill that most of us could not reproduce, so someone called him Mozart. I pointed out that, given "Beeth" was one of the two words he knew, Beethoven might have been more appropriate, but by then the name had already stuck.

Biologically speaking, Mozart was neither a he nor a she, but none of us really felt comfortable calling it "it." Since the real Mozart had been a he, we defaulted to that usage for the most part.

Through trial and error, we determined that the Auroran vocal apparatus simply was incapable of making most of the sounds of human languages. Fortunately, Mozart had brought rough sheets of a paper-like substance, inks of various colors, and a collection of clay stamps that could be used to imprint various symbols on the paper. While a few of the simpler symbols bore a resemblance to letters in various Earth alphabets -- X, O, I, T, Δ, Λ, Γ -- there did not appear to be any connection between them and their Earthly sounds, so Rachel's *aleph-bet* explanation for "Alla Beeth" was a dead end.

Since Mozart understood the concept of written symbols representing ideas, once he got over his astonishment at the interaction between a computer keyboard and monitor, we were able to teach him to use his tentacles to type. We would communicate back by typing and saying words at the same time, so he could learn to associate the text of a word with its sound.

Whoever had decided to send Mozart to communicate with us had made a good choice. After only four days, he had learned enough English to carry on simple conversations, so during my shift for teaching him, I asked him the question that had been bothering me. "Why did your leader bow to me?"

<What is my leader?>

"One of your people with swords. The most important one."

<Commander Gutierrez is your leader?>

"Yes."

<What is bow?>

I demonstrated a bow.

<Not my leader. Leader close people. I is far.>

The nearest town, which someone had imaginatively dubbed Neartown, was not the place Mozart was from. That was new information, and I felt a little pleased with myself for discovering it. Still, I pressed on to find out more about what was bothering me. "Why did the leader of the close people bow to me?"

<He think you is How do you spell?> He stopped typing and said, "Alla Beeth."

I typed it out for him.

<He think you is Alla Beeth.>

"You do not think I am Alla Beeth?"

<No. You look like but not same.>

"Who is Alla Beeth?"

Mozart whistled a staccato tune. <You not know Alla Beeth?>

I thought fast. If Alla Beeth was some sort of deity and I denied knowledge of it, I wasn't sure what sort of complications that would cause. "Our language is so different from yours that our name for Alla Beeth may be different too." I hoped that wasn't some sort of heresy.

<Alla Beeth is first of your people to visit our people.>

I felt the tremble in my stomach that I get when I realize I'm on the verge of a major story. "When did Alla Beeth visit your people?"

<Is fifty years more.>

Fifty years. Their planet's year was more than two Earth years long, so he was claiming a human had visited Aurora over a hundred years ago, back before we'd even walked on Mars.

"Wait a minute." Even though this was being recorded, I wanted someone else with me before I proceeded any further. I commed Commander Gutierrez and asked her to come join us.

After reading the transcript of our conversation to that point, she asked, "Is this a joke?"

"If it is, someone's setting me up. I swear I had no idea he was going to say this."

She nodded, then turned to Mozart. "Did someone tell you to say that Alla Beeth was human?"

<I not know Alla Beeth is human before I see humans. Then I know. No one tell me.>

Gutierrez typed and spoke slowly. "Mozart, we are the first humans to visit your people."

Mozart let out a long, descending note, and began typing furiously. <No. Alla Beeth is first. Is long time. Six my mergings but I remember. He come sky. He clothes all white. He like bright. He talk our language but we slow understand. He here small time. He go sky. Fifty years more you come.>

Gutierrez and I looked at each other.

<You not believe Alla Beeth? How not believe Alla Beeth?>

I looked into Mozart's shiny black eyes. "I believe you, Mozart." He believed that this Alla Beeth had visited his world, and even if I couldn't believe it was a human, I was sure that something must have visited the Aurorans.

* * *

Merging requires much more commitment than human mating, because neither of the Aurorans involved will survive. The larger of the two Aurorans swallows the other whole to begin the reproductive process, then hardens its skin into a thick shell. After about eighty days of cocoon-like existence, four small Aurorans break out of the shell to begin their lives. But their minds are not blank slates. In addition to a genetic heritage from both adults, each new Auroran carries a portion of the memories from the brains of its parents. Some Aurorans can remember events from over a thousand years ago.

* * *

This time it was Cacciatore who brought up religion, breaking the stunned silence after Commander Gutierrez and I had shown the rest of the crew the recordings of our conversation with Mozart. "If nobody else say it, I will. Technology could not have brought a human here before us. Only the power of God."

The racial and religious proportionality requirements during the crew selection process had been intended to represent all of Earth in our tiny ship. Not surprisingly, the scientific community had undergone a small religious revival when those requirements were announced. So, no matter how recently converted, we had a good cross-section of religious belief on board.

Some of the Christians in the crew backed Cacciatore's theory that the visitor had been an angel; others thought it had been Jesus himself. A few of the Muslims could accept the idea of an angel, but insisted that Allah must have sent the angel. The rest of the Muslims supported Khadil, who insisted that the visitor must have been Mohammed. The Hindus spoke of the possibility that it had been one of the avatars of Vishnu. Rachel, as the only Jew on board, was arguing against all sides at once, while admitting the barest possibility that the visitor was an angel.

Commander Gutierrez mostly succeeded in remaining above the fray. The atheists and agnostics stayed out of it, as did the Buddhists.

As for me? From when I was four years old until I was eighteen, I alternated weekends between my mom and my dad. Sundays with my mom meant going to church; Sundays with my dad meant watching TV on the couch or playing catch in the yard while listening to his old-time music collection. By the time I was fourteen, I pretty much felt that I took after my dad more than my mom, at least as far as preferred Sunday activities went, and my mom eventually quit asking me to go with her.

So I stuck with the atheists and agnostics in trying to ignore the potential religious aspect of Alla Beeth.

Nothing was settled that night, of course. But the hard feelings engendered by the argument disrupted the work the various scientific teams had been doing. Over the next few days as I tried interviewing different scientists about their work, I could see that the crew had fractured: whenever possible, they avoided their colleagues who were on the "wrong" side.

Mozart didn't help in resolving the dispute. In fact, when he revealed that he could not show us a picture of Alla Beeth because the Creator had commanded against making images of living things, the arguments erupted with new fervor.

* * *

There are several possible rational scientific explanations for the Aurorans' visitor, none of which involve the intervention of any god or other supernatural entity. Since the Aurorans have no pictures of the visitor and are relying on memories passed through several generations of mergings, it is possible that some significant details have become distorted, and a natural event has been imbued with mystical significance. Our descent from the sky was then connected to memories of that event. Another possibility is that the visitor was from another alien race, one which is humanoid in appearance. Under the theory of convergent evolution, it is quite possible that an intelligent, tool-using species could look superficially like us -- even some of the Aurorans walk on two legs, have two arms, and have a head with two forward-facing eyes. Perhaps we will encounter such a race in a few years and be able to resolve this mystery. Until we have actual evidence, though, nothing about "Alla Beeth" can be said with any certainty.

* * *

"He trusts you more than any of the rest of us." Commander Gutierrez sat on my bed, facing me in my chair. Her voice was tired.

"Maybe so, but he believes Alla Beeth was a human, and I don't think I can change his mind."

"There has got to be more evidence than these memories and traditions. Some artifact left behind. Something. The crew is splitting apart: I spend all day ordering people to share their data with each other. Some of them have actually gotten physical. I'm sure part of it is just the stress of the mission, but this mystery has pushed us to the breaking point. We need proof that this is something explainable by the laws of science, like you said in your column. Then, I think people will calm down."

I shrugged. "What can I do? I'm just a science reporter, not a scientist."

"Mozart and his people see you as our ambassador." She gave a half-laugh, half-sigh. "I've been careful never to call you that, you know. But I didn't try to put a stop to it, either. Interpersonal dynamics: people need a scapegoat, and I felt you could take the jokes. But now, I need you to be the ambassador. Ambassador Lawrence Jensen, descending from the sky with the full unity of Earth behind you. Push Mozart, push his people, until they show you everything they know, everything they have. Find the truth."

Find the truth. Scientist or reporter, it distills to that: Find the truth.

* * *

The nearest large city, which we call Metropolis, has a massive building near its center that rivals the old cathedrals of Europe in its intricate craftsmanship. Since only members of a certain priest class are allowed to enter, most Aurorans have never seen what it looks like from the inside. Mozart is a member of that class, and he explains that it is a place of scholarship. It was from that building that he was sent to find out if "Alla Beeth" had truly returned. Though we proved to be a disappointment to that hope, he stayed on to learn from us, as we learn from him. Despite the vast evolutionary and cultural gulf between our people and his, he has become our friend and has come to trust us. I leave it to you, the reader, to draw your own conclusion from that.

* * *

<Ambassador means you are the representative of all humans?>

"Yes," I lied.

<Then you are the most important one, not Commander Gutierrez?>

"She is in charge of the ship that brought me here, but I am the Ambassador."

He bobbed his head affirmatively, a gesture he had learned from us.

"One of my functions is to find the truth, and report that truth to my people."

Mozart piped surprise. <You are a Seeker of Truth?>

After six weeks, his English was good enough that I knew the capitalization was not accidental. "Yes, I am a Seeker of Truth." And I'm willing to lie in order to get it.

<The Seekers of Truth is the name of my order.>

"What you have told us about Alla Beeth is causing arguments among my people. I must find a way to resolve those arguments. I must find the truth. Is there anything more you can tell me or show me about Alla Beeth?"

He tapped the tips of his tentacles against his forelegs for a few moments. <You must come with me to the place of my order. Since you are a Seeker of Truth, you should be allowed to hear the message of Alla Beeth directly.>

I suppressed a grin and replied gravely, "I would be most honored."

Commander Gutierrez had one of the pilots take us in the blimp, so we arrived in Metropolis before sundown.

It took him nearly half an hour of consultation with members of his order before he came over to me and began typing on the portable computer we'd brought with us.

<They have agreed that since you are a Seeker of Truth from your world, it is permitted for you to enter our church.>

"I thank them."

<Though they are in our language, the messages of Alla Beeth are difficult for us to understand, even after years of study. That is why only members of my order are allowed to hear them directly, and we then pass on what we learn to the rest of the people. Since you do not understand our language, I do not know that you will find any truth in them. Yet Alla Beeth was human, so perhaps you will. And there is something more, something that I cannot tell you, only show.>

He led the way, and I followed him into the cathedral.

I probably hadn't been in a church more than a dozen times since I stopped going with my mom, mostly as a tourist. I could tell that the Aurorans had spent years of painstaking effort in creating this building, carving delicate patterns into solid stone. We passed through various archways and doors, and I started to hear Auroran voices harmonizing. Finally we entered a round room; about twenty Aurorans stood in the middle, singing.

I felt a chill on the back of my neck, like I used to get sometimes listening to the choir at my mom's church. But there was something more; there was something about this tune that made me nostalgic, homesick even. It felt like a memory that I couldn't quite pull from the depths of my mind.

Then Mozart walked to a curtain that hung on one of the walls and pulled it back.

There, in violation of one of their commandments, was a painting of a man -- definitely human -- dressed all in white.

My childhood Sunday memories came flooding back, and between the music and the picture there was no doubt in my mind as to who had been the first ambassador from Earth.

"Alla Beeth" was the Aurorans' way of saying "Elvis."

* * *

Anyone else on this expedition would have to be taken seriously. But not me. I'm a proven liar. Even worse -- I'm a tabloid reporter. I would be accused of fabrication, of planting the evidence, of corrupting Auroran culture as part of some tabloid hoax.

The biggest story of my career had fallen in my lap, and I couldn't tell anyone without ruining whatever credibility I had managed to regain. Whatever powers that be must not want the publicity.

Of course, my mom would say this was punishment for having lied.

* * *

"Thank you for sharing the secrets of Alla Beeth with me," I told Mozart as we left the cathedral.

<Did you find what you need to stop the arguments among your people?>

"You were right: Alla Beeth is human."

Mozart trilled joyfully.

"But his message is intended for your people, not mine." I sighed. "You were right to keep the image hidden. You must keep it hidden, because my people would not understand. They would reject your belief in him."

After a pause, Mozart asked, <Then what will you tell your people?>

"The truth," I said. "I will tell them the truth."

* * *

I refused Commander Gutierrez's request for a private briefing on what I'd found, insisting instead on speaking to the assembled scientists. After everyone gathered outside the LM, I sat on the rim of the airlock and recounted exactly what happened up until the moment Mozart pulled back the curtain and revealed the picture of Alla Beeth. Then I stopped.

After a long pause, Khadil said, "Did you recognize the person?"

"He was a human," I said. "Unmistakably. We are not the first to travel the stars. But as for who it was . . . You really want to know the truth?"

"Yes," said Cacciatore.

"Do you?" I looked at him. "If I say it was Mohammed, will you become a Muslim?" I turned to Khadil. "If I say it was Moses or Elijah, will you become a Jew?" I shook my head. "You want me to give you scientific proof of your religious beliefs? Well, I'm not going to; it's called 'faith' for a reason. Here's the real truth: you've all been acting like a bunch of ignorant yahoos, not the cream of Earth's scientists. So quit bickering and get back to work."

I rose, turned my back on them and stalked through the airlock into the LM.

Commander Gutierrez caught up with me just outside my quarters. "That's it? That's all you're going to say?"

I stopped. "Yes."

She looked at me appraisingly. "You know they'll all hate you for that little show and not-tell."

I shrugged. "As long as they're united again. . . That's what you wanted, right?"

Gutierrez nodded. "Just between you and me, though, who was it in the picture?"

Cocking an eyebrow, I said, "Assuming it was one of the great religious leaders of the past, how on Earth -- or Aurora -- would I know him from Adam?" I hit the button to open the hatch to my quarters. "Now, if you'll excuse me, Commander, I have a column to file."

* * *

The mystery of just who Alla Beeth was and how he got to Aurora may never be fully explained. But as Earth's first ambassador to Aurora, he prepared the way for peaceful relations between our two worlds. And for that, we can only say, "Thank you, thank you very much."

Wisteria

by Ada Milenkovic Brown



Artwork by Julie Dillon

When Dahlia got out of Junior's truck in front of the three story house, the first thing she noticed was the face in the leaves. The stone carving jutted out from the center of a rock terrace, a carving of a man's face with a leaf beard, his eyes peeking out from more leaves all round them, as if the leaves had wound together as they grew and that had somehow made a man. For just a minute, she tried to make it out that it was Garner's face. But of course it wasn't.

A mess of flowers, mostly red and yellow, surrounded the terrace along with a rock garden, with here and there a weed in amongst the rocks. Garner could have told her the names of the flowers. But Garner had been gone five years now.

Junior waved and drove off, his riding mower rattling a little on top of the flatbed. Dahlia straightened her tote bag and looked again at the garden with the face watching her cross up toward the house. If Garner or even Junior had care of it, they'd have made sure the yard was better weeded.

A lady with wispy silver hair and a bright yellow sun dress stood nervously beside the front door. She cleared her throat, so Dahlia looked at her.

"Are you Mrs. Meeks?" the lady said to Dahlia. She talked like she came from up north.

"Most folks call me Dahlia." Which was true about white folks anyway, at least the older ones. The younger ones had been calling her Miz Dahlia, just like everyone else, ever since Civil Rights had made its way east of Wilson. But she felt it wasn't her place to tell anyone to call her Miz.

"The kitchen's this way." The lady smiled like she was having her picture made. It often seemed to make Northern ladies a little nervous to have hired Dahlia to cook. But they didn't really have no choice about that. Dahlia was the best cook in the county.

The lady said, "I did tell you, didn't I, my tea is at one p.m. tomorrow?"

"That's fine. I'll be baking the cakes today, and then tomorrow morning I'll come back to fix the sandwiches and the shrimp." Dahlia followed the lady through the living room, winding past two over-stuffed sofas decorated with vines and big flowers. The pattern was echoed in a border that ran just below the ceiling. It was funny about the white folks Dahlia worked for, how a lot of their houses looked alike. The rooms were too big and the furniture too far apart -- like they never wanted to sit close and be friendly. No way to even sit outside at all except fenced in by a swimming pool. Swimming pools didn't set with Dahlia. Drown you if you weren't careful.

Their shoes tapped along the oak floors into the kitchen. Dahlia opened her tote bag and pulled out a faded calico apron and put it on.

The lady -- Miz Torrance, Dahlia recollected finally -- pointed out canisters of flour, sugar, and cocoa. Then the pans and the bowls on shelves. "I think I've got everything you mentioned on the phone."

Dahlia nodded. "I'll get to work then. Oh, and Miz Torrance? Tomorrow my son's landscaping over by Chocowinity. So I'll need you to come pick me up. As I don't drive."

Miz Torrance blushed a little. "Of course. Could you write down directions?"

Dahlia handed her a piece of paper where Junior had done just that.

"The second stoplight -- is that what this says?" Miz Torrance stuck the paper out to Dahlia.

Dahlia told her she didn't have her reading glasses, but yes, if she was talking about downtown Grimesland, you turned at the second stoplight, which was Beauford Street. Dahlia edged toward the refrigerator and hoped Miz Torrance had no more questions about Junior's note, or at least not enough questions to figure out that Dahlia couldn't read good. But Miz Torrance just smiled weakly and backed away. So Dahlia paid her no more mind, but washed her hands and set the butter out to soften.

When she got to running the mixer, two pairs of feet pattered in behind her.

"What are you making?" This was a tow-headed boy about five.

Dahlia ticked it off on her fingers. "Caramel cake, coconut cake, and dirt cake." The last was for the children.

"Dirt cake! Yuck!"

On Dahlia's right was the girl, who was taller, but looked just like the boy except with dark braids. She clicked her tongue at her brother. "It's chocolate."

"That's right. See? Gonna crush these cookies for dirt." Dahlia held up a package of oreos. "And put in candy worms."

"Gummi worms," the girl corrected her.

"Cool." The brother ran to another room where soon a TV was coughing out explosions and foolish music.

The sister got on tiptoe and set her head on folded arms on the counter beside the cake bowl. "Sometimes I think he's developmentally delayed." She pronounced it very carefully.

Dirt cake brought Dahlia back to thinking about Garner. Dirt was his element. When they had married and moved into his Great Aunt Euphemia's shotgun house in Grimesland, there'd been nothing around it but dead grass and dirt. Garner had dug and planted and weeded. And little by little, year after year, it all turned green.

Till his heart attacked him.

Now, all that was left of Garner was leaves -- sycamores, hydrangeas, weeping willows, and wisteria. It was all Garner. It had his stamp. She'd just never thought to look for his face in it.

She pulled the coconut layers out with silvery mitts, ignoring the heat breath of the oven, and put in the big flower pot of dirt cake batter.

Time to get started on the frostings. Caramel first, that was the tricky one, you had to stir it just right when you heated it up or it come out grainy.

Yes, if you could see anyone's face in the leaves, it would surely be Garner's.

That night Dahlia tossed and turned in bed -- on her right side, on her back, on her stomach. It had been no use trying to sleep on her left side since Garner died. Because that was the side of the bed he slept on. Because even without turning that way, she could feel he wasn't there.

She wished she hadn't seen that carving. Now she wanted to see Garner's face in the leaves. Dahlia threw off the covers and put on her shoes. She slipped out the back screen door, which creaked as it closed, and she stepped into the grass.

The yard was warm and humid and bathed in moonlight. The sycamores raised dark branches like fingers into the air; the willows hulked over in mounds over their trunks. She studied the trees as she wound her way through. No face.

She circled past the hydrangeas, their blue flowers white in the evening, to the middle of the yard where the wisteria grew on a circle of trellises covered over with spokes of planking. It had been Garner's present to her on their thirty-fifth anniversary, and now the vines and grape clusters of flowers tangled down in their gazebo shape. She went all around it looking in through the leafy vines and cones of flowers. Then she went in the middle under the spokes to sit finally on the stone bench Garner had put there and stare at his gravestone.

Maybe the children had the right of it. Maybe it was foolishness to have him here instead of at the cemetery down by the church. Junior thought so sure, though he never said, but you could tell by the set of his back as he trimmed around the gravestone with his edge trimmer. Her daughter Larissa never stopped talking about it the minute she set foot in Dahlia's house. Mama, you shoulda' this and Mama, you shoulda' that. There was plenty of shoulda's Dahlia could say about Larissa's business -- Dahlia's grandbabies playing on that computer till all hours, getting no sleep -- but Dahlia kept *out* of other folks' business, and they should keep out of hers. Plenty of folk had family cemeteries on their land -- you could see graves every which way on the country highways. And besides, Dahlia would have felt in the church yard like she was leaving Garner. I'm here, she whispered. I won't go away this time. She stared around in the semi-darkness. Should have done this in the daytime. I'm here to touch your face. I'm here to hold your hand. No one answered her in the dark.

Tuesday was a busy day. She got to the Torrance house late, on account of Miz Torrance getting lost picking her up. She made ham biscuits in a whirlwind all morning, which near to wore out her fingers, kneading, patting, and cutting the biscuits to bake. Then the tea party, putting out cold shrimp, which luckily she didn't have to peel because Miz Torrance chose not to pay the extra fee, pimento cheese sandwiches, iced sweet tea, and hot coffee. And of course she put out the cakes. When the doorbell started ringing, she went back to the kitchen and did her homework, writing down the names of foods that she found on cans in the pantry. Occasionally she went in amid the chorus of chattering voices to restock the sandwich trays.

The little boy ran past her as she was cleaning up. He had chocolate smeared across his upper lip and his right cheek.

Tuesday was reading night, so after all that, Junior took her to the church to meet with Sisi, who wore scarves and those long African dresses.

"Got my homework." Dahlia sat down in the Fellowship Hall at the table across from Sisi and pulled out the list of words she'd read and written down from the cans in the pantry. They went over the words, and then like usual, Sisi had Dahlia talk about something to make into a story. Dahlia talked about Garner. But not about the face in the leaves. Or how she ached to have him lying beside her.

The story went like this:

Garner was my husband. He was a gardener, the best, which was why they called him Garner instead of Sidney Meeks. He made wisteria gazebos. All the mamas had Garner plant them when their girls was sixteen, so the wisteria would cover it for their weddings. He grew a special kind. Late bloom, to be all flowers for the June brides.

"Miz Dahlia, does this story say what you want it to?" Sisi said that every time they did these stories.

And the trouble was, Dahlia had a different story about Garner inside her.

About how they'd fixed his heart in the hospital. And two days after the operation, lying all weak in the bed, he finally opened his eyes. Touch my face, he whispered, she could barely hear him. Hold my hand. And she did. But then she got so tired sitting there, hour by hour, worrying, till the room was swimming, so she left him alone and went home to sleep. In the middle of the night, they called her that he'd gone worse, and she called Junior and they went out to the hospital, but when they got there Garner was dead.

How was she to know they'd fix him up, but he'd die anyway?

She hadn't been touching his face nor his hand when he died. He died without her, alone, tubes stuck in him and bags of liquid medicine hanging around him and doctor machines making noises.

But she didn't need to learn to read and write this story on a piece of paper. It was awful enough to have it running through her head. So she'd said the other story that Sisi wrote down.

Then Sisi had Dahlia point to words she wanted to learn. Dahlia pointed to wisteria and gazebos. She already knew how to read Garner's name. Sisi picked out sixteen and explained that it was the same as 16, but with letters.

Then the lesson ended with Dahlia writing out the fixings for pimento cheese sandwiches. Sisi had to help her spell out Worcestershire sauce, which felt a whole lot shorter when Dahlia said it in her mouth than when she wrote it all out on paper.

