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ANDROMEDA SPACEWAYS

Inflight Magazine

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Editorial

...Zara Baxter

I saw *Children of Men* when it came out in the UK last year. *Children of Men* portrays a future where everyone is infertile. There have been no babies born for over eighteen years, and time is running out for humans to ever reproduce again.

Why is the movie called *Children of Men*, when there are no actual children? The metaphorical “Children of Men” referred to in the movie are not babies, they are war and poverty, division and strife, hatred towards fellow mankind and fear of difference.

Real human babies, in the movie, are symbolic of hope.

In *Children of Men*, then, we are looking at a world — pretty much literally — without hope. One of the key insights about the movie, for me, was that a world without hope looks an awful lot like ours, with only a few years remove and only a few small pieces of legislation between us and them.

Have we lost hope? Is everything from here a long descent into blackness?

We’ve taken a step over a line that divides a world able to halt or even reverse some effects of climate change, to a world that can no longer do that. As one example, the polar ice caps are melting, and we can’t refreeze them by choosing alternative energies. It’ll take centuries to reach a new equilibrium from the changes we’re already wrought, let alone time to allow the earth to repair the damage we’ve done. It may prove irreparable.

If I sound pessimistic, I am, but I think what disappoints me is that I haven’t yet seen much science fiction that tries to tackle that globally warmed future. Oh, there are stories where the world looks just like ours but with hydrogen-powered cars. And there are works, like Octavia Butler’s *Parable of The Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* and the wonderful *River of Gods*, by Ian MacDonald, that portray a world socially and politically compatible with global warming. But I wonder whether we don’t want to imagine our future; a world that can only get worse. Maybe we want an optimistic vision, an escape from the inevitable. We want ASIM, right?

Zara Baxter,



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pointless events.....



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Grace

...Ian McHugh

Six months after she died, he gets the call to collect her from the airport. He doesn't listen to their excuses, just pulls on his coat and boots, rushes from the house and runs down to the station to wait, panting and impatient, for the next cable car across the canyon.

His agitation abates once he settles into his seat. His breath condenses on the cold glass, obscuring his reflection. He leans his head back against the seat, closes his eyes and lets his mind drift.

The cold air burns his lungs after the heat of the cable car. He winces at the dying shriek of the dirigible's turbofans.

The terminal building is crowded with people — passengers arriving and waiting to leave, relatives come to collect their loved ones or say goodbye. She stands in the alcove beside the ticket office, solitary amidst the hubbub. His chest feels like it will burst at the sight of her.

He drinks in the details, missed for so long. Wide blue eyes and a heart-shaped face, small mouth, pointed chin, a scatter of freckles across her nose and cheeks. Fair hair, worn loose around her shoulders, kinking to follow the line of her jaw. A petite frame but well fleshed.

She is taller than she used to be. They got that wrong the first time and he decided he liked it. Other things have changed too — nose, breasts, ankles, the set of her eyes — ironing out the flaws of the original.

She doesn't notice him until he reaches for her. She gives a tiny smile of recognition, hesitant at meeting the man of her dreams for the first time. Her memories are fabricated from photos and videos and his own recollections; stolen from elsewhere to build her a childhood.

He smiles in return and takes her hands in his. Her smile widens in relief and sudden certainty.

"I'm glad you're back," he says. An inane statement, and slightly foolish, since his joy is plain to see and she is here for the first time.

She says nothing in return. He doesn't mind at all, he can feel the contentment that radiates from her.

He leads her back to the cable car platform. The car he arrived in is about to depart on its return journey. They hurry through the doors. They look for seats as it lurches into motion.

The other passengers all know him, but their greetings are perfunctory as he leads her along the aisle. They speak to her not at all, although their eyes linger. She discomfits them, blurs the distinction between human and the organic constructs most people own.

Ignorant, she spares barely a glance for the pliant, blank-eyed constructs that stand together in the luggage space at the back of the car.

The front-most seats are vacant, as they usually are. There is too little room for his knees and he has to wedge himself in. He doesn't mind, since this means he must sit with his leg pressed against hers.

The cable car hauls itself up the slope from the airport. The sun's glare directly ahead turns the window a fluorescent white. They ascend into heaven.

The car pauses at the edge of the valley, as though to catch its breath, before plunging past. The ground drops away sharply as it continues on, unhurried after the initial drop.

The cable from which they hang seems as insubstantial as a spider's thread, anchored to nothingness by the repeller buoys that grasp it every few hundred metres. Today they share the sky with a hawk. It drifts lazily across their path.

Beside him, her lips part in a gasp. Her eyes glisten with tears. Her hand seeks his.

Her emotions are as carefully sculpted as her body, every response a pre-defined instruction from the organic processor inside her head. He knows it, but the sleight of hand is so skilled that the imitation transgresses into the real.

Besides, he tells himself, am I any different? Aren't we all just constructs, dreaming that we're real?

"I'm glad you're still living here," she says.

She stands by the window, silhouetted against the evening light. Her hair makes a wavy halo around her head. Behind her, blue ghosts of mountains fade into the sky.

"I'm glad you're back." It doesn't sound so foolish now they're home. Her face is in darkness, but he can feel her smile.

"All your things are in the end room. There's a bed made up."

"We're not sharing?"

Past echoes raise the hairs on the back of his neck. She is always surprised by that and he always answers the same way: "You remember me. But those are someone else's memories. You don't know me yet."

"You're older than I remember," she says. "You didn't have any grey hairs before."

"Eight years older."

“How did I die?”

The question startles him. He looks up from his newspaper. She stands in the doorway, doesn't step out onto the balcony. She watches him, expectantly.

“We were on holiday. You fell...”

His head hangs over the edge of the cliff. His hands and knees are bruised and skinned. He almost falls himself. Her body lies broken on the rocks below. Her arms and legs splay awkwardly from her torso, every limb suddenly with too many joints. Her keening carries up to him over the rumble and hiss of the waves.

The sea reaches out a delicate finger, lifts her from the rocks and bears her away. He teeters on the brink, then scrambles back.

The faux-deaths that followed tumble over the first. Three times, painless and clean, but regrettable, crying tears of frustration in the dark while he waits for her breathing to stop. And then the last... He shies away from it, drags himself back to the present. He's sweating, his breath shallow and rapid.

Her face pales at his distress. Their eyes meet. The aversion programme belatedly kicks in and she realises she doesn't want to know, after all. He folds his newspaper, sharply, and looks away.

She changes the subject, but not to one that is any easier to discuss.

“Have you been alone all this time?”

His mind is empty of the response he's rehearsed. He nods.

“You never wanted to find someone else?”

He shakes his head and silently wishes for her to go away. A minute later he hears the door slide shut.

She hasn't left the house in two weeks.

He feels for her, though her isolation suits him.

“This isn't the first time you've brought me back, is it?”

The knife hangs over the chopping board. Blood pounds in his ears. *Damn them, they should have fixed this.*

He resumes cutting and pretends confusion.

She goes on. “I went out today, down to the store. A man I don't know was speaking to the shopkeeper. He said that he could hardly believe I was just a construct.”

“That's what they're supposed to think. Clones are illegal...”

She cuts him off. “He said he thought my tits were better the last time. Then he said this was the best arse they'd sculpted on me.”

He stops cutting again. He shuts his eyes against the words and wishes he could shut his ears.

“I asked him why he would say that. He wouldn't answer. He just walked past me.”

She falls silent. He looks to see if she is still there.

“If I were really a clone, I’d be identical to the original.” She meets his gaze with teary eyes. Her voice remains taut. “Is it true? Am I just a construct?”

He watches while some mechanical part of him tries to answer. “I... You...”

He stares at his hands.

“Is anything of what I am real?”

“Yes,” his mouth whispers. *No!* His mind screams.

“What happened?”

The question disorients him. Life and faux-lives run together. He tries to order them.

“The first time...” His voice betrays him, speaks the thought aloud.

She pounces on it. “How *many* times have you brought me back?”

He holds down the panicked response that surges up from his chest. He is queasy with *deja vu*.

“Five.” He can barely get any sound past his throat.

“Five?” Her voice breaks over the word.

He is silent. Numb and helpless to save himself.

“Why?”

His vision blurs. He shakes his head.

“She’s still too simple,” he remembers saying, before the last time. “She’s boring. And creepy. She still won’t occupy herself. She just stands there, like the other two. She’s like a fucking appliance.”

She is an appliance, their long silence replies, and you’re a sick fuck.

Sick fucks, yourselves. Don’t pretend you’re not enjoying your petty godhood.

“We can certainly add a higher level of complexity, give her more self-direction. Her behaviour will be less predictable.”

He looks down at the meat-factory floor, at all the unsculpted bodies, inert in their translucent sarcophagi.

“Make her as real as you can...”

“Five. I’m the fifth. Then do I only live two years, or do you kill me every time?”

“No!” He chokes on the lie. *I can’t kill you*, his traitor mind says, *you’re just a fucking appliance.*

He faces her, pleading.

“I can’t stay here. I’m leaving.”

“No!” The knife comes up, unbidden.

Her face drains of colour.

She looks so tiny lying at his feet. Empty eyes stare at nothing and blood mats in blonde hair. He can’t remember how this happened. The sea breeze whips her hair about her face. Dark lenses hide her eyes, her expression cool while he shatters inside. The sea reaches out... She breathes out with a faint rattle and doesn’t inhale. He beats at his forehead and tugs at his hair. There’s blood on the tiles, on his hand, locked around the handle of a bloody knife. He unclenches his fingers.

The blade clatters loudly on the floor.

The noise releases her. She flees.

Equilibrium returns. He stares at the knife.

He won’t need it this time. He has a termination code, after the last disaster.

He walks into the hall to get his coat. Her initiative will fail before she gets too far. He follows her outside.

He opens his eyes and lets the light burn the nightmares away. The cable car is noisy with the voices of the other passengers but she wraps her silence about her like a cloak. Sitting beside her, he is included under the peaceful shroud.

He basks in the warmth of the sun, the unperfumed smell of her, the touch of her fingers in his palm, the heat of her, where her hip and thigh press against his.

He lets out a sigh that has waited half a year for release.



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Sweet Potato Woman

...Chris Barnes

One Thursday morning, while digging in the sweet potato patch, George Mullett found a tuber with a face.

He had been probing deep through the sprawling leafy runners, scraping aside soil with his trowel, when he uncovered the startling sight. He stared in puzzlement, unsure of what he was seeing. With a few delicate flicks of his fingers he cleared the dirt from the root and looked closer.

It was a woman's face. Not just a chance assembly of dimples and lumps that was only face-like if you looked at it just so, at this angle, in that light. No, it was a proper face, quite unmistakable. A soil-born sculpture in sweet potato.

"Good lord," said George. With his earth-stained hands, he dug around the tuber and lifted it free.

It was sizeable, a good kilogram in weight, he reckoned. He considered the face, turning it this way and that. A smooth forehead, fine eyebrows; slender, aquiline nose; thin lips in a Mona Lisa smile. The eyes were closed, as though sleeping. A beautiful face: serene, noble, a little world-weary, but not unkind.

"Remarkable," said George to himself. He put the tuber on the garden bench and continued digging, wondering what else he might uncover. June had planted the patch, maintaining it with her usual love and skill, until she'd become too sick. Not even she had managed to grow such a wondrous thing.

George went onto other tasks: pruning, weeding, mowing. There was a lot to do in the garden during springtime. The rest of the gardening chores were comfortably mundane.

At lunchtime he carried inside a bucket of sweet potatoes, zucchinis and lemons, a bunch of white Marguerite daisies and the mysterious tuber. He put a dozen lemons into the fruit bowl, zucchinis into the fridge and some sweet potatoes in the pantry, leaving the rest in the bucket for his delivery rounds later on. The daisies he trimmed and arranged in the vase on the glassware cabinet, next to June's photograph. Her sweet face smiled up at him. "There you go, darling," he said, wiping a fleck of dust off the photo's silver frame. "Daisies have come up nice again this year."

She'd always liked Marguerite daisies. Simple and cheery, she used to say. She'd sing and hum while arranging the flowers. She had always loved to sing.

Five years come Monday, since the cancer took her.

George went back to the kitchen. He sat on a stool and studied the strange tuber, moving his bifocals up and down. Either way, the face lay there on the kitchen bench, peaceful, eyes shut, apparently sleeping.

He pondered what to do with it. Show it off? But to who? He didn't relish the idea of word getting around that June's garden produced freakish vegetables. And carving it up was unthinkable. It was too wonderful for mere eating.

He put it in the pantry with the other sweet potatoes, laying it on top of the stack like a gnarled, earthy effigy.

After dinner, George took his bucket of fruit and vegetables and went on his weekly round of Garden Close.

Lemons for the Taylors at number seven, in exchange for apples. Lemons and zucchinis for the Fosters at number nine, who gave George some Tahitian limes. Old Mr Chiew at number eleven liked sweet potato, and always traded a Chinese melon, winter melons or the long knobbly bitter melons, depending on the season. George had no idea what to do with the things. He and June had tried a few recipes from June's *Women's Weekly* Asian cookbook, but neither of them had especially liked the taste. He discreetly put the melons into the compost each week. It was the trading that George enjoyed — the smiling and nodding, and the not-quite-bow Mr Chiew made at the end of the transaction. George never understood much of what the white-haired Chinese man said, but that was all part of the pleasure. Part of the ritual.

June had enjoyed the weekly rounds. "Share the harvest," she'd always said. "Sow well, and reap what you sow," that was her motto.

George stopped in front of number thirteen: Marilyn Hardcastle's place. He rested a hand on her gate and tried to see through the frosted glass of her front door. The light was on inside, but perhaps she wasn't home...

Wait — there — a shadow moved behind the door. Oh well, he thought.

"George!" Marilyn exclaimed as she opened the door. "On time as usual. Put the bucket by the door, and come in for a cuppa. No, not there, put it by the hatstand. Yes, that's right. Good! Come on!" She took his hand in her rather-too-firm grip and led him into the living room. "Now! Sit there — no, there on the sofa — while I make us a nice cuppa. You'd like Earl Grey, wouldn't you, George? Course you would." She bustled into the kitchen.

He sat on her plastic-covered sofa and tried to pay attention to the stream of chatter echoing from the kitchen. He gazed around the room. A glass-doored cabinet full of porcelain knick-knacks. A wall-mounted set of souvenir teaspoons. Photos of Ern on the mantelpiece. Poor old Ern. He'd passed on a couple of years back. Despite its just-so neatness, Marilyn's house never felt very comfortable. Too sterile, thought George. No flowers.

Marilyn came back in with two steaming cups of tea. "There!" she said, putting the cups on the coffee table. She sat next to George. "This is nice, isn't it. Yes, it is." She patted his knee before he could move it away. "And how are you? I'm pretty well, myself, as always, always on the go! Have you booked the coach tour yet?"

“Well, I...”

“I have the brochures right here.” She took some glossy papers from the coffee table’s lower shelf. ‘Super Sunshine Coach Tours’ proclaimed one. It showed a large silver coach full of smiling silver-haired people.

“Marilyn, I really don’t think I...”

“Oh, come on, George! Stop moping around your house. It’s been five years, for goodness sake! Get away, have some fun. Think of it, three months around Australia. Staying in all those nice hotels. Just book the ticket.” She put the brochures into his hand.

“Well...”

She edged closer. Her thigh pressed against his. “You’ll make new friends, George.”

He cleared his throat. “Well. I’ll think about it.”

Marilyn’s faced sagged a little, then reset into a frown. “Don’t think. Just book it. The tour leaves next month, you know. I’ve already got my ticket. So it’s settled.”

He gulped down his hot tea. “Thanks for the cuppa, Marilyn. Er... So, did you want any lemons?”

George woke suddenly. A voice. Was there a voice? Yes. A woman, sweetly singing a simple, plaintive melody, just at the edge of hearing. He lay still, straining to catch the distant words through the hushed, dark house.

*I'm your sweet potato woman,
Long growing in your field.
Can you hear me singing
of the crop that field will yield?*

The voice hummed the tune again, softer. George blinked, rubbed his eyes and focused on the bedside clock’s green glowing hands. Twelve-something.

Kitchen. The song was coming from the kitchen. He sat up and listened. The tempo slowed, the voice faded, vanished. The house fell silent, expectant.

George climbed out bed, switched on the lamp, put on his glasses and stumbled into the hallway. He stood and listened. Nothing. Through the living room, the dining room, into the kitchen. The linoleum chilled the soles of his feet. He tried the back door. Locked, as it should be. Then where...?

The sweet potato woman?

The strange tuber lay in the pantry just as he’d left it, its expression still serene and faintly amused. Except — were the eyes a little open now?

George caught his breath. For a moment, the face looked like someone who was only *pretending* to be asleep.

Can’t be, he thought. It’s just my imagination. I’m still half asleep, that’s all. He yawned and went back to bed.

Sleep returned slowly. He dreamed, as always, of June: of holding her close, the summer-day smell of her hair, the welcome touch of her strong, beautifully warm hands.

On Monday, George drove out to the crematorium. It was a long drive and he didn't enjoy all the traffic. But the crematorium gardens were top notch, and the rose bushes around June's plaque were in bloom. Yellow roses, her favourite kind. George laid a bunch of daisies alongside the plaque. Roses were lovely, but he liked to think she'd enjoy a homely touch as well.

Five years. He walked around the small plot, looking at the other memorial plaques. Most of them he knew by heart now. Some were more recent than June's. One was less than a year old, and he'd never seen any flowers near it. No-one came to visit these people. Sad, how quickly some people gave up and forgot their loved ones. 'Moved on', as they said.

Bees buzzed around the yellow blooms. Such a simple life, he thought. Gather nectar, spread pollen, make honey, and die. When a bee died, did its companions mourn? Not likely. No eternal numbness for them. Just move on, on to the next flower.

"Well, I'll move on when I'm good and ready," he told the bees, and returned to the car.

That night, George again started out of sleep to the faint sound of singing.

He clutched the sheets. His hands felt sweaty. This was no dream. The woman's voice hummed the same tune as before, then sang.

*I'm your sweet potato woman,
Long growing in your field.
Can you hear me singing
of the crop that field will yield?*

More humming. He flung the blankets aside, struggled off the bed, grabbed his glasses and ran into the hall — and stopped as the voice continued with new words.

*Sun, shine down from heaven,
Rainfall, do your part,
Grow a special harvest
in the place I left my heart.*

George stood in the hall, heart pounding. He put a hand against the wall to steady himself, and breathed deeply. Stay calm, George, he thought. It's a trick. A hallucination.

Never heard of a singing hallucination before, though. He wiped his hands on his pyjama top.

The voice faded once more into silence as he approached the kitchen warily. Nothing moved when he switched on the light. The pantry door was closed. He listened at it for a minute. Silence. He flung open the door.

The tuber was still in place. He picked it up, turned it over and over, held it to his ear. Nothing. He put on his glasses and looked closely at the face. It looked back at him through distinctly half-open eyes.

“Good God!” said George with a start. The tuber slipped from his hand and thudded to the floor. He prodded the tuber gingerly with one foot. It didn’t react. Must be a practical joke, he thought. But who’d do it, and why? He looked out the window into the garden. Moonlight silvered the yard. There was no-one there.

His gaze returned to the sweet potato. Time to put a stop to this nonsense, he thought. He put the tuber onto the chopping board and took out the cleaver from the knife drawer, raised the heavy blade to strike.

The face looked so peaceful, so beautiful. Serene. He slowly lowered the cleaver. No, he thought. I have to find out more about this sweet potato woman.

George put the sweet potato woman in his bedroom. He found her presence disconcerting at first, and turned her face to the wall. He had an absurd urge to apologise for doing so. She remained silent, her subtle expression unchanged.

The following night, he sat up late in bed reading an old Zane Grey western, glancing occasionally at the tuber on the dresser. Midnight came and went, and the sweet potato woman did not sing. George fell asleep with the book sprawled on the bed, and did not wake until morning.

He put her back into the pantry where it was dark and cool. After breakfast, he stood sipping his coffee, looking out the kitchen window, planning the routine of tasks for the day. A bit more pruning. The lawn edges could do with a trim, too. Nothing too strenuous. He wanted to be alert for tonight’s vigil. But still, a man’s got to keep his garden tidy, he thought.

His garden? No, June’s garden. Our garden.

The doorbell rang before he could settle his thoughts. He paused as he recognised the silhouette behind the glass-panelled door.

“Yoo-hoo, George!” called Marilyn.

He opened the door. “Hello, Marilyn,” he said warily.

She stepped in without waiting for an invitation. “Now George, I need to know. Have you booked your ticket yet?”

“Er...no.”

She sighed. “I thought so! Dear oh dear, George, honestly and truly, you just don’t know whether you’re Arthur or Martha these days. Come on, we’ll do it now.” She strode into the living room, George following anxiously behind.

“Marilyn...”

“No, it’s no trouble!” she said. “You can pay by credit card over the phone, you know? Marvellous, isn’t it. Now come on, get your card ready.”

He moved his hand towards his pocket, but stopped and curled it into a fist. “No,” he said. “I’m not going.”

Marilyn stared at him. “What? Of course you are. We decided.”

“No. You decided. I didn’t. I’m not going. I have things to do.”

“What things?” she demanded. “Moping around dusting old photographs? Burying yourself in that bloody garden?”

He stepped back, stung.

Her face wavered. “George, I’m sorry...”

George realised he was still making a fist, and uncurled his fingers. “I’m sorry too,” he said. “I should have made my feelings clear. Said something sooner.”

“Your feelings?” she said hopefully.

“I don’t want to go. Not with you, Marilyn.” The words hit her hard, and his heart sank at her obvious pain. “There’s someone else,” he added suddenly, surprising even himself. “Come and see.” He led her into the kitchen and opened the pantry.

“Look,” he said, picking up the sweet potato woman.

Marilyn’s mouth hung open. She backed away from the tuber. “What is that? Did you grow that? It’s horrible. It’s grotesque!”

“No,” George said. “She’s strange, but I think she’s also rather beautiful.” He placed the tuber back in the pantry, gently laying it down. “She sings to me, sometimes, but I don’t understand the song yet. I won’t leave here until I do.”

“Barmy,” whispered Marilyn. “You’re completely barmy.” She backed away further. “Don’t you come near me, George Mullett! To think I wanted to...oh, my God.” She turned and strode towards the front door.

