

BABEL 3000

by Colin P. Davies

Colin P. Davies has just completed his first novel, a comic fantasy for young adults. Further details about it are available on his website, [www.colinpdavies.com](http://www.colinpdavies.com). The author's previous story for us, "The Defenders" (October/November 2004), resurfaced in The Year's Best SF #22. More recently, many of his tales have appeared in the online 'zine, Bewildering Stories. In his newest story for our pages, he takes us far into a future where we can attempt to interpret...

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Unbeknownst to Smith, archaic words had become cool.

"Nicola..." he protested. "You're making that word up."

The blonde girl's cheeks flared crimson and she was clearly befuddled. She leaned her bicycle against the crumbling bark of a naked oak tree.

"Honest Guv ... I ain't. I ... I heard it only yesterday. My boyfriend hooked it in London, 1236 AD."

"And it's definitely a must have?" He removed his trilby and glanced about to ensure they were alone here this morning on the banks of the river.

"You'll be cooler than an Argentinian penguin farmer." She laughed. Her fingers fought with the breeze to keep her shoulder-length hair out of her doll-perfect face.

"I thought Japanese words were current."

"Keep up, Smithy! Fatima used an archaic, totally unknown word on Lunchtime Debate, two days ago. Now everybody wants one."

Smith was reluctant to part with his credit—it was a novel weight on his spreadsheet. But still ... a new old word! Maybe he could use it at Jenny's millennium dinner party tonight.

"I'm telling you, Señor Smithy. No one else has got it yet." She tugged on her white T-shirt so that he could not miss the word UNIQUE stretched across her chest. "My boyfriend has the best ear, and the best gear, for time-fishing. He's sharp, sly. Bit of a geek."

Smith recalled how his wife, Mary, had loved that word ... geek. He was a geek for collecting hats. He was a geek for choosing to cook. She'd been dead nine years now and he still missed being a geek.

Nicola moved towards him. With her confident hips and assured shoulders, her casual, almost careless style—evidenced by the yellow trousers complete with bicycle clips—Nicola reminded him of Mary. He wondered why he'd not seen it before.

"Okay," he said. "I'll take it." The girl had not let him down yet. Every word she'd sold him had been received with admiration and applause, whether literary, educational, technical ... whatever. He'd come to trust her, and to look forward to their meetings. Indeed, today, after she'd called to make the arrangement, he'd immediately showered and chosen a sharp charcoal suit he had not worn in nine years.

They touched fingertip terminals. The credit transfer was swift and Smith experienced the usual sherbet fizz in his left temple. "Lodged and logged. I feel positively medieval."

"Thanks, Mister."

Mister? Yes ... he was twice her age. "On your way, Lass. And..." He pressed his hat back onto his bald head and turned up his coat collar. "And wrap up warmer."

Smith watched Nicola pedal off on her bicycle while he reflected on the speed of change. He'd only recently adapted to the fashion for Japanese jargon following months of entrepreneurial claptrap. And now this. It seemed the world had grown old while he'd slept.

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"Jenny." Smith hugged the tall, elegant lady and kissed her naked earlobe.

"Smithy..." She snaked an arm around his shoulders, reached up and cheekily dislodged his top hat.

"I've got something for everyone to hear," he said quietly, taking the hat in hand. "At the end of the main course." He noted that her scarlet, off-the-shoulder, silk gown carried the word erudite in gold and in a variety of sizes and fonts. She could possibly be the most stylish host in Cambridge. She was certainly the most industrious--this was her fourth millennium party and they were only halfway through January.

"Angelina also has a word, Smithy. Can yours wait till after that?" She helped him out of his overcoat.

"Indubitably. No rush." Fashions changed fast, but not usually during the course of a formal dinner.

However, he soon noted that most guests were attired in red, whilst he had opted for a black kimono. Tomorrow he would re-subscribe to the lifestyle channel.

Later, as he polished off his four-seasons pizza, Smith was disturbed to see the Holy Anderson rise to speak. The sensei's gaze flitted about like a butterfly, alighting on guest after guest, freezing each for a moment's examination. He was canny, this priest. He would first still the conversation and then drop in his word like a fox into a hen house. This time, however, he held back. "I give way to the delectable Angelina," he said.

"Thanks, Dad." The exceedingly short young lady coughed as her eyes appeared over the rim of the table. "This word is deep, so think about it and weep." A murmur sneaked around the table. Angelina coughed again. "Are we ready?" Silence.

"Asinine!"

Anderson's claps were small explosions of delight. Jenny and the guests followed suit. Smith merely gulped with relief. Not a new old word. Not even a rare word. She'd gone for a just right word. Undeniably deep ... and poignant, with the memory of her mother's refusal to learn the offworlders' tongue, and her subsequent incarceration, still fresh and painful. He had to admire the little gnome.