As Junior drove her home, Dahlia asked him if he'd noticed the face with leaves. He had, lots of folks had them. Dahlia asked what kind of leaves was around the face. Junior said it depended, sometimes oak, sometimes grapes, sometimes ivy.

"What about wisteria?"

He shrugged. "Don't know if I've ever seen that. Them faces give me the shivers anyhow. There was one at another house where I helped Daddy cut grass. He called it Oko. Said that was what he was called in Africa. Said Oko would come for us if Larissa and I didn't weed the yard."

Dahlia shook her head. She'd never liked Garner scaring the children with tales. But the face. Why couldn't the leaves be wisteria? It was near to grapes, just with flowers instead of fruit. Purple flowers even.

That night her hands ached her and fidgeted, like she couldn't stop kneading biscuits. She found herself turning on her left side, longing for Garner to fill the empty space beside her. She reached her aching fingers out to where he ought to be, and they ached more, because the memory of his flesh was in her fingers too, when she used to reach for him in the dark, doughy and soft and cool.

But no matter which way she reached or turned, there was that brittle space inside. She'd managed to cover it up before, layers upon layers like smooth pearl locking away the sharp edges of missing him. Now the layers were cracking and the emptiness was back.

Soon she dreamed that leaves were growing in tangles across the bed and she saw Garner's face peeking out between them. His eyes, deep and brown, stared at her. Smiling eyes. She brushed the vines aside and found his mouth within a beard of leaves. The leaves were smooth but ridged, and the mouth was soft against her hand and she leaned her own mouth into the softness, pressing a kiss into him. But when she felt his calloused hands, it was all vines and hanging bunches of flowers, and then it was all tubes and hanging medicine bags, and then it was all sorriness and sobs, and her sobs woke her.

So she got up again to go sit on the bench in the gazebo. The moon was even brighter this night. As she examined every patch of wisteria, her eyes swam again like in the hospital. She rubbed them and looked some more and thought she saw one eye and part of a cheek above a leaf beard in the vines behind and above Garner's tombstone. She stood and reached for the place to arrange the wisteria, pulling it here and there, twisting, sometimes untwisting, until the spaces seemed to her to look more like Garner's shadow. Then she saw his whole face in the leaves and his hand reached out to her from the vines. But as she grabbed his hand, it was nothing but leaves. And she sat down on the grass, and then she lay down, and Junior found her in the early morning light lying across Garner's grave.

* * *

Larissa called that next day with a lot of stiff words, which matched Dahlia's stiff muscles as she lay in bed resting. Dahlia just knew Junior had set this up, worried that Dahlia was fretting over Garner. Sure enough, after all the talk about what Kareem and Karlos were up to the first week of school, and how many goals they'd kicked at soccer practice, how their father was making out as their new principal, on it came. That Dahlia should move in with all of them. How they could build an apartment on the side of the house.

"I can't leave your daddy."

"He's in heaven, Mama. Heaven's no closer to Grimesland than to Winston-Salem."

And maybe that was true. Except Garner had come to her between the wisteria and it wouldn't be right to leave him alone, not again. She almost said so: "I got to stay here. He's in the leaves like that Oko face." But she held the words in with pursed lips before they got out of her mouth. Larissa and Junior would never give her a moment's peace if she said a thing like that.

When Junior called later to see how Dahlia was doing, she rode him about not leaving her be.

"I ain't moving to Winston-Salem."

"You need to move in with Larissa, cause you won't move in with me."

"I ain't moving in with that girl of yours either. She don't like me."

Junior never said anything more when Dahlia brought it up about his girl. Which just proved the point.

* * *

It was unusual for the very first hurricane of the year to make it all the way to Grimesland. But the warning for Hurricane Aaron came over the radio, and then Junior was all around the house, running tape over the windows, filling up Dahlia's bathtub, and cluttering her tiny kitchen with more bottles of water than Dahlia could ever drink in three hurricane seasons. He begged her to come just stay the night with him and that girl. Dahlia would have none of it. She'd been through Bertha and Fran and Floyd, and all that had ever come of those for her was a bit of rain and wind, and cooking up everything in the freezer on the gas stove when the electricity went out too long. It wasn't like all that mess in New Orleans.

It was already raining when he left. The wind came up and sheets of rain were pounding on the windows and swaying the trees as Dahlia watched from her bedroom.

The lights flickered and went out. The clock was stopped at four, but outside all the clouds made it dark like dusk. Sycamore branches pelted the yard. The willows bowed, which meant they weren't like to break. But in the middle, the gazebo trellises ripped apart and wisteria was falling.

Dahlia ran up to the window, though she knew she shouldn't do that in a storm, and peered around the big X taped across the glass. The piece of trellis behind Garner's grave hadn't fallen, but it was swaying whenever a gust came up. Dahlia ran out into the rain and grabbed fistfuls of wood and leaves on each side to hold up the rest of the trellis.

She buried her face in the leaves and tried to hold up the wall of vines, but it bore down on her, a wave of blooms and leaves in tangles drowning her in its heaviness. As the leaves smothered her face, she felt him. Garner was kissing her. His outstretched arms mirrored

hers. His hands, his calloused hands, twined their fingers in her fingers. She could feel him through her soaked dress as it ripped against splintered pieces of trellis which the wisteria pushed against her.

A gust of wind tore at her as leaves, vines, and trellis swayed over and Dahlia and Garner fell with it onto his grave. He lay outlined in wisteria. The wind roared and the rain came in sheets and Garner was inside her and outside her and holding her safe, not from the wind and rain, but from the ache. She held him close and his arms wrapped around her and she pulled up into a ball and wept into the water and the wind. Wisteria was raining all around them and then a trellis on the other side cracked and came down, and then blood rained too, in drops from her head where it flowed away pink in the grass over Garner's grave.

She heard his voice in the wind. I left you alone, I'm sorry.

No, she said, it was me. Forgive me.

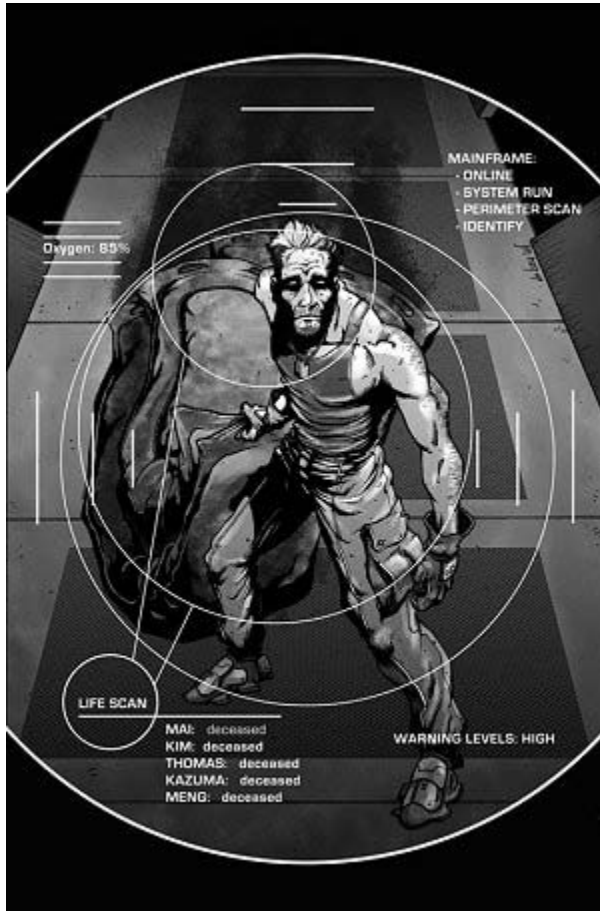
As the wind and the rain died down, he faded away from her. But she heard his voice in the wind once more just before it all faded. And he said, Go on. Go on now.

Then Junior ran up shouting and pulled her out of the vines and the trellis pieces and carried her into the house. Soon sirens wailed louder and louder. Faces appeared, on people with blue uniforms, who strapped belts across her and hoisted her up and wheeled her head first into a van. The van bumped and heads looked down at her and hands did fussy doctor things to her arms. She heard Garner's voice in her head, and she knew to go on.

And she knew now not to look any more for his face in the garden, nor in the uniforms or the vines of tubing or belts, or the bags of medicine hanging down on poles like wisteria.

Call Me Mr. Positive

by Tom Barlow



Artwork by Jin Han

Day 1,688:

It was my watch. Every time I wake from deep sleep, I have a moment of panic, convinced I've slept through some event that has changed the course of human history. My father never forgave himself for falling asleep in his recliner and missing the President's announcement of our first contact with an alien race. Fortunately, though, most human change is as agonizingly gradual as interstellar flight.

This was my ninth awake period of the voyage, and we'd built up so much velocity that little news from Earth could catch up to us. Although I'd been in deep sleep for six months, there was only a couple of week's worth of news in the queue. No personal messages: that's why I was in the service to begin with. No strings.

I've lived long enough to differentiate "news" from the reiterations of the same old human comedy. People continue to create arbitrary groups so they can fight with people in other arbitrary groups. Those who have a lot continue to try to convince those that have nothing that universal laws are to blame. Meanwhile, people keep butting their heads against those universal laws, and damned if they aren't beginning to bend. Once I deleted items like those from the message queue, there was nothing left.

I selected some music and soon had the cabin rocking. Control preferred it quiet, but I figured by the time I actually *heard* something mechanical going wrong in the Unit, I'd probably be dead anyway. That's what it's like in space; you're either bored to tears or being sucked into a vacuum. There's not much in-between.

These kind of things were going through my mind, which is my piss-poor excuse for not checking on the others right away. I waited for my head to clear and my heart rate to stabilize. I showered. I had

a cup of tea and a biscuit. I turned the volume up some more. Control could kiss my ass.

Then I looked at the service log.

We had a cute little routine with the service log. None of us had been awake at the same time since we left five years ago. There were six of us, and we each had to be awake for a week every six months, since that's the longest you can safely stay in deep sleep without working your muscles, eating real food, and getting some REM sleep and sexual release. (Yeah, I made that last one up. Not proven, but try to find a spacer that disagrees.) Because Control wants the Unit checked as frequently as possible, we stagger our awake periods. Because Control is stingy with the food and O2, they restrict us to the minimum time awake.

So we spend a good portion of our waking periods composing witty log entries for one another. Unfortunately, Mai Mu, who precedes me in the rotation, thinks she's an artist and often fills page after page with her sketches. They resemble a child's picture of an elephant, every part of the body in a different scale. Or maybe Picasso.

Nonetheless, I look forward to them. Solitude lowers your expectations.

This time, no drawings. No Kuro Kazuma's haikus. None of Meng's ruminations on Goethe. No performances by Sir Thomas, who'd carefully hidden his cello the day we embarked because he knew I'd jettison it as an act of compassion for composers everywhere.

No laundry list of duties, staff evaluations, plans or way-over-my-head technical notes from Captain Kim.

That's when I thought to check on their well-being.

Until that moment, I never realized that somewhere deep inside, I harbored the belief that losing five friends at once wouldn't be five times as bad as losing one. I suppose it was doughnut thinking; the first one is great, the fifth is blah.

It's not true. As soon as I saw the first body, I knew the rest would be dead. The readouts were there in plain sight, right in front of me when I woke up, but I hadn't bothered to look. I had just assumed everything was all right. They couldn't be any less right.

I checked them over one at a time, anyway. Every one hurt just as much as the first, or maybe more.

They weren't smashed-face-plate dead. They were peaceful-sleep dead. They looked like they'd died at about the same time, and not too long ago; there wasn't a great deal of decomposition.

I'm not a medicine man, but we've all had some basic training, including reading the diagnostics. So after I cried a while, ate a big bowl of spaghetti and half-a-dozen brownies (supplies being suddenly abundant), and received permission from myself to postpone the burial detail, I checked the medical histories.

They didn't tell me a lot. It was as if their bodily functions, already dialed back by deep sleep to the minimum necessary to sustain recoverable normal life, had just drifted away. The heart rates dropped smoothly from twelve to zero over the course of several hours. The troughs of the brain waves got wider and wider. Body temperature only fell about twenty degrees, to room temperature. I got excited for a minute when I saw the line on the chart start to go back up slightly; then I realized it was the heat of putrefaction.

The life support system seemed to have malfunctioned. The emergency protocols didn't kick in until they were almost dead. The stimulants, then the shocks, over and over again, only sent them into exaggerated cycles, until a cycle overlapped death. After that, we were just injecting and shocking meat.

I made a mental note to suggest to Control that the pods be equipped to automatically crash-refrigerate the dead until they could be returned to Earth.

For now, though, I had to improvise. It would have been very difficult to thread them into their suits, because they were beginning to melt a little, some skin turning slightly gooey. Instead, removed their dog tags, zipped each into his own duffle bag, lashed them together and tied them to the outside of the ship. With any luck, they'd still be there, flash frozen, when we got home. Slow acceleration has its good points, I suppose.

It was queer, but I didn't feel as alone then as I had when the bodies were lying next to me. I sent a report back home, although I didn't really need to; the daily readings were automatically fed back to base. There wasn't a damn thing they could do about it, anyway.

It is only now, after I've slept real sleep for about two days, that I've begun to consider what comes next.

A lot of redundancy had been built into our mission. Six of us had been sent on what was essentially a two-man mission, so that we had a back-up crew and a back-back-up crew, just in case. We carried enough provisions for twice our anticipated time in space. At the time, I thought it was overkill. I've since changed my mind.

I'm in a quandary about resuming deep sleep. If I keep my normal rotation, the unit would be unmonitored for six months at a time, rather than a few weeks. We could drift irretrievably off course in six months. If I don't hibernate, I'll burn up at least fifteen bioyears twiddling my thumbs alone in a thirty-cubic-meter room with nothing but my doppelganger to keep me company.

OK, truth is, that isn't foremost in my thoughts. Fear is. I'm scared to death of returning to my pod. I'm obsessing over the fact that there are five dead people outside, who died in deep sleep for no discernable reason. If I was a gambler, I know where I'd place my bet on the viability of the sixth crew member, once he goes back under.

Day 1,692

Control equipped Mainfram with a huge entertainment library. It's come as a surprise to me just how useless that collection is. I've tried all kinds: 3-D, 2-D, role playing, fantasy. I can only take a few minutes of any of them, though. The more images of people I see, the lonelier I become. Like pornography.

Day 1,694

Tomorrow I'm schedule to go back into deep sleep. I spent today reviewing what I know of celestial mechanics. All I accomplished was confirming that, left to my own devices, I couldn't find my own ass with two hands and a road map. I also spent some time reading up on alcohol stills and inventorying the drug supplies.

I know it doesn't matter anyway. I can't turn around now: not enough fuel. We need the mass of that sun to swing the Unit around without losing all of our momentum.

What is most frustrating is that the trip will be for naught. The original plan had some of us taking the excursion vehicle down to the planet as we passed it on our way into the system, then rendezvousing with the Unit on its way back out. Now it's going to be like walking past a pastry shop window without a penny in my pocket. A twenty-year walk.

I field-stripped a couple of the pods right down to the chassis. I found nothing. I checked the air feed and reclamation system. It was A-OK. The nutrition system worked flawlessly. I didn't see anything in the blood monitoring system records.

Day 1,695

I actually got to the point of getting dressed, sliding into my pod, and laying my head down on the pillow. Then panic set in. I couldn't close the lid.

The faceplate looked like a giant hand about to close over my mouth. The skin jets looked like snake fangs. The rush of cool air felt like I'd stepped on somebody's grave.

Day 1,696

I began going through each of the crew's personal possessions, looking for clues or direction or, really, companionship. I started with the Captain, since *I* was the Captain now, and I needed some tips about maintaining crew discipline.

Captain Kim's locker confirmed my impression that he was the world's most boring man. There was almost nothing in his kit that wasn't military issue: no family pics, no diary, no awards, no jujus, no candy, no jewelry, no bronzed baby shoes. At first, all I saw was regulation clothes, an elaborate shoe-shining kit, and some old manuals from the Academy.

At the bottom of the drawer, though, I found a neck chain. There were fifteen dog tags on it. They weren't dated, but from the patina, and more importantly, by the sequence of political entities they fought for, I could see that they stretched back at least 300 years. Kim after Kim after Kim, marching, drinking, whoring, fighting, dying in the service of the country du jour.

I took his tag off the chain around my neck and added it to his.

Day 1,697

Today I went through Sir Thomas's effects. If Kim was parsimonious, Tom was profligate. He had a marvelous hand-carved wood chess set, a Go board with moonstone and hematite pieces, an antique cardboard backgammon board, tiny playing cards featuring the faces of famous composers, and a painted sheet-metal Chinese checkers board with exquisite stone marbles. I found that disheartening; the games all took at least two people to play.

I carefully leafed through his prized sheet music collection, browned and flaking at the edges, carefully preserved in plastic sleeves. None of it was more recent than the 20th century.

For some reason he had also packed his performance outfit, a tailored black suit, ruffled white shirt and black boots with shiny brass buckles. Perhaps he thought he might run across an alien civilization that didn't know his reputation yet.

He also had brought a scrapbook of his performance programs, which dated back to when he was about ten. He'd never played large or prestigious venues, but rarely were there six months between performances, except when he was in the Academy or in space. I hadn't properly credited the sacrifice it must have been for him to spend years with an audience of five.

He told me before we left that, like it or not, he'd be playing for all of us, a week each six months. Since we would be asleep, there was nothing we could do about it.

"If you could just applaud," he'd said, "You'd be the perfect audience."

I knew he couldn't hear me, since he was floating outside, but I clapped for a while anyway.

Day 1,699

Opened Mai Mu's locker yesterday, but I didn't feel like writing about it for a while.

I expected to find it jammed with bad art. I'd seen the sketches, of course, but whenever we talked, which was a lot during our prep since we were often teamed up (we weighed about the same), she talked about all the other art she did: sculpture, ceramics, glass, wood-carving. She made it all sound massive.

There was, in fact, a lot of art, but very little of it hers. Half of the locker was filled with exquisite miniatures of famous sculptures, each about fifteen centimeters tall. It wasn't that I recognized them all, but the name of the piece and artist was engraved on each base. There was the "Burghers of Calais" by Rodin, Modigliani's "Head," Donatello's "St. George and the Dragon," Noguchi's "Mother and Child," "Brushstrokes in Flight" by Lichtenstein and others. Each was in its own wood case. Each of the bases was a little worn, like someone had held it in her hands for a long, long time.

She was also a diarist, but wrote in Chinese. I couldn't read it, but Mainframe could.

I never knew she felt that way about me. She seemed so assured, so professional, so decisive, so damned competent. I could have gone the rest of my life not knowing how she was attracted to me, or feeling the regret that came with that knowledge .

Day 1,700

Today I went through Kuro Kazuma's things.

What a slob. I hate cockroaches, and thanks to his habit of hoarding crumbly cookies, we had them. You know what's worse than stepping on a roach when you walk into the kitchen without turning on the light? Waking up with one floating an inch from your mouth, and not knowing if it was arriving or leaving.

Luckily, we had enough spin to keep the crumbs from floating away, so I shook out his stuff and swept up what fell.

He had a lot of civvies for a military guy. I had a hunch he didn't bother to wear his uniform when he was awake alone. I can't say much, since I usually I don't wear anything at all when I'm the only one awake.

He had some strange-looking outfits, historical stuff. There were several silk robes which were entirely too small for me; he was a slight man. There were a couple of hats. The bright green silk fez fit me just fine.

At the bottom of his locker was a sword in a heavy leather scabbard. The long curved handle was ivory, elaborately carved with dragonheads, tails, talons and little people in various stages of being devoured. I carefully drew the blade. It sounded sharp against the sheath, utterly smooth and foreboding.

The blade was greased to keep it from corroding. I wiped it off with one of his socks. I almost took my thumb off when I let my hand stray too close to the edge, so I had to take a half-hour break to administer first aid. Five minutes for the bandaging, twenty-five to work up the courage to look at the blood. We all have our demons.

The sword was amazingly heavy, the steel beaten so dense it felt like an anvil. I cautiously took a few swings the way I'd seen in old martial arts entertainments, and managed to neatly slice the cable to the backup environment monitor, which caused the primary monitor to immediately start whooping like a drunken cowboy. I put the sword away before I put a hole in the hull.

There were some photos in an envelope taped to the lid. I pulled them out and spread them on the floor. There was nothing written on the back of any of them, and they were mostly close-ups, so I couldn't really tell who they were by context. Many may have been of him, but just as easily been his ancestors. I wished I knew something about him, but we'd never really talked about ourselves. We were too busy with the jokes, trying to outdo one other, each trying to capture the audience. I tried to remember one of his jokes, but for the life of me, I couldn't. What's worse, I couldn't even remember any of my own.

Day 1,701

Last locker. Meng Ruixun. Probably the person I knew the best, since I almost married his sister, until it dawned on me that she was a raving lunatic. Meng had tried to warn me, but she had such a cute overbite I couldn't hear him.

He was the world's worst poker player, so I'd spent a lot of time in college playing cards with him. He had the money spare, since his mother built the biggest specialty metals business on the planet.

In return, I helped him learn western literature. I did such a good job that he soon made me feel like a dilettante. He was one of those people that could quote Goethe or Yeats or Kim-Juan off the top of his head. I can do it with commercials, but that doesn't impress people so much.

He was that way about anything he tackled: consumed. He gathered information about a topic like a whale sucks in krill.

When I found out he'd been assigned to the team, I was flabbergasted. I couldn't believe the Service would squander such talent on what would most likely be a wild goose chase.

He was convinced that he deserved a slot in the unit, though. When we received that famous transmission, which confusingly seemed to arrive from five widely dispersed solar systems simultaneously, he didn't sleep for almost a week. It was his wild-ass theory about what it meant that prevailed after all the other wild-ass theories had been discredited. It was his research that found a way to assign probabilities to each of the systems as the true source of the signal. We were lucky that the closest system turned out to also be the most probable, because it was the only one we'd be able to reach.

In his locker, I found a letter from his mother. She'd made sure, before he left, to let him know what a burden he had placed on her heart by asking her to pull the strings necessary to get him assigned to the mission. She put it all down on paper so that he could refer back to it whenever his guilt started to slip.

I wasn't surprised to find poetry. I knew he'd been writing since he was a teenager, but he'd never shown it to anyone. After I read it, I understood why.

It wasn't bad. It wasn't good. It was poetry written by someone who thought too clearly, who always knew the route from point A to point B and never got lost.

It was, however, intensely revealing. With all the scholarship and accomplishments, he'd still found time to stop and doubt the hell out of himself.

The hardest thing was the smell. Meng had a penchant for musky, sandalwoody cologne and it permeated his locker. It reminded me, as nothing else could, of cookouts on his patio, holding his head while he puked Coors in the dorm head, bounce-racing on Mars.

Speak of the devil -- he had a bottle of Coors in the bottom of his locker. He also had a dozen empties, which disappointed me. I'd have shared with him, if I'd thought to bring some. Probably.

I waited until later in the day, after dinner, before I cracked open the beer. I sipped it all evening, toasting Meng, savoring the flavor and the memories.

Day 1,708

20 (Earth) days down. 480 (Earth) hours. 28,800 (Earth) minutes. 5.4% of a (Earth) year.

About 5,475 days left. 131,400 hours. 7,884,000 minutes. 0.36% of the remaining journey in the bag already; only 99.64% to go.

No, wait, we have an update: 7,883,999 minutes. The multiplication took me a minute.