George did not follow. He heard the front door slam. Well, Marilyn’s gossip spreads faster than Wandering Jew, he thought. Barmy George and his singing spuds. He drew himself up. He didn’t care. Barmy maybe, but he had to hear what the sweet potato woman was telling him, and no one was going to stop him.

She lay on the dresser, peeping at George through half-open eyes. He sat in bed, staring straight back, willing her to sing, to do anything. Night blanketed the house in silence. The only sound came from the bedside clock, a solitary ticking that amplified the stillness.

George and the sweet potato woman lay there until the hypnotic tick, tick, tick sent George into sleep.

He dreamed that the sweet potato woman rose from the dresser and floated towards the bed, hovered above him and stared down with widening eyes, and opening mouth...

A shout echoed in the room. George realised he was sitting upright, hands clenched on the blankets. The shout was his. Just a dream. The sweet potato woman was lying on the dresser, as he’d left her.

Except that her eyes were now fully open, and she was singing.

Her mouth didn’t move, but George had no doubt. She hummed softly, and then the words came.

*I'm your sweet potato woman,
Long-growing in your field.
Can you hear me singing
of the crop that field will yield?*

*Sun, shine down from heaven,
Rainfall, do your part,
Grow a special harvest
in the place I left my heart.*

George waited, hoped, knew another verse must come.

*When spring is at its ending
and the crop is fully grown,
You'll understand my singing,
and reap what you have sown.*

She hummed the tune again, and the notes faded into silence. George waited, but she did not sing again.

When spring was at its ending? That'd be in six weeks.

He wondered what he had sown, and fell asleep still wondering. For the first time in five years, he slept the night through without dreaming of June.

When he woke, the sweet potato woman's eyes were firmly shut. He stood and stared at the bright day outside, sapphire sky and golden roses and emerald grass, the day and himself full of expectation, and he felt as though his own eyes had never been more open.

He kept the sweet potato woman for a few more days, but she began to look rather old and withered. She had not sung again. After much thought, George decided to bury her in the sweet potato patch. He felt very odd doing it, as though he ought have a minute of silence or say some appropriate words, but in the end he simply murmured "Goodbye," as he covered her over. As he patted down the soil with his hands, he felt that a long, still chapter of his life had quietly closed. Well, I've sown, he thought. Now let's see what I reap.

Two weeks later, Marilyn left on the coach tour. George went around the night before her departure to say goodbye, but she wouldn't let him inside, and made only the briefest of conversations. The neighbours in Garden Close seemed glad to see him on his Thursday rounds, however, and were very solicitous about his health. Old Mr Chiew seemed especially keen to communicate something about the sweet potatoes, with many chuckles and sly nods, but George could only nod along and grin in turn. Mr Chiew insisted on trading two melons for one potato this time.

Three weeks later, George noticed a 'For Sale' sign go up in Marilyn's front yard. Her son came from across the city to supervise furniture removal and the open house

inspections. He gave George a strange look when George introduced himself, but seemed friendly enough, and said that his mother had always wanted to move closer to her grandchildren, and decided to have it all done while she was away.

In the fourth week, George realised he had not dusted June's photograph for two days, and that he felt no guilt about it.

In the fifth week, while weeding the flower beds, George decided to remodel the garden. He'd always wanted a water feature, with a frog pond. He began drawing plans that same afternoon.

On the morning of the last day of Spring, while walking up to the corner shop for milk, George saw that the 'For Sale' sign in the front yard at number thirteen had a large 'SOLD' banner plastered across it. He paused at the gate. The front door was ajar. The new owner, perhaps? He heard someone moving about inside, whistling merrily. "Hello in there!" he called, approaching the door.

"Just a minute!" replied a distant voice. A trim, silver-haired woman appeared shortly in the doorway. "Hello?" she said.

George stared. He knew her face. Serene, noble, a little world-weary but not unkind. She returned his stare with a bemused smile. When he finally gathered his wits to shake her proffered hand, he found her grip was strong, and beautifully warm.

Polish

...Kaaron Warren

The car was smooth, air-conditioned, and completely wrong.

“We should be suffering,” I said to Callie. She was driving, sucking barley sugar, silent. “We should be hot and have only travelled half as far. We should have changed a tyre.” I drank a mouthful of water. “And I should be desperate to turn around, go back home to the city. Instead, I’m looking forward to getting to the old homestead.”

Callie smiled at me. “Things are different now. Your parents are dead. All the ghosts are gone.” It was a strange thing for her to say, because I had never told her about Yessmiss. There was something familiar waiting for me at the homestead; something I had not seen for years.

“Yes,” I said. “Yes, Miss.” I used my sleeve to polish the dashboard. “Yes, Miss,” I said. The smell of furniture polish haunted me as a child; I smelt it when no one else did. I only use a cloth when I polish.

The smell of polish surely didn’t get stronger as we drove further away from the city. I sniffed, though, sniffed again, and I could smell Yessmiss, my childhood ghost, as we drew closer and closer to the place of my birth.

Callie didn’t speak. She drove, just crunch crunch of the road, crunch crunch of the barley sugar until her eyes watered. Without asking me, she pulled in at a pub. “Let’s have a drink,” she said.

She wasn’t a country girl, she didn’t realise what these places could be like. The social centre of a small town, where people behaved in established ways. Two women together were sluts looking for a root.

Pubs don’t welcome strangers.

“Well, don’t order a martini,” I said. “Just a beer. Don’t even specify which kind, just say beer.”

Callie laughed. She grew up in the inner-city; she thinks she’s tough. She leaned over and kissed me on the mouth. Her lips were sticky with barley sugar juice. I polished them with my tongue.

“Yes, Miss,” she said. I had never explained my silly saying. Didn’t need to with her. She just accepted it, embraced it. As she embraced me and my skittishness, my temper, my passions, my goals.

“This isn’t the place to be out,” I said.

“Der,” she said, squeezing my thigh. “Really, you think you’ve cornered the market for narrow-minded. Mate, I’ve been abused in more places than you’ve...”

She couldn’t think of a clever ending and I laughed.

“Than I’ve had trips around the world. Which is none.”

“Won’t be long,” she said. We were travelling together in three months’ time, my last chance before the next career move tied me up for years. It would be our honeymoon, in advance.

But first I needed to watch the demolition of my childhood home.

There was a buzzy murmur as we entered the pub. Callie behaved beautifully, but I could see it annoyed her. I had suffered so much, I knew how cruel, how BLIND, these people could be.

There is always a young one in the pub, who gets a little sex every now and then from someone who isn’t his wife, shoots more kangaroos because he can still steer and aim at the same time, he’s a legend for his drinking. He’s been brought up at the pub, there with his Dad from the age of five, rather than home with Mum, because all she does is whinge. If Dad gets a bit pissy he might belt you one, but he’ll give you a dollar with it. He’ll give you sips of beer, get you pissed till you chuck at twelve, then you’ll beat the crap out of him on the day you turn eighteen and take his place at the bar.

I know this; this is the story of my father and my brother.

They never heard Yessmiss. I was the only one. It began with the smell of furniture polish. We didn’t use it in the house; we used spit.

I could read by the time I was three. Dad read the paper aloud, he had to to understand it, and I sat on his knee and followed his moving finger. Mum taught me all she knew, but I was desperate for more. I read everything that came into the house; *Reader’s Digest* was my favourite, because it lasted a little while, and there were hundreds of them piled up in the dunny.

I never saw Yessmiss. I imagined her round and cuddly, taller than me. At night I dreamt she crawled into bed with me, and we held on tight while the usual noise went on. Just before I left home at sixteen I thought I saw her; I woke with my heart racing, darkest before the dawn as I often did. I glimpsed a bent figure, fumbling at my bedhead. “Yessmiss,” she said. “Yessmiss.”

That was all.

The carpet in the pub was green, though it could once have been beige. A dishrag was close by and I dried a puddle of beer, rubbing it, rubbing.

“That’ll do, thanks, love,” the bartender said. “You’ll make someone a good wife, elbow grease like that.”

“Can I have some chips, please?” I said. “A coupla packs of salt ’n’ vinegar and one barbecue.” He tossed them on the counter and I paid, munched away, because I didn’t want to talk to Callie. They’d KNOW if we talked. They’d be able to tell.

“Just passin’ through, are yous?” It was the young guy; he could have been my brother.

“Just seeing a bit of the countryside,” Callie said.

“God’s country, here,” he said, and the bar murmured. I glanced around; the door was propped open with the fire extinguisher; brilliant sunlight poured in, a broad strip. A black dog lay sleeping there, his ears flicking away the flies.

Apart from that the place was in darkness. There were no windows, only advertisements for beer, boxers, guns and *Penthouse*.

“God’s country,” I said, and raised my glass. Callie glared at me; she knows better than me when to put a stop to things.

The young guy took the stool next to me at the bar.

I polished the bar. “Yes, Miss,” I said.

“Sorry, love?” said the young guy. He leaned close and I could see he wasn’t so young. Mid thirties and nowhere to go.

“Buy you another?” he said.

“Nah, look, we’ve gotta head off,” I said, and Callie and I downed our beers and stood up. I didn’t know, until we were in the car, if they would let us go. I had forgotten how frightened I could be.

“Fuckin’ lezzos,” they said after us, which made us smile, then laugh, made it all worth it.

“So, what was all that about?” I said to Callie. “Why the tearing need to get our heads kicked in at a country pub?”

“I just needed a break.”

“Oh, from me? Thanks a lot. I won’t say anything if that’s it.”

We drove in silence while she thought of what to say.

“It’s just that I don’t always understand you. I thought if we broke it up a bit, you’d stop worrying.”

“Well, it didn’t work. It’s worse.”

“Well, I only tried.” She was right; I had thought I was happy to be heading home, but she saw through my pretence. Yes, Miss, she did.

We were still five hours from the homestead, and I wanted energy for what came next, so we pulled into a motel, just three rooms, coffee and tea facilities and a huge fat candle to make things romantic.

The owner didn’t flinch, putting us in the same room. We’re such good friends, Callie and I, people don’t assume we’re lovers as well. And he had that tired look, that bored look, he didn’t care anymore, he just wanted it to be over.

The bed sagged in the middle so we rolled together all night. We lay, lip to lip, breathing each other’s air until we were dizzy. Then we kissed, lazy, salty kisses, and we touched warm fingers to warmer skin, we threw off the blankets and watched the

candlelight against our lovely bodies. Nobody grunted and I didn't polish a thing. I do it in meetings; they mimic me, the others. Polish my glasses, or anything I can touch, the table, the coffee cup. They say if I stop polishing watch out!

I asked Mum once if she ever saw or heard Yessmiss, and I described her. Because she was clear in my mind. I knew what she looked like although I hadn't seen her.

Mum told me to stop eating cheese, it was giving me nightmares. In fact, she said, I needed to cut back all round if I was to be a lovely bride.

"Can girls marry girls?" I said, because I didn't ever want a husband, I wanted a wife. A wife would laugh with me and be my friend. A wife would smell nice.

Some things never change.

At school, I realised I was somebody; I was a Robey. My family had been in the district forever. We were the richies; we had servants, once. We were known for toughness, meanness, cruelty. If I ever asked anyone to do anything, they'd say, "Oh, yes, Mistress Robey, immediately."

Callie was very good to me. Very patient. She calmed me when I panicked. She talked to me a lot, the last five hours of the trip, made me laugh, let me be quiet and think. Yessmiss was waiting for me. I polished the windows to make sure we got there safely.

It was my first time home in fifteen years.

As we approached, I thought the front door was open, and I drew my breath, the fear of intruders too much.

"What is it?" Callie said. It was a favourite saying. "What is it?" I saw so many things she didn't see.

"There's someone in the house," I said, but when I looked again the door was closed.

"It's okay," I said. "It's all right. I'm just remembering things. Let's go in."

I had a sticky key; hidden in a desk drawer these fifteen years. The door had not changed in that time; it was like I was returning from a week at school.

The front verandah hadn't changed.

"There's Dad's chair," I said. The imprint of his bum, decades of fat-arsed relaxing, had not left. He worked without cease, my Dad, until my brother was old enough, and then he sat down and hardly got up again.

"Once he stopped going to the pub he sat there for hours, drinking, shouting out at some ghost no one else could see."

Callie smiled at me, held my hand, tugged me close, kissed my cheek.

"I didn't realise you two had so much in common," she said.

"You'll have a ghost of your own one day: me, dead from neglect."

"Hardly."

The front door key was hot in my palm. I had had it ready to use for an hour now, my fingers pinching it, my wrist turning. I used it at last, and pushed open the door to my family home.

The smell of furniture polish would have made me gag if I were not so used to it. It made me remember how much I had forgotten about my childhood friend.

The house gleamed — shone — it was cleaner than I'd ever seen.

“Ooh, bit of dust there,” Callie said, sarcastically. She didn't understand, so she joked.

“Yes, Miss,” I heard.

It was Yessmiss. She was there.

Callie turned on the lights and we saw the stain in the thin, old carpet at the foot of the stairs where my mother had landed. I could imagine my father pushing her, because he'd done it before. But they were certain his heart attack had killed him three hours before she died; in that time she had fallen, dragged herself to the phone, and stayed alive long enough to reach hospital. She hated hospitals. They always asked questions about her injuries that were none of their business.

Callie explored the house. There was not much to look at; my siblings had cleaned the place out after the funeral. Piles of old *Reader's Digests*, a broken toy or two, furniture nobody would ever want, that's all they left. I sat upstairs, alone in my bedroom and waited for Yessmiss.

“Are you there, Yessmiss?”

“Yessmiss,” my childhood ghost said. She was louder than I remembered, and a trick of light showed her to me. She was short, and broad, and familiar.

Callie and I ate toast cooked in the fire and drank red wine from plastic cups we found under the sink.

My old room had barely been touched. We slept that night in my single bed, where I had spent so many nights dreaming of this; a beautiful woman holding me perfectly. Callie always sleeps by the wall if there is one. Our king-sized bed at home has only one free side. She feels protected that way. She knows what's coming. Callie, I think, has stories of her own she doesn't tell.

Yessmiss woke me in the night. She was clearer in the moonlight. She polished the brass knobs of my old family bed, the one which had belonged to a spinster aunt when the house was first built and the family rich, a hundred years before.

That aunt was the main cause of our family's reputation.

Yessmiss polished and polished. “Yessmiss,” she said, and “Yessmiss.” Then, and I could see this clearly now, I knew it wasn't a dream, she raised her hands to protect herself and fell to the floor.

I threw off the doona, crawled to the end of the bed. She was not there.

My heart beat quickly, too fast. Yessmiss had woken me out of deep dreaming, shocked me, and I wondered for a moment if she had appeared to my father as suddenly, and made his heart fail.

Callie loved the heat, sat out in it till her clothes sizzled. We ate sandwiches and toast, drank cuppa after cuppa sitting on the verandah.

Time passed. We were happy, unhassled, though we snapped a little at each other in the quiet of it all.

Then one morning we woke to banging downstairs. I pulled on some clothes and covered Callie with the doona. It was the wrecker, wanting to come look. My brother owned the house now, because girls didn't own houses. He hated it. Hated the age of it, so he was having it pulled down. A new house built, modern, with pastel colours and man-made materials.

The wrecker was a small, smelly man, neatly dressed in a polyester shirt. Three or four days of sweat-stains under the arms looked like a map showing rainfall. His men were giants and worked in shorts, their backs bare, brown and marked with melanomas.

"Didn't think anyone was here," the wrecker said. He nodded at me. Not his place to judge. He did a quick scout around the house, a first impression, he called it, while his assistants smoked, leaving the cigarette butts in a neat campfire pile. He caught Callie and me kissing in the kitchen; he rapped on the window.

"Hello, hello," he said. "Don't let us stop you."

"How do you do?" said Callie, turning to face him. Her voice is strong but gentle. The wrecker stared at her, then me.

"Well, well," he said. And that was it for niceties. "We'll be back next Thursdee."

Yessmiss appeared again and again. Callie couldn't see her at all; she watched me watching, and I caught her crying.

"She's there," I said. Yessmiss polished every night, I could see her. Had she always been there to be seen? As Callie and I tasted and touched, I heard her mutter, and there at the foot of the bed she was, she polished the ancient brass knobs then her hands flew to her head, her eyes locked with mine, she collapsed.

I stared at the space thinking it was real.

"What is it, love?" Callie said. I loved her for not adding, "this time."

"Murder," I said. "Murder."

I thought again about my father and how my mother would have found him and run down the stairs. Naked, I walked there; stood at the top and slid my feet over the smooth, slippery polished surface. I had my mother's habit of wearing socks to bed.

Yessmiss watched me. She held her head; seemed to be crying.

"Yes, Miss," I said. She walked towards me. I remembered how I dreamed of her, those lonely nights in my antique bed. She held her arms out to me but I didn't fear being pushed. I held my arms out and somehow she was whole, I hugged her and her flesh was sweet.

She passed her hands across my face and I was her, and my name was Agnes, and I worked for the spinster, the one whose photographic image was sour and unhappy.

I was her servant, my jobs were many, but mostly I had to polish. The Miss loved her things shiny and they were never shiny enough.

My ears were boxed, my legs pricked with pins, she said, "Agnes, let's get a nice shine up. A nice shine," and I said, "Yes, Miss." That's all. I didn't have other words.

Some days she was even meaner and I was terrified for my life. And she slept in the bed with the brass knobs, and she liked them shiny first thing, shiny like the

sun, and I get up in the dark to polish and polish, and one morning it's dark and she groans in her sleep, and the master of the house is within the bed, and he shouts at my presence when the moonlight strikes.

And she strikes me; and again.

And I polish and polish, as is my job. And I see a young girl, lonely like me, different like me, and she hears me.

She hears me.

She is the only one who does.

Agnes took her hands away and was gone. Callie called me and oh, how she loved me. She said, "Never mind, never mind," without needing to know what was wrong, and I realised she often spoke to me like that, warm short words like pats of comfort.

I promised myself to be good to her, understand her, allow her to be weak sometimes.

But I know I'll forget.

We packed all the things from my room. Dismantled the bed and strapped it to the roof rack. I whispered, "You shouldn't have killed them, Agnes. Not for me, anyway. But I wish you well. I hope you find another little girl."

Agnes paced back and forth across the room, her hands flapping.

I watched her until my eyes felt gritty with sand.

Callie and I sat in the air-conditioned car for three hours and watched men demolish the house. I thought of Agnes; I pictured her there, on her knees, polishing the floorboards. She was about to die again.

We went into town for lunch, came back, the house was almost gone. Such a simple, destructive thing. My brother wanted the land cleared. He wanted every last bloody stick off it.

We drove away.

As we left, I felt something nestle around my neck, a cool, soft wreath I could lie my head against. "Agnes," I thought. She would love our house in the city; made of wood, full of it, and it's a warm, comfortable place. We allow things to pile up. Callie says often, "For someone who loves to polish, you're a pig!" but she is like that too. We both love a mess.

We were nearing home, after many hours, when Callie sniffed the air. Her brow creased, a rare sight.

“What is it?” I said.

“I smell furniture polish. Why would I suddenly smell furniture polish?”

I had never told her about the smell of Agnes. I had mentioned her, not her polish.

“I can smell it too,” I said. I wondered how Agnes could possibly have known we were approaching her new home.

I would never bring her killer to justice, but I mourned her death and I felt the guilt for my ancestors.

That, it seemed, was enough. She forgave me, and my family, and once we were home I rubbed Callie’s feet until she moaned.

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Rest Stop

...Marissa K Lingen

When I woke up that morning, the city was gone.

The buildings and the streets were all still there, the parks and abandoned lots, the strays, the pets, the people — all of that was still around. So I didn't notice until I got off the train to catch the bus that the city had gone missing.

Usually I see her a good half-dozen times on my way to work. She's a homeless guy peeing in the corner of the train station, a woman in a college sweatshirt pushing a jogging stroller, a little boy dragging a stick along the railing, a yuppie rehearsing her presentation on the bus. I think of her as female, but that's an approximation.

My partner Wayne didn't notice at all, but the Chief did. That's why she's the Chief. She called us into her office before I had even finished stirring my coffee. "I don't know what the hell happened last night," she said. "But you guys have to fix it *right now*."

I nodded. "Who was on duty last night?"

"Caroline, Alex, and Lenny."

"What are you talking about?" demanded Wayne.

"The City is gone," said the Chief. "He was gone this morning. And you need to find him." Evidently the Chief interacted with the City as male. Interesting.

Wayne frowned. "I don't understand. How can the City be *gone*? Don't we live *in* it?"

The Chief leaned back in her chair. "Any ideas, Toni?"

I thought about it. The Chief clearly had something in mind, but I wasn't sure what. "Either she — er, sorry, Chief, *he*—"

The Chief waved her hand wearily. "Doesn't matter. Go on."

"Either she's off somewhere, or she's withdrawn into some part of herself. The hills, say, or the ghetto. Something like that. She might decide what's 'really' her and try to make it stick."

"She's capricious. I'd thought of that part." The Chief frowned. "Off somewhere? How do you mean?"

"In the boonies. Either kidnapped or ran away. Trying to be...something she's not." I shrugged. "God knows we humans do enough of it."

We all thought about that. When we deal with them — the others, the personifications, the abstract nouns — our one real certainty is that they have to

be themselves. They can approach it slant-wise — Beauty could be a toothless ninety-year-old instead of a toothsome nineteen-year-old, as long as someone could see the beauty in the old woman. But they couldn't leave themselves behind. Loyalty couldn't betray. Faith couldn't doubt.

The City couldn't go rustic.

"She could be out there somewhere," Wayne said tentatively. "You always hear about the people who take civilization with them wherever they go. Loud radios on the beach, snowmobiles in Yellowstone."

The kid is occasionally good for something. I groaned. "I know where she is."

The Chief raised an eyebrow at me.

"If she tried to get away, I mean. The place where country has to have city amenities, of sorts." They both gave me puzzled looks, so I spelled it out: "A roadside rest stop. You know, along the freeway."

After a moment of silence, Wayne said, "Oh, that makes it easy, doesn't it, Toni? How many rest stops are there within a couple hours' drive of here? A dozen? Twenty? And we don't even know when she left."

The puppy had learned sarcasm. At least I was teaching him *something*.

The Chief sighed. "Let's explore the options. I'll look into kidnappings — who might have wanted to grab him and why, who could manage it. Toni, you talk to Caroline about what she might have noticed on duty last night. See if there was anything unusual, anything we might use to track him if he's left the metro area. Wayne, you investigate the, uh, metro itself. See if any part of it is behaving oddly or looks like a good possibility for the City to withdraw into. And if either of you sees Truth, tell it I'm looking for it."