"Bird-brained!" came a call from amongst the guests.

Angelina aimed a sour look at the culprit.

Another voice announced, "Muleish."

"Follyology," someone else suggested.

And so Angelina's moment was lost in a tangle of bitter, and increasingly inappropriate, words from a scrum of inebriated invitees who should have known better. The in-crowd loved a good squabble.

Not the best moment for optimal output, Smith realized. His word would have to wait.

When all had gorged to the max and the servants were clearing the table, Smith sidled over to Jenny, who had wedged herself into a corner.

He took her clammy hand. "Overdrunk?"

She smiled without conviction. "I never want to hear another synonym for aging." A tear tracked down her powdered cheek.

"You need a new guest list."

She shrugged and stared at the snowflake wallpaper.

He released her hand. "Perhaps, then, this is not the right time for a word...."

Jenny burst into weeping.

Smith took a used napkin from a windowledge and handed it to his host.

Then he collected his hat and overcoat and left without saying cheerio.

\* \* \* \*

He took his word home by way of the riverside walk. No point rushing back to an empty apartment. So he strolled and mulled and soon found himself upon a rusted iron bench watching the undulating reflections of the few remaining farside lanterns. In front of him the uneven cracked flagstones were all but defeated, submitting to centuries of frost and feet. He gazed up through his misted breath to the sky, where lights tracked between the stars.

At times like this he often succumbed to thinking. And the subject that, today, had never quite slipped off the edge of his awareness was time-fishing.

He was struck by the wonder of this technology that could listen to the sounds of the past—the words of the street people ... words never documented. New, old words. Put to other uses, what else could a technology such as that achieve? But before he could begin to imagine the possibilities ... the changes that could result from a redirected common will—a will concerned with other than oneupmanship through salvaging the scraps of a dying language—he was distracted by nearby voices.

Some way down the riverside path, the Holy Anderson and Angelina were talking. The discussion appeared heated and Smith quieted his breathing in order to hear.

They were having words. Stated words. Exclaimed words. Questioning words. Heartfelt words....

After a time, they both turned to survey the river in silence, then hurried away together.

Smith found himself unsettled. It had been an odd day. Unique perhaps, with Nicola and Mary and his frustrated dinner party plans and Jenny's uncomfortable emotionality. And now this overheard father/daughter conversation. So many words, so many interesting and educated and unusual words, and yet nothing—nothing at all that mattered—had been said.

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That night Smith dreamed of Nicola, the bicycle girl. She rode down from an overcast sky with her long, sun-colored hair flowing around her head. Smith stood upon soft moist grass that made him feel unsteady, unconnected to the world. The girl stopped her bicycle and put one bare foot to the ground. She adjusted her scarlet bikini top.

"I have another new old word for you," she said.

He noted the paleness of her skin, the breathtaking blue globes of her eyes.

"Guaranteed eleventh century," she told him. "My boyfriend overheard it in the babble of a York market."

Smith heard his own mouth say, "I'm not interested."

Nicola stumbled and fought to keep the bicycle upright. "But...."

He no longer wanted words. He needed something else. Something he could feel, but not explain.

He watched the sway of the girl's hips as she cycled away.

Something he had not yet bought the word for....

He awoke bemused and strangely sad.

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The morning was chilled and frosted, the blue sky traced with the intertwined tracks of the offworlders' space freighters. Under this laced canopy, Smith made his way to Jenny's house. A servant admitted him and he found Jenny spread upon a settee, dressed in pink pajamas and browsing through a fine art catalog.

She brightened. "Andrew."

He glanced around and then remembered that Andrew was his own, little-used, name.

She pointed at his head. "No hat?"

He ran a hand over his smooth scalp. "I didn't realize...."

"I trust you enjoyed yourself last night," she said.

"Without a doubt."

"Isn't it wonderful to meet so many sparkling, interesting, educated people!"

"So you think it went well?"

She dropped the catalog onto the lacquered teak floor. "Oh yes, I had a wonderful time."

He examined her eyes, but they were one-way glass. He sat next to her on the settee.

"Did you leave something behind at the party?" she said.

"In a way, yes." He took her hand. She returned his grip with a gentle squeeze. "And I've brought something for you," he said.

"Oh good!" She sat upright. "What is it?"

"It's a new old word, from 1236 London."

"Wonderful!" She freed her hand and raised her fingertip terminals. "Don't worry about the price. I trust you."

Gently, he lowered her hand. "No charge. I just want you to have it."

And with that, he leaned forward and whispered in her ear.

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