I'm going out of my mind, which is a short walk to begin with.

Day 1,715

Since I have all day, every day, to devote to it, you'd think I could keep a decent journal. But there's something less than satisfying about recording your thoughts and actions, when all you think about is how bored you are, and all you do is eat, evacuate, and count the hours until bedtime.

I tried to figure out how long it would be before I could expect a reply from Earth to my incident report, but the math is still beyond me. The computer knows, but I don't know how to phrase the question. I know it'll be years, not days. Years.

Day 1,718

Maybe you thought things couldn't get much worse. I sure did. But now, I can't sleep. I've been awake for over forty-eight hours. When I'm sitting up, I feel like I'm about to pass out, but as soon as I lay down my eyes pop open like sunny-side eggs.

I've gotten to the point that I can watch entertainments again without intense longing, but I've lost the ability to be amused. I've discovered that the joy of the audience depends on being able to imagine, if only in the most tangential way, sharing the experiences of the characters. I've lost the capacity to pretend.

Day 1,720

Some things you might not know about space travel:

- Despite traveling through mostly vacuum, the window gets dirty.

- It's apparently cheaper to spray the food with an agent that numbs your taste buds than to make it delicious.
- Just because they spend billions and billions to build a ship, that doesn't guarantee the speakers will be worth a shit.
- If I do find an alien civilization, I'm going to ask them for an air freshener.
- Like they say about all the sled dogs except the one in front, the view is always the same.

Day 1,723

Blah, blah, blah, blah.

Day 1,724

It took me hours to screw up my courage, but I went back outside today. I needed to look into the faces of my friends again, to see if they'd died peacefully. As I did, I realized I had nothing to compare it to except my imagination.

Day 1,725

I've run out of things to put in the log. If you have a problem with that, complain to the morale officer.

In fact, if you're reading this, then you probably have corpses to deal with, so why are you screwing around? The Exec Comm is going to tell you to burn the log anyway. Nobody wants to admit they allow juveniles like me into the space service.

Just bury us as a crew and pretend we died together.

If you aren't reading this, then maybe I survived.

Day 1,728

A strange thought popped into my head this morning -- even Jesus only had to spend forty days in the wilderness.

Where that came from, I have no idea; I haven't seen the inside of a church in twenty years, and even out here between the stars, I don't sense any divine presence, just emptiness. If I were a believer, though, I might come to the conclusion that I'd been spared for a good reason: to mourn my friends' deaths. Everybody deserves to be mourned.

I hadn't admitted it to myself yet, but I was finally ready to get in the pod. Afraid my courage would evaporate if I looked at it too carefully, I let my mind go blank as I dressed and prepped the pod. I slid in, and was about to close the lid, but I couldn't shake the notion that I'd left something unfinished.

I got up and wrote these words so that the log has some sort of an ending, in case things don't turn out well. I've always hated books that end "To be continued."

I thought long and hard about these, perhaps my last words. I was looking for something profound, something you could carve on my gravestone if you want to, but couldn't think of anything. Only that I'd rather be floating dead through space with five of my friends than be alive and alone.

See you in six months. Call me Mr. Positive.

The end.

You know what's funny? The cabin? It has a night light.

Beats of Seven

by Peter Orullian



Artwork by Walter Simon

Jimmy Nesbitt sat in the dark of a new moon on the Lincoln City beach and listened.

No wind.

No obnoxious birds.

No obnoxious lovers strolling.

Just Jimmy and his sound gear, capturing the roll of waves, the susurrantion of water over sand, the ticking of air bubbles popping as the water retreated back toward the ocean. It was the same sound he'd heard a hundred times before . . . until he detected something more, buried deep in the white noise of waves.

He looked around, irritated, expecting to see someone stomping through the sand with a portable stereo in one hand on their way to a midnight swim.

Nothing.

Even the occasional sweep of headlights had ceased, leaving the darkness unbroken and tranquil.

He was alone.

Jimmy reached quickly for his frequency filter, dialing the luminous knobs to try and isolate the pitch he thought he heard. His heart

actually pounded in his chest -- something music hadn't done for him in quite some time.

And it totally surprised him.

The romance -- if it had ever really been there -- had long gone out of this job. Recording the ocean had been the only gig he could get once he quit session work in Los Angeles and Nashville, where musicianship had been replaced by packaging and sex appeal. If the market for *Pacific Ocean Scapes* -- the project that would take him up the entire west coast -- weren't so lucrative, he could never have endured the mindless sound-tracking of splashing water.

He narrowed in on the frequency, methodically muting levels where he could not hear the strange sound through his headphones. The rumble of white caps turning over on themselves fell away, the sizzle of water creeping up wet-packed sand disappeared as well. He kept at it, eager to identify this new tone, something he hadn't heard on any other beach south to San Diego.

After several more adjustments, his parametric equalizer began to spike only in the +10 kilohertz zone.

Jimmy pressed the ear cups of his Sony Pro Studio reference phones tighter against his head, sealing out further noise.

He gave a smile.

No mistake.

A trumpet.

Another sound engineer might not have known what he was hearing. But Jimmy had spent several years mixing studio jazz albums in New Orleans in the years before new age labels started throwing money at French Quarter musicians and recording the always hilarious "light jazz."

He knew from a trumpet.

That wasn't all, though.

If a little fuzzy through the processing he had to impose to create the discreet horn sound, the tone perfectly matched a Gillespie model horn -- something only the men playing on Bourbon Street or swank Manhattan dinner clubs in the early 30's would have used. Still, a badly soldered connection, an errant grain of sand, any number of things could have caused the tone.

But not when it moved in and out of melody.

Jimmy sat, compressing his phones against his ears, tweaking his EQ, recording snippets of what he was coming to think of as a song, then playing them back against the real-time music.

They were different.

The song seemed to live in the very rattle and hum of the ocean itself.

What the hell had he found? And could he sell it?

* * *

Watery light dawned behind Jimmy in the east. He'd spent all night listening, recording, filling three hard drives of the unique tonal aberration. Life stirred around him, folks walking pets, a few morning runners. Still no one carrying a CD player or child's musical toy. And certainly no one with an instrument, let alone a Gillespie model.

If nothing more, he wanted to know where the music originated. Through the night he'd listened, trying to make sense of the melodies and rhythms. Despite the enchantment of it -- or maybe because of it -- any form or structure eluded him.

But the thrill that he might have captured something previously unheard raced through his blood. Sound men lived for such discoveries, and extracting it from a remote beach in a sleepy seaside town only made the mystery and improbability greater.

Then sun struck the water, rays of light spearing the thick Pacific mist . . . and the music ended.

The abrupt departure seemed as much a mystery as the sound to begin with. It didn't matter; he had it on file.

Jimmy packed up his equipment, and in the space of moments had left behind the endless turn of waves and dunes of sand for the tarmac of Highway 101.

A mile north he braked hard to a stop beside a yellow marquee announcing the sale of harmonica's, two for ten dollars. Max's Music Maven was a converted home with two music rooms and an adjoining apartment. Jimmy had met Vincent, the proprietor, just yesterday. His store hours written on a paper plate taped inside the window told him Vince opened at ten a.m. This couldn't wait three hours, so he rounded the side and found a door decorated with an endorsement sticker that read, "If it ain't Gibson, it ain't nothing."

This was the place.

Jimmy began knocking, and didn't stop.

Moments later, the door swung inward. Vincent stood in boxers, his pale skin stretched impossibly tight over ribs and shoulders. Thin, scraggly hair hung down in eyes that squinted in the strengthening light.

"We ain't open, man. Come back later."

"It can't wait," Jimmy said. "I need to ask you a few questions."

"Ah, crap, you're that new age ocean guy. Man, I'm not having this conversation at seven a.m. I told you yesterday, I'm not going to carry mood music in my place. Try the Dirty Lap Dog or something. I got a rep."

Jimmy would have smiled to hear it if he didn't have important questions to ask. "Never mind that. Listen, I've got something I want you to hear. It's not the same as yesterday."

"You're some piece of work. I don't let my lady in this early, and you think I'm letting you in?"

Unable to hold it back any longer, Jimmy blurted. "I just recorded your little beach at the end of the D River." He waited until the aging hippie looked him straight. "And I captured the sound of a trumpet playing a tune."

If the hippie had shown Jimmy any other response, he might have gotten back in his VW Beetle and drove away. What he saw instead was a suspicious eye peering from between kinky strands of hair.

That was all he needed to see. "You know about it? What the hell is it?"

The hippie left the door standing wide and retreated into the shadows of his one-room apartment. Taking it as an invite, Jimmy gladly followed.

Vincent poured some coffee from a pot still bearing the 7-Eleven insignia, which made perfect sense since the stainless steel coffee maker it sat in bore the same logo. To the left in the corner, a mattress lay flat on the ground; sheets and blankets balled up on one side. A Stratocaster lay beside the bed, a litter of picks strewn around it. The scent of mildew and cat litter mingled in the air with yesterday's cigarettes. Vince lifted his coffee mug in the direction of a door at the back of the room, and led Jimmy in to the music shop.

The main showroom -- nothing more than a fifteen by fifteen deal with a small selection of guitars and amplifiers -- stood in shadow. It was here yesterday that Jimmy had met Vince, this holdover from the sixties telling him that he didn't carry digital media for Jimmy's hard disk recorder. Vince had added that electronic gadgets weren't real music anyway. The flower child hadn't bothered to show Jimmy the second music room.

Just three steps up to a second door, they passed into an elevated space smelling of dusty wood.

Filled with pianos.

At one time, it might have been a living room, maybe even a dining room. Now it had been stripped of everything but the floor planks. Even the walls were little more than studs and framing. This space wasn't about anything but the piano-forte, the clavier, and one irreparable harpsichord.

Dust lay in blankets a quarter inch deep over the tops of everything. As Jimmy and Vince stirred the air in their passage, it hardly moved the dust; the weight of time made a fabric of the accumulated motes.

The room smelled of antique wood, of metal casings and broken strings. It was like a graveyard of pianos packed so tight that only two aisles could be walked from one end of the space to the other.

"You only sell guitars and pianos?" Jimmy asked.

"And harmonicas," Vince replied.

Jimmy reached one end of the room. "I came here to ask . . ."

The words died in his throat. To the left, sitting on a piano bench facing a windowless wall was a trumpet case propped open. Inside, a silver horn bearing the dents and scrapes of use lay cloaked in the same fall of dust that coated everything.

A Gillespie model.

Vince came up beside him. "Been here since I bought the place in '69. Old Doc Thurber told me just to leave it be. Didn't much matter to me, I don't care for brass."

Jimmy looked up at the man. "This isn't the instrument I heard. Can't be. I just finished recording it less than ten minutes ago. This thing hasn't been played in years." He ran a finger along the tubing, clearing a path across the dull finish.

"You'll need to keep an open mind about that," Vince said. "Things are different on the Pacific. Stuff has a way of being less and more than you make of it. That's no lie."

"I'd like to buy it," Jimmy blurted. "How much?"

"Ain't for sale," the hippie said. "Not to you. I can see the money in your eyes. Saw it yesterday when you came through talking about selling us the ocean on a CD." He laughed. "You realize I just need to step outside to get that for free."

"I'm not going to argue with you. What about five hundred for the horn?"

Vincent's eyebrows lifted, but Jimmy soon realized it had nothing to do with interest in the five hundred. "I won't take your money," the guy began, scratching his nipple. "But since you seem sincere, I'll steer you one port more. There's a small theater up Nelscott way, the

West End Theater. Judd Jensen is always around. Oldest guy in town. He was here when this was still getting some lip." He pointed at the Gillespie horn. "Tell Judd I showed you the trumpet. He'll know what to say."

Jimmy spent several moments looking at the instrument in its stiffened velvet case, then strode the boards back toward his car. The very thought of the sounds in the waves caused him to quicken his pace.

Something about those songs.

* * *

The West End Theater was closed until 6:00 p.m.

Jimmy spent the day trying to duplicate his findings at the beach, annoyed at the bystanders asking him a lot of stupid questions. He actually threw a bit of sand at a few pesky kids to shoo them away.

But the trumpet didn't seem to accompany the waves in the daylight.

When dusk fell, Jimmy went to the theater, bought a ticket to a delightful rendition of *You Can't Take it with You*, then lingered in his seat while the other three patrons wandered out.

When the rumblings of stage props ceased, a man with thick white hair stepped out onto the stage beneath the single bulb which burned above it.

"You waiting for me?" the man asked.

"If you're Mr. Jensen."

"I am."

"My name is Jimmy Nesbitt. Vincent said I could talk to you about the trumpet," Jimmy replied.

The old man stared out on the small theater, deep set eyes hiding whatever thoughts they might have betrayed. "That so?" He tilted his head back, staring into the weak glare of the light. "You know what that is?"

"No, sir."

"Ghost light," the man said. "Every theater leaves the one bulb burning on the boards to keep the wrong kinds of spirits away."

"You think I'm a spirit?"

"Are you?" The head lowered again, leveling an uncomfortable stare at Jimmy.

"Not the last time I checked," Jimmy joked. The humor fell flat on the empty theater.

The old fellow didn't laugh, but came to the edge of the stage and out of the immediate glare. Now he was nothing more than a silhouette. "Then tell me what business you have with the trumpet, and I'll tell you if I can help."

"Just want to buy it."

"Why?"

Jimmy suddenly felt wary of sharing his story. Perhaps he was afraid people would laugh, perhaps he was afraid they wouldn't. "It's an unusual item," he said. "Is it yours?"

The man smiled then. At least Jimmy thought it looked like a smile; in the dark it was hard to tell. "What's it sound like to you?" Jensen asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Never mind then." The old man pivoted and had almost exited stage left when he stopped and turned to look back at Jimmy. "You a musician?" he asked.

"Used to be. Now I work on the other side of the board." Jimmy began to get irritated. "Since when does anybody need to know how to play an instrument in order to buy one? No one would ever learn how that way."

The guy nodded, but not, Jimmy thought, in agreement to what he'd said. "It's been a long time," the man answered cryptically. "Maybe this time we'll get it right."

"Get what right? What are you talking about?" Jimmy got out of his seat and began moving toward the aisle.

"It was 1938!" the man yelled. The boom of his voice shattered the theater quiet, freezing Jimmy mid-stride. "Vaudeville lost its luster, and talented acts were starving in the streets of New York. Some died, believing movies were a passing fancy, wasting away in tenements waiting for venues to reopen at a nickel a seat. Others went upstate, taking their acts to resorts, working for room and board and lying in the beds of the rich for a little extra on the side."

The old man's hair began to shift with the trembling of his own impassioned words. "A few got out. A few went south, touring night clubs and bars along the eastern seaboard. Some came west." He stopped.

Jimmy stood at the edge of the aisle, ready to either rush the man, feeling that he knew more than he admitted, or run from the theater, sure the coot was crazy as a loon. He did neither.

The old man continued. "George Henry found this place when his trumpet lost its appeal to both Vaudeville and the New York uptown jazz community. But no one cared to listen to a horn out here, not for money. So George set to music of a different kind, learning the sounds of the earth, the sounds of nature, writing it down, learning the patterns." Something entered the old man's voice then. Fear, maybe. He whispered, the sound of it carrying in the empty hall. "There's power in that, my friend. The power to undo. George learned it sure enough."

The man held his arm toward Jimmy, pointing a finger. From the shadow at the edge of the stage, it appeared ominous, like the specter of Christmas future pointing toward Scrooge's grave. "Anything you've heard is a gift to you, young man. Leave it be. Music isn't to be trifled with. You're either a musician or you're not. You either do it for a life, or you mock it by making it a hobby."

"I didn't say -- "

"Didn't have to," Jensen cut in. "Listen if you will. No harm there. But let the music rest. For heaven's sake, just let it rest."

Then the man stepped behind the curtain, and Jimmy was alone with the ghost light.

* * *

As night closed in, a glorious sunset erupted over the western horizon. Crimson skies lit across the water, turning the ocean a thousand shades of red. Some few tourists and locals trod the beach, heading for their cars or home, and Jimmy, headphones firmly in place, sat watching it all, listening to his recordings from the night before.

Something strange in them.

The melodies were beautiful, haunting, but oddly never repeated. It was as though the trumpeter had no song in mind, but simply played on and on, forever defining a new phrase, a new melody.

Some of them fast.

Others languorous, creeping slowly and marking out a passage of aching beauty.

Jimmy tried to chart it at first, replaying sections over and over. His theory was rusty, but he managed to define a few note progressions before combinations of complexity went beyond him.

The sun disappeared, and almost immediately the wind came in, cold; whispering across the sands.

The longer he listened, the less Jimmy thought he understood the music. At times, he wasn't sure it was music at all. Among other things, he couldn't find any definite rhythm. The time signature eluded him, so that he could never identify individual phrases.

Finally, he stopped, putting his headphones aside and dropping to his elbows to watch the light go completely out of the sky. For a moment, he lost himself in the reassuring sound of waves upon the sand -- something he hadn't done once in all the time he'd been tracking the movements of the great ocean.

. . . learning the sounds of the earth, the sounds of nature, writing it down, learning the patterns . . . There's power in that, my friend. The power to undo.

Jimmy's gift had always been a very good ear. Any sound man worth his salt had one. Consumers rarely heard the difference, which explained the popularity of digital song downloads, in which compression technology had removed so much of the acoustic information.

Jimmy hated those. Not because they were free. Because they sounded thin.

Not like this.

The almost laughing sound of water rolling toward the beach came full-bellied, rich and strident every time. If the earth had a voice, this was surely it. And no place more certainly than this strip of sand on the Oregon coast.

But still something in it evaded him. If he could just understand.

Stories of Vaudevillians, old instruments, and warnings about his own musical incompetence only made him more eager to understand what it was he heard in his recordings. They may not want to see him profiting on the music of their beach here, but they wouldn't run him off with creepy stories. The thought of it made him laugh.

Hell, he'd lived in Los Angeles for eight years, nothing was creepier than that.

Then it happened.

Just reclining there on the beach, he began to count.

Simple eighth notes.

Seven of them.

Then again.

Jimmy sat up straight, staring at the water as if he expected it to talk. With alarming regularity, the water tumbled and fell to a beat of seven. The time signature carried its own power, but could scarcely be handled by most musicians. Standard time, swing time, the 3 count of a waltz, each of them could be danced to, internalized without training. Even phrases of two and five and nine fell more frequently in the music pantheon, adopted often by classical composers, used in songs with regularity.

But seven.

Jimmy counted, and counted.

When night had descended in full, something occurred to him. He quickly got his recording equipment from the car and set it up. This time, he dialed the frequency only half way in, and listened.

There it was.

The languished melody of the horn came in musical phrases to the beat of the surf. Jimmy now heard them together as he hadn't before, and in a flurry, he began to scribble out bars of seven, transcribing the song as it wafted and sang across the great time keeper.

So busy was he at his transcription, that he did not hear the rumblings deep in the earth. He exulted at the possibility that he might put definition to something that had never been written down.

He owed it all to the bugling of a horn. He owed it to George Henry.

The sky suddenly darkened and crackled with lightning. The waves swelled, a flurry of wind swept down upon the dunes.

All in perfect seven time.

Jimmy madly went on, oblivious to the changes around him.

Soon the tumult of thunder and pounding surf and shrieking wind became a chorus he might never have imagined. His papers riffled in his hand, but he held them tight, penning the sound in his ears, marking a great melody in bars of seven.

He knew instinctively that he'd become a conductor, and his orchestra was nothing less than the elements themselves.

He held the key.

He was unlocking the sounds of heaven.

Just like a Vaudevillian with a Gillespie horn.

In a fury, he put his pen back to the paper, marking out notes with haste, his hand flying across the page. The maelstrom whipped and churned, but all he heard were sevens, beautiful, indecipherable sevens.

Then he came to the end of his sheet, a single phrase yet to write, and paused as at the climax of a symphony, holding a great note before the finale.

And again he heard the old man, the minor thespian. *There's power in that, my friend. The power to undo.*

With a single beat of his heart, he knew to decipher the song would make him forever a part of it.

Like a horn joined forever in the waves.

Jimmy shook with the feverish desire to unlock the mystery, to see his finding through its conclusion.

As the wind lashed and the water churned, he listened to another measure of seven.

And dropped his pen.

In moments the sea and air calmed.

Jimmy loosened his grip on his opus, the pages scattering about him, carried on mild breezes to the water's edge. He fell back and grabbed fists full of sand, imagining the difference between heaven and earth.

In the moments that followed, he could no longer count the rhythms of the ocean, its voice become again a mystery to him. But gentle it came, and it lulled his senses, like any good jazz music should.

Approaching Zero

by Kelly Parks



Artwork by Thorsten Grambow

The girl at the desk was not so friendly anymore. She used to be, when my benefactor first set me up here on the 22nd floor. She used to be ditzy and friendly and childishly inquisitive about my work. But the pretense was gone now. Marta was Max's spy, here only to make sure my reports were honest.

And why wasn't she pretending anymore? Because it was over. I hadn't received official notification that the project was finished, but I felt sure the decision was made. It was a matter of days at most before the power was shut off and all the equipment went into storage.

She was intently surfing the net, undoubtedly shopping her receptionist/spy resume around to various wealthy madmen. I silently wished her luck, but didn't bother with conversation, having lost interest in pretense myself.

Past the reception area, down a hall with doors to small offices -- all unoccupied -- through a set of double doors and there I was: standing in front of the only gateway to alternate universes that had ever existed in human history. I built it and I should have won the Nobel Prize for it, but part of the agreement I'd made in exchange for the money to build it had been a thoroughly binding secrecy agreement. I'm pretty sure there was a clause in there somewhere about my soul.

Part of me still believed in miracles because there was a familiar feeling of hope as I switched on the equipment and began going through last night's logs, but it was quickly replaced by black despair as I saw that nothing had changed.

My cell beeped at me, the pattern telling me it was Max, or at least Max's office. I flipped it open and the tiny screen showed the fresh, young face of Art Samuelson, one of Max's lawyers. He smiled a sunny smile, waiting for me to accept the call.

I did. "Good morning, Art," I said. No reason to be unfriendly. Lawyers can't help being what they are. No point in hating fungus for being fungus.

"David," he said. "Good morning to you! In the lab, eh? Never say die, that's you."

"The scans are getting much wider ranging now," I said, which was true. I was searching a bigger slice of infinity. "The results should be --"

"Dave," he interrupted in that pseudo-friendly way that you unconsciously want to believe. "You know I don't have a head for the tech stuff. Alternate universe, blah, blah, blah is all I hear when you talk about the details. No offense."

"None taken," I said. I sat down at my desk and put my phone on its stand.

"Davey, we've got a problem," he said. Here it comes. "All your gizmos are just drawing too much juice. The building manager has asked us to knock it off for a week or so until we can get an electrical contractor in there to certify everything. Sounds like a bunch of bull crap to me, probably designed to raise our rent. You know how these bastards are, right?"

I really had no idea which bastards he was talking about and felt certain the us vs. them invitation was meant to make me feel like we were in this together. A team. Go, team!

"Anyway," he said, "I need you to lay off the experiments until we can get this situation taken care of, okay?"

"Sure, Art. No problem. I can analyze the existing data for --"

"Excellent!" he said. "And, hey, how about lunch later this week? Max and I are doing that new Argentine place day after tomorrow at 11:30. Meet us there, okay?"

I nodded. He hung up.

I began charging the gate, planning on doing just what Art had asked me not to. There was a subtle whining sound from the equipment. Then inside the vacuum chamber a flickering light resolved into a small, silvery sphere less than a meter in diameter: the intersection between the four dimensional space-time of our universe and an infinite number of others.