"Just like always, Chief," I said. She glared at me.

"I know this must sound stupid," said Wayne — and believe me, he starts a lot of his sentences that way. "But what happens if we don't find, uh, it?"

The Chief and I looked at each other. "I don't know for sure," said the Chief. "As whimsical as he gets with the traffic and the climate variations and the strays, the City keeps everyone going as some kind of unit. Without it, all you've got is just a few million people in overpriced housing stacked too close together. We have to do our job, or the regular cops will be working double-time on theirs."

On my way over to Caroline's, I began to see what the Chief meant. Nothing really major happened on the bus, but people pulled as far away from each other as they could. Their eyes were lost and bewildered. And when the bus came up over the hill and I could see Park Presidio and the Golden Gate stretched out before me, I felt...nothing. Usually there's a thrill of recognition, a sense that yes, this is where I live for real, this is *my* city.

It was some buildings, some trees, a nice enough bridge. Nothing more.

Caroline still lived in the Richmond district, where she'd grown up. All day long, the produce trucks filled the streets and the grocers spilled their wares out into sidewalk stalls. Half the stuff was shipped in from the Central Valley, the rest from

the port. I picked up a spiky yellow thing and paid for it. I could figure out how to eat it later. I climbed the stairs to Caroline's pastel aqua townhouse.

Caroline answered the door in her sweats. "Did I wake you?" I asked.

"No, I hadn't even gone to bed. What's up?"

"It's a little much for the front step. Can I come in?"

"Oh, sure, sorry." Caroline moved aside and gestured for me to pass her. Her apartment was much neater than mine, with no half-assembled spells on the kitchen table, no piles of crumbling old texts on the couch. She did have the requisite single woman's cat, a curious ginger beast that mrrred inquiringly at me.

"Quite well, and you?" I answered, scratching behind its ears. I gave it a lap on the sofa and turned my attention back to its owner. "In the night, sometime, the City disappeared."

Instinctively, Caroline turned to the window, where the blinds were mostly drawn. I smiled. "No, not like that. You weren't *that* tired coming home. It's just — her. She's gone, somewhere, and the Chief was wondering if you noticed anything funny going on."

Caroline frowned thoughtfully. "Anything funny? With our job?"

"But funny-funny," I said. "Not like Screaming Sal and her night rides or the weekly appearance of Fashion in clubs off Market. The never-before stuff."

"There was a song," said Caroline. "Right around 2:30, it came on all the radio stations. I thought it was in Spanish, but Alex had five years of it in high school and said no way. And the brujos keep a close eye on their own, I think, so it wouldn't have been someone from that community. Alex thought it sounded like Chinese, but just the words, not the melody. I said no way to that, too."

"I didn't know you spoke Chinese," I said.

She grinned at me. "Thank you for not assuming. I do, but only children's Cantonese, put-that-down and come-give-auntie-a-kiss and I-said-no. But I know what it sounds like — I can pick out what *isn't* Cantonese. It wasn't."

"How would you describe the song?"

She made a face. "I wouldn't. Seriously, it went all over the place, kind of lilting. What do people speak in India? It might be that. I don't know."

"They speak all kinds of things in India," I said, "but I'll bet it wasn't any of them. I'll bet it was the City, speaking to the...you know. The others. Telling them she was going."

Caroline frowned. "We had an altercation with Pretension last night," she said. He attacked Lenny, and when we got him calmed down, he wouldn't stop crying. Lenny ended up taking him around to a couple of clubs until we found some kids who'd take him for the rest of the night. He'll feel better when people start getting off the subway cars this morning."

"Pretension can operate without a City," I said thoughtfully, "but it's a lot harder."

"Yeah, but usually that's because there are, you know, sheep and stuff," said Caroline.

"I do know sheep and stuff," I said dryly. "But you're right, it's much harder to be pretentious while you're stepping around cow pats. I'd think he'd adjust and rail about the soullessness of the new clubs and warehouses. He'd enjoy that."

"Eventually," said Caroline. "When he thinks of it." She ran her hands through her hair; it fell back exactly as it had been, thick and shiny. "I sure hope you know what to do here, Toni, because I really have no clue."

"I've got a few ideas. Tell your friends and family to stay in, if you talk to them." Her eyes widened. "What are you going to do?"

"No, no, it's not that. It's just that people are...not really feeling the connection with their neighbors very much right now. The bus was ruder than usual."

"That had to have set some kind of land-rudeness record."

I grinned. "I've got Wayne out checking to see if she's holed up somewhere in the metro area, drawn in on herself. Otherwise, we're going to hit the road. Any ideas about direction?"

Caroline shook her head. "I wouldn't even have known it was her in the song. Be careful, all right? She can get pretty nasty."

"Don't I know it."

I gave her a hug and let her get some sleep, then headed back to the station, keeping an eye out for trouble. I didn't see anything much, but it was only a matter of time.

My phone rang while I was walking back from the bus stop. It was my husband. Ex-husband. Possibly-soon-to-be-ex-husband. Ian.

"I just wanted to make sure we're still on for tonight."

I smiled wearily. "Same old Ian. You know I'd call if there was a change in plans."

"Good." I could hear the answering smile in his voice. "I'm looking forward to it. I've made reservations at this little Chinese place — the crispy-skin chicken is fabulous."

"I'm glad to hear it. Quit fussing." I was pushing the office door open by that point.

"Who's fussing?"

He was. I know this man. "It'll be fine," I repeated.

"So, seven o'clock, my place?"

"I know. Seven. I'll be there."

"Great. See you tonight."

I clicked the phone shut. Wayne was staring at me.

"Ian?"

"Yes. We're having dinner."

Wayne raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"When will your divorce be final?"

"We're...still discussing that."

The other eyebrow went up as well.

"Did you find out anything interesting out there?" I asked.

"Don't think I've forgotten about this with Ian."

I bit my tongue and counted to ten. “I wouldn’t dream of it. What did you find out?”

“Downtown is empty,” he said. “I figured you were going north, so I headed south down the peninsula. Nothing, and nothing, and nothing. Not even traces of city activity in the magic. So I crossed on the Dumbarton Bridge and drove up the East Bay. Nothing there, either.” He sighed. “I hope you weren’t counting on me, because I am fresh out of options.”

“Well, I do know what happened, sort of. The City’s gone,” I said. “She sang a song to everybody. It was on all the radio stations, but Caroline didn’t get a recording of it fast enough that we could tell for sure what it said. But it sounds like it was a farewell.”

“What do we do now?”

“I have a few ideas,” I said, “but all of them are fueled by better coffee than we can get here. Come on. Let’s hit Jenn’s on the way out of town.”

“Where are we going out of town?”

“We’ll find out once I’ve got my coffee.”

It was only a few steps around the corner to our favorite coffee place, and before we could get to the counter, we spotted a familiar face. She was dark-skinned and curly-haired, young and smitten.

Ever since we got locked in a basement with Love, we’ve run into her quite a bit. She gazed at a young couple who had eyes for no one but each other.

“They’re going to invite me over,” she murmured. “I just know they will.”

“In the meantime, you can sit with us and have coffee and maybe help out a little,” I said.

She turned to me, her eyes still half-lidded. “What kind of help did you need?”

“We need you to tell us where the City went.”

Love’s attention drifted back to the young couple. “I can’t do that.”

“I thought you were everywhere,” said Wayne.

“I am, sweetheart,” she said absently. “I just don’t always feel the need to jump up and down and shout.”

“So you’re with the City now,” he persisted.

“I choose to leave him his privacy.”

“You could tell us where the City is, you just don’t want to?”

Love shook her curly head and took a big drink of her mocha. “Won’t it be more fun if you find out yourself?”

“Fun,” said Wayne bitterly. “Oh yes. Fun.”

He stalked over to the counter angrily, ready to get his coffee to go. I said to her, “Will I see you tonight with Ian?”

The boy at the next table reached for the girl’s hand, and Love turned to me, satisfied. “Sugar, it’s up to you whether you come find me or not. Come on now. You know that.”

“You could help out a little bit.”

“You have no idea how much I help out.”

I ruffled her hair; she ducked out from under my hand. “Fine,” I said. “Be that way. See you tonight.” I plunked down a couple bucks for my coffee and settled into

the passenger's seat. Wayne was fuming. He spilled coffee on his hand. That didn't help anything.

"We got her out of that trap, didn't we? And she couldn't even point us in the right direction?"

"East," I said. "Go east."

"Why east?"

"Because to the south is Santa Barbara and L.A. and San Diego—"

"What about north?"

"She's not north."

"How do you know?"

"I just know, okay? She's not north."

"If we drive all the way to Stockton—"

"Stockton is part of the Bay Area. We only wish it wasn't. Drive down through Modesto, see what we get after that." I wedged my coffee in the cup holder and started digging through my purse.

Wayne looked at me out of the corner of his eye.

"Watch the road," I told him.

"What are you doing?"

"Looking for a rubber band. We're going to dowse."

"Dowse? What-all have you got in that purse, witch hazel?"

"I leave the witch hazel at home most days, thank you very much," I said. "All I need's the rubber band. Dammit. Second choice."

He saw me dig the pocket knife out. "Oh, no. No cutting while I'm driving."

"No kidding, with the way you drive. I'll wait for the stoplight."

"What are you cutting, anyway?"

"The dowsing rod." We had to wait through three lights to get on the eastbound Bay Bridge — more than long enough to slice along half the length of the coffee stirrer. "What do cities run on but coffee?" I said. "And plastic, a lot of plastic. So, to dowse, a plastic coffee stirrer."

Wayne shook his head and merged behind a beat-up red Chevette. "When I've been doing this job for ten years, will I come up with this weird-ass shit?"

"In less time than that," I assured him. "Especially because it's weird-ass shit that works."

"I can't believe I agreed to a job that made me drive the Bay Bridge three times in one morning."

"Oh, quit whining."

As soon as we were over the bridge into Oakland, I took a branch of the coffee stirrer in each hand. It twisted and dipped and pointed. "Okay, take 580 south," I said. "That's a pretty good way to get east."

And it's prettier than 880, too, although I don't know that dowsing rods care about that sort of thing. We drove through the Oakland hills, not down the industrial corridor, peering up at Mormon temples and turquoise houses. The highway went east in Hayward, and we got on 205.

"Hayward is such a pit," I said.

“My friend Judy says it used to be all cherry orchards and open fields,” said Wayne.

I shook my head. “The City has a lot to answer for.”

“Does she? Maybe she’s just as pissed as Judy is over the cherry orchards.”

“I don’t know, Wayne. I just don’t think of her as being much for cherry orchards. Maybe the kind in a Chekhov play.”

He grinned. “Yeah, she’s that kind of city, isn’t she? San Diego is totally not a Chekhov city.” He paused. “But if she left, maybe she’s doing things she doesn’t normally do. Maybe she went to find some cherry orchards.”

“We’ll be searching the Central Valley all week, if that’s the case.” We both thought about it. “No,” I decided. “If she’s out in the real sticks, we’ll know soon enough, because it’ll make a radical turn into city.”

“We hope,” he added.

I thought that was unnecessarily grim. I kept the dowsing rod out in front of me.

Highway 205 took us east to Manteca. I had never had any cause to go to Manteca, and I couldn’t say I saw anything there that would make me want to return. I started to get tired of holding the coffee stirrer, so I put it down until I saw exits coming up. It jumped in my hands at highway 99.

“Here we go, south here,” I said.

“This is the way to Fresno.”

I shrugged. “Evidently we should drive towards Fresno. I don’t know. I don’t make these things up.”

“If it’s leading us to the best coffee in Northern California, I’m going to be pretty put out.”

I shook my head. “The best coffee in Northern California is at a little place in Half Moon Bay. Down the street from the fish taco place.”

“How do you know that? Have you tried them all?”

“I did a spell to find out.”

“Oh.”

We drove on through Turlock, Merced, and Madera, with nary a twitch from the coffee stirrer. By that point, we had been driving for hours with little conversation and less of interest on the road. Highway 99 brought us to the outskirts of Fresno.

“She’s here,” said Wayne. “I can feel her here.”

“No, that’s Fresno.”

“Fresno is a city.”

“I’m sure many coastal Californians would like to argue that point with you,” I said, “but the evidence is on your side. But she’s not the same here. It’s not the same manifestation.”

“I don’t see what difference it makes.”

“If we caught her here, we’d just de-citify Fresno. You have no idea how hard it is for me not to make a joke at this juncture.”

“Let’s assume you’re very funny and move on to explaining what the hell you mean.”

“Okay, say we were back at Jenn’s with Love. And say you managed to get that ex-girlfriend of yours to come in and sit on the other side of Love there in Jenn’s with

you. Would that mean that everything would be okay? I mean, there would be Love between you again.”

Wayne said, “No, of course not. It’s a different...oh.”

“Yeah. A different flavor, a different incarnation. That’s how the City is, too. We’ll just have to hope that something prevents our City from taking refuge with their City, or my rest stop idea is totally shot, and we’ll be combing through Sacramento, Fresno, maybe even up to Portland.”

“I’ll bet she’d like Powell’s bookstore,” said Wayne thoughtfully.

“Well, we’ll know where to start if this doesn’t pay off, then.” I stared out the window. “Hey, are you hungry? Because I don’t know what there is to eat beyond Fresno.”

So we got ourselves In-And-Out Burgers and kept driving. I had just wiped the ketchup off my fingers when I saw the sign. The next rest area had amenities. “I’ll bet it’s this one,” I said.

“Wishful thinking,” said Wayne.

“Hey, since when are you the pessimist? I have a feeling about this.”

“So do I, actually.” He pulled off, and we got out of the car.

The City perched on a picnic table, a slender, dark-haired girl of indeterminate ethnic background, wearing jeans and a Cal sweatshirt. “Oh, it’s you,” she said. “I should have known it would be.” She jumped off the picnic table and went to the water fountain. We trailed after her.

“We want you to come home,” I said.

“We missed you,” Wayne added. I rolled my eyes at him, but secretly I thought it was probably a good thing to say to her.

She let out spurts of water and trailed her fingers in the fountain and stared at the ripples as if they contained a koan in each ridge. “Do you think I could have canals?” she asked dreamily. “I always loved having canals.”

“They would dig you a dozen canals, if you liked,” I said. “But you’d have to come back. There’s nowhere for canals out here.”

“There’s always somewhere for canals.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” I told her. “The canals would be much better by the Bay.”

“But they’d all worry about the birds and the fishes and all.”

“Well, of course they would,” said Wayne. “Wouldn’t you? They’re your birds.”

“They’re not mine,” said the City. “They belong to Nature.”

“Can’t you share them?” I asked.

For the first time since we arrived, the City smiled. “Sometimes we do.” She laughed. “Nature shares with me, though. It’s always clear whose they are. But the herons are so nice, and the little birds with judge wigs.”

“Will you ladies excuse me a moment?” said Wayne.

The City watched him go. “He’s much more fastidious than some of my people.”

“Yeah, you’ve got some real prizes,” I said. I was immediately sorry I’d said it.

“I know,” she said. “The stockbrokers, the yuppies, the pretentious former hippies, the pretentious current hippies—”

“You made Pretension very sad when you left,” I told her.

“Pretension can fend for himself,” she said. “I’ve got Beatniks! I’ve got homeless people pissing on my walls!”

She stuck out her lip in a pout and paddled her fingers in the water. It took me a minute to see what she was up to. “Stop that. I’m not going to feel sorry for you just because you look younger.”

She pushed her lip out further and reduced her apparent age to about nine. She wore glittery butterfly barrettes. “But I’m really not that old. Those others, Truth and Justice and all of them, they’re mean to me.”

“They’re mean to everybody,” I said. “They don’t mean anything by it. And you’re no angel yourself.”

She laughed, and her clothes changed to leopard print hooker-wear. I wish it had been shocking to see on a nine-year-old. “I pull them in and keep them with me,” she sing-songed. “Seduce, destroy, seduce, destroy.”

“You’re not that much of a badass, either,” I said sharply.

She scowled at me. “You never let me have any fun.”

“You have plenty of fun.”

She played with the handle on the drinking fountain, an arcane Morse code of her own, and didn’t answer. When she spotted Wayne coming our way, she gave him a big smile and skipped down the path to meet him, dancing around his heels like a puppy.

“*Wayne* loves me,” she informed me.

He looked from her to me, quizzically.

“I love you, too. Just not like this. Don’t let her con you,” I told my partner. “She’s being a real pain in the ass.”

She affected the disdain only a preteen can manage. “Not like this — only when I’m snow-white and covered in parkas or mosquito-bitten and sweating like a mad thing.”

Only when she was Minneapolis. “That’s not true.” But it was, a bit. I remembered the way I felt about my home city, and it wasn’t like this.

She was watching me cannily. “Of course it’s true.”

“Lots of people love you,” said Wayne.

The City turned her back on him. “No. I think I’ll stay out here by myself. It’s nice out here.”

“Come on,” I said softly. “What would you do with yourself? You know it’s no place for you. Why did you leave, anyway?”

She didn’t want to answer right away. “Did you know that they thought I was ugly and disease-ridden at first?”

“You *were* ugly and disease-ridden at first,” I said sharply. “You were ugly and disease-ridden for centuries, and it doesn’t seem to have done you any harm.”

“Some diseases can’t be cured by modern medicine,” she said coyly.

It struck me again, what we had talked about with the Chief. “Did you do this everywhere? Or just in the Bay?”

She looked at me defiantly. “Just in the Bay. But I like it. I’m thinking of doing it everywhere.”

Wayne spoke quietly. "My mother has always said you can't run away from yourself. She meant it in terms of my gifts, but it's doubly true for you. If you stay out here, you'll turn it into the City all over again."

"But without the bridge congestion and the road construction and the smog," she said petulantly.

"For now," said Wayne.

I nodded. "Your midlife crisis, your problem. Not ours."

The light in her eyes when she smiled scared me. "I can *make* it your problem. That's who I am."

"I told you you're not so tough," I said, but she kept smiling.

"I'm bigger than you," said Wayne.

"You think so?" asked the City. She went from a slender nine-year-old to an obese middle-aged woman, several inches taller than Wayne and several hundred pounds heavier. "Do you really think so?"

"Stop that," I told her. "You're going to draw attention to yourself, and you can always do it again if he tries to pick you up."

She switched back to nine-year-old form and folded her arms, scowling.

"What can we do to get you home?"

"Nothing. I want to be out here. There are flowers."

"You have flowers!" I said in exasperation.

She planted her skinny child butt on the picnic bench and looked at us.

"What the hell are we going to do now?" Wayne asked me.

"I have no idea."

We sat down next to her on the picnic bench, but not too close.

"We need an ally," I said after a long silence.

"Who do you propose?"

I got up and sauntered away from the picnic table, and Wayne followed. I kept an eye on the City but talked quietly. "She wants flowers. She wants birds. She wants Nature. So all we need to do is get Nature to convince her not to be out here."

"That's crazy," said Wayne. "There are other cities that have much less nature than the Bay Area. All those parks up in the hills, and the preserves, and—"

"I know that, but she isn't any other city. She's herself."

"Nature," said Wayne thoughtfully. "How on earth do we do that?"

"With whatever we've got out here, I guess."

One of us kept an eye on the City at all times, and we prowled around the rest stop looking for bits and pieces that might help with our summoning spell. The other drivers stretching their legs looked at us sidelong, but Wayne kept muttering explanations like, 'botanical survey,' and they left us alone.

I wove grass into braids. I muttered spells. I piled pebbles and chanted, and nothing happened. The sun crept through the sky. Wayne crushed flowers and imitated birdsongs, and nothing happened. The City watched us with folded arms.

Finally, I collapsed, and Wayne said, "Ohhhhh. Here he is."

Nature was long-legged, broad-shouldered. Male, for the moment; sunburned and thinning of hair. He squinted down at us.

"You certainly are persistent little things," he said.

“We appreciate your coming here. We need you to talk to her.”

The City scowled, but she looked hopefully up from under her lashes at him. “Hi.”

He ruffled her hair. “What are you doing out here? You have a job to do back there?”

“Don’t *you* start. I *like* it here. It’s no fun back there.”

“Not at the colleges? Not at the cafés? Not in the houses or parks or anywhere?”

She looked at him suspiciously and then shook her head. “No. I don’t want to be there any more.”

“It’s who you are,” I murmured.

“We called him,” whispered Wayne. “Let him do his thing.”

“You know we can’t live together,” said Nature. “But we can spend time together. Where else do they try to make us allies but here?”

“Everywhere,” muttered the City, but Nature pressed on.

“They’re not very good at letting me come visit you, I know, but they’ll do better. Won’t you?”

I was getting the death stare from Nature. I said, “Sure, why not? We’ll definitely try harder.”

“And maybe a new skyscraper?” said the City. “I love skyscrapers. They’re all pointy. I’ve got one with statues on it now, all hooded and spooky.”

“I’ve seen it,” I said. “It’s very nice.”

“They do love you,” said Nature. “They really do.”

The City stuck out her lip in a last-ditch attempt at a pout. “You have to come with me for awhile.”

“Of course,” said Nature. “I’m with you all the time, you know. You just have to look to find me. Sometimes you forget to look.”

There was a little silence, and then the City said, “Oh, all right, why not. The people would come anyway.”

I nodded. “They would. It wouldn’t stay like this.”

“It’d be a muddy mess within days,” said Wayne.

Suddenly, something clicked in my brain. “Did you decide to leave New York City for awhile, back in the late 1960s?”

“I needed a vacation,” she said, shrugging, “and it seemed like a nice place at first.”

Wayne looked from me to her, puzzled, but he put an arm around the City and an arm around Nature and led them back to the car. He turned on the radio. The City knew all the words and sung them loudly, and I was trying to tune out some brainless pop song when it hit me.

“Shit!”

“What?” asked Wayne, the City, and Nature in unison.

“Ian.”

“Who’s Ian?” asked Nature.

“Her ex-husband,” said Wayne.

“Soon-to-be-ex-husband,” I said.

“Maybe,” said the City. “They haven’t decided yet.”

“We’re supposed to have dinner in Pacifica at seven.”

“You’re not going to make Pacifica by seven,” said Nature.

“Thank you,” I said dryly, dialing the cell. “Everybody shut up.” I was surprised that they obeyed.