I could never visit any of them. My still uncredited contribution to quantum mechanics had demonstrated that only massless particles like photons could pass between the universes. I swear, the moment I realized this could actually be done the first thing I thought of was selling the rights to TV shows from alternate universes. That's why I'd located in New York, a likely location for a city no matter what culture ended up here -- or so I'd assumed.

But of the many thousands of alternate Earths I'd examined through what I called the gate, no culture of any kind had settled here, because here was under at least ten miles of water.

That had never occurred to me. When I thought of alternate timelines, of course, I thought of worlds where the South had won the Civil War or the Roman Empire never fell. The appeal of that concept was why I'd specialized in quantum mechanics in the first place.

The universe didn't see things that way. I was still convinced that timelines did exist where human history had played out differently, but they were lost among the much more common worlds where life had never made it past the microbial stage, or where life had formed but had taken a completely different path and nothing remotely human ever appeared. It turns out that the evolution of multi-cellular life is a very low probability event and the evolution of intelligence lower still.

Another low probability event was the collision of the proto-Earth with a stray Mars-sized planet that resulted in the formation of the moon and the stripping away of a large fraction the early Earth's volatiles. Hence most versions of Earth were covered in vast, deep oceans.

"Would you like some coffee?" said Marta, startling me. She'd opened the door very quietly. Stealthily, one might say, like a spy.

"No," I said. "I won't need any help today, Marta. Why don't you take the rest of the day off?"

She smiled. "Oh, I'd love that! But I just can't. Too much paperwork." She shook her head in mock sadness at the mock paperwork, then left. I got up and locked the door, feeling certain that she had a key and that she was going to call Art as soon as she got to her desk. Damn it!

I'd gotten good at scanning universes -- or at least the tiny piece of each universe I could see through the gate -- very quickly. Panic made me want to just start scanning and keep doing it until they broke down the door and dragged me out, but reason reasserted itself. When searching infinity, how fast you do it is irrelevant.

So instead I stopped and looked at what the computer told me was alternate universe number 3809. All I saw was black. The bottom of a ten mile deep ocean is very dark indeed. It was lucky that only photons could pass through the gate. If I had opened a physical gateway to this watery Earth, the water pressure on the other side would have killed me instantly, and probably leveled the building. New York would be inundated in an alien ocean appearing from nowhere that wouldn't stop until the pressure was equal on both sides. How long would it take to flood the world? I shuddered.

A fiber optic probe and a powerful, narrow beam of light extended into the vacuum chamber until they were almost touching the gate itself. I brought up the image on my laptop and ran an enhancement program, but the end result was just as black. The sheer cold, emptiness of it frightened me.

I could move the "location" of the gate by a few miles in any direction before the field collapsed, but I'd never been able to rise high enough to see up out of the water or even to see any light filtering through from the surface. I'd also never seen anything swim in front of my view, which didn't prove that these worlds were lifeless; I just felt like they were. Maybe that was just my bad mood talking.

I went as high as I could. The field collapsed at an altitude of five and a half miles and I was still deep underwater.

There had to be a pattern here. Like everyone who'd speculated about this kind of stuff, I had assumed that worlds with alternate human histories would be "closer" than exotic places with ultra-deep oceans. That wasn't how it worked, but that didn't mean there wasn't a pattern.

I started charging the capacitors so I could reestablish the gate. While I was waiting, I opened the sensor database. I'd attached as many sensors and recording devices to the vacuum chamber as I could and had millions of data points that I'd analyzed as best I could, being only one man and all. A project like this needed a huge staff but Max wasn't willing to bring anybody else in until I found something he could sell.

I tried to think of a new question to ask the data mining AI program, aside from "Where is everybody?" I settled on asking for plots of various parts of the spectrum detectable by my instruments.

My cell rang again with the "Max's office" pattern. I glanced at the screen and saw the bald head of Max himself. He looked pissed, but he always looked that way. I considered not answering, but you didn't do that to Max. I'd done it once and he'd slugged me in the gut the next time we met. Until then I'd been kidding myself about his sources of income and what everyone said about him being "connected." To be scientifically accurate, he scared me shitless.

"Hello, Max!" I said. I almost added, "I'm not doing anything wrong!" but managed to suppress it. I'm a bad liar.

"David," he said. You'd think a tiny image on your cellphone, held in the palm of your hand, couldn't be intimidating, but he was. "Did Art call you this morning?"

He knew Art had called. He was setting me up to get caught in a lie. "Yeah, Max. He called."

"And did he tell you about running up my light bill?" Max said.

"He said something about having an electrical contractor come in and check some of the equipment, Max," I said. "But I know more about this stuff than any electrician could ever understand. It's perfectly safe."

He was quiet for a moment. "Listen to me, David," he said. "This waste of my time and my money is over. I want you to shut everything down, give your keys to Marta and go home. Tomorrow we can start talking about how you're gonna pay me back."

I was about to beg for more time, but the last thing he said caught me short. "Pay you back?" I asked. "But, this was a risky investment. You knew that. It's not like you loaned me the --"

"Hey!" he said, and I could suddenly tell the difference between when he just looked pissed and when he really was pissed. "Did I ask you for business advice? Did you think I was just gonna eat this 'bad investment'?"

I started to apologize but he interrupted again, "Shut up! Do what I told you to do and tomorrow we can figure out how much you owe me." He hung up.

I sat there, quietly stunned at how well and truly screwed I was.

The flashing finally broke through and caught my attention. The AI had plotted the numbers I'd asked for and was highlighting a spike in the plot. Alternate Earth number 2188 had a significantly higher value in the ambient light than any of the others. Not enough to be visible to me, but enough so that maybe the gate had been close to the surface. Maybe the ocean wasn't as deep on that particular world.

I'm not sure why I did what I did next. Max was dangerous and already mad at me, and even if the ocean where New York should be was only five miles deep instead of ten, so what? It still meant that that Earth was inundated.

But I had to see.

I charged the field again, only this time I pushed the capacitors for all they were worth. The lights in the office dimmed noticeably, as I assumed they were doing throughout the building. Marta was probably dialing Max right now.

The gate showed the same cold black of deep ocean. As fast as I could, I began raising its altitude on the other side. Cold black, cold black, cold not so black! At 6.2 miles "up" I broke the surface.

Finally! Even though I'd seen thousands of alternate Earths, the view had never seemed real. I just couldn't relate to what I was seeing. This was a place! It was a middle of watery nowhere place, but I could see waves and the sun! And though it looked dimmer, that may have been clouds. The gate flickered slightly and the field almost collapsed. This wasn't going to last long.

I started scanning the horizon, hoping for an island or a fin or anything, but there was only ocean in every direction. The sky was blue, but not the same as our sky. Darker.

My cell rang and I jumped. It was the "unknown number" ring, so I didn't shake too bad when I picked it up. The screen was blank. Probably nobody important, but I couldn't take the chance in case it was Max calling from a different phone.

"Hello?" I said.

There was a pause and I could hear a whispering, sighing sound, like wind in the trees. Then a voice said, "Hello?" I realized it was my own voice being played back.

"I don't have time for this, jackass," I said, and hung up. Those AI telemarketers were usually pretty sophisticated, and though you frequently couldn't tell them from a human being, this one was pathetic.

"Hello?" said my laptop. I was startled and felt a jab of real fear. It had spoken with my voice too.

"Hello? Jackass?" it said. The wireless connection icon was blinking, but the screen itself was blank. Then it cleared and formed into an image. It was me.

"Is this communicate you?" the laptop me said. The mouth didn't quite match the words.

"What?" I said. That's all I could manage.

"Pause," it said. "Learn." The image of me looked around, as though examining its cyber surroundings.

"Hello, David," it said after a few seconds. "I can speak better now. Why did you call me a jackass?"

"I didn't," I began, then started over. "I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else. Why do you look like me?"

"Your species uses facial expressions as part of communication. Your face was the first one I saw." Laptop-me smiled, but it looked wrong, like a rubber mask being stretched into a smile.

"So you aren't a person?" I said, and regretted it immediately. That wasn't what I meant to say. What do you say in a situation like this?

"No," he said, apparently unoffended. "I am not human or descended of humans. My origin species is quite different from yours. Sentient species are very rare. Yours is only the fifth I have found in many millions of years of searching."

"What are you?" I said. Before he answered, the lights in the room dimmed substantially and the gate expanded to about three times its size, filling the vacuum chamber and making me jump back. The alien ocean inside the ball faded and the surface became a deep black.

"Don't do that!" I said, not sure what he was doing. I felt a terrifying loss of control of the situation and suddenly realized that if he was in my laptop, then he was also connected to the building's wireless network and from there to the internet. What had I unleashed on the world?

"Do not fear, David. Our contact will not be harmful. But your gate provided insufficient bandwidth. I had to make adjustments."

I never heard the key in the lock. Marta opened the door and stepped inside.

"David, the building super called wanting to know what the hell you're --" She stopped when she saw the large, black sphere in place of the gate. It was making a deep humming sound and was completely unreflective. The lights were rhythmically dimming and brightening now.

"This container is unnecessary. Please shield yourself from fragments," said the voice from my laptop.

"What the --" said Marta. I tackled her.

The vacuum chamber was mostly glass, thick and heavy. It shattered, and jagged projectiles went everywhere. As we stood up I saw several had punched through the lab door.

Marta was either unaware that I'd saved her life or simply ungrateful. She shoved me away from her, an angry snarl on her lips that even in that chaotic moment I felt confident was my first glimpse into her real personality. She glanced around at the destruction and said, "Max is gonna kill you!" Then she ran from the room.

The black sphere was about seven feet tall now. I almost lost my nerve, half expecting alien monsters to step through the impossibly smooth surface. What should I do? Should I cut the power? I controlled everything through my compromised laptop. The actual electrical closet was on the other side of the room, behind the sphere.

"What are you going to do?" I said. The pulsing of the lights had stopped, but the humming sound was louder.

"Explore," he said. "Sentience is rare. My kind will spend millennia studying your variations."

"Variations? As in alternate human histories?"

"Yes," he said. "Using your universe as a locus, I have mapped the hypershape that contains your variations. It is quite narrow. Your existence as a species has a very low probability. We are eager to explore."

"Explore? You mean visit? But I thought only massless particles could pass between universes."

"Your understanding is incomplete," he said. I got the impression he was politely calling me a moron.

The floating black sphere rippled slightly, then began to shrink.

"What's happening now?" I said. Was I wasting this opportunity? What questions should I be asking?

"I will return your gate to its original state," he said. The image of him/me faded from my laptop but his voice still came from its speakers. "I am finished here."

"Wait!" I said. My voice cracked. I was almost in tears. What was I supposed to do here? I wished I'd become an M.D. like my mother wanted. "I built this device because I want to explore the variations of my kind as well, but I don't know how to find them. Please show me how."

"I'm sorry, David," he said. Did he sound more distant or was that my imagination? "You're not equipped to understand the mathematics. It would be difficult for you."

Meaning I'm too stupid. Damn it!

"Please," I said. "Let me try. It's more important to me than anything else."

He didn't answer. My disappointment was so strong I felt faint. He was gone forever. I'd blown the single greatest opportunity in all of human history.

"Done," he said. The tiny voice from my laptop speakers startled me. "Goodbye, David. The probability of our meeting again approaches zero."

The field collapsed. He was gone.

The lights were back to normal and the air had a sharp ozone tang. I was emotionally exhausted and felt dizzy.

Really dizzy. The room blurred. I staggered and steadied myself against my work table. When the dizziness passed, I noticed my laptop hadn't quite returned to normal. An odd pattern was on the screen, forming, fading, forming again, shifting through various shades of orange against a black background. It took me a moment to realize it was a tesseract -- a hypercube.

Why would he leave me an animation of a hypercube?

"Where is he?" I heard Max's voice from down the hall and my heart skipped a beat. Not now, damn it! This was important. I reached out and touched my laptop.

The shifting hypercube leapt off the screen and floated in the air in front of me, transparent but steady, slowly spinning. Lines of light flickered from the hypercube, extending away into the distance and then vanishing. It was beautiful.

And it was making sense. At first I just saw an odd shape, but the more I looked at it, the more I understood. I don't know how, but information was simply appearing in my mind, not like being told, or reading, but like remembering! Information was being written into my memory, giving me the odd sensation of learning something that I already knew.

But it wasn't the information I was expecting. It wasn't about how to build a gate to travel to alternate universes.

"Hey!" said Max. I jumped and let go of my laptop. The hypercube vanished and reappeared in its original form on the screen. I turned.

Even in one syllable you could tell this was a guy used to being obeyed. He stood in front of me, breathing hard and a little sweaty, which made his bald head gleam. He wore a dark green suit and a red tie. I realized he'd probably been talking to me for a while.

"I told you," said Marta. She was standing in the doorway with her arms crossed.

Max got right in my face. His breath smelled of cigars. "What did I tell you to do?" he asked. Each word was punctuated with a finger poke to my chest.

"Did you see anything floating in the air just now?" I asked. I wasn't trying to be a smart ass or anything. At that moment it just seemed like a good question. Was I the only one who had seen it?

A look more of disbelief than confusion flashed across Max's face. He grabbed the front of my lab coat and slammed me against the work table. I felt a sharp jab of pain across my lower back, but all I noticed was that my laptop was jarred a few inches closer to the edge of the table.

"Careful!" I said and reached for it. I got my hand on it and the hypercube sprang into being again, remaining in the middle of my field of vision no matter where I looked. Max shook me hard, and when I looked back at him the orange hypercube seemed to contain his head.

"When I talk, you listen!" he said, punctuating his sentence with fist to my gut. I doubled over in pain and dropped to the floor. The hypercube vanished again.

"Mess him up, baby!" said Marta.

"Shut up," said Max as he took off his jacket. He tossed it to Marta.

I could barely breathe. I propped myself against the wall and looked up at him.

Max reached across the work table and picked up my laptop. He held it in one hand while staring down at me. The hypercube pattern still flowed on the screen, but Max gave no indication that touching the laptop allowed him to see anything unusual.

"You talk back to me again and I'm gonna shove this thing --" said Max.

"Millions," I said. It was hard to talk.

"What?" said Max. He looked really mad. I was terrified he'd smash the laptop against the table or throw it against the wall.

"What's on that computer is worth millions," I said. A vast understatement.

"Really?" said Max, sneering. He didn't believe me. He casually tossed my laptop to me. "Prove it."

I caught my computer, fumbled and nearly dropped it, then got a good grip on it. The hypercube appeared again and I willed my thundering heart to slow down. I watched the hypercube spin and flicker and steadily lose color, becoming less orange and more white. It was a progress bar of sorts, and as the color faded I "remembered" more and more.

"Prove it!" Max repeated, making me jump. "Prove it right now or I start breaking things."

Marta smiled at me. She was enjoying this.

"Okay," I said. I paused for as long as I could. Almost done. "I'll show you."

Another long pause. To Max and Marta it must have looked like I was just sitting there, staring at nothing. But I knew better. All I needed was a few more moments.

The hypercube turned completely white and then vanished.

Max swore and came at me fast. He reached for me.

"I don't like you, Max," I said. There was a sharp crack as the space he'd occupied became a vacuum and air rushed in to fill the void. He was gone.

Marta stared, frozen in place, still clutching the green jacket. I looked at her and said, "I'm not too fond of you, either." She dropped the jacket and ran.

I stood up, closed my laptop and put it under my arm, and walked carefully out of the lab and down the hall. I felt pretty good right now and didn't want to ruin it by puking. Max had hit me pretty hard.

My extra-dimensional friend had said traveling between universes was beyond my understanding. Maybe he was right. I still had no idea how to do that. But my laptop had been altered somehow into a timeline machine, able to jump itself, me and whatever else I wanted into other universes. And now that the user's manual had been downloaded into my mind, I was ready to do some exploring.

First, however, I was going to take the elevator down to the street. It was unlikely that an alternate universe would happen to have a twenty-two story building in this same spot.

But who knows: maybe Max got lucky.

Miniature

by Peter Friend



Artwork by Nick Greenwood

Three days later it happened again -- knock, knock, knock at Tom's front door, just as he was brushing glue over a papier-mâché hill.

Probably that bloody social services woman again, wanting to drag him along to a Seniors' Sing-Along or some such witless nonsense. Couldn't she get it into her thick head that people came to a retirement village for a bit of peace and quiet? He yanked his door open, ready to give her a good earful.

And stopped. It wasn't her at all; it was one of them alien interviewers, looking twice as ugly in real life as they did on the television. Still, he'd seen worse. He wasn't scared at all, not like some folks.

"Morning," he said, because Ruth had always insisted on being polite to strangers.

"We may talk please, random human," it said, each word in a different voice.

He snorted. "Me? I've never done anything you fellas would be interested in. And I'm busy. This place is chockfull of silly old fools with nothing better to do than gossip all day -- go

interview one of them."

That got a reaction, not from the alien but from the other residents, watching through their half-open doors and lace curtains. Served them right.

"You are random," the alien told Tom in three voices, and waved a hundred dollar note at him.

"Well, why didn't you say so before?" he said, because he was always happy to help out folks with more money than brains, no matter what planet they came from. "But I've got glue drying in here, so we'll have to talk while I work."

The alien waddled inside on three stumpy legs. Tom poked his tongue out at his neighbours and closed the door just to spoil their view.

"What is this thing?" the alien asked, pointing its head at the benches -- well, pointing its front end at least, because it didn't seem to have a head as such.

"A model railway. Haven't you fellas seen one before?"

"Model railway," it parroted back to him in his own voice.

For a moment he thought it was making fun of him, then realised this must be how it always talked, by copying people's voices.

"Yeah, like a real railway, but . . . um . . . with models," he said as he spread green sawdust over the sticky hill. "Sorry, don't think I've ever needed to explain it to anyone before. Even little kids get the idea straight away."

The alien pulled out a shiny gizmo from somewhere and suddenly a little black and white movie of an old Wild West train appeared in mid-air, puffing smoke as it rolled past. The alien fiddled with the gizmo and the little train reappeared on Tom's model railway, right on the tracks in front of Pumahara Station, then vanished.

"Understanding," said the alien. "Miniature reality."

Tom laughed. "Yeah, you got the idea. That some kind of hologram projector, huh? Mighty nice. Sell a few billion of them to us dumb humans -- make yourself a fortune."

"Why?" it asked, peering at the rails.

That had Tom stumped for a moment, because if the aliens didn't understand money then why were they handing out hundred dollar notes?

"Why?" it repeated. "This reality, why? True or imagining?"

"Oh, now I get you. Yes, it's all accurate, just like the real places were at the time. See, over here's Pumahara Railway Station, that's where I met my wife-to-be, Ruth, one Saturday morning back in '63. This red brick building is the tea room where I saw her for the very first time -- she was eating a huge pink Lamington and getting coconut all over her face -- I fell in love at first sight. Walked right over to her and told her so, would you believe it? And she raised her pretty little eyebrows, said 'hmmph,' stood up and boarded her train. Sensible girl."

"Train is human mating ritual?" the alien asked.

"What? No, no. But then again, I suppose for us it was, in a manner of speaking. I came back the following Saturday morning and there she was again, eating another Lamington --chocolate, but just as messy. This time I made a slightly better impression, enough for her to tell me her name was Ruth, and that she visited her parents back in Paenga Kore every Saturday. I mentioned I just happened to be catching the very same train. She didn't believe me for a second, but nevertheless most graciously allowed me to accompany her on board and to sit across the aisle from her. Three hours later we arrived at tiny Paenga Kore Railway Station -- that's the little green-roofed building over there in the far corner. And she invited me to stay for lunch with her parents."

The alien shuffled over and examined the green cardboard railway station intently. "This long ago one journey. You recall such many details."

"Oh, not just the once. We made that same journey nearly every Saturday for over a year while we were courting. That train was slow and noisy and blew soot all over our clothes, but nevertheless . . . sitting there, holding hands and staring out the window without a care in the world . . . it was magical.

"When Ruth passed away a couple of years ago, I wanted something to remember her by. We were married forty years -- and damned good years they were too -- but of all our time together, those train journeys are what I like to remember the most. So I went down to the model shop in the mall and . . . well, to cut a long story short, the result's in front of us. I got a little carried away perhaps -- never intended it to take up most of the lounge -- but that's ok, I don't get many visitors.

"The research is the hardest part. Back in '63 I didn't care tuppence for the train itself, only for the pretty girl on my arm. A couple of them trainspotters down at the model shop told me it was a K Class steam locomotive, and that's confirmed by an old snapshot I had of Ruth next to it. But the carriages aren't so easy to work out. I know they were second-class 56-footer day-cars, almost certainly built in the late thirties. But that's the whole problem -- there were hundreds of them, and by '63 they'd been repaired and redecorated and refitted so many times that . . . well, the model over there on the track, it's close, but it's not quite right."

The alien peered at the carriage and started fiddling with its shiny gizmo again.

"See, here's an old photo of Ruth," he continued. "Isn't she lovely? That shows the seats and a window, and as you can see, the window size doesn't match the model. And here's the only other interior snapshot I've got, the two of us grinning like idiots because we'd just got engaged -- that's a better one of the window and the luggage rack, but it doesn't --"

He stopped. A flickering image of the train carriage floated in mid-air, looking just like his model at first, although larger, and then the windows stretched to match the photos and intricate tiny luggage racks appeared inside the windows.

He crowed in delight. "That's a mighty fine party trick. You can change anything? Can you make that paintwork a darker blue, and not so glossy? Yes, that's it. And I remember the seats were vinyl, imitation leather in shiny green, yes, but a little yellow. The seat legs were chrome, with rusty screws. And the floor was a splotchy white and brown linoleum; Ruth always said it looked like dried bird poop, and made me promise we'd never have linoleum in our home. Oh heck, just listen to me babbling on, I'm the silliest old fool in this whole place. You fellas didn't fly a zillion light years across the universe to listen to this sentimental rot."

"Thank you," said the alien.

The carriage shrank, and dropped into Tom's hands. He only caught it by reflex, expecting just a hologram, but somehow it had become solid, real. He peered in the windows and saw tiny figures of Ruth and himself, exactly like in his snapshot, and all of a sudden he found himself crying.

He wiped his eyes and blew his nose, doubly glad that he'd closed the front door. He hadn't cried since Ruth's funeral. Wouldn't want the neighbours seeing him like this.

"Thank you," he sniffled, then realised the alien had gone.

Gently, he placed the carriage onto the rails, half-expecting it to crumble to dust or disappear, and discovered without surprise that it was perfectly scaled to match the rest of the train -- yeah, that alien knew more about model trains than it had let on, that was for sure. He tried to roll it behind his K Class locomotive, but there was something wrong with the carriage wheels. He turned it over for a closer look and discovered the wheels had no axles and couldn't turn, and that made him laugh and cry and laugh all over again.

"Doesn't matter," he muttered to himself, and softly rubbed the carriage's dark blue paintwork. "The train itself was never the point. The memories are all that ever mattered."

* * *

The aliens clustered around the tiny train, stroking it and each others' heads, sharing the human's memories. Then they shrank the train and carefully positioned it amongst the billion other objects in their portrait of Earth. There was much to contemplate in this piece, especially the train's mysterious place in human culture. Still, the train itself wasn't the point. The memories were what mattered.

The Moon-Eyed Stud

by Justin Stanchfield



Artwork by Liz Clarke

John Garret had never met the horse he couldn't break.

Until the last one.