Ian was evidently not surprised by anything. He answered the phone with, “Where are you?”

“Merced,” I said meekly.

“Shit! Toni, goddamn it.”

“I’ve got the City in the car with me. She went AWOL for a while today, but we enlisted Nature, and we’re bringing her back. Nature’s in the backseat as well.”

“I’m glad you saved the day again,” he said, but there was that familiar bite to his voice.

“You would have preferred it if I’d let the City go to hell as long as I made it to your place at seven.”

“I would have preferred it if you let someone else do a little bit of world-saving.”

“Wayne did his part.” I knew as I said it that this was not the point, and the look Wayne gave me did not scream with gratitude.

“But he had to be there, and you had to be there.”

“Yes.”

“That’s fine,” he said, with a sigh in his voice. “I’ll cancel the reservations.”

“Shall we reschedule for—”

“Why bother rescheduling?”

“Fine,” I snapped. Shutting the cell phone with a click was not nearly as satisfying as slamming down the receiver on a regular phone. Nobody else in the car said a word.

This always happens to me, whenever I have to lecture one of *them*, it always comes back at me. I don’t know if they get Justice to come in and act particularly poetic on my ass or what. But I don’t appreciate it.

And as if I hadn’t noticed, Wayne said, “You know, what you were saying earlier about—”

“Shut up, Wayne,” I said.

“I just was thinking—”

“I know what you were thinking. Shut up.”

“Everybody’s going home,” said the City happily. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the car window.

The Dark and What It Said

...Rick Kennett

It didn't start with their leaving the train at Ferndale in the foothills, backpacks loaded. Nor when they entered the Matagong Ranges, hiking on upward trails of gravel and clay; cold winds sighing almost humanly through the trees. Not even when bad weather caught them three days later on a lonely mountain road, little more than a dirt track, making them pitch camp in the early afternoon. It started when Rudy on all fours pushed through the tent flap and said, "Jeez, I hate that!"

"What? My cooking?" said Andrew, stirring dehydrated vegetables in a pot bubbling on their little one-burner stove.

"Yeah, that too." Rudy threw the torch in ahead of him now that he was back in the light of the hissing kerosene lamp. He closed the flap behind him, zippering out the rain and the cold night wind. "No, I mean people dumping old car bodies in the bush, cluttering up the place. Isn't that what junk yards are for? There's a rusty old hulk just up the slope here. Almost banged into it in the dark while I was looking for a big enough tree to pee on. Looks like it's been there for years."

"The tree?"

"The car." Rudy reached for a towel amongst his bedding and started drying his hair wet from the rain.

"Eh? What sort of car?"

"Dunno what make — some old sedan by the look of it. Rusty and pretty overgrown with branches and bushes. Smelt sort of funny too, sort of sour, so I didn't really take a good look. Wheels were still on, though. Tyres too, but flat. Odd for a wreck to have its wheels still on."

"Probably stolen," Andrew said. "Stolen, then brought out here and stripped of its radio and stuff." He dropped a couple of beef stock cubes into the pot, followed by a handful of instant mash for thickening. "Was all the glass still in place?"

"Um...yes, come to think of it. I remember my torch glinting off the windscreen. Not sure about the side windows though."

"And was the engine still under the hood?"

"Didn't look. Like I said, too dark and wet and smelly to go poking about under the hood. But you might be right about it being stolen. I'll check it out in the morning." Rudy rummaged in his backpack sitting in a corner of the tent and brought out the two plastic plates which served as their only crockery, followed by

a couple of plastic forks salvaged from the last take-away they'd had before leaving the city. "Say, when I was out there did you call me?"

"Not me," said Andrew, adding, "Give us your plate," and began spooning out a brown concoction that smelt better than it looked.

"Hmmm. Could've sworn I heard you say 'Hey there' or something. Maybe it was a night bird. Maybe the wind in the trees. Who knows."

"Maybe you're going bush-happy."

Rudy laughed. "No, I enjoy it too much. There's more to bush walking than getting out in the open, getting the country air. Even more than giving you self reliance, it gives you self belief. You know?" He started looking through his pack for the bread they'd bought the day before at that mountain township, their last contact with civilization. "A good pair of boots and some common sense are practically the essentials. Tell someone where you're going and you can't go wrong."

"You did tell someone where we were going, didn't you, Rudy?"

"Huh? No, I thought you did."

"What?" Andrew glanced up into a perfectly straight face — then saw that his friend's eyes were smiling. No way would Rudy ever overlook a fundamental rule of bush walking. But there was something else that bothered Andrew. With some forced casualness he said, "What about snakes?"

"What about them?"

"Despite all this," Andrew said, pausing a moment to listen to the rain pattering against the nylon sides of the tent, "it's coming on to warmer weather. Won't they be coming out of their holes about now?"

"Snakes feel your footsteps through their bellies. They slither off long before you see them." Rudy handed out slices of stale bread as if he were dealing cards, three each. "It might be a cliché, Andrew, but they *are* more scared of you than you are of them."

"I doubt it. I'm terrified of them."

"Shouldn't be." Rudy dunked bread into the contents of his plate. "As my grandpa used to say, snakes and ghosts are overrated."

"Ghosts?"

"Good stew," said Rudy, eating.

"Scratch feeds are my specialty," said Andrew, then prompting repeated, "Ghosts?"

Rudy gave his friend a sour look. "You're not gunna tell me you're scared of ghosts as well as snakes?"

"In all the time we've been bush walking together this is the first time you've mentioned ghosts."

"And this is the first time you've got skitty about snakes. So what?"

"Are there ghosts in these mountains?"

"There are more ghosts in cities. But...yeah, the Matagong Ranges are big enough to have its share of ghost stories...but, shit, Rudy, they were made up by old timers in the olden days. I've hiked these mountains for years and I've hardly ever seen a ghost."

Despite his passion for the Great Outdoors, Andrew had to admit to himself that lonely places sometimes got to him. Lonesome places like the Matagong Ranges generated ghost stories. For all he knew they generated ghosts as well. In his childhood — not that long ago — he'd twice heard rapid knocking on windows facing into empty rooms. And lying awake one night watching the oblong of his open bedroom doorway, dimly outlined by light down the hallway, he'd seen something hunched and black, framed for a few seconds, creep by in silence. Then the hall was again empty and remained so for the rest of that frightened, wakeful night. It had foretold nothing, it had never appeared again. But he kept his room door closed at night from then on and never again watched open doorways for fear of what he might see go by. He'd told no one of any of these things. Not his parents, not any of his friends. Not then, not ever.

Midnight. Or so Andrew thought. Rudy had the only watch.

He'd woken some minutes before from uneasy dreams and was lying in his sleeping bag, looking up into the dark. The smell of dinner had disappeared earlier while they'd drank coffee and played cards. The tent, Andrew now thought, smelt of all the Summer forests and Autumn hills it had ever been pitched all the years Rudy had owned it, and whoever had owned it before him. And perhaps — he took a long, silent breath — perhaps just a hint of something sour, something he couldn't identify and didn't like. The patter of rain on nylon, the sound they had listened to for the last nine hours, had ceased. The wind too had dropped, was no longer making almost human noises among the trees. A heavy, uncanny silence enveloped the night, both outside and within the tent, like that which had preceded the rapping on those childhood windows, like those few watching seconds before the hunched and creeping thing had crossed his doorway all that time ago.

Beside him, Rudy rolled over in his sleeping bag and someone outside grunted, "Hey you there."

Eyes wide in the dark, suddenly cold, Andrew listened in this immense silence. Waited for the voice to speak again, hoping he wouldn't hear again, maybe just a night noise, maybe just a waking dream, just a dream, maybe the wind, imagination maybe maybe maybe.

Seconds passed but the sound he dreaded to hear again was not repeated. As quietly as he could, Andrew unzipped his bag, freed an arm and nudged his sleeping friend.

"Rudy!" he whispered. "Rudy! Wake up!"

The dark beside him muttered sleepily

"Rudy, there's someone out there."

"Wot?" said Rudy heavily.

"Shhh. I just heard someone talking outside the tent."

They listened, both of them, to the deep silence of the night.

"You were dreaming," whispered Rudy at last. "You're—"

The voice grunted again. Where it came from they couldn't tell, couldn't even be sure of the words exactly. *Hey you there? Ya you care?* But it was close and surely addressed to them. Here in the depths of the scrubby faraway in the middle of the black of the night it could only mean trouble. Unbidden memories came to mind of stories of crime in lonely places: forest murders and shallow bush-land graves not found for years, not found at all.

Rudy was first to move. He sat up and groped for the torch while Andrew struggled to escape his sleeping bag. Whatever threatened outside was best faced standing up and in the open, not lying in a ready-made nylon shroud, no proof against anything but rain.

Rudy zipped open the tent flap, gently, slowly, a few teeth at a time. He and Andrew edged together and peered out. Not that there was anything to see. So dark was the night they might as well have been on the far side of Oblivion. With fear surging through them their sense of smell grew acute: the smell of the forest damp after the rain, of dripping branches and rotting leaves on the ground...and something else, sour, bad. Their hearing sharpened too. They listened for the sound of breathing, for footsteps squelching in the wet grass, for the *click* of a gun being cocked.

It was easy in the night to imagine someone, something standing over the tent, large, tall, silent, malign. In the mind's eye it was always large and tall, always silent and malign.

Spurred less by bravery than by a need to know what the night might hide, Rudy flashed the torch on, swinging the beam around in an almost frantic fashion, shining now on branches sparkling with rain drops, now on the wet grass, now on the empty road, lonely in the forest depths.

They scrambled from the tent, the light flicking up the slope and into the trees behind them, swinging back and forth.

A tree, another tree, another tree...the moving torch beam set their shadows off in a marching line slowly left to right, thin black fingers pointing to things out of sight.

The light touched on a bulky, indefinite shape, hard by a tree, obscured by a low branch across the top of it.

"What's that?" whispered Andrew.

"That old car body I told you about," Rudy whispered back. He moved the light along, then swept it all around to catch whatever might be creeping up from behind. Nothing was creeping up from behind.

"Maybe it was a night bird like you said before," said Andrew, not at all sounding like he believed it. "I've sometimes heard a bird call that sounds like 'Whatcha reading.' Maybe there's something out here that hoots 'Hey you there' at night."

As he said this Andrew thought Rudy turned his face towards him, but in the dark he couldn't see his friend's expression. Nor at that moment did he want to.

High in the trees a stray breeze rustled the branches, shaking last droplets to fall cold onto the grass around them. Nothing moved except Rudy's light across the trees, across the grass, across the old car body, into the thick scrub beyond. He turned the beam back to the car. The light glinted on its unbroken windscreen, flashed across flat tyres, over the doors and hood, rusted but undamaged. The light seemed unable to penetrate its dark interior.

They returned to their tent where the torch remained switched on until the kero lamp was pumped and primed and lit. They dragged their sleeping bags outside and remained in the open, comforted by the regular hissing of the lamp and its ring of illumination, sitting up, determined to watch out the night. Overhead vast clouds rolled by and cleared, revealing stars in a patch of sky cut jagged on all sides by huddling treetops.

The great forest brooded in the dark, all shadows. Nothing came down the road, nothing came out of the trees.

By slow degrees alarm subsided. They spoke little and that in whispers. Sleep slipped back and caught Andrew unawares. Sitting on his sleeping bag, the lamp between Rudy and himself, he seemed to nod for an instant, and opening his eyes he found that the light from the lamp was wavering, had taken on a reddish tinge. He'd fallen asleep and the lamp's reservoir of kerosene was nearly spent. Opposite was Rudy's sleeping bag, empty. Yet it was still warm to the touch, so he couldn't be long gone or far away. A quick check of the tent showed he wasn't there.

Andrew lifted the dying lamp against the encroaching dark and cast about its flickering rays.

"Rudy?" he called, but not too loudly. The forest didn't seem the place nor the night the right time for a raised voice.

A gleam of torch light flashed at him from up the slope, within the trees close by. To Andrew's immense relief Rudy stepped into view from behind the branches and scrub half hiding the body of the car.

"Just taking a closer look at this," he said. He kicked the car a solid blow, causing a yell of outraged metal to echo around the trees.

"Leave it alone, Rudy. It's probably crawling with snakes." Andrew lowered the failing lamp to the ground and began to work its plunger, pumping its last drops of kerosene up into its mantle.

Andrew shone his torch through the passenger side window and peered into its dark interior. "I don't know why you want to go bush walking if you're so shit-scared of snakes."

"I'm not scared of...yes, all right, I am. But at least I don't go putting my hand into hollow logs or shove my face into places where they might be. Your grandpa was wrong, Rudy. Snakes — ghosts too — are *not* overrated."

Ignoring his friend's warning, Rudy crouched in front of the car and probed his light through the tarnished chromium of the grill. "I think you're right about it being a stolen car. The engine *is* here. The number plate too, but it's too rusty to read."

Andrew, working the lamp's plunger, snorted a non-committal noise at this vindication of his suspicion, but said nothing. Where they were was one of the loneliest parts of the mountains. Why should anyone haul a wreck all this distance? No, it had to have been stolen: driven to this mountain, along that dirt road and parked, deliberately left up there among the trees. Many reasons for this crime loomed in his imagination, none of them he liked. He continued pumping. The lamp was burning again but not strongly.

Rudy stood and came around the side of the car. He pushed back a branch growing across the roof and shone his light in through the passenger side window again

which had been rolled down, not smashed out. “You’d’ve thought any half-decent thief would’ve taken the radio, but it’s still there by what I can see...hey! I think it’s a CB unit. I can see a microphone or something dangling by its flex. Weird, eh,” he said over his shoulder. “Steal a car, drive it into the mountains, but don’t even bother levering out the radio.”

“Who’s to say it was a crime of profit?” Andrew held aloft the lamp, its light diminishing. For a moment, before it began flickering again, he saw Rudy plainly, the car too, standing out for a second edged in red. “Rudy, whose pack has the kero bottle? This needs refilling.”

“The kero bottle? It’s in—”

A guttural, grunting voice cut across his words. Rudy gasped, half in surprise, half out of curiosity and stared closer into the dark inside the car. Andrew saw his friend’s dim form, partly silhouetted by torch-light, stoop to the car’s side window in a sort of listening attitude.

“It is a ghost!”

“Rudy!” Andrew said, fearing for him, not knowing why. “Leave it alone!”

“I want to find out what it’s saying. If I can—”

The grunt came again, unintelligible to Andrew. Then Rudy barked a laugh of surprise. “So that’s what it is. Hey, Andrew!” he called, his voice tight with excitement, “Andrew! I’ve worked it out! I know what this car is!” He inclined his head further towards the window, shining the light at the driver’s seat. The grunting, guff voice spoke once more from out of the dark of the car. Rudy, pushing his face in through the window, said, “Yes. I am.”

A rusty ratchet clicked inside the car. The torch fell to the ground with a dull bump and went out.

Andrew peered up the slope as the lamp in his upraised hand began to flicker badly.

“Rudy?”

The lamp flared once, showing for a stark second the abandoned car all by itself, then went out. Darkness and silence surged in together. Surged in all around Andrew, leaving him there in the night, blind and uncomprehending, the heat from the dead lamp the only thing telling him that the world still existed. “Rudy?” he said again, softer than before. More than ever now the night forest seemed no place for a raised voice.

A fear leapt upon him. Not of the night, nor of Rudy’s disappearance, but that he might suddenly hear that grunted, gruff voice again in the dark. He couldn’t take that.

“Rudy! Stop playing funny buggers!” he said, louder now. No, the quiet of the forest be damned. He was going to yell if he had to, scream if he wanted. There was no way he was hearing that voice again. “Rudy!”

No answer, not from his friend nor from anything else. The night enveloped him, seemed to press down like a weight and be taken blackly into his lungs with every shuddery breath he took. He stood with the lamp still raised uselessly, wondering what to do.

Grope back down the slope, maybe trip over the tent ropes, maybe blunder into the tent and bring it down, maybe run into something waiting there in the darkness, try to find the kero bottle, try to find the matches, try to light the lamp in the middle of the darkest night imaginable. Or go up the slope, find what had happened to Rudy, maybe fallen by the car, maybe injured, maybe bleeding.

The sensible part of his mind told him to find Rudy, told him his friend was in trouble, that he needed help, don't waste time. But there was another part of him, a scared little boy part of him, that said keep away, this was wrong, weird and wrong. It was the part of his mind that feared to watch open doorways at night, hated to be alone with windows looking into empty rooms that perhaps were looking back.

Nevertheless but none too brave, Andrew started up the slope, one small step at a time, hands outstretched. He smelt the rust before his fingers touched its roughened metal surface. Then his boot bumped against the fallen torch. He picked it up, shook it gently. It lit.

"Rudy?" Despite wanting to yell a few seconds ago he was whispering again.

He shone the torch about and inside the old car, saw no sign of his friend. Saw the front and back seats, both old-fashioned bench types, upholstery dirty and cracked. The steering wheel was there, mounted on a thick iron column. Intact speedo glass glinted in the torchlight. The speaker of a radio sat dirty and rusty beside it, just as Rudy had said, with a microphone dangling on a wire down near the brake pedal.

Something clicked like a clock for a couple of seconds, *tickety-tickety*, now heard, now gone. He flashed the light to the top of the dashboard where he thought the sound, real or imaginary, had come from. There a sort of box projected out from the other instruments, and from this box something jutted like a lever. But it was too dirty and rusty to make out clearly. All was silent in there now anyway. The inside door panels and the roof lining were cobwebby, cracked and dirty, and some brown staining blotted the fabric above the driver's seat. But no Rudy, not the slightest sign.

"Rudy!" He meant it as a shout. It came out as a half-strangled yelp.

The sourness of the interior came at Andrew cold against his nose, catching at the back of his throat. He thrust the torch further into the old car to look again in the back seat. He never saw that slither of shadow. A dark flicker of something sinewy. A blow, almost gentle, lightning quick striking against the underside of his left arm. Two tiny needles stinging into his flesh, there and gone.

Andrew yelled, snatched back his hand, dropping the torch inside the car. A little blood trickled warm between his fingers clutched tight around the bite.

He reeled back and glared at the car. Swore at it furiously, uselessly. Watched for a few seconds as a long and scaly something, lit by the torch within, slid over the sill of the back door and plopped onto the ground.

Andrew stumbled down the slope, tripped over tent ropes, sprawled in the dirt, sure the snake was there, right there, right behind him. His hands skidded across the nylon of the tent. Where was the flap? Why couldn't he find the flap? The snake. Where was it? By his leg? At his heel? Rearing for his face?

He found the tent flap and dived inside, zipping it up behind him, any second expecting his fingers to move from cold metal zip to cool scales twisting.

He sat there trembling in the dark, hand clenched tight over the bite, mind numbed by what'd happened to him in the last few seconds: the voice, the snake, Rudy saying "Yes. I am," and then Rudy not being there...

Under his bloodied fingers his left arm began to ache, began to throb: up the forearm into shoulder, down into wrist and hand and fingers. Despite his grip the venom was spreading. Sobbing, he felt about in the dark for Rudy's pack, for the first aid kit inside it.

Bedding.

Hats.

Plastic water bottle...

Rudy's bag. He opened it. It still smelt of Rudy somehow, an indefinable something. Andrew plunged his hand in, felt his friend's belongings, his spare T-shirt, sox, rain jacket, deck of cards...

Rudy was gone and he didn't know why.

...packets of dehydrated food, map, shaving brush...

Rudy had said, "Yes. I am," and then Rudy wasn't there.

The first aid kit bumped against his swelling fingers. He had to let go the wound and use his right hand to open the kit. The fingers of his left hand no longer flexed. He smeared antiseptic about the wound, then with a roll of bandages bound it tight, as tight as he could stand, down around the fingers, up to the elbow. Keeping the left arm immobile he felt again inside Rudy's bag with his right hand and found the kero bottle. Good. Good. Now to fill...

"Shit!"

The lamp was still up there by the car. In the dark. Where the snake was. Where the voice was. He'd put it down when he'd picked up the torch. Now the torch was gone too.

He felt about in his own bag and found a box of matches. But without so much as a candle they weren't much good. A fire? What wood he might find probably be wet. And what if the first branch he picked up twisted scaly in his hands and bit again? Anyway he couldn't go scrambling about; he had to keep still if he was to stop the poison from circulating in his blood. So walking out was not an option. If he were to survive help would have to find him.

Bind the wound and keep still was about all he knew of treating snake bite. Though he also knew that not all snake venom was alike, just as all bites didn't always inject a full fang's worth. If what had bit him was something like an olive whip snake his body could probably fight off the poison in a day or two. And even if it was something deadly like a black snake or a tiger snake it might not have fanged him with a full dose. In which case the worst of it might eventually pass if only he could keep still. If however it was a tiger or black snake and if it was a full dose Andrew knew he'd be dead by sunrise.

He couldn't feel his left arm anymore. As he lay there, breathing coming just a little faster now, he had to stop himself from striking matches to see that the arm had not dropped off. He didn't want to see; he could well imagine his blackened, swollen arm from fingers to shoulder. Yet again and again these compulsive thoughts came, and again and again he had to fight them off. It was, he knew, the beginnings of

delirium. And he was losing. As his body grew hot and cold in dull rhythmic pulses he felt his mind slipping away. Time and reason unravelled. He was back on the train taking them to Ferndale in the foothills, though now all alone in the carriage. He was tramping up the mountain tracks again, but where was Rudy? All around the trees swayed violently back and forth, back and forth with a loud wind like a grunting guff voice saying something not quite understood. He felt a great fear that the trees must surely snap. This fear, this anticipation he could not bear. Out ahead the road was alive with snakes. They wriggled and squirmed and turned their heads towards him and grinned to show their gleaming fangs.

Somewhere in the distance, far down this road, he could hear a car coming nearer, getting louder, while all around the trees swayed and swayed, back and forth, back and forth, harder faster madder, and he knew their rhythmic wrenching would surely pull the Earth off its axis, harder faster madder, wobble it out of orbit, and closer came the car, its purring engine like the sound of a gruff grunting wind in the swaying trees, oh how could those trees stand such movement, how could the Earth resist their harder faster madder tugging—

Lights shone through the tent walls, first dimly then with closer intensity, and the world rocked and spun.

Was this rescue or more delirium? Could he hear a car coming down the track? He couldn't tell anymore, couldn't even be sure if the car still neared, whether it now idled just outside, whether he could hear it at all. His mind was humming a tune all askew.

He waited and watched the tent flap, expecting something, not sure what. The tent flap quivered. The lights still shone, brighter now, brighter, but he still couldn't tell if it was real or not.

Yet Andrew waited and watched the light strengthening, watched the tent flap in a sort of dread at what he might see suddenly unzip the opening. Concentrated so that the dead weight of his arm was forgotten, the delirium mellowed. He watched for what seemed a long time, but nothing happened. Then out of the noises in his head came the sound of the car again, clear and precise. Definite this time. Coming down the track. In seconds it would pass the tent.

Andrew struggled up from the bedding, and a long, dull ache pounded through his arm. He fell forward to the flap and without hesitation opened it.

The car, smeared in a soft light that had little power to pierce the darkness, was moving slowly past the tent — a dirty, rusty sedan growling past though its tyres were flat and did not seem to be turning. Rudy was there in the passenger seat, looking through the window at him. He seemed to be saying something but Andrew couldn't catch a word. Beside Rudy, driving, was an ill-defined figure wearing what might've been a peaked cap.

The vision glided on in a weird slow rush and Andrew tumbled from the tent.

“Rudy!”

Though seeming barely to be moving the car was already past the tent and well down the road, out of reach.

“Rudy! Wait!”

Rudy put his head out the window and looked back with an expression on his face Andrew could not decipher. And as distance and darkness swallowed up car and face Rudy yelled something about *a ride* and *Yes I am* and *cost*. Or had he said *lost*? Andrew had no idea. He was looking again at an empty road — or rather the pitch black dark where the road was. Nevertheless he began to run down it, heedless now that he would be pushing poison through his body. He had to find his friend, sure that Rudy was in some greater danger.

But he'd made hardly any dark distance when it seemed to him the road twisted and humped up like a snake. He blundered into bushes, collided with trees. He called again, "Rudy! Rudy!" but Rudy never answered. Pain returned in his arm, and pumped by his quickened heartbeat spread into his body. What light he could see were coloured specks racing before his eyes, swirling and swirling. Holding the matchbox clumsily in his bandaged left hand he lit one, then another and another, fighting to keep them in his trembling fingers. Featureless scrub was all that confronted him in its brief glare.

Where the hell's the road?

He tripped on something, fell among a heap of sticks and what felt like strips of old leather. It smelt musty, sour. He struck another match and before it sputtered out he glimpsed white bones. Three matches struck together gave a longer light, for some seconds showing a skull, empty eye sockets dark and staring, and broken at the back by two large holes. Nearby half buried in the dirt was the tattered remains of a peaked cap.

The matches went out.

Ignoring the pain, the growing nausea, Andrew stumbled off into the dark.

Find the road. Find the tent. Get me outta here!

From some direction he couldn't tell where exactly came a voice, a thin telephone voice. Andrew followed it through the dark, through thick bushes, clambering around dense stands of trees. He could not tell what it was saying, but he knew he was closer now and it was almost certainly Rudy speaking. He did not call out, but crazed in his mind decided stealth was what was needed now. Yet he blundered on through the bush, pushing through scrub and crashing swearing into trees.

The voice was clear now. A radio voice. Rudy's voice. It came from the car sitting half covered in branches and bush, rusty, dirty, tyres flat and a haven for snakes. He weaved his sick way to the passenger side window where the fallen torch still shone, showing a clean interior, no dirt or cobwebs or brown stains on the roof. He stooped his head inside, though it cost him some effort. Lost Rudy's voice came from the two-way radio, its microphone clipped onto the dashboard, a drone of words sapped of all warmth and emotion. And Andrew understood now what the car was and why Rudy had said what he had said.

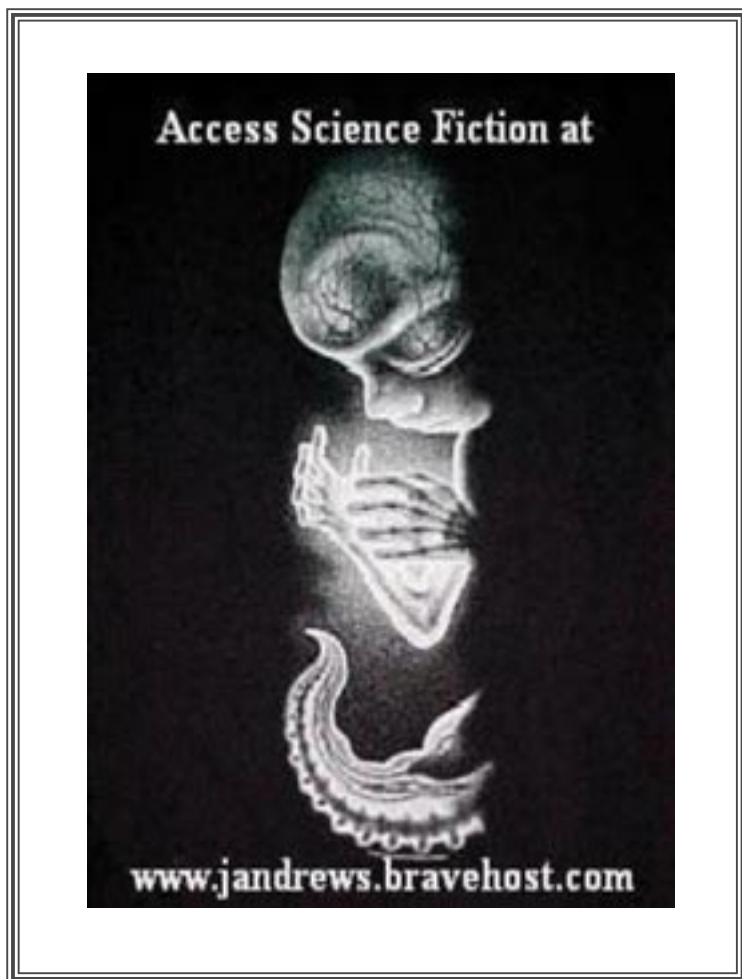
The figure in the driver's seat, the peaked cap on its shattered head, turned toward him, and Andrew wondered if he were still in a delirium or if it really did have no face.

"Are you the fare?"

A gruff, grunted voice he had heard before.

"Yes. I am," he said without thinking.

The driver reached a thin hand out for the dashboard to ratchet down the lever on the old taxi meter *tickety tickety*, and Andrew waited still stooped by the window for what would come next.



The Eradicator

...Ben Cook

“What’s this?” Jamie asked.

“It’s an Eradicator,” said Dr Cranz. Jamie had known Henry since primary school, but even when they were five, everyone had called him Dr Cranz.

“It looks like your Remote Lint Compressor,” Jamie told him. “And it’s got that kind of invisible glow, like your Syllogism Splicer. You know, like it’s shining really bright, but the light itself’s been taken away and just left you with the feeling of brightness... But mostly it looks *just* like my garage door remote. I’ve been looking for that.”

“Sorry, but this is important. This is an Eradicator.”

“What’s it do?” Jamie peered at the Eradicator.

“Ah ha! Watch this.” Dr Cranz seemed elated, although that was not unusual. He pointed the device, and pressed the button. “What do you think of that?”

“What?”

“It’s gone.”

Jamie looked at Doctor Cranz closely. He still had the Eradicator. He was unhinged, unbalanced, but unchanged. “It’s in your hand.”

“Not that. The oak tree. The one we had a tree house in when we were kids,” Dr Cranz said.

Jamie eyed the bare patch of lawn suspiciously. “We didn’t have a tree house when we were kids. Your dad said the only sensible place for your experiments was underground.”

“Ah, yes, of course... Well you see, that’s how it works,” Dr Cranz led Jamie over to where the tree wasn’t. “There *was* a tree here up until a moment ago. But once I pressed the button it never existed. The machine altered time and now the oak tree in the front yard was never planted. I’m the only person who remembers it.”

Jamie nodded slowly. There was certainly plenty of evidence to back up the theory that there had never been a tree there. As for the rest of the theory...

“Seems pretty powerful for a little box. Are you sure it doesn’t just cause delusions in the person who’s holding it?”

“Ah, well... Difficult to prove or disprove, eh?” Dr Cranz tapped the side of his nose.

“Can I have a go?” Jamie asked. It was a simple way to prove what the thing really did. Unless it really *did* cause delusions.

“Sure, that’s what I brought it to you for,” Dr Cranz said.

“Me?”

“We’ve been friends since primary school, who else can I trust?” He proffered the device eagerly, and Jamie suddenly found himself a little unwilling to take it. Dr Cranz sometimes had trouble telling the difference between friends and guinea pigs.

“Why not use it yourself? After the Total Inversion Video Game I’m a bit leery of your gadgets,” Jamie said.

“Too busy. I can’t be eradicating things. I’ve got my Multiple Resonance Wave Collider to work on.”

“That old thing?”

“Yes ‘that old thing’. My life’s work.”

“It doesn’t do anything!” Jamie rolled his eyes.

“What do you mean?” Dr Cranz demanded. “When I’ve perfected it it’ll make everyone’s dreams come true!”

“Yeah, but right now — and for the last fifteen years — whenever you turn it on it just blacks out the neighbourhood,” Jamie said.

“So? It does *something*. Listen, I need to get back to work. I’m at a critical stage.” Dr Cranz ignored Jamie’s eyebrows and handed him the Eradicator. “You take this and try it out. And take a note of anything you eradicate, and what effects it had. Obviously I’m not going to remember it.”

“Okay.” Jamie looked at the little device dubiously.

Dr Cranz waved a hand at him. “And if it starts to only partly eradicate things, or only works sometimes, or if whatever you eradicated comes back, just change the batteries. It takes two double As.”

“Sure.”

“And for God’s sake, don’t eradicate your own grandfather. I know it sounds corny, but sometimes you have to warn people about that kind of thing.”

“Hang on. You mean this thing does people?” Jamie was suddenly a lot less sure he wanted anything to do with it.

“Of course. It does anything.”

“So if I point it at the ground...”

“Within reason,” Dr Cranz said.

“Well, that’s okay then.” Jamie meant to sound sarcastic, but he wasn’t sure he pulled it off.

“If you wanted to eradicate something as big as the planet you’d probably have to hook it up to mains power,” Dr Cranz went on blithely.

“I won’t do that,” was all Jamie could think of to say.

“Probably best if you don’t. Okay, see you later. Don’t eradicate anything I wouldn’t.”

“Uh... Okay.” Jamie staggered off. All he intended to eradicate right now was a beer, and he was going to do it the old fashioned way.

Jamie stuffed the Eradicator in his back pocket, after carefully removing the batteries, and jumped into his car. The last thing he needed was to have his pants eradicated. Actually, the last thing he needed was another parking fine. Or another speeding fine. Or to be up in court for drink driving again.

In fact, the last thing he needed was this bloody car, which had cost him \$400 to buy, \$1200 to repair, \$1600 to register and insure every year, and an average of \$350 per month for the last two years. If it weren't for this car, he calculated, he'd currently be up about \$13,000, minus two years' bus fares.

A fairly obvious plan formed in his mind.

He pulled up outside the local pub, a grey brick cube with no name and no personality. He jumped out of the car — or as he had just christened it, the Condemned. The batteries clicked back into place and Jamie aimed the Eradicator at the vehicle.

A thought occurred.

The car was granted a stay of execution while Jamie hunted in the glove box for a notepad and pen. He'd promised Dr Cranz he'd take notes, and he didn't want to face the Dot Point Memory Actualiser again.

Moments later, the car had never existed. Jamie checked his wallet, but there was no extra money. That didn't mean there wasn't extra in the bank though. A bus pass had appeared and, strangely, so had a public health care card. That didn't bode well: normally only people on a pension or welfare got those.

A check of the bank confirmed his fears: he had less money than before! His fortnightly pay had been replaced by a much smaller handout from the government. Somehow, by eradicating his car, he had eradicated his job too.

His hand flew to his mobile to call Dr Cranz, but that was gone too. He had change in his wallet, but public phones had always struck him as an admission of failure. With a sigh he headed for the bus stop.

Jamie stamped into Dr Cranz workshop. "How long have I been on the dole?" he demanded.

Doctor Cranz jumped and swore as his soldering iron slipped and set fire his wiring diagram.

"A couple of years," he said, slapping the flames out with a bare hand. "Ever since you got fired for showing up late all the time."

"I eradicated my car."

"That was silly."

"Yeah," Jamie sighed. "I'm starting to see that. Now I'm broke."

"Well don't worry. You can eradicate any bills you get and it'll be like they never existed. That should save you some money."

"Will that work?"

"Dunno. Let's try it."

They went to Jamie's house and hunted around until they found an electricity bill to eradicate. Instantly, the lights went out.

"Nice one, Henry," muttered Jamie.

Some days later Jamie staggered into Dr Cranz's workshop and went straight to the safe. After so many years he knew the combination off by heart, and he knew Dr Cranz kept a bottle of scotch alongside his more dangerous inventions.

"What's up with you?" Dr Cranz asked. He wore goggles that made his eyes about three times their usual size. Jamie giggled slightly hysterically.

"I eradicated a person today."

"Oh." Dr Cranz handed him a glass and surreptitiously fumbled for a notepad. "Why?"

"He was drunk," Jamie said, and downed a triple at one gulp, then held the glass out for more. "He and some other guys got in a fight on the bus. One of them landed on me, I pushed him off, and he smacked me."

"So you eradicated him?"

"I was angry. And he'd broken my nose. And I wasn't going to point the Eradicator at my own face to fix it."

"You think maybe the police might have been a better idea?" Cranz's tone of voice was one that normally says 'tell me what you remember about your mother'.

"Yeah, probably. But it's too late now." Jamie downed another triple and stared into the glass. He would have liked the haunting features of the person he had destroyed to be staring back at him, but he realised now that he could not even remember what the man had looked like.

"How do you feel?" Dr Cranz asked eventually.

"Like I've just swallowed a hot bowling ball," Jamie answered after some thought.

"I meant about the guy you eradicated."

"Screw him. He probably deserved it."

"That's what I like to hear," smiled Dr Cranz, "some nice rationalisations. We'll make a mad scientist of you yet."

"What if he had a wife and kids?" Jamie gasped, but his face cleared immediately. "Actually, who cares? They'll never know anything about it." He laughed suddenly. "And she might be hot! Less competition for the rest of us."

"Okay, and *that's* going a bit too far." Dr Cranz took the glass away from him. "I think you should go have a nice lie down and maybe don't eradicate anyone else for a while, okay?"

"This Eradicator thing isn't working out so well," said Jamie.

They were sitting in the darkened workshop, with only a single candle for light and the bottle of scotch for warmth. The latest test of the Multiple Resonance Wave

Collider had yielded predictable results. Although the latest advances had allowed it to black out the whole suburb rather than just a couple of blocks. By Christmas, with luck, it could shut down the city.

“What’s the problem?” Dr Cranz asked. “Have you changed the batteries?”

“That’s not what I mean. Every time I eradicate something, things get worse. I get rid of my car, and suddenly I’m unemployed. We did that power bill, and not only did I get cut off, I’ve never been connected at all! And today I decide to do some public good, so I eradicate the brick some kid chucked through a window at the shops last night. Now it turns out he robbed them at gunpoint instead. Okay, so eradicating dog turds on footpaths seems to work okay, but I’m afraid I’ve made some dog somewhere explode. The thing’s cursed.”

“Well, there’s a theory that everything happens for a reason,” Dr Cranz said. “Maybe every time you eradicate something, you’re messing with some kind of grand design.”

“You think so?”

“Not really.”

“Well what am I going to do? Can’t you build an Uneradicator?”

“It doesn’t work like that. Once something’s been eradicated, there’s no trace of it left. There’s be nothing for an Uneradicator to work on. But if it’s such a problem why don’t you just stop eradicating things?”

“I can’t help it,” Jamie cried. “It’s just so easy and so satisfying. I’m a serial eradicator! A premature eradicator. I need to go to Eradicators Anonymous, but even if they ever existed, they probably don’t any more.” He put his face in his hands. “Why don’t I just give the thing back to you?”

“I’m not having anything to do with it. It’s too dangerous.” Dr Cranz peered over his glasses at Jamie. “Look, just take the batteries out and leave it at home. That way you won’t be able to eradicate anything.”

“Why not just hit it with a hammer?”

“Try it.” Dr Cranz offered up a hammer.

Jamie tried to smash the Eradicator, but suddenly there was nothing in his hand.

“It’s gone!”

“What is?”

“The hammer,” Jamie said.

“What hammer?”

“The one with the red handle. The one you just gave me.”

“I don’t have a hammer with a red handle,” Said Dr Cranz.

“I see,” said Jamie wearily. “Of course you don’t.”

“Were you trying to smash the Eradicator? It won’t work: It’s self-preserving.”

“I gathered.”

“Look,” Dr Cranz patted him on the shoulder, “take it home, take the batteries out, and put it somewhere safe. We can’t destroy it, but if you don’t use it any more, everything will be fine.”

Jamie sighed. “Okay, I’ll try it. But if your pet budgie suddenly never existed, don’t come crying to me.”

“What budgie?” Dr Cranz asked with a puzzled look. “Relax! Relax, I’m joking.”

Strangely, when Jamie rushed into the workshop several days later, Dr Cranz was not at work. He was staring at the wall and gnawing on a fingernail.

“I eradicated someone else today,” Jamie blurted out.

Cranz was jerked out of his reverie. “I thought you weren’t going to do any more people. In fact,” he peered at Jamie over his glasses, “I thought you weren’t going to use the Eradicator at all.”

“This was for the good of all humanity.”

“Who was he,” Dr Cranz laughed, “a politician?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh.”

“He wasn’t that important, he was just a Country member,”

“Yes, I remember.”

“I thought you said you couldn’t remember anything I eradicated,” Jamie protested.

“No, I mean, you said... Never mind. I *don’t* remember. But keep going anyway.”

“He came up with that plan for microchipping everyone born overseas so the cops could track them. You probably don’t remember it. Anyway, he had some powerful friends, and it really looked like they would push it through.”

“Seems a bit trivial.”

“Eh?”

“With the whole nuclear standoff business and everything. You would have been better off eradicating one of the guys behind that.”

“What nuclear standoff? There isn’t a nuclear standoff.”

“Ah,” breathed Dr Cranz. “Now we get to it. You’d better look at the news.”

He searched among the remote controls until he found the one for the television. *...increased today*, said the reporter, in front of images of military trucks zooming back and forth, *with the announcement that China and the United States have cut off diplomatic relations...*

“None of this was going on before,” Jamie whispered in horror. “I must have caused it somehow.”

Most commentators agree that some form of conflict is only days away unless the two superpowers agree to...wait, I’m getting news just in...

This is a public announcement, said an even more serious voice. *All members of the public should be aware of an imminent thermonuclear threat. You are advised to stay indoors, away from windows. Move to the basement or bomb shelter should you have one. Disconnect any electrical devices. Do not attempt to use the telephone. Do not go out of doors. This warning will be repeated for as long as possible. This is a public announcement. All members of the public should be aware of an imminent thermonuclear threat...*

The voice repeated the message two more times, while Jamie and Dr Cranz listened aghast, until it was finally cut off and replaced with a test pattern. Jamie sagged to his knees in the middle of the room.

“Oh, nice one, Jamie,” Dr Cranz sneered. “You get pissed off at some redneck with delusions of grandeur and with one little press of the button — ‘whoops, I’ve destroyed civilisation’.”

“I didn’t mean to!”

“Look at the telly!”

The television went oooooooooooooo, as if meditating.

“This is ridiculous,” he shouted. “All I did was eradicate one stupid politician. How could that have caused World War Three?”

“I don’t know. But whatever you did, it’s probably destroyed most of the world and it’s going to finish off the rest in about five minutes.”

“I wish you’d never built this stupid thing,” he whispered, then leapt to his feet. “Of course! That’s it. All we have to do is eradicate the Eradicator.”

“With what?”

“We...uh...point it at a mirror.”

“Poof, no more mirror.”

“Then we build another one and use that.”

“In three minutes? This thing is a technological miracle. I had to invent a whole new field of science from scratch. It took me hours!” He sighed and looked Jamie straight in the eye. “But you’re on the right track. There is *one* thing you can eradicate that would undo all the damage.”

“You mean...”

“The one thing that’s common in all the eradications.” Dr Cranz nodded solemnly. “The person who caused it all. I’m sorry, but it’s the only way.”

“I... You’re right. I know you are. But I’m not sure if I can.”

“You have to be strong. You’re the only one with the right to do it. But you need to make up your mind in the next two minutes.”

“O-okay...” Jamie took a deep breath to steel himself, then aimed the Eradicator.

“What the hell are you doing?” Dr Cranz cried. “I thought you were going to eradicate yourself!”

“Bugger that,” said Jamie. “I didn’t invent the bloody thing.”

And he pressed the button.

HAL: Role Model or Total Idiot?

Exclusive interview inside!

MONDAY

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Want your valuable cargo stowed across the
nearest planet? Call Hal Spacejock!

Hal Spacejock Just Desserts Out Now!

Don't miss it!

Across Australia and New Zealand, bookstores are unpacking their copies of *Hal Spacejock Just Desserts* while fans of this eagerly-awaited title sit at home reading SF magazines with improbable-sounding titles.

"I didn't know it was out," said Kim 'Hal' Smith, fiddling with a life-size model of his hero, Clunk.

"It's shocking," said Hilary 'Spacejock' Grimes. "They ought to announce it or something. Let people know it's available."

However, one store has the opposite problem. "We can't get to the door

to open up," said the aggrieved owner, panting from his crowd-parting exertions.

"Shocking"

"They were outside when I got here ... hundreds of 'em!"

Asked if the milling fans had gathered to buy Hal 3, he replied "Hell no, someone told 'em a famous author was doing a book signing, and when I find the person responsible I'll --"

Author Simon Haynes was busy spreading rumours of a book signing, and was therefore unavailable for comment.

A New New New Edition!

New!

Fremantle Arts Centre Press reports that the first edition of Hal Spacejock has sold out. "We have no idea where they went," said 'Fingers' Flannigan, chief of security at the publisher's warehouse. "One night they were there and the next morning they'd gone. Must be the fastest seller ever."

"The fastest seller ever"

To celebrate, FACP ordered a second print run - and a new padlock for the warehouse. This new edition has a Dion Hamill cover commissioned to match those of Hal books 2 and 3.

Reports that Hal Spacejock has seen more covers than *Stairway to Heaven* are greatly exaggerated.



This cover not admissible in evidence ...