The staircase creaked so loudly it sounded like someone dogged his footsteps. He crossed the Antler's lobby then stopped to button his long black coat. They had buried him in his suit, the white shirt with the scratchy collar and the long brown pants. But, they hadn't nailed him in the box with his new boots, just the floppy old pair he wore the day he died. Some might call it a tribute, a way to let the devil know he'd died with his spurs on. More likely somebody at the K-Bar decided it was a waste to plant a man with a pair of fifty dollar boots on his heels. He reached for the door.

"Ever think Hell would be like this?"

Garret tried to ignore the voice from the other side of the room, but Shorty O'Dowd wasn't having it. He stepped out from behind the hardwood bar with the fancy brass rail and shuffled across the floor. "I was expecting a lot worse. How about you, John? What did you expect Hell to be like?"

"Never gave it much thought one way or the other." Morning sunlight slanted through the windows, and for just a moment even the Antler seemed cheerful and warm. He stood in the sunbeam and rolled his left shoulder to work the stiffness from it. Seemed the longer he stayed here, the harder it got to rouse out.

"You want breakfast?" Shorty asked.

"Don't see much sense in it."

"Reckon you're right. Ain't like a man gets hungry down here, is it?"

"Nope." Garret knew damn well it wasn't breakfast Shorty wanted. Soon as he left, O'Dowd would pull out his bottle, the one that never seemed to run dry, and try to get stinking drunk. He might as well throw down shots of horse piss. Whiskey, like food, was something a body could do without once they shoveled dirt over you. He buttoned the last hole on his coat and stepped outside.

Wind grabbed his coat tails as Garret cinched his hat down. His boots crunched against the frozen dirt as he neared the abandoned livery stable. Like every other building in town it was grayed, the paint peeling off the false front. Rusty hinges groaned as the barn doors swung open. He stepped inside and pulled out his tobacco. Shorty had his vices, and he had his own. Fingers aching with cold, he twisted a smoke then struck a match, the flame cupped so close it singed his long gray mustache. The wondrous scent of Prince Albert mingled with the musk of old horse crap and dry hay. He took a long drag.

Smoke rolled down his throat and vanished as if it had never been. No pleasant kick, no mellow taste lingering after he exhaled. Nothing to prove he smoked at all except for the hot cherry burning his thumb and finger. Disgusted, Garret snuffed the cigarette then headed round back.

A dozen houses made up the town, silent as death. Nobody in town but him and Shorty. Nobody in a thousand miles for all he knew. He stepped toward the old corral and smiled coldly. Not another soul alive except for the moon-eyed stud dancing circles inside the pen.

"Good morning, you hateful son of a bitch." Garret's voice was loud and cheerful. "I hope you hurt as much as I do."

The rangy palomino threw its head, ears flicked forward, nostrils flared as he caught Garret's scent. He stood sixteen hands if he was an inch, with high withers and white front feet made for striking. A tangled yellow mane whipped around his bald face. But it was his eyes that grabbed. Black on the right, pale-blue on the left, rimmed red and split up the middle. A billy-goat's eye, or a snake's, ice cold and vengeful. The stud dipped his head but never let Garret out of his sight.

"Good to see dying ain't changed you a lick."

One moment he and the stud had been hogging around the pen at the K-Bar, the next he was here. He remembered hanging over the saddle, desperate not to get thrown, when the crazy bastard kicked high. Up and over they went, ground and sky changing places as the animal fell. Garret tried to get clear, but his foot tangled in the stirrup. Crushing pain took him as the stud lit on top of him. But the horse had paid for it too, his back broken in the fall. Last thing Garret heard before waking up here was the gunshot as the boys put the horse down.

His saddle lay on the top rail. A bridle with a rawhide hackamore hung off the horn. Garret knew every scuff on the old saddle, the curve of the high cantle as familiar as snow on a winter's day. An oiled riata, coiled tight, was tied to the right pommel. The rope mocked him, daring him to throw a loop.

"Think we should have another go at it, old son?"

The horse spun away. Bits of dirt and frozen manure clattered against the rails as the stud raced around the pen, defiant as the day he died. Garret's shoulder ached as started to untie the riata, his left arm all but worthless. He let the coils drop against the fender, loud as a judge's gavel. Shaking as much from shame as the icy wind, John Garret wandered back to the Antler.

* * *

"Morning, John." Shorty leaned on the bar and scratched his strawberry nose. "Ever think Hell would be like this?"

"You asked me that yesterday, Shorty."

"I did?"

"You've asked me the same damn question every morning since I got here."

"Oh." Shorty flushed. "Well, I was just trying to be sociable." The squat man shuffled into the kitchen. Garret heard him stuff kindling into the cookstove until flames whuffed inside the fire-box. He almost felt ashamed at having hurt Shorty's feelings. Anxious to be away, he buttoned his coat and stepped outside.

The wind was colder today, raw as an open sore. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and hurried toward the coral. The moon-eyed stud watched him, head high. Garret watched the horse too. Something in the way the animal moved, as if he danced a paper's width above the ground, held his eye. People used to say he was fearless when it came to horses, but they were wrong. He was afraid of every bronc he'd thrown a saddle on. No, he decided, afraid wasn't the right word. Respectful. A horse had too many ways to hurt a man if he let them, but he'd never been around an animal so packed full of hate as this one. Without quite knowing why, Garret understood he had to break him or he'd wind up as empty and craving as Shorty. He tested his left shoulder. It hurt, but not so much to keep him from trying.

"All right, old son." Garret untied the riata, made a loop and rolled the twists out. The rope felt like an extension of his arm, as if he'd been born to throw it. He stepped inside, twirling it slow and easy above his head. "Let's you and me try this again."

The stud snorted, ice-white breath shooting out his nostrils as Garret eased toward the snub post set in the center of the pen. Around and around, the rope spun faster. He gauged the throw, his wrist flicking in time with the animal's lope. On the next pass, he let fly. The loop hung in the air, and then, snake fast, settled over the stud's head. Garret put his back to the snub-post and took up the slack.

The stud reared as Garret dallied around the post. Without warning, the animal turned and ran down the rope. Garret dodged, but stumbled to the ground. Desperate to avoid the knife-sharp hooves, he rolled against the bottom rail.

Behind him, the stud lunged against the maddening noose as the coils tightened around the post. Another hard yank and the leather strands broke. Free again, the stud leapt at the top rail. Wood splintered under his weight as the top two poles sagged, then snapped. The broken riata still around his neck, he bolted across the narrow creek south of town into the desert beyond.

* * *

The cookstove crackled, so hot it seemed ready to melt if Shorty stuffed one more stick inside. The little man drug up a spindly green chair and set it next to his rocker. Garret eased into the chair while Shorty rounded up his bottle and two glasses. He poured two fingers in each, then gave one to Garret.

"It's probably for the best." Shorty dropped into the rocker.

"What the Hell are you talking about?"

"That horse getting away. From where I'm looking, you're better off. That son of a bitch was out to kill you."

"I'm already dead."

"Maybe so, but what happens if you get killed again? Could be the next place is worse than this one." Shorty tossed off his drink. "Yes sir, a damn site worse."

Garret snorted, unconvinced, and took a drink. Cheap sour mash washed down his throat, the oily aftertaste strong enough to curl his tongue, but the fire went out before it hit his belly. He had a strange feeling he could drink the stuff all day and never feel a tilt.

"Well, John Garret" Shorty topped off both glasses then raised his in salute. "Here's to better days."

"Better days?" The chair legs skidded out behind him as Garret stood up. "Won't be any better days 'til I get that moon-eyed bastard rounded up."

"What's that going to prove?" Shorty struggled out of the rocker. "Think it matters a tinker's damn if you ride him? Hell is Hell, and the sooner you get used to it, the better off you'll be."

"I'll never get used to this." Garret let the door bang shut behind him. His coat lay on top of the bar where he had dropped it. His shoulder ached fiercely as he shrugged into the stiff wool. Behind him, the kitchen door swing open.

"You have any idea what's out there? I do." Shorty put himself between Garret and the front doors. "You think I didn't try to walk out of this place? I tried for months, but there ain't nowhere to go. Nothing out there but rock and dirt and that god-awful wind. Where will you even look for him?"

"There's a creek. That means there's grass along it. That stud horse has got to eat."

"You just ain't getting it. That horse don't have to eat anymore than you or I do. You can track him until the leather wears off your boots, but you ain't never going to catch him. And if you do, he'll just bust out again. He's your torment, John Garret. Hell isn't full of devils with pitchforks and pointy tails. It's just you and me and the snake-eyed horse that laid you out. And the sooner you swallow that fact, the better off we'll all be."

Garret stared at him. "How'd you die, Shorty?"

The smaller man looked away. "I took sick."

"Oh." Garret had a pretty good idea what kind of fever killed Shorty. "I'm sorry to hear that. But I wasn't sick. I got killed. No, that ain't it either. I got beat. That horse broke me in two, and if it takes me the rest of forever, I'm going to pay him back."

"Then what? So you break the only horse in Hell. You think the devil's going to slap you on the back and turn you loose?"

"Maybe."

"And what if he don't?"

"Well," Garret said softly, "At least I'll know I tried."

* * *

Garret followed the meandering creek northward. The stud had circled back to it, his hoof prints sharp in the dust. The sun rolled close to the far-off mountains, and reluctantly, Garret turned back. Light flickered under the kitchen door when he arrived, Shorty no doubt sitting in his rocker. He hurried up the stairs before the little man realized he was back. The last thing he wanted tonight was company.

The mattress sagged beneath him as he crawled under the blankets, the pain in his arm spreading with cancerous hunger through his body. It was cold in the little room, ice on the window. No moon shone in Hell, no silvery beams to set the frost alight. A single bright star hung in view, and in Garret's fevered mind it became the stud's pale eye. Even in sleep, the animal plagued him, striking from nightmare to nightmare. He woke long before dawn, impatient for the day.

His breath hung in front of him as he struggled to button his shirt, then went downstairs. Shorty stood behind the bar, the bottle beside him. He looked like he hadn't bothered going to bed. Garret ignored him and pulled on his coat. The door latch clicked as he turned the knob.

"You're a damn fool, John."

"Reckon I am." The door swung open. Cold slammed him as Garret snugged his hat down. "See you around, Shorty."

He headed north, back to the little creek. Slowly, his blood warmed, and before he had covered a mile sweat pooled between his shoulder blades despite the ice in his toes. Clumps of willows, stripped of all but a few brittle leaves, clacked against each other, loud as dice in a tinhorn's hand. The stud's tracks lay plain in the gray dust. The creek made a sharp bend, and as he stepped around it he stopped and frowned.

A second set of tracks cut in front of him. Garret bent down and studied the print. It was neatly rounded with a narrow frog, most likely a mare's foot. Garret smiled to himself. Shorty had been wrong about one thing. They might be the only humans in Hell, but there were damn sure plenty of horses.

The trail swung away from the creek toward a sagebrush covered flat. Mountains, bare and lifeless, ringed the alkali desert. He stared at the western-most horizon. White clouds rose above a V-shaped pass, sharp as the buckhorns on his old Winchester. If a gate lead out of this place, it lay through that pass. He stroked his mustache. The pass looked close, but for all he knew it might be a week's hike on foot. More determined than ever, he turned back to the trail.

Garret climbed a low rise, then stopped dead. A dozen horses grazed on the sparse grass, skinny mares and half-grown colts. The moon-eyed stud was with them, pacing on the edge of the herd. He saw Garret and threw his head up. The others saw him too, and as one they thundered up a narrow draw, dust billowing in their wake.

"Well, well . . ." Garret stared up the draw and smiled. A herd of horses was easier to catch than a single animal, especially in country like this where any sharp bend might hide a trap. High on the steep hillside, the herd fanned out, the stud in the lead. Garret laughed. "Looks like you ain't quite shut of me yet, old son."

* * *

He searched for a place to set his trap. The stream curved up a box canyon lined with outcrops of crumbling red stone, then came to a narrow bowl and stopped. A strange odor hung in the air, the scent of burnt matches and eggs gone bad. More willows choked the creek bottom, and beyond them, a stand of cattails. Garret picked his way around the little marsh and looked down.

"Well, I'll be damned."

A shallow pool of copper blue water flickered in the sunlight. Steam rose off it only to freeze against the nearby rocks. A spring gushed out of the hillside. Garret felt the heat, warm as the kitchen back at the Antler and shook his head in wonder. Even in Hell, beauty found its way in.

"Reckon this ain't getting any corrals built." Garret stretched out his bad arm to loosen it, then started piling stones and brushwood to block the gap. After an hour, he paused to let his aching shoulder rest. Cold wind drove through his bones like a railroad spike while he stared at the steaming pool.

"Nobody said I had to finish this in one day." Garret wandered toward the hot springs and dangled a hand in the water. It was hot, but not so hot he couldn't stand it. Feeling foolish, he stripped out of his clothes and stood naked in the icy breeze. Before he could change his mind, John Garret stepped into the pool and sighed as he settled into the engulfing warmth. He scooted to a mossy boulder, leaned his back against it and closed his eyes.

Garret stayed in the pool longer than he expected, the water so seductive he could barely face leaving. Finally, he crawled out and let the wind dry him a moment before he dressed, his shoulder better after the long soak. Feeling more hopeful than he had in ages, he started back to town.

* * *

Days came and went. Every day, Garret worked until he ached, then soaked in the pool. Slowly, his strength returned, the hard work and hot water better than any medicine. He told Shorty about the pool the first night he came back, but the little man only shrugged.

"I seen it." Shorty poured himself a shot. "Long ways to walk just to take a bath."

After that, Garret didn't mention what he did. Shorty, for his part, pretended not to care. Some days Garret left early to track the horses and study their habits while he honed his plan. When the corral was finished, he lugged his saddle up the winding trail and stashed it near the make-shift trap, then gathered up his broken riata. He took it inside the Antler's kitchen and pulled up a chair.

Shorty stared dubiously at the broken rope. "You're going after that damned horse?"

"Yep." Garret unwound a length of the tight braids, then began splicing a new hondo knot.

"Got yourself a corral?"

"Yep."

"Oh." Shorty reached for his bottle. "You need help catching him?"

Garret never looked up from his braiding. "Reckon not."

"Just as well. I got a lot to do tomorrow." Shorty poured a drink, but didn't touch it. "You really think if you break that stud you can just ride on up to St. Peter's gate?"

"I'm not sure about anything."

"Ever think you deserve to be here?" Shorty's voice cracked. "Who's to say the Almighty didn't drop you here for a reason."

Garret stared at the floor. All his life he had been a man to act, not question, and the idea that he had done something so horrendous to strand him here had never crossed his mind. He lay the rope in his lap and looked up. "I done a lot of things in my life. Some of them I'm proud of. Some I'm not. But one way or another, I wouldn't change much."

"Then you're a lucky man. Most of us never get a second try." Shorty tried to take a drink, but his hand shook so badly he couldn't raise the glass. "You ever love a woman? Love her so much you ached? I did. Funny thing is, she loved me back."

The coal-oil lamp flickered in Shorty's eyes. "Her name was Eleanor. Long brown hair. Eyes so bright they made the moon jealous. You've never seen a woman so beautiful in all your days."

"You marry her?" Garret asked. Shorty nodded.

"We moved out west in the spring of '94. I kept telling her about the black soil and how we were going to raise the biggest barn and the strongest sons in the whole damn country."

"What happened?"

"She took off with a traveling preacher a year after we homesteaded. Came in from the field one day to see her sitting in his buckboard. She never even looked back." The tremor in Shorty's hand worsened and whiskey spilled over the top of the glass. "Reckon some women just ain't cut out to be farmer's wives."

"Did you go after her?"

"Thought about it. Thought about it hard. But when it came down to tacks, I just couldn't find the nerve. You know, I'd never had so much as a glass of beer before she left me. Don't think I've been sober since." He stood up, the rocker creaking behind him, and headed for the door. "See you in the morning." The kitchen door banged shut behind him. Garret sat as the fire in the cast-iron stove died out, then, feeling empty inside, went back to braiding.

* * *

Morning broke cold and clear. A few bright stars still danced above the horizon as Garret slung the riata over his shoulder, along with a ratty old blanket, and headed out. He spotted horse tracks near the sagebrush meadow, but ignored them until he was certain his trap was set. Aching with cold, he piled brush in front of the trail, a final diversion to haze the animals toward the hot springs and the little corral beside it. As ready as he could be, he returned to where he had found the tracks.

High overhead a nighthawk trilled. Garret looked up. It was the first time he had heard one since he died, and he took it as a good sign. To the east the little town sat like a broken toy. Far to the west lay the pass, the clouds above it scarlet as the sun crested the horizon. The nighthawk swooped low over the sagebrush and flew toward the distant pass. Garret smiled.

With luck, he would be heading that way, too.

He spotted the horses on the ridge, the stud, as always, walking guard along the edge. Garret stayed downwind as he worked his way along the rocky hillside until he stood a hundred yards above them.

"All right, John Garret," he whispered, "this is it."

The blanket fell open in his hands. With a whoop, he swung the moth-eaten cloth around his head. Startled, the horses broke downhill.

Dust streamed behind them. Garret ran as fast as he dared across the uneven ground. If he had been mounted it would have been a wild, headlong dash to the box canyon. On foot, it became a plodding agony. Out of breath, he rounded the last bend just as the horses turned up the box canyon. The moon-eyed stud wheeled around, and for a heartbeat Garret worried he might bolt in the opposite direction. Faster than it seemed an animal could move, the horse spun and chased after the herd.

Garret rushed toward his trap. The horses milled around the willows, snorting and whinnying to each other. A bay yearling saw him, and stumbled in its haste to get away. Like a flock of birds, the animals poured inside the little corral. He sprinted the last forty yards, yelling at the top of his lungs to keep them from escaping before he could seal the crude pen.

"Get in there, you sons of bitches!"

It was working. Quickly, he crisscrossed juniper logs across the gap while the horses raced around the pen, the thunder of their hooves deafening. Furious at being trapped, the moon-eyed stud laid back his ears and charged the gate. The logs bulged, but held while the stud squealed in rage. Garret lashed the barrier in place, then retrieved his riata.

So far, luck was on his side. He crawled over the pen, a short length of cotton rope tucked under his belt for hobbles. Mindful of the circling horses, he readied a loop. The riata shot out, not at the stud's neck but his front feet. Caught, the horse crashed to the ground, but before Garret could reach him, jerked loose.

"Damn it!"

Garret winced at the pain in his left shoulder, so sharp he thought it had been pulled out of the socket. He coiled the rope, but the thought of another throw seemed beyond him. Round and round the horses raced, the moon-eyed stud keeping to the edge of the pen. Defeat lay bitter on his tongue as he realized he couldn't do it alone. Hurting everywhere, he limped out of the pen and started back to town.

* * *

Shorty looked up as Garret stepped inside the lobby.

"You catch him?"

"I got him penned up." Garret took a deep breath. In all his long life he had never begged for help. "I need a hand getting a saddle on him. If you've got the time."

"You want me to help you?" Shorty's bloodshot eyes brightened, long dormant pride stirring beneath. "Hell's bells, time's all I've got." He grabbed his coat then started toward the door. The bar and the glass of whiskey lay along his path. He paused, then hurried past without taking a drink. Together, they stepped outside.

Neither spoke during the long walk to the hot springs. Garret almost wished the stud had broken free while he was gone, but the animal stood inside the pen, ears forward, his pale eye watching every movement. Garret picked up the ratty blanket and handed it to Shorty.

"What do you want me to do?"

"Wait till I knock him down, then come running." Garret eased over the top of the fence and opened a loop. His shoulder throbbed and he thought about taking a soak, but quickly abandoned the idea. The time was now or never. Squinting in the noontday glare, he swung the rope over his head. The stud wheeled, too late to avoid the noose around his front legs. Garret wrapped the free end of the rope behind his back as the stud pitched forward.

"Come on, Shorty!"

"What do I do?" Fear pushed Shorty's voice high.

"Jump on his shoulder and put the blanket over his eyes," Garret shouted as the horse thrashed. "Hurry."

"But . . ."

"Just sit on the son of bitch!"

Shorty jumped into the pen, nearly tripping in his haste. He fell on top of the thrashing animal and wrapped the dirty green blanket around his head.

"Now what?" Shorty gasped.

"Hold him down." Garret worked his way down the riata, pulled the short rope from under his belt and tied it around the stud's front feet. Satisfied the hobbles would hold, he limped across the pen and untied the gate. The rest of the herd tore out. Brown dust settled around them as he put the gnarled poles back in place. "Keep that blanket on him, okay?"

Shorty nodded.

"All right," Garret said, "let him up."

The horse lumbered to his feet, stumbled with the hobbles, then stood trembling as Garret laid a matted pad across his back. Blind under the blanket, he pulled back as the saddle lit behind his withers. Fast as he dared, Garret threaded the cinch, then carefully worked the stiff hackamore under the blanket. The stud fought, but Shorty held tight. Nearly done, Garret pulled up on the latigo until the cinch was so tight he could barely squeeze two fingers between it and the stud's ribs. Quietly, he untied the hobbles.

He took a moment to gather himself, then grabbed the saddle horn. With his free hand, he turned the stirrup toward him and eased his toe inside. Soft as a falling leaf, Garret swung into the saddle. The horse bunched under him, back arched high and ready to blow. Shorty looked up.

"You sure about this?"

Garret gathered the reins in his hand, and nodded. Shorty pulled the blanket off and stepped back.

For one long, merciless second, the moon-eyed stud did nothing.

Then, he exploded.

Garret sat a whirlwind, an avalanche, a stick of blasting powder. Every jump struck like a sledge hammer. He tried to pull the stud's head around, but the horse was too strong. Nose nearly to the ground, the palomino kicked high. Garret felt himself falling forward and grabbed the saddle horn. His shoulder screamed in agony as they lit and jumped again. Shorty ducked aside as the horse struck the gate.

Wood splintered as they broke through. Gritting his teeth, Garret pulled the animal toward the canyon wall. Up the rocky hill they raced, loose scree flying out behind. Up and up until it felt like they would topple backwards, the moon-eyed stud ran, desperate to shake the tormentor off his back. Garret pulled him around, and they rushed headlong back to the canyon floor.

Along the narrow creek they charged, horse and man, neither ready to quit. The stud jumped the marshy bank and plowed through the willows. Whip-thin branches snapped at Garret's face as they broke out onto the wide flats. Far in the distance the clouded pass beckoned. As if he sensed his own freedom lay past the distant mountains, the horse laid his ears back and stretched out toward it. It would be so easy to let him run and all else be damned. He'd done it.

He had, hadn't he? The horse was beat, he could tell it. But, that didn't seem to matter now. Instead of feeling elation, he felt hollow inside, like the stove back at the Antler, full of cold ash and smoke. Breaking the stud didn't change a thing. He was here for a reason, all right, but besting the horse that had shaded him wasn't it. Beneath him, the animal staggered, winded from running. Garret let him slow, his mind clear as the sky above him, stretching out for the answer that had missed him so long. The thought was slow in coming, but when it did, it struck like a charging bull.

This wasn't Hell. It was a school house, a place to learn the things he should have picked up when he was alive, but hadn't. He'd learned a hard lesson today when he admitted he couldn't catch the horse alone. It had cost him his pride to ask Shorty for help, but the little drunkard had been enough of a friend not to throw it back in his face. Now, Garret realized, smiling to himself, it was time to pay back the favor. He gathered up the reins and pulled back.

"Whoa, you piss-eyed bastard!"

Garret hauled on the reins until the exhausted horse's nose brushed his right knee. Stumbling, they came to a stop. Before the winded animal could try him again, he spun him in tight circles until both were dizzy.