ADVERTISEMENT

Forgotten Fable Fights Back!

With 7 words.

Seriously miffed at the lack of mentions, Hal Spacejock *Second Course* recently took out an advert in Spacejock News to announce ... itself.

"None of the other books are as thick as me. None of them have Sonya. And if you want to see someone really go to pieces you'll have to read me, because the other titles have nothing in the going-to-pieces line."

Second Course also pointed out that desserts are light and insubstantial, and the first book in the series doesn't even have a catchy meal-related subtitle. "Entree? Fish Soup? I mean, what's the story with that anyway?"



Now THAT'S a cover ...

The Bluebell Vengeance

...Tansy Rayner Roberts

Mendra Melody just loved humans. They were irresistibly round and pink and luscious, like ripe Christmas strawberries.

Take the specimen she had just woken up next to. He wasn't classically perfect (she didn't like them too pretty) but he had an interesting face and wild, curly hair. You could tell just by looking at him that he was an artist, or a writer — anyway, that he didn't work for a living.

Mendra could still feel the imprint of his long, tapered fingers on the inside of her thighs. His nails were speckled with blue paint, here and there along the cuticle. Definitely an artist.

While he continued to sleep, Mendra slid out from under his doona and headed for the bathroom — where she would find evidence of a girlfriend, if one existed. It was hardly worth giving him a second tumble if there wasn't some sweet, naïve little chickadee to drive crazy about it.

Oh, yes. There was a girlfriend. She obviously stayed over on a regular basis — the bathroom cabinet was too tidy to suggest otherwise. Rose soaps and bubble bath pellets crowded the razors and general man-things. Freshly laundered towels lined the rail. A house-proud girlfriend; this was going to be fun.

Mendra's goth makeup was a nightmare scrawl across her face. Her Blood Mandarin lipstick had been kissed off her mouth and deposited somewhere near her ear. Her long black hair needed not only a brush, but was greasy from the frantic dancing and the sweaty, Olympic-standard sex. A flick of her fingers and she shimmered into something far more respectable: Day Goth chic, her lipstick and mascara a little less intimidating than the night before, and her hair braided back instead of swinging to her waist. Much better. She yawned and smiled at herself, then turned back towards the bedroom. She had a human to play with, and a girlfriend to plot against.

Who said romance was dead?

After the man in question had woken up, and they had located almost all of their discarded items of clothing, the two of them walked the short distance to the nearest cappuccino bar for breakfast (note: he lived in a very trendy area,

convenient for vintage clothes shopping, art cafés and gay novel-writing waiters). By the time the coffee and croissants arrived, Mendra had discovered:

a) Her new lover's name was Glen.

b) He was indeed an artist, though his cagey use of the word 'painter' made her suspect that he painted houses rather more often than, say, masterpieces.

c) He was a very good liar. He said he didn't have a girlfriend with such sincerity and conviction that any woman who hadn't looked into his bathroom cupboard would believe him in a heartbeat.

Mendra found this very intriguing. Every pore of Glen's body suggested 'good guy' and yet he could present a major lie without a single guilty tell — not a blink or a twitch or a smile. Mendra did like a mystery.

"So, Mendra," said Glen once his credentials had been established. "What do you do?"

She sipped her cappuccino to disguise her panic. She couldn't think of any of her usual stories. What was wrong with her? Was he such an accomplished liar that he had put her off her game? "I work for a...family business," she said. Godsdamnit, that was the truth! Bad enough that she had given him her real name.

"What kind of business?" he asked, a perfectly reasonable question.

She smiled into his very human brown eyes, wondering how he would react if she told him the whole, unvarnished truth. "Mail order stuff." Curse frocks, poisoned cloaks, trick wands, bondage gear made from frog skin leather and unicorn bristles... "Fashion."

"Oh, interesting." He popped a bit of croissant into his mouth. "So, when can I see you again?"

Mendra opened her mouth, debating between 'never' and 'when your girlfriend says it's okay for a threesome'. Her mobile sang out with the theme tune of *The Addams Family* (da-da-da-dum click-click) and relief washed over her as she reached for it. *No. You can't see him again. You practically held his hand on the way here! And you think he's cute. You hate cute! Could you stab a bunny rabbit in front of this man? I think not.*

The voice of reason in her head was so loud and demanding that it took a little while to recognise her cousin Chat on the phone.

"Get over here now, Menge. It's an emergency!"

She snapped the phone shut. "Sorry, Glen. Emergency."

"Can I have your number?" he asked. *Damn it, you are so not attractive. I can give you up any time I like. Right now, for instance.*

"Sure." She scribbled a mobile number on a napkin and only after she had walked away did she realise she had given him the right one by accident. *Accident? Yeah, right.*

“This had better be important, Chat,” Mendra said as she entered the kitchen of the Big House on Hemlock Street.

He was waiting for her, wide eyed and wired. “It’s Granpap. You know that big curse he’d been working on for the VIP client? It hit a shield spell. A good one.”

“No one’s good enough to block a Granpap special,” Mendra scoffed.

“Someone is,” said Chat. “He’s a mess. If we don’t fix it before Granmam and the pares come home from Europe...”

Mendra shuddered at the thought of Granmam in a rage. Not to mention her parents and Chat’s, almost as bad as each other... “Who did this? Not those eBay wizards again? The anti-curses they’ve been selling are a joke.”

“I don’t think it’s wizard work at all.”

“One of the other Dark Families, looking for revenge?”

They rounded the corner together, into the Library.

“Oh, my—” said Mendra at the first sight of her Granpap. This was a man who had been cursing kittens, princesses and Hollywood starlets since the Roman Empire was new. He was the most feared of the Dark Lords who had survived the Great Transylvanian Massacre. A man so very, very evil that even the Sex Pistols used to watch their language around him.

He sat in the middle of the floor, surrounded by bluebells. They grew up out of the carpet, twiddled between his bare toes, and lay in scattered handfuls across his lap. A braided wreath of them lay upon his silver hair, and more jutted out from his long beard. He was smiling as if he was genuinely happy.

“Crap,” said Mendra. “It’s the fucking fairies.”

“Don’t be like that, my sweet,” said Granpap. “Why can’t you just relax and enjoy the scenery? It’s so...peaceful.”

“Hippie fucking fairies,” agreed Chat.

“Mum’s regular supplies aren’t going to cut it,” Mendra said heavily. “For this, we need the garden centre.”

‘Zebedee’s Plants and Garden Supplies’ wasn’t your everyday garden centre. Due to the owner’s herbalist sensibilities, and his wife’s deep commitment to medieval botany, you could get just about any strange or unusual plant.

Mendra was carrying a box of wild widow-wart, African hearth grass and poisonous daisyblades to her car when she noticed the smell of bluebells. The heady, sickly scent of the fairy flowers hovered over her Renault like a soggy cloud. Small tendrils of leaf and stalk were twisted around one of her back tyres, and against her windscreen.

“Bugger!” The spell had followed her. She put her box of plants on the ground and opened the driver’s side door. A clump of bluebells sprung out of the cigarette lighter. Mendra was utterly unsurprised when the engine failed to turn over. Fairy magic was notorious for fucking with all forms of modern technology.

“Gah.” Mendra leaned her forehead on the steering wheel. She could call Chat to pick her up in the family bus, but he was already panicky since both his and Mendra’s

parents were coming home tomorrow. For a twenty-four year old, Chat was still deathly afraid of his mum and dad.

She hoped this thing with Granpap would be relegated to an amusing dinnertime story about how Mendra and Chat saved the day, rather than further evidence to support the general family theory that the younger generation was so not cut out for the stickier side of the family business.

But bluebells were the worst. If they didn't peel this spell off Granpap soon, there wouldn't be a Big House left to greet the pares on their return — just uber-meadow from one end of Hemlock Street to the other.

"Mendra?"

She jumped at the sound of the friendly voice. "Gah! Glen?"

Her one-night stand leaned over the door of her car. His smile was so warm she could feel it heating up her stomach from the inside out. "I didn't expect to see you so soon."

"Um, me neither. What are you doing here?"

"I just finished a job — painting. You know. I paint. Walls, mostly." He revved up that smile again, though it faltered a little when he spotted the state of her dashboard. "Are those...bluebells?"

Mendra pushed herself out of the driver's seat so fast she practically ended up in his arms. Not intentional, that move, oh no. "Car. You have a car here?"

"Well...a truck."

"Brilliant. I need a lift. If I don't get these plants to my Granpap straight away, he'll..." *be stuck with the personality of a giant flower-sucking garden gnome for all eternity*, "...be really grumpy."

Glen laughed. "Heaven preserve us from grumpy grandpas."

Mendra gave him a long-suffering stare. "You really have — no — idea."

"What did you bring him for?" Chat demanded as Glen carried Mendra's box of sinister plant life into the Big House on Hemlock Street.

Glen smiled in a non-confrontational way. "You must be the brother."

"Cousin," said Mendra, thanking all the blood-sucking saints that Glen wasn't likely to meet any of her brothers any time soon. "Don't mind him. Can you pop the plants in the family room?"

"Righty ho," said Glen.

"What are you doing with a man who says 'righty ho'?" Chat demanded, as soon as Glen was out of earshot. "Our Granpap is turning into a frigging flowerpot hugger, and you're taking time out to get laid?"

"I didn't take time out." Mendra wondered if making out at the traffic lights counted as a delay. "Maybe I multi-tasked..."

"Mendra!" called Glen, from the family room. "Do you know this old fellow?"

"Granpap!" Mendra gasped, heading down the corridor.

"He must have escaped the bathroom!" said Chat, following her. "*None* of this is my fault!"

The family room was usually an oasis of simplicity, compared to the high Gothic grandeur of the rest of the house. The furniture was red velvet and black leather, and the walls were decorated with family portraits rather than the usual collection of Dark Lords and Evil Queens that Granpap emulated.

Today, bluebells hung from every surface and corner like a riot of springtime. Plagues of baby's breath and violets joined them. Granpap dangled upside down from the spiked light fittings, his long white beard dripping with petals and posies. He was singing a song about sweet little squirrels. With the word 'nonny' in it.

Glen held the box of plants in a death grip. His eyes roamed the walls anxiously. He didn't seem overly comforted by the watchful presence of Auntie Batwing and Great-Great-Uncle Spyderwart. Did mortals never pose for portraits with their favourite horned blood-parasites proudly displayed on their laps?

Granpap hiccupped, and tiny pink bubbles escaped from his nose and mouth.

"It's reached the third stage!" Chat yelled. He grabbed a pot of daisyblades.

Mendra snatched at the hearth grass and widow-wart. "Close the door," she snapped at Glen. "We can't risk the fumes escaping." She began the chant, and Chat joined in on the chorus.

"Dark Lord, resist this fairy spell. Blight their power, give them hell." It was a simple charm, one that they had learned in their cradles. Far better than *Hey Diddle Diddle*, which wasn't much use once you had reclaimed all the runaway crockery.

Glen staggered, still only halfway to the door. "I have to get out of here..."

"No one's stopping you!" Mendra said as she shredded the hearth grass. "Close the door on the way out. Dark Lord, resist this fairy spell. Blight their power, give them hell."

Glen hit the carpet, holding his head in his hands.

Chat threw the daisyblades at Granpap's torso. They pierced his flesh even through the thick layers of beard and bluebells. Tiny droplets of blood ran down Granpap's body.

"Dark Lord, resist this fairy spell. Blight their power, give them hell."

Granpap screamed, a long horror movie of a scream. Mendra and Chat hit the floor on either side of Glen, covering their noses and mouths. There was an explosion of bluebells.

Mendra kept her eyes tightly shut even after the noise had faded. She wasn't sure she wanted to see the results of their little botany experiment.

"Isamendra," said a deadly voice. "Chatsworth. What exactly are you two playing at?"

It sounded like the real Grandpap. Mendra peeped through her fingers.

He hovered several inches off the carpet, his usual black cape and opera suit billowing around him. "You do know that I will kill you for this?"

Mendra pushed herself to her feet. "Well, that's hardly fair. I can't think how you could possibly blame either of us for this whole bluebell disaster."

"Not you, girl, or the idiot boy. I am talking to him." He raised his arm, pointing at Glen.

Mendra took a deep breath. "Granpap, I think you're a little confused."

“Confused?” said the Dark Lord, his voice dripping with charm. “I do not think I am the one who is confused, you incompetent excuse for a witch. I am not the one who brought a filthy *fairy* into the private sanctum of your family.”

Mendra stared at Glen. He didn’t look anything other than mortal. “You’re kidding, right?”

Granpap’s voice rose into a roar. “You think it is a joke? Not only do you bring a fairy into this house, but the very one that wrought this evil spell upon me. His fingernails are still stained with vile bluebell juice.”

“That’s paint,” said Mendra. “He paints. Mostly houses.”

“Actually,” said Glen, standing up. “Mostly flowers. My real name is Bluebell Glen, from the Clan Glen. And that spell you just took off your grandfather was definitely my handiwork. I was hired last week to pop up a shield at the Bank of Greenelves to protect them from warlocks, witches, goblins and terrorists. Um. I am a fairy. Sorry?”

A guttural roar burst out of Granpap. He whirled toward the lanky fairy in a tornado of rage and curse magic. Mendra summoned up her own power as a shield and pushed herself between Granpap and Glen.

Granpap reared back as if he had been physically struck. “Traitor,” he hissed. “Oathbreaker!”

There were two inviolate rules in the magical world, fairies and witches alike. The first one was about family — family always comes first, and the happiness of the family is more important than the happiness of the individual.

The second one was about promises. Once given, one magical being to another, a promise was unbreakable.

“What oath?” Mendra yelled. “Thou shalt not protect thy boyfriends from thy *nutso* grandfather?”

A strange look came over Granpap’s face. “Family comes first, Isamendra. You broke one of the Inviolable Rules to protect a clover-sniffing, dirt-humping, tinsel-snorting *fairy*. You are no longer my granddaughter.”

Mendra blinked, and she was standing outside the Big House. Glen crashed into the gutter, his arms and legs flailing. She stepped towards the house, but an invisible barrier held her back. “No!”

“What’s wrong?” Glen asked from the gutter.

“He’s revoked my Family status,” she said. It was too big to contemplate.

“Um.” He stood awkwardly. “Can I give you a lift back to your place?”

Mendra felt numb. “My flat is Family property too. I won’t be able to get in.” This had happened to her third cousin Serenilla after she was caught in bed with a leprechaun. Serenilla’s entire apartment block was still surrounded by a hedge of thorns. She took up pole dancing and librarianship to scratch a living without Family support. Mendra didn’t even know what a Dewey decimal was.

“My place then,” suggested Glen.

“You’re a fairy,” she said accusingly.

“I’m a fairy with a truck.”

“Fair point.”

Granpap's word was law. That ran through Mendra's mind as the truck growled away from Hemlock Street. Mendra's pears had never once stood up to him about anything that mattered. And as for Grandmam...well, she would stand up to Granpap in a heartbeat if she ever disagreed with him. But in seven hundred years, she never had.

So that was it. She was no longer a curse witch. No longer a Melody. Just... Mendra.

She was so busy with her own thoughts that she was out of the truck and halfway up a disturbingly floral garden path before she realised that Glen had not brought her to his flat. "Where the hell are we?"

"I said I was taking you to my place. Home."

She stared at him. For a non-human, there was something awfully mortal about that stray lock of hair that kept flopping in his face. "Your place is a flat. The neat freak place with the scented bathroom."

"This is my home too. I just have to stop in for a few minutes."

She stared at the house in a panic. What was this, Goldilocks Avenue? Primroses grew around the windows, and there were hollyhocks everywhere. The letterbox was pink. "Oh, no. This is your *family home*." Talk about rubbing it in. "Glen, I can't cope with fairies right now."

"My parents are away," he said in a soothing voice. "I said I'd feed the pets. We'll be out of here in fifteen minutes."

Relieved of the horror of meeting glitter-dripping parents, Mendra allowed him to steer her inside. "Don't you have a girlfriend to get home to?"

"I don't have a girlfriend," he said. "I told you that."

"You were obviously lying. Why else would your bathroom smell of...flowers. Oh shit," she said miserably. "You are a fairy."

There was nothing for it but to have a cup of tea. Mendra sat at the country pine kitchen table, debating whether or not she should beat her head against it.

Glen put the steaming cup in front of her, followed by a plate of Arnott's Assorted Creams. "Sorry, we're out of fairy bread."

She knocked back the tea. It barely touched the sides. "How can you joke about this? Did you know who I am — what I am — when we got together?"

"Of course not." He sounded shocked at the idea. Fair enough, really. Her Granpap's reaction had been pretty bad, but Mendra couldn't imagine how fairy parents would cope with their son fraternising with the enemy. "I didn't suspect until I saw the bluebells in your car."

"So it's a coincidence that Granpap ran up against *your* curse shield?"

"Not entirely. I'm the only one making major-league curse shields except the eBay wizards, and no one buys from them any more. But you and me? Yeah. A horrible coincidence."

Mendra tried to recall the night before. Why had she picked Glen out of the crowd? Why would her subconscious hook her up with a card-carrying member of the Bright Families? “Just the other day, I complained that the Universe kept sending me blokes who were wrong for me,” she muttered. “Ever notice that the Universe has an evil sense of humour?”

He reached out, and touched her hair. “Right now, I’m not complaining.”

The Universe paused for a moment or two, to laugh at them. Mendra wasn’t listening.

The front door crashed open. “Bluebell, is that your mouldy old truck outside?” screeched a female voice. “Put the kettle on, will you?”

Mendra jerked away from Glen in a panic. “Fairies! Mustn’t see me here. Bad. Fairies bad.”

“It’s worse than you think,” said Glen. “That’s one of my sisters.”

Luciana of the House Glen was a fairy. There was no denying it. Her brother Bluebell (Mendra was still firmly calling him ‘Glen’ inside her head) might get away with looking vaguely ‘artistic’, but his sister had been seriously doused with the glitter gene.

She was tiny and blonde, with tapering fingernails and a giggle that could shatter frozen vodka. When she sat at the table, Mendra could hear the burr of invisible wings vibrating against her chair back.

She also wasn’t fooled in the least when Glen introduced Mendra as ‘my friend’. “Does she know?” she shrilled.

Mendra rolled her eyes at the lack of tact. “That he’s a fairy?” she said sweetly. “Oh, yes. He told me on our second date.” *If you count getting a girl evicted from her family home a date.*

“Aren’t you sharp for a mortal?” said Luciana with something halfway between a smile and a leer.

Mendra managed to keep her mouth shut at that one. If Glen’s sister wanted to think of her as a redblood, fine.

“So have you heard from Mummy and Daddy?” asked Luciana.

“They called my place earlier to say they were finished with their business in Prague and would be home tomorrow,” said Glen.

Mendra almost swallowed her own tongue. Prague. That was where the pares had been, last she heard — supporting the revolutionary magic-workers of the city against the smug Sweetness and Light corporation that had bought out the entire city to use as a backlot for filming inspirational movies. There had been open fighting in the streets: warlocks, witches, goblins and werewolves vs fairies, pixies, talking bunny rabbits and the occasional Hollywood vampire.

“Are you all right?” Glen asked her.

Mendra wanted to break something. How dare he be so considerate of her feelings? Didn’t he realise they were at war? “I have to go,” she said, pushing herself to her feet.

“Don’t let us stop you,” said Luciana, rolling her eyes. “If I’d known you like them prickly, Blues, I could have set you up with a curse hag.”

“I’ll see you out,” said Glen.

“Don’t bother,” said Mendra, heading for the door.

He followed her anyway. “Where are you going?”

“Anywhere’s better than here,” she hissed. “Our parents have probably been trying to kill each other over in Prague.”

“It saves us having to wait for them to come home to do it,” he joked.

The smell of hollyhocks in the front garden made Mendra’s shoulder blades itch. “Funny. It’s just hilarious the way you have totally screwed up my life.”

“Stick around. Maybe I can repair some of the damage.”

“Why are you being so nice to me? It was just a fuck, Glen, a lousy one-night stand. Don’t try to make this more than it is.”

He gave her an annoyingly patient look. “If what we have is so meaningless, why have we barely spent an hour apart all day?”

“Because you tried to kill my Granpap!”

“You know that’s not entirely true.”

“I can’t get my family back until you are out of the picture.”

“Are you sure you want them back after the way they treated you?”

Any regrets she had about dumping him instantly grew wings and flew to Cuba. “And how would your lovely folks react if they knew I was a witch from a Dark Family? Would you give them up for me?”

“Mendra... I’ve never felt this way about anyone.”

Emergency, emergency...red lights flashing, get out of there! Mendra hesitated on the doorstep, momentarily caught by Glen’s deep, sincere brown eyes. In a parallel universe, he kissed her and she kissed him back, and somehow it all worked out for the best...

But this universe was the one where he leaned in as if to kiss her, and she socked him in the eye before transforming herself into a flock of bats.

Bat travel was the worst. For a start, there were the orienteering issues of trying to find your way across a stretch of unfamiliar suburbia when your consciousness was spread over a multitude of small flying rodents. Then there was the fact that bats, when it came right down to it, weren’t at their best in the mid-afternoon.

But, hell. It was a great exit.

Somewhere between ‘Fairville’ and Mendra’s inner city flat, her mobile rang. The vibrations of *The Addams Family* theme tune threw bat radar into utter confusion, and she fell in a shower of membranous wings, scratchy claws and long black hair.

Luckily, a handy cemetery broke her fall.

Mostly reassembled, Mendra answered her phone on the fourth ring. “Yes?”

“Dahhhhhling.” There was only one woman who could pronounce four ‘h’s in the word ‘darling’.

“Hi, Mum.”

“We’ve heard all about it, sweetness,” said Valmai Melody. “Chat sent us a very detailed email, and it seems obvious to me that the old man’s finahhhhhly lost it. Hallucinating fairies left right and centre — I mean, reahhhhhly. Does he expect us to

believe our little girl is mindblowingly stupid enough to get hot and sweaty with a sparklebunny?” She laughed for quite a long time.

Mendra tried to resist the urge to stab her own veins with her fingernails. “Will you be home soon?” The thought of the older generations rampaging to the rescue was suddenly a huge relief.

“Of course, dahhhhhling. We’ll be home any minute. Your father and I will handle evehhhhrything, and you’ll be back in the bosom of the Family before you know it.”

“What...exactly do you mean by handling everything?”