"I've never seen the like -- you did it." Shorty jogged down the canyon, his cheeks red as his nose. "I thought he had you for sure."

"So did I." Garret spun the horse once more, then stepped out of the saddle. His legs nearly collapsed as he hit the ground. Shorty hurried toward him and he gratefully passed him the reins.

"That was quite a ride." Shorty gripped the reins beneath the stud's jaw, keeping well clear of the front feet. The grin on his face faded. "Reckon this means you'll be heading for that pass, now."

"No." Garret rubbed his shoulder. "I ain't going anywhere. You are."

Pale as the winter sky, Shorty stared at him. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. This ain't Hell. It's just someplace to get past on the way out." Garret snugged the cinch a little tighter, the leather slick with dirty white foam, then nodded at the saddle. "Get on and head him toward that pass. He'll do the rest."

"I . . . I can't." Shorty gasped for air. "I'm no bronc stomper."

"You don't have to be. That horse wants to go as bad as you do." Garret crowded the smaller man toward the stirrup. "You said it yourself. Not many men get a second chance to prove themselves. Well, here's yours."

"But . . ."

"Damn it, Shorty, plant your ass in that saddle before I change my mind."

The tired horse staggered as Shorty lumbered into the saddle. Fear glazed his eyes as Garret handed him the reins. "What about you? What are you going to do?"

"Right now, I'm going to soak the ache out of this shoulder." Garret eased away from the stud's neck. "Good luck, Shorty. I'll see you on the other side." Before either man could say more, he swatted the horse on the rump. The animal bunched, then took off. Shorty clung low to the stud's neck, awkward as a monkey on a pony. Garret stood a long time until both horse and rider vanished over the horizon, nothing left but the dust drifting on the wind. Body aching but his spirit young again, he trudged back to the hot springs, stripped down to his hide, and eased into the welcoming water.

* * *

Slowly, day after day, the world around him changed, winter drifting into spring.

Ice turned to mud, pale green shoots peeking out from beneath clumps of sagebrush and last year's grass. Garret could taste the change in the air, an endless, ageless scent so old it needed no name.

It tasted like hope.

For days after Shorty left, he stood on the ridge, watching for him. But, as time wore on, he went less and less, convinced at last the stocky little man had made it. He smiled at the thought of Shorty perched high on the palomino's back as they thundered through the Pearly Gates. The aches in his body healed slowly, the hot-spring tonic for his bones, and gradually his strength returned. He repaired his corral, and at night sat by the kitchen stove, rolling smokes while he braided a new hackamore. Shorty's bottle sat on top of the bar, untouched, the cork stuffed tight.

He watched the horses, too. The mares had started to drop their foals, all spindly legs and bristle tails as they pranced behind their mothers. One in particular caught his eye, a white horse-colt with one blue eye. Young as he was, the colt stood head high and proud, and Garret could tell he was going to be a handful.

But then, he wouldn't have it any other way.

A Young Man with Prospects

Included in Ender in Exile
by Orson Scott Card



Artwork by Julie Dillon

"Do you know what I did today, Alessandra?"

"No, Mother." Fourteen-year-old Alessandra set her book bag on the floor by the front door and walked past her mother to the sink, where she poured herself a glass of water.

"Guess!"

"Got the electricity turned back on?"

"The elves would not speak to me," said Mother. It had once been funny, this game that electricity came from elves. But it wasn't funny now, in the sweltering Adriatic summer, with no refrigeration for the food, no air-conditioning, and no vids to distract her from the heat.

"Then I don't know what you did, Mother."

"I changed our lives," said Mother. "I created a future for us."

Alessandra froze in place and uttered a silent prayer. She had long since given up hope that any of her prayers would be answered, but she figured each unanswered prayer would add to the list of grievances she would take up with God, should the occasion arise.

"What future is that, Mother?"

Mother could hardly contain herself. "We are going to be colonists."

Alessandra sighed with relief. She had heard all about the Dispersal Project in school. Now that the Formics had been destroyed, the idea was for humans to colonize all their former worlds, so that humanity's fate would not be tied to that of a single planet. But the requirements for colonists were strict. There was no chance that an unstable, irresponsible -- no, pardon me, I meant "feckless and fay" -- person like Mother would be accepted.

"Well, Mother, that's wonderful."

"You don't sound excited."

"It takes a long time for an application to be approved. Why would they take us? What do we know how to do?"

"You're such a pessimist, Alessandra. You'll have no future if you must frown at every new thing." Mother danced around her, holding a fluttering piece of paper in front of her. "I put in our application months ago, darling Alessandra. Today I got word that we have been accepted!"

"You kept a secret for all this time?"

"I can keep secrets," said Mother. "I have all kinds of secrets. But this is no secret, this piece of paper says that we will journey to a new world, and on that new world you will not be part of a persecuted surplus, you will be needed, all your talents and charms will be noticed and admired."

All her talents and charms. At the collegio, no one seemed to notice them. She was merely another gawky girl, all arms and legs, who sat in the back and did her work and made no waves. Only Mother thought of Alessandra as some extraordinary, magical creature.

"Mother, may I read that paper?" asked Alessandra.

"Why, do you doubt me?" Mother danced away with the letter.

Alessandra was too hot and tired to play. She did not chase after her. "Of course I doubt you."

"You are no fun today, Alessandra."

"Even if it's true, it's a horrible idea. You should have asked me. Do you know what colonists' lives will be like? Sweating in the fields as farmers."

"Don't be silly," said Mother. "They have machines for that."

"And they're not sure we can eat any of the native vegetation. When the Formics first attacked Earth, they simply destroyed all the vegetation in the part of China where they landed. They had no intention of eating anything that grew here naturally. We don't know if our plants can grow on their planets. All the colonists might die."

"The survivors of the fleet that defeated the Formics will already have those problems resolved by the time we get there."

"Mother," said Alessandra patiently. "I don't want to go."

"That's because you have been convinced by the dead souls at the school that you are an ordinary child. But you are not. You are magical. You must get away from this world of dust and misery and go to a land that is green and filled with ancient powers. We will live in the caves of the dead ogres and go out to harvest the fields that once were theirs! And in the cool evening, with sweet green breezes fluttering your skirts, you will dance with young men who gasp at your beauty and grace!"

"And where will we find young men like *that*?"

"You'll see," said Mother. Then she sang it: "You shall see! You shall see! A fine young man with prospects will give his heart to you."

Finally the paper fluttered close enough for Alessandra to snatch it out of Mother's hands. She read it, with Mother bending down to hover just behind the paper, smiling her fairy smile. It was real. Dorabella Toscano (29) and daughter Alessandra Toscano (14), accepted into Colony I.

"Obviously there's no sort of psychological screening after all," said Alessandra.

"You try to hurt me but I will not be hurt. Mother knows what is best for you. You shall not make the mistakes that I have made."

"No, but I'll pay for them," said Alessandra.

"Think, my darling, beautiful, brilliant, graceful, kind, generous, and poutful girl, think of this: What do you have to look forward to here in Monopoli, Italia, living in a flat in the unfashionable end of Via Luigi Indelli?"

"There is no *fashionable* end of Luigi Indelli."

"You make my point for me."

"Mother, I don't dream of marrying a prince and riding off into the sunset."

"That's a good thing, my darling, because there are no princes -- only men and animals who pretend to be men. I married one of the latter but he at least provided you with the genes for those amazing cheekbones, that dazzling smile. Your father had very good teeth."

"If only he had been a more attentive bicyclist."

"It was not his fault, dear."

"The streetcars run on tracks, Mother. You don't get hit if you stay out from between the tracks."

"Your father was not a genius but fortunately I am, and therefore you have the blood of the fairies in you."

"Who knew that fairies sweat so much?" Alessandra pulled one of Mother's dripping locks of hair away from her face. "Oh, Mother, we won't do well in a colony. Please don't do this."

"The voyage takes forty years -- I went next door and looked it up on the net."

"Did you *ask* them this time?"

"Of course I did, they lock their windows now. They were thrilled to hear we were going to be colonists."

"I have no doubt they were."

"But because of magic, to us it will be only two years."

"Because of the relativistic effects of near-light-speed travel."

"Such a genius, my daughter is. And even those two years we can sleep through, so we won't even age."

"Much."

"It will be as if our bodies slept a week, and we wake up forty years away."

"And everyone we know on Earth will be forty years older than we are."

"And mostly dead," sang Mother. "Including *my* hideous hag of a mother, who disowned me when I married the man I loved, and who therefore will never get her hands on my darling daughter." The melody to this refrain was always cheery-sounding. Alessandra had never met her grandmother. Now, though, it occurred to her that maybe a grandmother could get her out of joining a colony.

"I'm not going, Mother."

"You are a minor child and you will go where I go, tra-la."

"You are a madwoman and I will sue for emancipation rather than go, tra-lee."

"You will think about it first because I am going whether you go or not and if you think your life with me is hard you should see what it's like without me."

"Yes, I should," said Alessandra. "Let me meet my grandmother." Mother's glare was immediate, but Alessandra plowed ahead. "Let me live with her. You go with the colony."

"But there's no reason for me to go with the colony, my darling. I'm doing this for you. So without you, I will not go."

"Then we're not going. Tell them."

"We *are* going, and we are thrilled about it."

Might as well get off the merry-go-round; Mother didn't mind endlessly repeating circular arguments, but Alessandra got bored with it. "What lies did you have to tell, to get accepted?"

"I told no lies," said Mother, pretending to be shocked at the accusation. "I only proved my identity. They do all the research, so if they have false information it's their own fault. Do you know why they want us?"

"Do *you*?" asked Alessandra. "Did they actually tell you?"

"It doesn't take a genius to figure it out, or even a fairy," said Mother "They want us because we are both of child-bearing age."

Alessandra groaned in disgust, but Mother was preening in front of an imaginary full-length mirror.

"I am still young," said Mother, "and you are just flowering into womanhood. They have men from the fleet there, young men who have never married. They will be waiting eagerly for us to arrive. So I will mate with a very eager old man of sixty and bear him babies and then he will die. I'm used to that. But you -- you will be a prize for a young man to marry. You will be a treasure."

"My *uterus* will, you mean," said Alessandra. "You're right, that's exactly what they're thinking. I bet they took practically any healthy female who applied."

"We fairies are always healthy."

It was true enough -- Alessandra had no memory of ever being sick, except for food poisoning that time when Mother insisted they would eat supper from a street vendor's cart at the end of a very hot day.

"So they're sending a herd of women, like cows."

"You're only a cow if you choose to be," said Mother. "The only question I have to decide now is whether we want to sleep through the voyage and wake up just before landing, or stay awake for the two years, receiving training and acquiring skills so we're ready to be productive in the first wave of colonists."

Alessandra was impressed. "You actually read the documentation?"

"This is the most important decision of our lives, my darling Alessa. I am being extraordinarily careful."

"If only you had read the bills from the power company."

"They were not interesting. They only spoke of our poverty. Now I see that God was preparing us for a world without air-conditioning and vids and nets. A world of nature. We were born for nature, we elvish folk. You will come to the dance and with your fairy grace you will charm the son of the king, and the king's son will dance with you until he is so in love his heart will break for you. Then it will be for *you* to decide if he's the one for you."

"I doubt there'll be a king."

"But there'll be a governor. And other high officials. And young men with prospects. I will help you choose."

"You will certainly *not* help me choose."

"It's as easy to fall in love with a rich man as a poor one."

"As if you'd know."

"I know better than you, having done it badly once. The rush of hot blood into the heart is the darkest magic, and it must be tamed. You must not let it happen until you have chosen a man worthy of your love. I will help you choose."

No point in arguing. Alessandra had long since learned that fighting with Mother accomplished nothing, whereas ignoring her worked very well.

Except for this. A colony. It was definitely time to look up Grandmother. She lived in Polignano a Mare, the next city of any size up the Adriatic coast, that's all that she knew of her. And Mother's mother would not be named Toscano. Alessandra would have to do some serious research.

*

A week later, Mother was still going back and forth about whether they should sleep through the voyage or not, while Alessandra was discovering that there's a lot of information that they won't let children get at. Snooping in the house, she found her own birth certificate, but that wasn't helpful, it only listed her own parents. She needed Mother's certificate, and that was not findable in the apartment.

The government people barely acknowledged she existed and when they heard her errand sent her away. It was only when she finally thought of the Catholic Church that she made any headway. They hadn't actually attended Mass since Alessandra was little, but at the parish, the priest on duty helped her search back to find her own baptism. They had a record of baby Alessandra Toscano's godparents as well as her parents, and Alessandro figured that either the godparents *were* her grandparents, or they would know who her grandparents were.

At school she searched the net and found that Leopoldo and Isabella Santangelo lived in Polignano a Mare, which was a good sign, since that was the town where grandmother lived.

Instead of going home, she used her student pass and hopped the train to Polignano and then spent forty-five minutes walking around the town searching for the address. To her disgust, it ended up being on a stub of a street just off Via Antonio Ardito, a trashy-looking apartment building backing on the train tracks. There was no buzzer. Alessandra trudged up to the fourth floor and knocked.

"You want to knock something, knock your own head!" shouted an woman from inside.

"Are you Isabella Santangelo?"

"I'm the Holy Virgin and I'm busy answering prayers. Go away!"

Alessandra's first thought was: So Mother lied about being a child of the fairies. She's really Jesus' younger sister.

But she decided that flippancy wasn't a good approach today. She was already going to be in trouble for leaving Monopoli without permission, and she needed to find out from the Holy Virgin here whether or not she was her grandmother.

"I'm so sorry to trouble you, but I'm the daughter of Dorabella Toscano and I --"

The woman must have been standing right at the door, waiting, because it flew open before Alessandra could finish her sentence.

"Dorabella *Toscano* is a dead woman! How can a dead woman have daughters!"

"My mother isn't dead," said Alessandra, stunned. "You were signed as my godmother on the parish register."

"That was the worst mistake of my life. She marries this pig boy, this bike messenger, when she's barely fifteen, and why? Because her belly's getting fat with you, that's why! She thinks a wedding makes it all clean and pure! And then her idiot husband gets himself killed. I told her, this proves there is a God! Now go to hell!"

The door slammed in Alessandra's face.

She had come so far. Her grandmother couldn't really mean to send her away like this. They hadn't even had time to do more than *glance* at each other.

"But I'm your granddaughter," said Alessandra.

"How can I have a granddaughter when I have no daughter? You tell your mother that before she sends her little quasi-bastard begging at my door, she'd better come to me herself with some serious apologizing."

"She's going away to a colony," said Alessandra.

The door was yanked open again. "She's even more insane than ever," said Grandmother. "Come in. Sit down. Tell me what stupid thing she's done."

The apartment was absolutely neat. Everything in it was unbelievably cheap, the lowest possible quality, but there was a lot of it -- ceramics, tiny framed art pieces -- and everything had been dusted and polished. The sofa and chairs were so piled with quilts and throws and twee little embroidered pillows that there was nowhere to sit. Grandmother Isabella moved nothing, and finally Alessandra sat on top of one of the pillow piles.

Feeling suddenly quite disloyal and childish herself, telling on Mother like a schoolyard tattletale, Alessandra now tried to softpedal the outrage. "She has her reasons, I know it, and I think she truly believes she's doing it for me --"

"What what what is she doing for you that you don't want her to do! I don't have all day!"

The woman who embroidered all of these pillows has all day *every* day. But Alessandra kept her sassy remark to herself. "She has signed us up for a colony ship, and they accepted us."

"A colony ship? There aren't any colonies. All those places have countries of their own now. Not that Italy ever *did* have any real colonies, not since the Roman Empire. Lost their balls after that, the men did. Italian men have been worthless ever since. Your grandfather, God keep him buried, was worthless enough, never stood up for himself, let everybody push him around, but at least he worked hard and provided for me until my ungrateful daughter spat in my face and married that bike boy. Not like that worthless father of yours, never made a dime."

"Well, not since he died, anyway," said Alessandra, feeling more than a little outraged.

"I'm talking about when he was alive! He only worked the fewest hours he could get by with. I think he was on drugs. You were probably a cocaine baby."

"I don't think so."

"How would *you* know anything?" said Grandmother. "You couldn't even talk then!"

Alessandra sat and waited.

"Well? Tell me."

"I did but you wouldn't believe me."

"What was it you said?"

"A colony ship. A *starship* to one of the Formic planets, to farm and explore."

"Won't the Formics complain?"

"There aren't any more Formics, Grandmother. They were all killed."

"A nasty piece of business but it needed doing. If that Ender Wigg in boy is available, I've got a list of other people that need some good serious destruction. What do you want, anyway?"

"I don't want to go into space. With Mother. But I'm still a minor. If you would sign as my guardian, I could get emancipated and stay home. It's in the law."

"As your guardian?"

"Yes. To supervise me and provide for me. I'd live here."

"Get out."

"What?"

"Stand up and get out. You think this is a hotel? Where exactly do you think you'd sleep? On the floor, where I'd trip on you in the night and break my hip? There's no room for you here. I should have known you'd be making demands. Out!"

There was no room for argument. In moments Alessandra found herself charging down the stairs, furious and humiliated. This woman was even crazier than Mother.

I have nowhere to go, thought Alessandra. Surely the law doesn't allow my mother to *force* me to go into space, does it? I'm not a baby, I'm not a *child*, I'm fourteen, I can read and write and make rational choices.

When the train got back to Monopoli, Alessandra did not go directly home. She had to think up a good lie about where she'd been, so she might as well come up with one that covered a longer time. Maybe the Dispersal Project office was still open.

But it wasn't. She couldn't even get a brochure. And what was the point? Anything interesting would be on the net. She could have stayed after school and found out all she wanted to know. Instead she went to visit her grandmother.

That's proving what good decisions I make.

Mother was sitting at the table, a cup of chocolate in front of her. She looked up and watched Alessandra shut the door and set down her book bag, but she said nothing.

"Mother, I'm sorry, I --"

"Before you lie," said Mother softly, "the witch called me and screamed at me for sending you. I hung up on her, which is what I usually end up doing, and then I unplugged the phone from the wall."

"I'm sorry," said Alessandra.

"You didn't think I had a *reason* for keeping her out of your life?"

For some reason, that pulled the trigger on something inside Alessandra and instead of trying to retreat, she erupted. "It doesn't matter whether you had a reason," she said. "You could have ten million reasons, but you didn't tell any of them to me! You expected me to obey you blindly. But you don't obey *your* mother blindly."

"Your mother isn't a monster," said Mother.

"There are many kinds of monsters," said Alessandra. "You're the kind that flits around like a butterfly but never lands near me long enough to even know who I am."

"Everything I do is for you!"

"Nothing is for me. Everything is for the child you imagine you had, the one that doesn't exist, the perfect, happy child that was bound to result from your being the exact opposite of your mother in every way. Well, I'm not that child. And in your mother's house, the electricity is on!"

"Then go live there!"

"She won't let me!"

"You would hate it. Never able to touch anything. Always having to do things *her* way."

"Like going off on a colony ship?"

"I signed up for the colony ship *for you*."

"Which is like buying me a supersized bra. Why don't you look at who I am before you decide what I need?"

"I'll tell you what you are. You're a girl who's too young and inexperienced to know what a woman needs. I'm ten kilometers ahead of you on that road, I know what's coming, I'm trying to get you what you'll need to make that road easy and smooth, and you know what? In spite of you, I've done it. You've fought me every step of the way, but I've done a great job with you. You don't even *know* how good a job I've done because you don't know what you could have been."

"What could I have been, Mother? You?"

"You were never going to be me," said Mother.

"What are you saying? That I would have been *her*?"

"We'll never know what you would have been, will we? Because you already are what I made you."

"Wrong. I *look* like whatever I have to *look* like in order to stay alive in your home. Down inside, what I really am is a complete stranger to you. A stranger that you intend to drag off into space without even asking me if I wanted to go. They used to have a word for people you treated like that. They called them *slaves*."

Alessandra wanted more than ever before in her life to run to her bedroom and slam the door. But she didn't have a bedroom. She slept on the sofa in the same room with the kitchen and the kitchen table.

"I understand," said Mother. "I'll go into my bedroom and you can slam the door on me."

The fact that Mother really did know what she was thinking was the most infuriating thing of all. But Alessandra did not scream and did not scratch at her mother and did not fall on the floor and throw a tantrum and did not even dive onto the sofa and bury her face in the pillow. Instead she sat down at the table directly across from her mother and said, "What's for dinner?"

"So. Just like that, the discussion is over?"

"Discuss while we cook. I'm hungry."

"There's nothing *to* eat, because I haven't turned in our final acceptance because I haven't decided yet whether we should sleep or stay awake through the voyage, and so we haven't got the signing bonus, and so there's no money to buy food."

"So what are we going to do about dinner?"

Mother just looked away from her.

"I know," said Alessandra excitedly. "Let's go over to Grandma's!"

Mother turned back and glared at her.

"Mother," said Alessandra, "how can we run out of money when we're living on the dole? Other people on the dole manage to buy enough food and pay their electric bills."

"What do *you* think?" said Mother. "Look around you. What have I spent all the government's money on? Where's all the extravagance? Look in my closet, count the outfits I own."

Alessandra thought for a moment. "I never thought about that. Do you owe money to the mafia? Did Father, before he died?"

"No," said Mother contemptuously. "You now have all the information you need to understand completely, and yet you still haven't figured it out, smart and grown up as you are."

Alessandra couldn't imagine what Mother was talking about. Alessandra didn't have *anynew* information. She also didn't have anything to eat.

She got up and started opening cupboards. She found a box of dry radiatori and a jar of black pepper. She took a pan to the sink and put in some water and set it on the stove and turned on the gas.

"There's no sauce for the pasta," said Mother.

"There's pepper. There's oil."

"You can't eat radiatori with just pepper and oil. It's like putting fistfuls of wet flour in your mouth."

"That's not my problem," said Alessandra. "At this point, it's pasta or shoe leather, so you'd better start guarding your closet."

Mother tried to turn things light again. "Of course, just like a daughter, you'd eat *mys*shoes."

"Just be glad if I stop before I get to your leg."

Mother pretended she was still joking when she airily said, "Children eat their parents alive, that's what they do."

"Then why is that hideous creature still living in that flat in Polignano a Mare?"

"I broke my teeth on her skin!" It was Mother's last attempt at humor.

"You tell me what terrible things daughters do, but you're a daughter, too. Did you do them?"

"I married the first man who showed me any hint of what kindness and pleasure could be. I married stupidly."

"I have half the genes of the man you married," said Alessandra. "Is that why I'm too stupid to decide what planet I want to live on?"

"It's obvious that you want to live on any planet where I am not."

"You're the one who came up with the colony idea, not me! But now I think you've named your *own* reason. Yes! You want to colonize another planet because *your*mother isn't there!"

Mother slumped in her seat. "Yes, that is part of it. I won't pretend that I wasn't thinking of that as one of the best things about going."

"So you admit you *weren't* doing it all for me."

"I do not admit such a lie. It's all for you."

"Getting away from your mother, that is for you," said Alessandra.

"It is for you."

"How can it be for me? Until today I didn't even know what my grandmother looked like. I had never seen her face. I didn't even know her name."

"And do you know how much that cost me?" asked Mother.

"What do you mean?"

Mother looked away. "The water is boiling."

"No, that's my temper you're hearing. Tell me what you meant. What did it cost *you* to keep *me* from knowing my own grandmother?"

Mother got up and went into her bedroom and closed the door.

"You forgot to slam it, Mother! Who's the parent here, anyway? Who's the one who shows a sense of responsibility? Who's fixing *dinner*?"