“Oh, honey pie, this shield spell that blew up in the old man’s face has obviously knocked something sideways. He needs some good old fashioned hexing to get him back on the straight and nahhhhrrow.”

Mendra squeezed her mobile tightly in her fingers. “Who exactly are you planning to hex?”

Even over the phone she could hear her mother’s frosty smile. “Who else, sweetpea? That son-of-a-bunny who set the wretched shield up in the first place. Mister Bluebell Britches.”

Mendra flew back to the Big House in Hemlock Street so fast that her bat wings had stretch marks. Chat was waiting for her by the gate. “Did they give me back my Family status?” she asked as she reassembled her arms and legs from the last few bats.

“Not exactly,” said Chat. “Grandmam used her Senior Crone’s pass to create an Exception Door in the barrier Granpap threw up, but he’s the only one who can actually reinstate you. And he started spitting bluebells again about ten minutes ago — looks like our anti-hex hex didn’t do much of a job.”

“Fan-frigging-tabulous,” said Mendra. She reached forward and felt the air between Chat’s left ear and the letterbox. Sure enough, there was a narrow doorway. “Do you know what they have planned for Glen?”

Chat looked embarrassed. “I’m not sure if I should tell you. It’s...you know, Family. Why do you care so much what happens to some stupid daffodil-shagger?”

She reached out and flicked Chat in the forehead. “He’s a person, you spineless wonder. Can you really stand back and watch our dearly beloveds take him apart?”

“If it’s a choice between him and me, damn straight,” Chat said, rubbing his forehead. “Rebellion isn’t exactly wise in a family where everyone has their own ceremonial axe. They want me to eat this joker’s major organs, I’m going to say, ‘spoon or chopsticks?’ So would you, a couple of days ago.”

Mendra hesitated. “Maybe. But not now.”

“So what happened? Poof, a big cloud of fairy dust and suddenly you’re less of a bitch than you were before Tinkerbell showed you a good time? He makes elves look butch, he can’t be that well equipped.”

“This isn’t about sex,” she said firmly, heading for the front door.

“So, what? You’re in loo-ove?”

Mendra whirled around. “Don’t say that word near this house! Don’t even think it!”

Chat looked panicked. “Shit, Mendra, I was kidding.”

She gave him a shifty look. “So was I.”

“Oh, you liar!”

“Just...shut up, can you do that, Chat? For me?”

The kitchen was the largest room in the Big House, and that was saying something for a building that included two Great Halls and three Ballrooms.

Exactly three square metres of the kitchen were dedicated to the preparation of food — and most of that was the fridge. The rest of it was a huge expanse of tiled floor — easier to hose blood off — and one massive granite ceremonial table.

Granpap was tied to the table, gibbering like the monster out of a 1930’s Frankenstein movie. A fresh haze of bluebells surrounded him, and new ones kept springing up out his ears and nostrils. Mendra’s mother, gowned in her best ceremonial Versace, was stirring something evil-smelling in a microwave-safe tupperware container. Her father, as usual, was sitting out of the way, reading a newspaper. He wiggled his fingers at her. “Hi, honey.”

Uncle Chatsworth and Auntie Dimelza marked out arcane symbols on the floor, using two pastry brushes and the blood-coloured contents of another tupperware container.

“So,” said Mendra, in what she hoped was a bright and non-threatening voice. “What exactly is the plan here?”

“That should be obvious,” said a menacing voice right behind her shoulder.

Mendra was proud of the way she glanced casually over her shoulder, as if she were only barely interested in who was standing there.

It was Grandmam, in full battledress, ready for action. Mendra had no doubt that there was no sight in the universe more terrifying, or ominous.

The fishnet stockings were a particularly intimidating touch.

Grandmam had been around since the days of Marie Antoinette. Even now, she carried herself as if a full boned corset and wide metal crinoline were taking the weight. Today, she was in black lace and leather mode, short skirt and long boots. This was the woman who had parachuted into WWII France to sell rabid hippogriffs to the Nazis. Her hair was perfectly set in a bounce that was more appropriate for a Bond girl than a nanna.

Actually, she had been a Bond girl. It had been the most convenient way to smuggle enchanted firearms into Europe in the sixties. These days, she was more into animal torture, and to that end had a chain of pet boutiques ranging from one end of the country to the other. Any remotely fashionable witch’s familiar had their fur styled and ears pierced at Trim and Catwax.

Grandmam’s heels clicked against the granite floor of the kitchen. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten the basic precepts of vengeance spells,” she said with a sneer. “The only way to cure your grandfather permanently is to take the snivelling creature who

perpetrated the original spell, cut him open, turn him inside out and hold him upside down until every drop of magic in his body is a congealed puddle on the floor. Then we can build the hex to end all hexes — send his accursed family into oblivion and protect ours from their ridiculous sparkledust antics FOREVER.”

Mendra couldn't help noticing a hint of black powder clinging to Grandmam's nostrils. Marvellous, she was snorting the mandrake root again. It would be a miracle if anyone got out of this alive. “You're speaking metaphorically about the turning him inside out and upside down, of course?” she suggested.

Grandmam smiled, thinly. “Henri, what do we have in the way of meat hooks?”

Mendra's Dad glanced up from his newspaper. “I'm sure we can scrounge something up, Arguerite.”

Okay, no reason to panic. Mendra just needed a brilliant plan in brand spanking time. Maybe she could sidle outside and send Glen a text from her mobile, warning him to leave the country for a decade or two. That could work. If she had his number.

Shit.

“Where's the prisoner?” Grandmam asked.

“I'll get her,” said Chat, sounding depressed.

Mendra whirled around. “We have a prisoner now?”

“How else to lure our little flower artist into a trap?” said Grandmam with a smirk.

The Addams Family theme tune rang out from within Mendra's handbag. “I have to get that,” she said gratefully, and fled through the french doors to the garden.

Outside, she scabbled for her phone. It was an unfamiliar caller number, but she had no doubt who it was. She could feel him glaring down the aether at her. “Glen?”

“Mendra, what have you done with my sister?” He sounded angry and forceful, in a Mr Darcy kind of way.

Mendra tried not to swoon. No time for this now, but she was going to have to remember for the future that his ‘bossy’ voice was sexy as hell. “Sister? What sister?”

“Luciana. The sister who was kidnapped by a warlock and a werewolf about fifteen minutes ago.”

“Haven't seen her...” Mendra's voice trailed off as she stared through the french doors into the kitchen. A petite, struggling blonde fairy in a pink ballet dress and Prada sandals was being handcuffed to the light fittings. “Oh, crap.”

“She's there, isn't she?”

“Glen, stay away. It's a trap, obviously. My family are going to kill you.”

“What am I supposed to do, trust you to help her escape?”

“That's optimistic of you. She wasn't awfully nice to me when we met.”

The french doors burst open, and Valmai Melody stood there, her designer suit fluttering around her. “Thahhht's him, isn't it?” she demanded of her daughter.

Mendra lowered the phone. “It's a phone sex line. I was feeling needy.”

Grandmam appeared beside Valmai. The two slender, striking figures in black looked like Best Actress nominees at an Oscars after party. “Be True,” Grandmam cursed.

Mendra held up the mobile. “Glen says hi. Can he have his sister back?”

Valmai stepped forward, her slasher movie fingernails outstretched towards her daughter’s phone. She mimed as if pulling something long, heavy and resistant through the air towards her.

A scream started in Mendra’s phone and stretched outward, the painful sound vibrating up her wrist.

The phone bulged, twisted and pulled apart to reveal a hand, and then an arm, and then a...

Glen...

He collapsed in a pile of yaargh! on the grass at Mendra’s feet.

“That was a brand new phone!” Mendra yelled at her mother. “And...this is getting way out of hand.” She didn’t like the looks that her mother and Grandmam were giving her. Evil looks. The looks that women only gave each other when there were no men watching.

“So, your Grandpap was right,” said Grandmam in an ‘Ah, so many Dalmations, so little time’, kind of voice. “You have been fornicating with the fairies, grand-daughter of mine.”

Mendra rolled her eyes at the word ‘fornicating’. Honestly, it wasn’t like Grandmam didn’t watch *The OC*. “I think you broke him.” She crouched down beside Glen.

“They’re coming for you,” he said in a hoarse voice.

There was a buzzing sound overhead. Several dozen balls of light smashed against the invisible shield that domed over the Big House. Then a veritable hailstorm of fluffy balls of light exploded above them.

There was a cracking sound.

“Get — in — side!” said Valmai, dragging on her daughter’s arm. Grandmam already had Glen sprawled across her broad shoulders. They crowded into the kitchen together.

“The fairies are besieging us, then,” said Mendra’s dad, turning another page of his newspaper.

“It took them about half an hour to break through the shield last time,” noted Uncle Chatsworth. “When was that, ’67?”

“1969,” said Auntie Dimelza. “We had to set that whole man on the moon thing up to distract the neighbours.”

“The shield’s a lot stronger than it used to be,” said Uncle Chatsworth. “Should take them at least forty five minutes.”

There was another cracking sound, louder than the first. “More like fifteen,” said Auntie Dimelza. “Fairy shield-crackers have improved a lot since then, too — haven’t you been keeping up with the journals?”

Grandmam dumped Glen on the floor and marched towards the struggling, bound figure of Luciana. “Now then, young Chatsworth. How would you like to have a go at your first Fairy Sacrifice?”

Chat looked horrified. “Um, what an honour. I’ve never done any Old Style spells at all, you know, just — the modern nuts and berries kind of stuff.”

“I’ll sharpen the knives for you,” she said almost kindly.

Mendra edged towards Glen. “I don’t know how to stop it,” she said in a frantic whisper.

He gave her a dirty look. “Do you expect me to believe that you want to?”

“I don’t know what I want!”

“Obviously.”

Granpap, whom no one had been paying attention to for some time, suddenly hiccupped. His body, still bound to the table, bucked wildly against its bonds.

It started raining bluebells.

“Hurry,” said Valmai. “Arguerite, you muhhhst start the hex now, the shield is giving way.”

Grandmam spat out a mouthful of bluebells, and handed a wicked carving knife to Chat. “We need blood, bone and a gobbet of flesh. Get working.”

Chat looked from Grandmam to the tied and struggling Luciana. “Okay,” he said miserably, his fingers trembling on the hilt of the knife.

There was a loud cracking sound as the anti-fairy shield above the Big House broke open. Balls of light skittered everywhere, smashing against the windows and squiggling through the crack under the door.

The air buzzed and hummed like the nagging of a thousand bumblebees.

The Melody family threw defensive hexes, jinxes and curses through the air. Bluebells and sparkle dust showered around them.

Mendra found herself under the table, holding hands with Glen as if her life depended on it.

“We have to do something,” he said. “Our families are going to tear themselves apart!”

Mendra swallowed. “Give me a ring,” she said.

“Oh, and look how well that turned out last time...”

“Not on the phone, you nong. Give me a *ring*. Of the engagement variety. I like rubies, personally, but I understand you might have to improvise.”

Glen’s mouth fell open. “Do you know what you’re asking?”

“Can you think of anything else that’s going to keep this lot from killing each other?”

Glen looked at her, and many emotions crossed over his face. Mendra was pleased to see that they didn’t all involve horror and nausea. “Right,” he said, and balled his hand into a fist. When he opened it, his hand contained a shiny silver ring with a sapphire the size of a bluebell sticking out of it. “I tried for a ruby,” he said apologetically. “But blue is kind of my default...”

“I’ll take it,” she said, sticking out her hand.

“You’re really sure about this?”

She looked through the sparkles and madness to where Grandmam held Chat by the wrist, miming the actions he should use to cut off bits of Luciana. Chat had already thrown up once, but Grandmam wouldn’t take no for an answer. “You’re the one who wanted this to be more than a one-night stand.”

“Okay, then.”

They climbed out from under the table together, and once they were on their feet, Glen slid the bluebell ring on to her finger. “Mendra, will you marry me?”

“Yes. Glen...”

“Bluebell.”

“Shit, sorry. Bluebell, will you marry me?”

“Yes.”

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“No!” shrieked Valmai Melody from the other side of the room.

Everything stopped. The hexes and curses dribbled off into the corners of the kitchen. The balls of light solidified into proper-sized, pissed off fairy people. Bluebells kept raining from the ceiling, but everyone was used to that by now.

Every member of the Dark Family Melody and the Fairy Clan Glen stopped what they were doing and stared at Mendra and Bluebell.

“We have an announcement,” Glen said with a sickly smile.

“You can’t do this!” said Grandmam. She let go of Chat’s wrist. He dropped the (still mercifully clean) carving knife, pale but relieved.

“Just did,” said Mendra. “Welcome to the family, everyone.”

Glen squeezed her hand. It felt kind of nice.

Valmai Melody sank on to the kitchen stool with her head in her hands. “I don’t beliehhve this is hahhhppening.”

A fluffy fairy woman, whom Mendra guessed was Glen’s mother, looked equally unwell, clutching the hand of a wiry, hippie-looking fairy male in a Hawaiian shirt and a beard — possibly Glen’s father. Or his disreputable older brother who’d had a very hard life. “Do you have anything to drink in this place?”

“Young Chatsworth,” said Grandmam in a lordly voice. “Put the kettle on.”

As if in a dream, Chat moved to obey her.

Grandmam herself went to untie Luciana’s wrists, but the blonde fairy dissolved her own bindings. “Don’t worry about me, Arguerite. Check that the old man’s doing okay.”

Grandpap sat up and spat out a last mouthful of bluebells. “I’m fine, young Lucie. You did very well.”

She blushed and giggled. “I always wanted to be an actress, you know.”

Mendra looked from one to another. “Now, hang on a minute.”

“Are we missing something really important?” Glen demanded.

Valmai stared at Grandmam and Grandpap, who looked awfully pleased with themselves. “I’d like to knohhhw that myself.”

“Luciana Violet Grimaldia Fiappacina Mabel Glen of the Clan Glen,” said Glen’s mother in a horrified voice. “What have you done now?”

“You’re always complaining about how he’s not settling down and giving you grandkids,” Luciana said sulkily. “I thought you’d be pleased I got him married off. And then this opportunity came up...a very lucrative business opportunity, I might add.”

“Indeed,” said Granmam. She pulled a sheaf of documents out from inside her corseted bosom. “Will you sign, my dear?”

“Oh, of course,” said Luciana. She signed several of the papers, then handed them back to Grandmam, who did likewise.

“There we are,” said Grandmam, finishing her last signature with a flourish. “As of Monday, Luciana’s patented Lucie Violet range of hand-herbed shampoos, conditioners and curl potions will be available in every Trim and Catwax salon in the country.”

Luciana took her copies of the contracts and simpered. “Of course, it’s illegal for Dark and Bright Families to do business with each other...”

“Unless they are connected by a tie of marriage,” said Glen in a very hard voice.

“Betrothal’s good enough for a holding period of six months,” Grandmam said brightly. “After all, it’s not like either of you can get out of it now. A promise is a promise. And family is family.”

Mendra blinked several times. “You set all this up — The bluebells, the hexing, the engagement — for cat shampoo?”

“Very good cat shampoo,” said Luciana. “I also have a range of herbal polishes for toads and bats.”

“We must discuss those,” agreed Grandmam.

“*Cat shampoo?*” shrieked Mendra.

“Let’s take a moment outside,” said Glen, steering her out the french doors.

Chat was already out there, sitting on the steps and looking somewhat greenish. “She knew,” he said unhappily. “She knew I was all talk — that I didn’t have it in me to be the Big Bad like the rest of them. She counted on it!”

Mendra cuffed his shoulder as she went past. “I wouldn’t be too upset about it. Why on earth would you want to be like anyone else in this family?” She glared furiously at Glen. “And that includes yours.”

“Keep moving,” Glen said firmly, dragging Mendra further down the garden and out of Chat’s earshot. They settled near the frog pond.

“Were you in on this?” she demanded.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

Mendra’s stomach swirled. She sat down in a hurry on the mossy rocks. “A Lust Haze,” she said quietly. “That’s how she got us together. That’s why I barely remembered anything of the nightclub, before getting back to your place.”

“Me too,” said Glen. “Damn it, I should have recognised the signs, I got spiked with enough of them at college.”

“Flower painting college?”

“Be nice.”

Mendra buried her head in her hands. “I don’t believe this is happening to me.”

He touched her hair. “Is it really so bad?”

“Are you kidding me? If I don’t want to be banished from our world forever as an Oathbreaker, I have to marry a man who went to bed with me because his sister hexed him to. It’s not only a blatant violation of my Magic Citizenship Rights, it’s bloody humiliating.”

“Mendra...maybe it wasn’t my choice to go to bed with you last night. But when I woke up this morning, do you know what I thought?”

“Aargh, I’ve been taken hostage by an evil goth girl?”

He laughed. “No. I thought, wow. I want to get to know this girl better.”

“Oh.”

“And do you know what I found out when I did get to know you better?”

“If you keep asking questions, I’m going to keep right on making sarcastic answers...”

Glen rolled his eyes. “If you’d shut up for thirty seconds, I could tell you that I think you’re funny and strange and somewhat twisted. And I’m completely crazy about you. Hadn’t you noticed?”

Mendra stared at him. “I think I need to lie down.” He hugged her close, and she let him. She buried her face in his neck, and breathed in the scent of man and bluebells.

“Our families,” she moaned.

“They kind of deserve each other, don’t you think?”

“Can we kill them all?”

“After the wedding.”

“After the wedding,” she agreed.

It seemed appropriate to kiss for a while, so they did that.

“Just so you know,” she said some time later. “I’m not wearing a tutu and wings to the wedding.”

“I’m not wearing a pointy hat.”

“I hate hollyhocks.”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“And if you think I’m going to read our children those stupid fairytales with witches being pushed into oven and fairy godmothers being all ‘la di dah, here’s a dress that is entirely impractical because you can only wear it once’ and what’s wrong with giving a goddaughter a pair of jeans or a coupon or whatever so she can buy her own clothes...”

“Mendra, do you ever stop talking?”

“You said you’d marry me, too late to back out now...”

He kissed her again, which was just fine with Mendra. As long as he was kissing her, she could forget that she had a wedding to plan, two incompatible families (cat shampoo transactions aside) to unite, and a whole host of fairy in-laws who were pretty much going to hate her until the day she died.

Yep. Kissing was definitely better than thinking. If she squeezed her eyes shut tight enough, and pressed hard enough against Glen’s warm, inviting body, she might possibly be able to fool herself into believing in Happily Ever After.

For at least thirty seconds.

House in Love

...Gail Kavanagh

Our house fell in love. Not with a decent house, mind you; not with the Morrison's state of the art smart house on the corner, but with the Tanner place across the road.

It all started a few months ago. I first noticed it when I tried to program the evening meal: tofu soufflé and permagreens. For dessert I debated between mint frappe and no-cream, no-sugar cheesecake, before deciding on the frappé.

My partner, Rick, and I share the household tasks. I do it three times a week, Rick does it three times a week, and on Sunday we order through the Net. The Sunday before, I remember, we had downloaded an exquisite meal from the Hong Kong Hilton. Programming a two-course meal was simple. I know I didn't make a mistake.

I called Rick's office upstairs to let him know dinner was ready. He met me in the kitchen and we opened the food server.

"What on earth is this?" Rick said.

I couldn't believe it. Instead of steaming hot reconstructed tofu soufflé, the house had served us simulated roast, baked permagreens and something it called a spotted dick. This was a revolting roll of damp pastry studded with things that looked like small wrinkled bullets.

We put the mess in the trasher and downloaded sweet and sour soybites from the Green Dragon Restaurant instead.

But that was only the beginning.

I was convinced there was something wrong with the house. Rick was doubtful at first, and blamed me for bad programming.

The turning point came when he turned off his office after an exhausting day conferencing with Stockholm, New York and Tokyo and asked for some light programming on the vid. He meant a concert, or the latest film. Instead, he got re-runs of soap operas from last century. That finally convinced him that something was amiss. That was a relief.

"This has to stop," he said. "Maybe we should call a counselor."

"It's not us," I said, "it's the house."

"I meant a house counselor," he snapped. "The Morrisons called one when their house changed the interior walls to darker shades of blue and purple while they were away."

“Why did it do that?” I said.

“The counselor said the house felt neglected because they went somewhere else to have fun. So they had a rumpus room installed and it changed the walls back to the original colors.”

While we talked, there was a knock on the door. We knew it was one of the Tanners because no one else knocks on doors. Our front door identifies everyone who approaches, and opens automatically for anyone we have approved, but still the Tanners knock. The Tanners live in a very unsmart house across the road.

Sam Tanner came in carrying some stuff in jars which he claimed was jam made by his wife Maureen.

“Strawberry jam,” Sam said, thrusting the jars at Rick. “Grew the strawberries myself — none of that permagreen muck from the modules.”

“How lovely,” Rick said, heading out to the trasher with the jars.

“How’s tricks, Tina?” Sam said. “Still working hard?”

His sarcasm is not subtle. Sam Tanner really believes that sitting in front of a computer all day is not work, at least not as he knows it — planting his strawberries and making banging noises in that thing he calls a shed. The Tanners don’t even work on the Net. Sam apparently actually sells the strange things he makes in the shed and grows in his garden, and Maureen makes what she calls ‘home made’ meals and delivers them to her customers. All very odd.

“Actually we’re having a little trouble with the house,” I said, just to make conversation. “It’s behaving strangely lately.”

“Oh yeah?” Sam glanced around nervously. “How strangely?”

“Nothing dangerous,” I assured him. “Just some out of character behavior. We’re going to call in a counselor.”

“A counselor? For the house? Well, I never heard of such a thing. You should get yourself a decent house, love, one that doesn’t have all these fancy gadgets installed. Gadgets just go wrong, you know.”

“Nothing goes wrong,” I said. “The house isn’t happy, that’s all.”

Sam gave me a strange look. “Happy? It’s the people in it that make a house happy or not,” he said.

“Sam, you wouldn’t understand. You live in the past. Your house is just a shelter with no smart attributes at all. You don’t even have the Net.”

“Wouldn’t want it,” he said.

“Then how did your children learn? What did you do about their schooling?” Once there had been places called schools, but children were schooled at home since people stopped going out. Everything was downloaded through the Net, and the road between our house and the Tanners was hardly used, except by the occasional maintenance crew in their electric vehicles. There was no need to leave your private living space at all; and who wanted to, anyway? What with exposure to the sun’s killing rays, the bad air and general lawlessness outside the secured suburbs, you would have to be mad.