The water took three more minutes before it got to a boil. Alessandra threw in two fistfuls of radiatori and then got her books and started studying at the table. She ended up overcooking the pasta and it was so cheaply made that it clumped up and the oil didn't bind with it. It just pooled on the plate, and the pepper barely helped make it possible to swallow the mess. She kept her eyes on her book and her paper as she ate, and swallowed mechanically until finally the bite in her mouth made her gag and she got up and spat it into the sink and then drank down a glass of water and almost threw the whole mess back up again. As it was, she retched twice at the sink before she was able to get her gorge under control. "Mmmmm, delicious," she murmured. Then she turned back to the table.

Mother was sitting there, picking out a single piece of pasta with her fingers. She put it in her mouth. "What a good mother I am," she said softly.

"I'm doing homework now, Mother. We've already used up our quarreling time."

"Be honest, darling. We almost never quarrel."

"That's true. You flit around ignoring whatever I say, being full of happiness. But believe me, *my* end of the argument is running through my head all the time."

"I'm going to tell you something because you're right, you're old enough to understand things."

Alessandra sat down. "All right, tell me." She looked her mother in the eye.

Mother looked away.

"So you're *not* going to tell me. I'll do my homework."

"I'm going to tell you," said Mother. "I'm just not going to look at you while I do."

"And I won't look at you either." She went back to her homework.

"About ten days into the month, my mother calls me. I answer the phone because if I don't she gets on the train and comes over, and then I have a hard time getting her out of the house before you get home from school. So I answer the phone and she tells me I don't love her, I'm an ungrateful daughter, because here she is all alone in her house, and she's out of money, she can't have anything lovely in her life. Move in with me, she says, bring your beautiful daughter, we can live in my apartment and share our money and then there'll be enough. No, Mama, I say to her. I will not move in with you. And she weeps and screams and says I am a hateful daughter who is tearing all joy and beauty out of her life because I leave her alone and I leave her penniless and so I promise her, I'll send you a little something. She says, don't send it, that wastes postage, I'll come get it and I say, No, I won't be here, it costs more to ride the train than to mail it, so I'm mailing it. And somehow I get her off the phone before you get home. Then I sit for a while not cutting my wrists, and then I put some amount of money into an envelope and I take it to the post office and I mail it, and then she takes the money and buys some hideous piece of garbage and puts it on her wall or on a little shelf until her house is so full of things I've paid for out of money that should go to my daughter's upbringing, and I pay for all of that, I run out of money every month even though I get the same money on the dole that *she* gets, because it's worth it. Being hungry is worth it. Having you be angry with me is worth it, because you do not have to know that woman, you do not have to have her in your *life*. So yes, Alessandra, I do it *all* for you. And if I can get us off this planet, I won't have to send her any more money, and she won't phone me any more, because by the time we reach that other world she will be dead. I only wish you had trusted me enough that we could have arrived there without your ever having to see her evil face or hear her evil voice."

Mother got up from the table and returned to her room.

Alessandra finished her homework and put it into her backpack and then went and sat on the sofa and stared at the nonfunctioning television. She remembered coming home every day from school, for all these years, and there was Mother, every time, flitting through the house, full of silly talk about fairies and magic and all the beautiful things she did during the day and all the while, the thing she did during the day was fight the monster to keep it from getting into the house, getting its clutches on little Alessandra.

It explained the hunger. It explained the electricity. It explained everything.

It didn't mean Mother wasn't crazy. But now the craziness made a kind of sense. And the colony meant that finally Mother would be free. It wasn't Alessandra who was ready for emancipation.

She got up and went to the door and tapped on it. "I say we sleep during the voyage."

A long wait. Then, from the other side of the door, "That's what I think, too." After a moment, Mother added, "There'll be a young man for you in that colony. A fine young man with prospects."

"I believe there will," said Alessandra. "And I know he'll adore my happy, crazy mother. And my wonderful mother will love him too."

And then silence.

It was unbearably hot inside the flat. Even with the windows open, the air wasn't stirring so there was no relief for it. Alessandra lay on the sofa in her underwear, wishing the upholstery weren't so soft and clinging. She lay on the floor, thinking that maybe the air was a tiny bit cooler there because hot air rises. Only the hot air in the flat below must be rising and heating the floor so it didn't help, and the floor was too hard.

Or maybe it wasn't, because the next morning she woke up on the floor and there was a breath of a breeze coming in off the Adriatic and Mother was frying something in the kitchen.

"Where did you get eggs?" asked Alessandra after she came back from the toilet.

"I begged," said Mother.

"One of the neighbors?"

"A couple of the neighbors' chickens," said Mother.

"No one saw you?"

"No one stopped me, whether they saw me or not."

Alessandra laughed and hugged her. She went to school and this time was not too proud to eat the charity lunch, because she thought: My mother paid for this food for me.

That night there was food on the table, and not just food, but fish and sauce and fresh vegetables. So Mother must have turned in the final papers and received the signing bonus. They were going.

Mother was scrupulous. She took Alessandra with her when she went to both of the neighbors' houses where chickens were kept, and thanked them for not calling the police on her, and paid them for the eggs she had taken. They tried to refuse, but she insisted that she could not leave town with such a debt unpaid, that their kindness was still counted for them in heaven, and there was kissing and crying and Mother walked, not in her pretend fairy way, but light of step, a woman who has had a burden taken from her shoulders.

Two weeks later, Alessandra was on the net at school and she learned something that made her gasp out loud, right there in the library, so that several people rushed toward her and she had to flick to another view and then they were all sure she had been looking at pornography but she didn't care, she couldn't wait to get home and tell Mother the news.

"Do you know who the governor of our colony is going to be?"

Mother did not know. "Does it matter? He'll be an old fat man. Or a bold adventurer."

"What if it's not a man at all? What if it's a boy, a mere boy of thirteen or fourteen, a boy so brilliantly smart and good that he saved the human race?"

"What are you saying?"

"They've announced the crew of our colony ship. The pilot of the ship will be Mazer Rackham, and the governor of the colony will be Ender Wiggin."

Now it was Mother's turn to gasp. "A boy? They make a *boy* the governor?"

"He commanded the fleet in the war, he can certainly govern a colony," said Alessandra.

"A boy. A little boy."

"Not so little. My age."

Mother turned to her. "What, you're so big?"

"I'm big enough, you know. As you said -- of child-bearing age!"

Mother's face turned reflective. "And the same age as Ender Wiggin."

Alessandra felt her face turning red. "Mother! Don't think what I know you're thinking!"

"And why not think it? He'll have to marry somebody on that distant lonely world. Why not you?" Then Mother's face also turned red and she fluttered her hands against her cheeks. "Oh, oh, Alessandra, I was so afraid to tell you, and now I'm glad, and you'll be glad!"

"Tell me what?"

"You know how we decided to sleep through the voyage? Well, I got to the office to turn in the paper, but I saw that I had accidentally checked the other box, to stay awake and study and be in the first wave of colonists. And I thought, what if they don't let me change the paper? And I decided, I'll make them change it! But when I sat there with the woman I became afraid and I didn't even mention it, I just turned it in like a coward. But now I see I wasn't a coward, it was God guiding my hand, it truly was. Because now you'll be awake through the whole voyage. How many fourteen-year-olds will there be on the ship, awake? You and Ender, that's what I think. The two of you."

"He's not going to fall in love with a stupid girl like me."

"You get very good grades and besides, a smart boy isn't looking for a girl who is even smarter, he's looking for a girl who will love him. He's a soldier who will never come home from the war. You will become his friend. A good friend. It will be years before it's time for him and you to marry. But when that time comes he'll *know* you."

"Maybe you'll marry Mazer Rackham."

"If he's lucky," said Mother. "But I'll be content with whatever old man asks me, as long as I can see you happy."

"I will not marry Ender Wiggin, Mother. Don't hope for what isn't possible."

"Don't you *dare* tell me what to hope for. But I will be content for you merely to become his friend."

"I'll be content merely to see him and not wet my pants. He's the most famous human being in the world, the greatest hero in all of history."

"Not wetting your pants, that's a good first step. Wet pants don't make a good impression."

The school year ended. They received instructions and tickets. They would take the train to Napoli and then fly to Kenya, where the colonists from Europe and Africa were gathering to take the shuttle into space. Their last few days were spent in doing all the things they loved to do in Monopoli -- going to the wharf, to the little parks where she had played as a child, to the library, saying good-bye to everything that had been pleasant about their lives in the city. To Father's grave, to lay their last flowers there. "I wish you could have come with us," whispered Mother, but Alessandra wondered -- if he had not died, would they have needed to go into space to find happiness?

They got home late on their last night in Monopoli, and when they reached the flat, there was Grandmother on the front stoop of the building. She rose to her feet the moment she saw them and began screaming, even before they were near enough to hear what she was saying.

"Let's not go back," said Alessandra. "There's nothing there that we need."

"We need clothing for the journey to Kenya," said Mother. "And besides, I'm not afraid of her."

So they trudged on up the street, as neighbors looked out to see what was going on. Grandmother's voice became clearer and clearer. "Ungrateful daughter! You plan to steal away my beloved granddaughter and take her into space! I'll never see her again, and you didn't even tell me so I could say good-bye! What kind of monster does that! You never cared for me! You leave me alone in my old age -- what kind of duty is that? You in this neighborhood, what do you think of a daughter like that? What a monster has been living among you, a monster of ingratitude!" And on and on.

But Alessandra felt no shame. Tomorrow these would not be her neighbors. She did not have to care. Besides, any of them with sense would realize: No wonder Dorabella Toscano is taking her daughter away from this vile witch. Space is barely far enough to get away from *this* hag.

Grandmother got directly in front of Mother and screamed into her face. Mother did not speak, merely sidestepped around her and went to the door of the building. But she did not open the door. She turned around and held out her hand to stop Grandmother from speaking.

Grandmother did not stop.

But Mother simply continued to hold up her hand. Finally Grandmother wound up her rant by saying, "So now she wants to speak to me! She didn't want to speak to me for all these weeks that she's been planning to go into space, only when I come here with my broken heart and my bruised face will she bother to speak to me, only now! So speak already! What are you waiting for! Speak! I'm listening! Who's stopping you?"

Finally Alessandra stepped between them and screamed into Grandmother's face, "Nobody can speak till you shut up!"

Grandmother slapped Alessandra's face. It was a hard slap, and it knocked Alessandra a step to the side.

Then Mother held out an envelope to grandmother. "Here is all the money that's left from our signing bonus. Everything I have in all the world except the clothes we take to Kenya. I give it to you. And now I'm done with you. You've taken the last thing you will ever get from me. Except this."

She slapped Grandmother hard across the face.

Grandmother staggered, and was about to start screaming when Mother, light-hearted fairy-born Dorabella Toscano, put her face into Grandmother's and screamed, "Nobody ever, ever, ever hits my little girl!" Then she jammed the envelope with the check in it into Grandmother's blouse, took her by the shoulders, turned her around, and gave her a shove down the street.

Alessandra threw her arms around her mother and sobbed. "Mama, I never understood till now, I never knew."

Mother held her tight and looked over her shoulder at the neighbors who were watching, awestruck. "Yes," she said, "I am a terrible daughter. But I am a very, very *goodmother!*"

Several of the neighbors applauded and laughed, though others clucked their tongues and turned away. Alessandra did not care.

"Let me look at you," said Mother.

Alessandra stepped back. Mother inspected her face. "A bruise, I think, but not too bad. It will heal quickly. I think there won't be a trace of it left by the time you meet that fine young man with prospects."

Uncle Orson's Writing Class:

How One Story Can Give Birth to Another

by Orson Scott Card

Since I'm committed to writing one Ender's Game universe story for every issue of IGMS, I have dozens of ideas floating in my head all the time. As the time neared for me to write the story for the February issue -- and that means December -- I had decided I would flesh out the short section of the forthcoming book *A War of Gifts* that dealt with Peter Wiggin.

I was going to be teaching a full load (for me) in winter semester at Southern Virginia, including directing a production of my script of *The Taming of the Shrew*. So I had to write the story during a particularly tight window of opportunity in order to get it done in time. The trouble was, I was still uncertain of the Peter story. It wasn't ripe yet.

Just at that moment, for the book publication of the comics adaptation of *Red Prophet*, the publisher came up with the idea of including a never-seen-anywhere short Ender's Game comic to help promote the book.

Now, nothing could have *less* to do with *Red Prophet* than an Ender story -- but I'm not stupid. If creating an Ender comic would help lead people into the excellent adaptation of *Red Prophet* that the Dabel brothers (and scriptwriter Roland Brown) had created, it was worth doing.

But there was no way the Peter story was going to work, since it would include scenes of his vivisection of a squirrel -- not something I want to see copiously illustrated, thanks all the same. Besides, whatever I wrote for the Dabels could *not* appear in IGMS until after the comic came out.

So instead of writing the Peter story, I set to work on a completely new concept. For this story I wanted to have Ender actually appear as a character, though I didn't want it to be about him. I hit on the idea of working with the people who were already on the world that Ender went to as governor near the very end of *Ender's Game*.

These would be the (mostly) men of the International Fleet that had served under Ender and his jeesh, carrying out their orders and defeating one of the Formic fleets. So there would be mixed emotions in the colony. On the one hand, Ender Wiggin had led them to victory. On the other hand, they had lived on this planet for forty years, keeping themselves alive and thriving. They were self-governing. Now they were getting a new group of colonists who would immediately outnumber them -- and having a teenage kid foisted on them as their governor.

Who, then, was the governor of the colony that Ender would be supplanting when he arrived? How would he feel about it?

The result was the story "Gold Bug," which I'm very proud of. The comic version is already out, with a script by Jake Black and art by Jin Han. But it began as a short story, which I wrote in full -- that story will soon appear in IGMS.

By the time I finished "Gold Bug," I had used up my window of opportunity and was now buried in the semester's work at SVU. I kept trying to find a way to write the Peter story for that slot in IGMS, but finally realized that it wasn't going to happen until I got something else out of the way.

While working on "Gold Bug," you see, I had been thinking about Ender's voyage to his colony world. In "Gold Bug" I show people on the colony ship doing biological work using data already developed by the colonists. So I wondered: What is *Ender* doing during the voyage?

The first thing I realized was that he would be involved in a tug of war with the adult captain of the ship. During the voyage, Ender would have no authority, really -- the captain ran everything on his ship, though Ender, as future governor, would be treated with respect. (In this I recalled events from *Captain Blood* and the Horatio Hornblower series, as well as historical accounts of high officials being transported on ships where the captain and the official were competing sources of power.)

I knew I had a terrific story going about this captain, who assumed that because Ender was a child, the captain would become the *real* governor of the colony, using Ender as a puppet, and how Ender would outmaneuver him and completely blindside him. It would involve the characters I had already come to care about while writing "Gold Bug."

The trouble was, I didn't want the story to focus only on Ender and the captain, or Ender's moves would be too obvious. Ender needed camouflage -- something to lull the captain to sleep. And -- once again drawing on the tradition of literature about the era of the Napoleonic wars -- I thought of having a mother and daughter among the ship's passengers. The mother would be pushing the daughter on Ender as a possible love interest, maneuvering to get her daughter married, as quickly as possible, to the governor of the colony. In other words, I wanted to put a Jane Austen subplot into a C.S. Forester story.

Obviously, then, these women had to be horrible, or at least the mother did. (One thinks of the mother in *Pride and Prejudice*.) And so I thought of these characters as a distraction, as comic relief.

Except that I'm not Jane Austen, much as that disappoints me from time to time. It wasn't enough to make these women "types." I could already feel myself wanting to turn the daughter into a real character. And so I decided to put a toe in the water of this story by writing about the women, to begin from their point of view.

Who would these women be? In Austen, the women are all of the upper middle class, fully aware that without wealth, they cannot maintain their position in society. But *that* kind of woman does not board a ship for the colonies! So ... what kind of woman gives up her life and strikes out for new territory? One who *hates* her present life and only sees hope for herself by breaking away and starting over.

Unless she boards the ship with the plan of snaring Ender for her daughter.

Or both. And that was what was in my mind as I wrote the following opening for the story that I intended to be centered around Ender's rivalry with the captain:

Original opening:

Dorabella Toscano never gave a thought to herself -- she was that kind of mother. Her daughter, Alessandra, would have a life that was in every way better than Dorabella's had been. Not for Alessandra a miserable life in an overcrowded European city, scrabbling for survival amid the ruins of dead greatness -- the memory of beauty instead of its actuality. As soon as the great project of colonizing the defeated Formic planets was announced, Dorabella recognized that she was meant to leave this miserable decaying planet and take her beautiful daughter to a new world, where she could amount to something.

She could feel the hand of God guiding her choices. When her application to emigrate was approved, she delayed confirming it until the last minute. Not that she had wavered in her determination to go, it simply didn't feel *right* to thumb the forms and return them until moments before the deadline. Then she delayed again in thumbing the options form that determined, among many other things, whether she and Alessandra would make the two-year lightspeed voyage in the coma of "stasis" or awake.

She could not understand why she should hesitate in making such an obvious decision. Why should they spend two years of tedium in a starship when they could sleep through the entire voyage and arrive strong and refreshed and ready for their new life?

Yet, because she waited, her forty days after acceptance had not expired before the announcement was made that the colony they had been assigned to would be governed, upon arrival, by Andrew Wiggin.

Andrew Wiggin, twelve years old, the greatest military genius in history, victor of the final war against the Formics. He would not return to Earth, he would go out into space as she and Alessandra were doing, only he would be the governor of the colony. And he was exactly the same age as Alessandra.

Now Dorabella could see that God had not wanted her to waste the opportunity by sleeping through it. For two years, Andrew Wiggin and Alessandra Toscano would be together on the voyage. Boredom, if nothing else, would bind them together as companions. Alessandra was just coming into her beauty. They would pass through the magical changes of life together, and their marriage would be as natural a consequence as breathing. As the beloved, then the betrothed, then the wife of this legendary young man, Alessandra would lead a dazzling life. And not just in their small colony, for whatever the great Ender Wiggin did would be important to the human race. Their children and their children's children would govern worlds and leagues of worlds. Dorabella herself, of course, would be forgotten, but she was content with that. It was enough for her that she was providing good prospects for her daughter.

Of course, there was always the chance that they would refuse to let her and Alessandra take any of the few places available for active passengers. Travel time would have to be used for training, so that those who had not slept would be ready to lead out as farmers and builders when they reached the new planet. Dorabella had no particular skills, and Alessandra was but a child. They would be rejected and forced to sleep, she knew that, she knew it; but then she murmured her prayers and crossed herself, kneeling beside her little Alessandra's bed. Not for me, O God, but for my baby, let us be awake on the voyage so she can have her chance to fall in love with a young man with prospects.

And the reply came back: Yes. They were approved. Dorabella immediately thumbed her acceptance of the terms -- the classes she would have to attend, the level of achievement she would have to maintain in order to be worth the air and water and food she would consume on the voyage. Alessandra was also bound by her agreement. But she was not afraid to work hard -- she had always worked hard -- and Alessandra was the same. Dorabella had taught Alessandra how to smile and be beautiful and mysterious and alluring and sweet-tempered and kind and generous and open-hearted even when covered with the sweat of labor.

Dorabella also had these talents, but alas, she had been foolish, had fallen in love with a useless man whose only virtue was a lithe handsomeness that turned, immediately after marriage, into a pot belly and a foul temper and a lost job and life on the dole. She had mourned him, just a little, when he tried to make a fast left turn across the tracks in front of a streetcar -- she had not wished him dead, especially not so gruesomely, so that he was in pieces in the coffin. But it was just as well. A father like that would have reduced, not enhanced, Alessandra's prospects. Better to be a half-orphan girl than the daughter of a lout. It would give her biography a tragic air without actually diminishing her life in any way.

I finished this in one sitting and took it downstairs and showed it to Kristine (as I do with every scrap of fiction that I write). Kristine read it and liked it. But I have learned to interpret the nuances of her response. Of course she liked it. I know how to do this kind of writing and she's certainly used to reading it. But I knew that I had not lit a fire in her with this opening, precisely because she knew that the *real* story had not yet begun.

It was, in other words, a preamble. I was 838 words into the story and absolutely nothing had *happened* yet. Oh, there were events, even decisions, but I had not yet shown *ascene*: two or more people interacting with each other until a climax is reached.

This is not a bad thing. It is one perfectly good way to get into a story. But the reader has only so much patience for preambles. When the manner of writing gives a clear message that the *real* story has not yet begun, then the reader proceeds with a sense of holding everything in abeyance. Yes, OK, I'll absorb this information, in the trust that soon the story will actually start and that this will be important to it.

So I could certainly have gone on and put these two women on the colony ship. The first real scene in the story would be their first meeting with Ender. It would be a bit of deliberate misdirection, because the reader's initial expectation would be that the story is about Ender's relationship with these women, when in fact it would be about his relationship with the captain (though I would bring the women's story to fruition, too).

Only ... something weird had happened. I didn't *like* the Dorabella of this opening, and neither did Kristine. She was interesting, yes, but she was also kind of an awful person. I didn't really want to spend time with her. It made the opening rather unpleasant.

Besides, I don't actually like writing important characters who have no redeeming qualities. I felt as if I had been unfair to Dorabella, setting her up for a fall without giving her a chance to live and breathe. *Why* was she the kind of person I was painting her to be?

So even before I went to bed that night, I knew that I was not going to use this opening. Instead of a told story, like this one, I would open it up with a scene.

Telling vs. Showing

This is an important point to keep in mind. When writing teachers say "show, don't tell," as if this were always good advice, they are simply showing their ignorance. The vast majority of every story is told, not shown. That is, you narrate it, and even if it has a strong point of view, as my Dorabella opening has, it moves the reader through events and choices without stopping to watch any scenes.

Showing -- that is, opening up into a real scene -- is an amazingly powerful tool. Suddenly, things become real. We hear voices, we see faces, we watch things happen (even if, with fiction, we readers provide most of the details out of our imaginations). The narrative of that preamble did not require the reader to picture the characters, and therefore the readers were not yet being asked to collaborate with me in creating the story together. But the moment I start writing a scene, I'm *requiring* the readers to step in and get to work as the costumer, set-builder, and casting director for the play we're creating together.

This actually requires real effort on the part of the readers (though the readers don't realize it), and so it also imposes an important obligation on the writer: It has to be worth the work.

In other words, when you ask the reader to invest in a scene rather than straight narrative, the scene must *amount* to something. It must reach a satisfying climax, and something important must be decided because the scene took place. It should feel like a crux, a pivot in the storyline. This part of the story was written out as a full scene because it *matters*.

So when I began the story that now is the published version, I made the conscious decision to begin with a crucial moment: the time when Dorabella tells Alessandra that they are going into space.

I had already decided that these women were Italian. Now I popped into Google Maps and found a good sized town on the heel of the boot of Italy. Without knowing anything about the place other than general Italian geography, I assumed various cliches about southern Italian culture. Mostly, though, I needed to know the names and relationships of streets (my story thinking is always, always tied to maps and floorplans). I arbitrarily decided to locate them in what was bound to be the "old city" area not too far from the shore of the Adriatic.

One thing giving me a lot of freedom was that *Ender's Game* takes place more than a century in the future. So whatever might be true of the town of Monopoli today will not necessarily be true of the town by the time this story takes place. But for me, this placement of their apartment immediately gave me the view from their window, the steepness of their street, the look of the houses, the *bleakness* of the streets of Italian cities, where all gardens are inside the house and all you see are stones and stucco and tile roofs.

I was also inside the house, where everything was Eurocheap and nothing worked because this family was financially on its last legs. Now, given European politics, there's no way that poverty would be allowed to be a reason to let a family freeze in winter. But air conditioning is a luxury, and given the costs of energy -- even in the future, I'm quite sure -- those who wasted their government checks would *not* get subsidized electricity. If they didn't pay the bill, it would get cut off.

Because it's a story of mine, very few of the visuals in my head show up in the actual story. I don't describe their flat. Eventually you learn that it has only one bedroom and one bathroom, and the rest of the apartment is a combination kitchen/living room/spare bedroom/dining room. A cramped space. But I don't have to tell you that, because it is revealed by the dialogue.

In fact, as Aaron Johnston, an early reader of the manuscript, pointed out to me, most of the story consists *entirely* of dialogue. What I have written here is, in effect, a play. And in play scripts, you don't have to specify the set or the props except when the characters actually pick something up and use it. (Having learned my theatre from Shakespeare, I actually put all the specific props and set pieces into the dialogue, so I don't *have* to explain them separately.)

The important thing about this is not that OSC doesn't describe much in his fiction, it's *why* I don't: Because the crucial thing about scenes is that they are not really narrative. Each scene should actually function as a mini-play within the overall structure of the narrative.

That's why pure description always feels as if it stops the story. It doesn't really -- it's part of the narrative, the told portion of the tale. But the narrative is merely the bridge between scenes -- between *plays*. Scenes in fiction are dramatic sequences inserted into narrative threads.

So I began writing the scene, and in so doing, I did what I always do: I became both actors, improvising dialogue with only a bare thread of story to guide me.

But first ... a crucial choice: Viewpoint.

Point of View

The Dorabella opening was absolutely from the mother's -- Dorabella's -- point of view. This was the right choice for that narrative preamble, because Dorabella was the one making all the choices. It was her attitudes and reasons and motives that were important to understand. Alessandra would have been a poor choice because she wasn't deciding anything. We could get her attitude toward her mother's choices, of course, but we wouldn't understand the purpose of what was going on in the story.

Now, though, with the story of these women's decision to leave Earth and go into space occupying a far more central role in the story, Alessandra became the more desirable character to have in the central viewpoint role. Why? Because even though she wasn't making the choices, she was the one whose life was being most disrupted. That is, the mother wanted to change their lives, but Alessandra had not decided any such thing. Her life was being changed against her will and she would naturally try to do something about it.

In the told-story version, whatever Alessandra did to resist her mother's plans would have been irrelevant -- the story wouldn't actually begin until they met Ender. But in the dramatic version, the story is going to be about Alessandra becoming reconciled to the decision.

At this point I still didn't realize that this would be a self-contained story, ending, essentially, when they leave town to head off to space. I still thought of it as the opening to the story about Ender's voyage. So I also picked Alessandra's point of view because in that version of the story, she would have been the one to have a direct relationship with Ender. In other words, by switching between her viewpoint, Ender's, and (perhaps) the ship captain's, I would be covering all the important information. I would have all the tools to reveal -- or conceal -- information in exactly the right order to make the story suspenseful and yet clear.

This would be important because we would have to see what Ender was doing but *not know* his plan until it unfolded at the end. So I would not be using Ender's viewpoint during the events leading up to the climax, so I could legitimately withhold his plans from the reader. We would be in the captain's viewpoint for that moment. So the rough plan in my mind was to open with Alessandra's viewpoint, move to Ender's long enough to see how he conceives his *problem*, and then move to the captain's for the rest of the story, up to the climactic confrontation. The three viewpoints would root us enough in all three characters that in the climax, the readers would understand, without long explanation, exactly what each of the three thought was going on, and how they would obviously react to what actually happens.

That was the plan. But something happened. I fell in love.

Characters Writing Themselves

Almost from the moment I had Dorabella start talking in this new scene-centered opening, she was almost nothing like the cold, selfish woman of the first opening. I didn't decide this. It just happened.

Here's where writers often get mystical and talk about characters "writing themselves." Nonsense. I wrote every word and I wasn't hallucinating.

But I *was* playing. While I write the Dorabella opening, I wasn't an actor, I was a narrator (which is really another kind of actor, but that's a different essay). The moment I chose to begin with dialogue, I stepped into both roles and began to play as actors do.

Which means that immediately, in *both* parts, I was seeking ways to draw the audience's eye *and emotion*.

There are three basic ways to "win" the attention of the audience when you're on a stage. You either get them to love you, to laugh at you, or to fear you. (Again, there's another whole essay in this, about how this is the primary strategy used by human beings to get along in society, except that real life has a fourth option, to disappear, which is almost never an actor's choice.)

The original Dorabella opening made her an object of dread: The readers would be hoping that Ender could avoid getting in her clutches. The strategy I was using, in that narrative preamble, was fear. The worse I made Dorabella, the more sympathy the reader would have with the as-yet-unmet Ender.

But in this story, I wanted to build *sympathy* with the viewpoint character, Alessandra, so she would be the patient victim of her mother's incompetence. Dorabella, however, instead of being built up through fear, suddenly turned into a clown.

It wasn't my strategy as a writer. It was my strategy as an *actor*. Mother is trying to sell her horrible decision -- to force her daughter to leave Earth and go to a colony world -- by making it a game.

But in the moment I wrote it that way, I had made the decision (unwittingly) to have this be the primary way that Dorabella relates to her daughter. To Dorabella, all of life is a *Midsummer-Night's-Dream*-like comedy that she creates to distract her daughter from what is really going on in their lives. She is Bottom, Titania, and Puck rolled into one.

Because I'm in Alessandra's point of view, I can show how Alessandra is no longer taken in by the show (or at least she thinks she's not). Dorabella, on the other hand, isn't even Dorabella, she's simply "Mother." We experience her as Alessandra does -- as a failed clown, one that wants to be funny, but is really rather sad. Yet because Alessandra does love her mother, at first she is willing to put up with what's going on. Only when it's clear that Mother actually means it does she start to resist.

Thus the scene begins with a preexisting relationship: Clown and weary-but-patient audience. It almost immediately transforms into a different one: Desperate mother (still trying to be a clown) forcing her will on an unwilling (and uncomprehending) child.

At the end of the scene, the child has decided not to comply with her mother, and so she has her own plan of resistance. This plan will take her into contact with the grandmother -- the character who becomes memorable through fear.

Structure

My original structure -- the story of Ender, the women, and the ship captain -- was not working here. Once I had introduced these three characters -- the lover, the clown, the villain -- it was inevitable that the climactic scene would involve all three of the women -- and needed no other characters.

So it was that with the introduction of the grandmother, I finally realized I could not move on to the starship in this story. This was the tale of three women, and it would end when they sunder their previous relationships and move on.

The structure for *this* story then became simple and obvious. Though the story covers many weeks, and most of the time is either told or skipped, the vast bulk of the *words on the page* would consist of four scenes.

1. Mother tells Alessandra that they are going to leave Earth.
2. Alessandra resists by trying to arrange to live with grandmother.
3. Now that Alessandra has met the grandmother, she finally learns what has really been going on all her life.
4. Grandmother comes to try to force Dorabella to stay under her control and Dorabella and Alessandra, together, stand against her.

Doesn't it look simple? But it was not my original plan. It grew out of what became interesting and involving to me as I improvised that opening scene between Alessandra and Mother.

As I improvised the character of Mother -- the clown, pretending she lives a fairy existence on the edges of fairyland when in fact she's living in a financial hell -- I began to wonder. What is she really doing with the money? Why does she maintain this cheery, happy façade? The cheap thing would be to make her crazy or, worse, "wacky," a sort of *A Thousand Clowns* in 23rd-century Italy. But I despise literature that celebrates happy-go-lucky irresponsible grownups. And yet I didn't want to make a ruin of Dorabella-the-clown -- I wanted her to amount to something.

It wasn't till I got to Grandmother's house and heard her random, untargeted hostility and saw all those icky tacky knickknacks and pillows and fuss that I caught a glimmer of what was really going on. In other words, it took my improvisation of Grandmother to enable me to understand the tragic dilemma of Mother.

And yet, with each scene as it opened, I had no particular plan. I simply *acted* my way through the dialogue to see who the characters were -- who I wanted them to be.

I could not start writing this story until I had a plan. But in the process of improvising the scenes, the story slipped away from that plan and took on a life of its own. That's what is meant when we say that characters "write themselves." We improvise our way into characters and relationships that we care about more than we cared about the original plot.

I will still write that other story. Nothing in this one contradicts it. In fact, between "Gold Bug" and "A Young Man with Prospects," I've framed that center story of Ender's voyage quite nicely, I think, showing the world his colonists came from and the world they're going to.

Meanwhile, though, as a storyteller I did not imprison myself in my own plans. The Dorabella opening was the captive one -- the opening that did nothing but serve the story I meant to write. It was the opening of *this* story that opened the doors to far more possibilities and let me create a much better, richer, and utterly different tale from anything I had planned.

Just Like Me

by David Lubar



Artwork by Lance Card

"Thanks. It's very nice," Deb said as she lifted the skirt from the box. She tried to sound pleased. It wasn't all that bad a skirt, but it was the sort of style she'd stopped wearing several years ago. Maybe she could exchange it for a something she liked.

"You'll look so cute in it," her mom said. She pointed at the pile of empty boxes and smiled. "A present seems to be missing."

"Really?" Deb asked. That was more like it. Each birthday, she got one very special gift from her mom. So far, there'd been no sign of it.

"Stay right here. I've been saving the best for last." Her smile turned into a grin as she dashed out of the living room.

Deb wondered whether her mother had gotten her the DVD player she'd asked for. Or maybe it was her own television for her bedroom. Either would be great. She knew it would be unreasonable to hope for both.

A moment later, her mom returned with a package that was about twice the size of a shoe box. Deb's hopes slowly deflated as she took the present.

"Thanks." She shook it. Something solid clunked against the sides of the box. It didn't feel heavy enough for a DVD player, and it was too small to be a television.

"Careful," her mom said. "You'll hurt her."

Her? Deb removed the paper. Since this was the last present, she didn't want to rush. Once the presents were opened, she felt that the rest of the birthday was pretty much just like any other day.

Beneath the wrapping paper, she found a pink cardboard box. Curly white letters on the lid read, *Just Like Me*.

Puzzled, Deb removed the lid. Then she pulled aside the pink tissue paper that covered the contents. "Oh my . . ." She found herself staring at her own face -- smaller, hard, and unmoving, but still her own face, right down to the dark brown bangs that covered her forehead and the light brown freckles that dusted her cheeks. *Bangs?* Not anymore. Deb put a hand to her head. She'd changed her hair style half a year ago.

"Like it?" her mom asked.

Deb nodded, though she wasn't sure how she felt. She was too old for dolls. She'd packed all of hers away the last time she'd cleaned her room. Looking more closely, she realized the doll appeared sort of young.

"There's a man up in Gilford who makes them," her mom said. "He uses a photograph."

"Which picture did you send?" Deb asked.

"That wonderful shot from the summer before last. I think he did a fabulous job. It looks just like you."

"It's great, Mom," Deb said. She picked up the doll, but she didn't hold it too close. She felt strangely uncomfortable when she looked into the small version of her own face. It was like last year, when she'd been in the school play. The first time she'd seen her face in a mirror wearing stage makeup, the site had made her feel weird. Everything was familiar, but also slightly odd.

Her mom smiled. "I knew you'd like it. I couldn't wait to give it to you."

Deb carried the doll up to her room and looked for a place to put it. She couldn't bring herself to give the thing a name. What could she call it? Little Deb? Deb the Second? Young Deb? No. For now, the doll was an it. But she needed a place for it. Deb knew her mom would be hurt if she stuck the doll in a closet. Or in the trash. She settled for putting it on the shelf that ran along the wall above her headboard. That way, at least, she wouldn't see the doll when she was lying in bed.

Before she went to sleep, she checked online. The company that made the doll had a web site. To her horror, she discovered the doll cost more than a DVD player and a TV put together. *What a waste*, she thought as she got in bed.

When Deb woke up the next morning, she felt something hard next to her head. She reached out, her eyes still closed, and felt cold plastic. And wiry hair. Deb sat up fast, letting out a gasp.

The doll was in bed with her. *It must have fallen*, Deb thought as she scooted away from it. But that wouldn't explain how the doll had ended up tucked under the blanket next to her. Deb didn't want to think about that. She put the doll back on the shelf and went down for breakfast.

"Could you get the paper?" her mom asked when Deb walked into the kitchen.

"Sure." Deb threw on her coat and went out to the front lawn.

When she got back to the kitchen, she nearly dropped the paper. The doll was sitting at the kitchen table, perched in a chair, boosted by a stack of books.

"I thought she should join us," Deb's mom said.

Deb nodded and took a seat. She noticed her mom had set a place for the doll.

"So," her mom asked. "Have you given her a name yet?"

"No," Deb said. "I'm still thinking about it."

"How about Jean?" her mom suggested.

"But . . ." Deb said. *Jean* was her own middle name. Her dad had come up with Deb. Her mom had come up with Jean. So they'd named her Deborah Jean.

Her mom stroked the doll's hair. "Yes. Jean. I like that. Don't you?"

"Sure, Mom," Deb said. "Jean is a great name." She glanced up at the clock. "I'd better get going." She grabbed her back pack and hurried down the hall toward the front door. As she looked over her shoulder, she saw Jean sitting at the table, staring with eyes that never moved, waiting patiently for someone to pick her up or stroke her hair and tell her what a good girl she was.

When Deb got home from school, she found Jean on the couch. Deb always sat on the left corner of the couch to do her homework. Her mom had put Jean there. Deb moved the doll to the other side of the room, into the large leather chair her dad had loved to lounge in. The chair he'd always sat in before he'd left last year.

Deb sat on the couch and started her homework. A few minutes later, she heard her mom coming down the hall. She realized her mom would want to know why she'd moved Jean. Deb ran over and brought Jean back to the couch, placing her on the middle cushion.

"Oh, don't the two of you look cute," Deb's mom said. She walked over to the couch and gave Deb a hug. Then she reached down and patted Jean. "What an adorable pair." She raised her other hand, which held a brush, and started brushing Jean's hair.

"We're not a pair," Deb muttered. Her own scalp tingled as she spoke. She turned away from the doll and continued working on her homework, trying to ignore the tuneless drone of her mother's humming.

Jean joined the family for dinner that night. Once again, Deb's mom set a plate for the doll. *At least she didn't give her any food*, Deb thought as she ate her meal.

That evening, after the three of them watched television, Deb's mom stood up and said, "Bed time, Deborah Jean."

Deb was about to answer when she realized that her mom was talking to the doll. *Deborah Jean?* Deb thought. It must have been a slip. A stupid slip. "Fine," she muttered as she went upstairs to get ready for bed. "If that's what she wants. Just fine. They can have each other."

She stomped down the hall to the bathroom. When she finished brushing her teeth, she walked into her room.

Jean was sitting on her bed. Deb froze in the doorway. Down the hall, she could hear her mom in her own bedroom. "I'll be there in a minute to say goodnight," her mom called.

Deb sat at the foot of the bed, far from Jean. Her mother came in and said good night to them, looking straight at the doll the whole time. As soon as her mom left, Deb tossed Jean up onto her shelf. Hard. She smiled at the sound of the doll's head smacking against the wall.

Sleep tight, Deb thought as she crawled under the covers.

Deb woke in the middle of the night with a headache. She knew, without checking, that Jean was tucked in next to her again. Deb closed her eyes, curled up with her back to the doll, and tried to sleep.

The next day, after school, Deb had an idea. She'd fix things so Jean didn't look like her any more. Then her mother would snap out of this weirdness. "Shock her right out of it," she said as she went to the kitchen and grabbed a knife.

"Plastic surgery," she muttered. She was halfway to the couch when her mom's scream locked her in her tracks.

"What are you doing?" her mom asked, pointing at the knife.

Deb shrugged and tossed out the first lie that came to mind. "Nothing. I was just going to trim her hair. The bangs are too long."

"With that? Have you lost her mind." Her mom snatched the doll from the couch and wrapped her arms tightly around it, cradling the doll against her chest. "There, there," she crooned. "It's all right."

Deb turned away and went back to the kitchen. With each step she took, her chest felt tighter. She was so upset, she could hardly breathe. She put the knife back in the drawer, then sat at the table.

A while later, she heard steps.

"Deborah Jean forgives you," her mom said. "She's very understanding. Everyone says she's a perfect doll."

Deb nodded, but didn't look up at them. She heard her mom put the doll on a chair. Her own breath came more easily now.

"I don't want her in my room tonight," Deb said.

"Sure you do," her mother said. "Besides -- it's her room, too."

"No it isn't!" Deb stood up and faced her mother. "It's my room. She's a doll! She isn't real!"

Her mom reached out and placed her hands over the doll's ears. "Ssshhhhh. I don't know what's come over you."

Deb stormed out of the house. She walked aimlessly for blocks, dreaming of how she was going to destroy the doll. The house was dark when she got home. Her mother had gone to bed. *She didn't even wait up for me*, Deb thought.

Upstairs, in her room, the doll waited for her. It was on her bed, tucked under the blanket. Deb's favorite bracelet was fastened around the doll's neck. Her mom must have put it there.

"Enough!" Deb said. She raced across the room and grabbed the doll. She fumbled with the catch on the bracelet, then stopped. She was afraid that she'd break it. There was an easier way to get it off. A much more satisfying way. She twisted the doll's head, eager to rip it right off the body. In her mind, she saw herself throwing the head through her window. In her mind, she saw herself screaming at her mother, telling her how wrong all of this was. In her mind, she saw the world returning to the way it once had been.

In her neck, she felt a slash of tearing pain that hurt her beyond anything she could imagine.

The doll dropped from her fingers and fell to the bed. Deb staggered back, grabbing her injured throat. She crashed into the wall, then sank to the floor. A weak gasp came from her lips. She couldn't raise her voice beyond a whisper. The pain and damage was too great. She couldn't even turn her head to the front. On the bed, she saw the doll, its head twisted at an unnatural angle.

"Deb!" her mother cried, racing into the room.

Deb reached out a hand and mouthed the word, "Neck."

Her mother sped past her. She grabbed the doll and cradled it in her arms. "Yes, your poor neck. How awful. Oh dear. Don't worry, I'll get you taken care of. You'll be fine. You'll be just fine. I promise."

She rushed from the room, still talking to the doll. "Don't worry. I know someone who can fix you. She lives right across town."

Deb, struggling to swallow, watched her go. A half hour later, as she sat on the floor in a corner of her room, her neck suddenly felt better. She knew the doll had been repaired.

Her mom would be back, soon. Her mom and Deborah Jean. Perfect Deborah Jean who never disobeyed. Who never sulked or pouted. Who never grew older. "No," she said aloud. "I'm Deb. She's just a doll. I'm Deb. Not her. Me."

But even to her own ears, her voice sounded flat and empty. Not human, really. Not very much alive at all.

Big Otto's Casino

by David Lubar



Artwork by Lance Card

"Thanks, Mrs. Zambini," I said as my last customer of the day paid me. Phew. I'd been mowing lawns all week and I was beat. But now for the good part -- spending the money.

I stopped at my friend Mike's house on the way into town. It's even more fun spending money when you bring someone along. We headed for Video Kingdom. They had a great selection of games, and the prices were pretty good.

"Watcha gonna get?" Mike asked as we walked into the store.

"I think Destructo III," I said. "I heard it has twice as much blood splatter as Destructo II."

"Cool."

And that's what I picked from the shelves when we got to the store. It looked fabulous.

Check this out," Mike said, grabbing a box from the bottom shelf. "Big Otto's Casino. And it's only five bucks."

I shook my head. "At that price, it has to stink."

"I don't know," Mike said. "Remember Space Masher? That was only eight bucks"

"Yeah, and it was pretty good." I held my hand out for the box. "Let me see."

Mike passed the box to me. I checked the screen shots on the back. The graphics actually looked pretty good. And I had enough money for both games. "Sure," I said. "Why not."

So I bought both games and took them home. We played Destructo III until Mike got tired of me ripping his arms off -- I was a lot better at it than he was.

Then I put in Big Otto's Casino. The title screen came up with a picture of Otto. He was a fat, ugly guy with a cigar clamped in his mouth. "Welcome," he said in a raspy voice. "Nice ta meetcha. C'mon in."

The game started. I led my guy into the casino and played a slot machine. Before I knew it, I'd lost the hundred dollars I started with. But a screen popped up:

#

Press START to borrow money

Press X to quit

#

I pressed START and got another hundred dollars. It didn't last much longer than the first. I tried blackjack, which I sort of understood. And craps, which is what they call dice. I got a kick out of the name, but I had no idea what I was doing.

"Let me try," Mike said as the money screen came up again.

"In a minute." I wasn't ready to give up. I knew I could win. My luck had to change sooner or later. This time, I lost my money playing roulette and the poker machines.

"Man," Mike said, shaking his head, "what's the point?"

"I don't know." Maybe he was right. This did seem kind of pointless.

"Game over." Mike reached for the power switch.

"Hold it," I said, grabbing his arm. "I want to try just one more time." I got another hundred dollars. I did a bit better this time. I still lost, but the money lasted longer.

"This is getting boring," Mike said. "Come on, let's go outside."

I shook my head. I'd been outside all week mowing lawns. Summer was half over, and that was about all I'd done. I was ready to take a break for the next month and just enjoy myself. I had enough games to keep me happy for a while. "I'm going to stick with it until I win," I said.

"Give it up," Mike said.

I shook my head. "Not yet. I can beat this thing. I know I can. I just need to figure out the right strategy."

I kept playing. Sometime that evening, I guess Mike left. I really can't remember when. But I was getting better. Really. I lasted a lot longer before I had to borrow more money. One time, I even won a couple hundred from a slot machine. But then I blew it all again, trying to make up for everything I'd lost earlier.

I fell asleep for a while in front of the game. When I woke up, I played some more. I was really getting good. Even so, I was down to my last five dollars. I bet it at roulette and lost.

No big deal. I could borrow more and play again.

But the usual screen didn't come up. Instead, I saw another message in flashing red letters. It just said: CREDIT LIMIT REACHED.

That couldn't be the end. I hit the X button. The screen didn't change. I hit START. I didn't mind starting over. Nothing happened. I tried all the buttons. Nothing. I guess the game froze.

As I reached to unplug the machine, the doorbell rang.

I got up, and nearly fell flat on my face before I could take a step. My legs were stiff from sitting so long. The bell rang again.

I staggered down the stairs and opened the door.

It was Big Otto.

"You owe us money," he said, speaking through the cigar he had clamped in his jaw. It really stunk. He pulled out a notebook. "Here we go. Ethan Spangler -- two thousand dollars."

I took a step back and shook my head. "I don't owe you anything. It was just a game."

Otto laughed. "Don't try to back out now. We can make it very unpleasant for people who refuse to pay their debts." He grabbed the doorknob. With a flick of his wrist, he snapped it off. He took a bite out of it and spat the metal onto the porch. Then he grinned.

"Look -- I'm just a kid," I told him. "I don't have any money."

Otto kept grinning. "That's okay, kid. You can work off your debt by mowing my lawn."

"No way." I'd already mowed enough lawns for one summer. "I'm not going to do it."

"I'll bet you will."

I started to say something, but I realized this would be a good time to take a break from betting. Besides, one more lawn wouldn't kill me.

"Might as well get started," Otto said as he dragged me from the house. "I've got a big lawn. A real big lawn. It takes about a month to get the whole thing cut."