The Tanners, who lived the way people used to do before the planet turned into a poison pit, were obviously mad.

“Books,” Sam said, answering my question as if he were forced to deal gently with an idiot. “And we talked to them.”

I gave up. The Tanners were an anachronism. I’ve seen them at night through our windows, sitting outside on that ramshackle appendage they call a verandah, playing a silly game they call Spot the Real Stars and watching the satellites and space stations pass overhead.

“Mark my words,” he said. “Happy people, happy house. Much better than all the gadgets. Take ’em out.”

“The house is the gadgets,” I said wearily. “The gadgets are the house. We can’t take them out.”

That night the house ejected the pots of jam from the trasher and lined them up on the display cabinet. I considered putting a lock on the servohands so the house couldn’t grab anyone who tried to move the jars.

Next morning we called the counselor.

The counselor’s name was Ethan Franks and he arrived in person, driving an electric car. This was something of a novelty — even medics don’t make house calls these days. Most houses are equipped with emergency equipment, operated by remote control from the hospital. The Tanners, of course, still made house calls. Several times a day.

Ethan Franks quickly apologized. It was unorthodox, as he pointed out, to come in person but people in his line of work found it necessary.

“You have to feel the house,” he said, brushing back a long floppy lock of hair from his brow. His eyes were an intense blue and he reminded me of one of the actors in those soaps the house kept tuning into. “This simply isn’t possible to achieve over the Net.”

“The Tanners would appreciate that,” I said. “They think the Smart House is an invention of the forces of evil. They live in the house across the road — they spend more time outside than they do inside.”

“So do I,” said Dr Franks, smiling at my look of surprise. He had a nice smile, too. “It’s really not so bad these days — there are far fewer atmosphere-related diseases. The aircon stacks have done a wonderful job of cleaning up the air, and there is much less risk of skin cancers with the atmosphere back in shape. Life outside is very different now, much more like it used to be. But it’s very difficult to persuade people that it’s safe to go outside now.

“No, indeed,” he went on, looking around the House with a professional air. “People get sick now because of their houses — a sick house makes a sick person.”

“You sound like Sam Tanner,” I said. But Dr Franks had spotted the jam jars. “What are those?” he asked.

“Don’t try moving them,” I said.

Ethan Franks took copious notes as he wandered through the house and downloaded all the construction records. “I think I see your problem,” he said, “but I have to check first. I’ll be in touch.”

He called in to see the Tanners after he left our house. Sam made him welcome and I saw some bottles of home made beer change hands.

Then I ordered the House to darken the windows. The sun was still bright outside, in spite of Ethan's declaration that it was safe. I had grown up under cover and protected from the outside. Old habits die hard.

But the House refused. The display on the house screen told me that the atmosphere was perfectly safe, the UV rays within acceptable limits, and there was no need to dim the windows. From my computer, I kept glancing at the scene outside. I could see the Tanners and Ethan getting on famously.

Next day, Ethan Franks uploaded his report and a large bill. The gist was that our house had formed an attachment to the Tanner's house and was trying to emulate it. The fault was in the central processor, he said.

After running a thorough diagnostic, he identified the CPU as one of a batch programmed for caring centers (or Homes for the 21st Century Bewildered, as Sam Tanner calls them). The house tended toward a nurturing role, such as the one played by the Tanner house in its non-tech way.

One of his recommendations was a predictably expensive re-programming. We needed a new CPU designed especially for our needs.

He also added a personal note to say how much he had enjoyed meeting me, and he hoped I was well.

There was a knock on the door as I was reading this. The door had already opened, in fact, but Maureen Tanner was standing in the hall and knocking anyway.

"Hello," she called. "Are you in?"

"It's all right, Maureen," I said. "You can come inside."

Maureen stepped into the house as if she were walking on landmines.

"I didn't mean to disturb you, I just brought something for the house."

She thrust a pot at me with some green extravaganza sprouting from it. "Your house counselor called in to see us yesterday," she said. "Isn't he a lovely man?"

"Yes, he is," I said. "What on earth is that?"

"It's a maidenhair fern," Maureen explained. "Ethan said some of the troubles you've been having with your house might be related to our house. I know he's an expert, but I didn't really understand a word he was saying. Anyway, he said your house might be trying to nurture, so maybe you could try this for it to lavish attention on. It might help." She scuttled out again as nervously as she had come in — our house always makes Maureen nervous.

I put the plant in a corner and promptly forgot about it. The reprogramming looked expensive and Ethan's other suggestion — have a child — wouldn't go down too well with Rick. A lot of things didn't go down well with Rick. I had once thought our life together would be bliss, but these days I might as well have been living alone. He hardly ever came out of his office. As for children — "who would bring children into a world like this?" he demanded if I so much as mentioned it.

The Tanners would, I thought, although I never said as much. Rick had no time for the Tanners, even less than he had for me. But the Tanner children looked happy and healthy, in spite of living in a non-smart house.

After a couple of days, the fern looking a bit shriveled. I don't know a lot about plants but I know when something is sick and made a mental note to ask Sam to take it away again. After all, we didn't even have a garden, although Smart Houses are programmed to take care of a conservatory. Rick wasn't interested — he says green things made him sneeze and remind him too much of *The Outside*.

The house was still doing strange things — one morning we got up to find the curtains had all been replaced with frilly blinds. That wasn't all. The house reprogrammed Rick's office a soothing shade of pink midway through the evening. Rick marched out and demanded that I call Ethan Franks first thing in the morning.

I went to bed that night feeling that perhaps the Tanners weren't as mad as I had thought. Their house didn't redecorate on a whim or demand they have babies — not that it had to. When I had looked out earlier, I saw them sitting on the veranda with their children and just for a moment...well, I thought I knew what was wrong with our house.

Laughter erupted from the Tanner's veranda as I headed to bed. It was not something I heard a great deal of.

I had just managed to drift off to sleep when a strange noise woke me up again. Rick was in his office, conferencing with New York and London, and I was used to the drone of his voice in the small hours. Something else had woken me. I crept downstairs. It sounded as if someone was singing, and there was the faint pattering sound of falling water.

I thought it might be raining but as I reached the foot of the stairs I realized the sound was coming from inside the house.

In the corner of the living room, where I had placed the fern, a soft light was shining. A soothing lullaby was coming from the sound system. The water I had heard was the indoor sprinkler system, gently dropping a stream of moisture on the plant. It was looking a lot better.

I watched for a while, then I glanced out of the window. The Tanners were still on their veranda, eating their home made food and playing *Spot The Real Stars*.

Why not? I thought. Maureen would be so pleased to know her plan had worked. I slipped into a pair of jeans and a sweater, and, taking my courage in both hands, I stepped outside.

The night air was warm. From the Tanner house I caught the faint scent of flowers — frangipani or jasmine, I wasn't sure which — maybe it was both. Then I looked up, and saw the night sky sparkling with stars for the first time.

There have been no incidents since the house discovered the plant and learned to take care of it. It has nurtured the plant to such a size that the huge feathery leaves are spreading across the floor and hiding half the window.

I'm not sure if Rick knows it is there. He became so entrenched in his office and caught up in his conferences that he just stopped coming out any more. I left him a note on the house screen when I moved out, but I don't know if he ever saw it.

I moved into a spare room at the Tanner's house. The whole place is as dumb as a bag of hammers, but I don't care. It's a fine night, the air is fragrant with frangipani and jasmine, and Sam has uncorked new bottle of peaspod wine.

Ethan is coming over to play Spot the Real Stars with us. He's named one bright one after me.

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This is the Way the World Ends — Not With a Bang but a Rip

...David L Clements

In a galaxy half way across the universe, a degenerate white dwarf star orbits a bloated red giant. Material skimmed off the surface of the giant falls across space and lands on the white dwarf, gradually increasing its mass. When the white dwarf reaches 1.4 times the mass of the Sun, its carbon and oxygen nuclei can no longer be held apart. Fusion stars, burning carbon and oxygen into ever-heavier elements, release a huge amount of energy. In a fraction of a second the star is destroyed, its constituents burnt to iron and nickel, scattered into space at thousands of kilometres a second, a brilliant flash sent into the universe in a supernova explosion.

Half a universe away, a telescope awaits the faint flash of the dying white dwarf six billion years before. The light has travelled a vast distance, and been stretched by the expansion of the universe, but is still bright enough to be seen. Soon enough it will be telling the attentive astronomers the fate of the universe.

Modern cosmology came about through two advances — Einstein's General Relativity, which allowed us to analyse the structure of the universe as a whole, and Hubble's observation that galaxies were moving away from each other, which revealed the expansion of the universe. The universe started in a hot, dense explosion of space and matter. The microwave background, which makes up about half the snow on a badly tuned TV, is the dull, dim afterglow of that explosion, stretched to ever-longer wavelengths by the expansion of space. This is the Big Bang. It happened about 14 billion years ago.

After the bang...

But where will things end up? Before the late 90s, it seemed there were just two alternatives: the universe continues to expand forever — an open universe — or it stops expanding and recollapses — a closed universe.

Imagine you throw a ball into the air. Usually the force of gravity is enough to halt the ball's upward flight, turn it around, and send it plummeting back to earth. This is how the closed universe models works, though the ball represents the expansion of space, and not an object like a galaxy flying into a pre-existing

emptiness. The gravitational pull of everything inside the universe is enough to halt this expansion of space and throw it into reverse. It's also called "The Big Crunch".

On the other hand, if you're especially strong, you could throw the ball hard enough to reach escape velocity. You'll then need a new ball, since it will travel upwards forever — gravity isn't strong enough to counter its velocity and pull it back to the ground. This is like the open universe, where the mass of the universe isn't strong enough to counteract the expansion initiated by the Big Bang.

The fate of life in these two universes is quite different. Nothing will survive the recollapse to a Big Crunch. The new Big Bang that follows will erase everything that came before in the newly ignited fires.

If the universe expands indefinitely, life, or some semblance of it, might be able to continue, though it will have to brave such hazards as the end of stars, as hydrogen runs out, and the end of matter, as protons fall apart over the unimaginable depths of time.

But there may be a third way, as research into supernovae reveals another, scarier possibility.

Fate of the universe

The key to determining the fate of the universe is to measure how the expansion of space, as traced by the velocities of galaxies moving with the expansion, changes with time.

If the speed at which galaxies stream away from each other is decreasing fast enough then recollapse is certain, and we're all headed for a big crunch. The speed of light is fixed, so the further away we look the further back in time we see — distance is equivalent to time. The relationship between expansion velocity and distance can thus tell us the deceleration, and allow us to figure out if the universe is expanding fast enough to avoid collapse.

Measuring distances, though, is a problem. The best way is to measure the amount of light received from a source, such as a star, whose brightness you know — the so-called 'standard candle' approach. For nearby galaxies you can do this with stars called Cepheid Variables.

Cepheid Stars increase and decrease brightness on a regular cycle. There's a relationship between the mass of a star and it's brightness, so we can use the length of the cycle to calculate how far away the stars are. Cepheids were used by the Hubble Space Telescope to measure the current expansion rate of the universe, but they're too faint to be seen at the much greater distances needed to see how the expansion rate is changing. This is where a very special class of star comes in: Type 1a supernovae.

Type 1a supernovae form when a white dwarf star, accreting matter from a companion, reaches the 1.4 solar mass Chandrasekhar Limit and explodes. All Type 1a supernovae are the same mass, so they put out more or less the same amount of energy. Comparing the amount of light we receive with the light we know they've produced allows us to measure how far away they are. This can then be compared

to the speed at which the expansion of the universe carries them away from us. We can measure the amount that their spectral lines are moved to the red by the Doppler Effect, in much the same way that a police radar trap measures the speed of cars. If nearby objects are found to be moving away from us slower than suggested by their more distant counterparts, then we can see how the expansion rate is changing, and we can find the fate of the universe.

Of course supernovae aren't that common, so it took some time to gather enough data to work out what was happening. The results were a complete surprise. The expansion rate isn't slowing, as all standard theories predicted, it's increasing. It's as if someone took our thrown ball and strapped rocket boosters to it. The force accelerating the expansion is theoretically explained by something called 'Dark Energy'. This is a way of providing a pressure in empty space that keeps pushing things apart, but its origin and how it behaves are completely unclear.

The worrying thing is that we don't know how its effects might change as the universe gets older and larger. Researchers propose a range of possibilities. The most extreme of these suggests that the accelerating force gets stronger and stronger as the universe gets larger, in a catastrophic vicious circle. The rocket boosters on our ball get more and more powerful the longer it travels. The end result of this process would be an irresistible force that first defeats gravity, scattering the stars in our galaxy and planets in our solar system far and wide. It then defeats stronger electromagnetic and atomic forces to destroy the Earth, and the very atoms that make up our bodies. This has been dubbed "the Big Rip". We don't yet know if this is how the world ends, but there are already some indications that the effects of dark energy do change over time.

If there is a Big Rip waiting for us, at least we have some time left to find the answers — it's not due for another 20 billion years.



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Minutus cantorum, minutus balorum,
minutus carborata descendum pantorum.

The Art of Balance

...Gillian Polack interviews Trudi Canavan

A writer's life is a peculiar kind of balancing act. Some writers achieve a balance with a lot more grace than others. Trudi Canavan (author of *The Black Magician* trilogy and *The Age of the Five* trilogy) recently answered some questions about walking the writers' taut wire. Externally, she handles the complicated balancing act with extraordinary grace and charm. So what does it look like from inside her world?



You balance a lot of things: writing and art, knitting and chocolate, private and public. How do they all inter-relate? Is there overlap between say, knitting and writing or chocolate and writing?

I've always preferred to have several creative interests going simultaneously. I suspect this is because I have a short attention span. This was obvious when I was a child and teenager. After a while what I was doing wouldn't excite me as much and I'd move on to the next fun thing. But I liked finishing things, so I was usually able to go back to a project once I'd had a break from it.

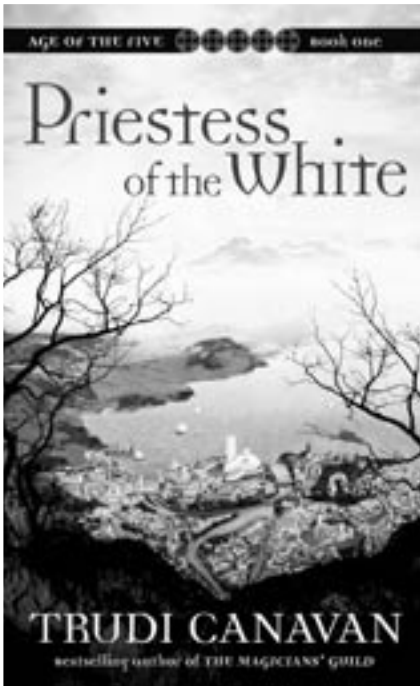
In my twenties I started working as a freelance illustrator in order to feed myself while finding more time to write. I thought I'd establish a nice routine of writing and working each day, but freelancers are often called in when a job is urgent so I'd end up frantically working for a few weeks then I'd frantically write before the next tight deadline illustration job started. (This is about the time my back packed it in.)

At the same time I started attending art classes. I deliberately chose oil paints as my medium because I never used them for illustration work (because they dry too slowly). I painted for fun. It doesn't matter if I never sell a painting, because that would make it too much like work.

Eventually I had to start writing full time. While this happened at a time when illustration was getting increasingly unprofitable, I found I missed the breaks from writing that illustration gave me. Now there are days when the writing is drudgery. Not all the time, thank goodness!

Chocolate is something I've always been obsessed with. I've been collecting facts and packaging since my late teens. Years ago Lonely Planet were going to publish a book on chocolate, so I applied for the job. I was told I was on the top of their list of applicants, but then they had a cash flow crisis and the idea was dumped. Though I was disappointed, HarperCollins bought the Black Magician Trilogy within the year, and I wouldn't have been free to rewrite it for them if I'd been writing a chocolate book.

I'm sure the reason I took to knitting was stress. There were all sorts of delays with the Age of the Five contract and advance, and it was about the same time I ran out of money and started living on credit that I found myself taking up the needles again. It also had to do with the health issues I was having at the time.



How about health issues? Do they help or hinder your writing? And how do you balance staying well and meeting deadlines?

I have a chronic back problem which I inherited from my mother. Hers kicked in at about the same age as mine did and both of us got it from desk jobs. In the good old days I could write with barely a break from dawn to midnight for four days in a row (though I admit what I wrote by day four was not worth reading!) and I might feel a little sore by the end. I used to average 5,000 words a day, now I'm happy if I manage half that. Now I can't spend more than a few hours on the computer without pain. And I can't read sitting up, so no reading on the train, couch, waiting rooms, etc. I have to lie down to read.

On top of that, I was plagued with inexplicable bouts of fatigue for two to three years — most of the time I was writing Age of the Five. I was tested for a whole range of things and the results would have made you think I was

Superwoman. Yet I was losing whole days to a weariness that made sitting still tiring, concentrating difficult and played with my memory's on and off switch. If I lay down to read I'd be asleep in a few minutes, so I wasn't able to do one of my life-long favourite pastimes. But I could knit, and that helped keep me sane.

If I'd had an office job, it would have been obvious that something was very wrong, but being self employed made it very hard to convince my doctor. There's no diagnosis for Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. You have to wait until every other possible reason for the fatigue has been ruled out before anyone will guess that it's CFS. This was frustrating when I needed to explain to publishers why I was unable to meet deadlines!

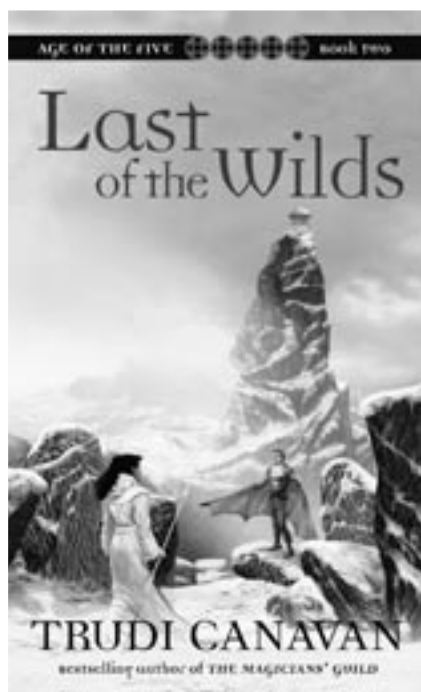
This year I've been feeling a lot better, and had only the occasional bout of fatigue, so I've got my fingers crossed I'm going to shake it fully one day. And I'm reading books without falling asleep.

Has the sudden change in your public status changed anything inside? Do you write differently now you know that you have lots of people watching? And those posters in the London Underground; your UK popularity: have they changed anything?

I've always written with 'the reader' in mind. I try to imagine how what I'm writing might affect them. Will they be moved? Will they be bored? I figure if I'm bored (remember my short attention span?) then they will be too.

I like to assume that my average reader is intelligent. Not uber-intelligent, but well-read, open-minded, not lacking in common sense or socially ignorant. I stubbornly insist on writing for this reader, even though some the fanmail I get or the reviews on Amazon sometimes work against this delusion.

Receiving feedback on my books is something that I anticipate, yet I have also learned to dread it. Fortunately most of the emails are lovely. Sometimes the feedback is so weird I wonder if it really was my book they read. I call this the 'loony' factor. And the bigger your audience, the more 'loonies' you encounter.



I've learned a lot from fanmail, but not what I expected. What one person likes another dislikes, and visa versa. Some issues are a matter of personal taste (should I call a rat-like creature a rat and risk jolting the reader back into this world, or use a made up word and frustrate those who dislike that approach?). When nobody agrees, I'll stick to what I like in a book. Then there's what I call the 'enthusiastic ignorance' email:

"Why don't you make a movie of the books?" Yeah, sure. I'll just buy a little hand-held camera and shoot it in the backyard. After all, who needs years of training and experience, and money, not to mention talent?

"Can't you write faster?" Not unless you want a crap book.

"I was so sure x and y would get married and live happily ever after and then you went and killed x! How could you do that to me!?" Are you sure you wouldn't be happier reading romance?.

You've got to bite your tongue and appreciate that they're just being enthusiastic.

Within your books you also have balancing acts. How do you go about building a character that will last more than three books? What is your relationship with your characters?

For me, the process of creating a story begins with a scenario, usually cultural. In the Black Magician Trilogy I tried to imagine how a society might develop if a minority had magical talent, but that talent needed to be developed and the use of it taught. That led me to a class structure where magicians were the most powerful members of the highest class, and magical education was confined to the rich. So the naturally I had to subvert that by having a slum girl with magical ability.

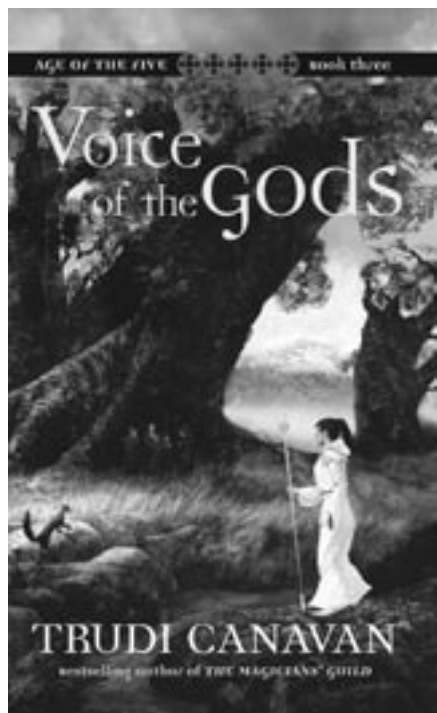
The main character in the Age of the Five series is one I created when I was fourteen or fifteen, but I returned to her because she is not your typical coming-of-age character. She is a woman who has already reached the pinnacle of power in her society. So the story had to be about the consequences of that: about how you can do harm when you think you're doing the right thing, how even those in power can and should feel humans emotion, how even rulers, when misinformed, can make honest but terrible mistakes.

These characters aren't based on anyone I know. They are based, if anything, on character *types*. Their individual personalities grow as I write. In fact, I've resigned myself to rewriting the first five or so chapters of a trilogy again because I haven't usually got to know the characters well enough at that point. Later they become more familiar than friends. Sometimes it feels like they have a life of their own, but I never let them out of my control!

Occasionally I'm asked if my main female characters are based on myself. I

wish! They're always more confident, brave, assertive and clever than me.

So a scenario leads to characters, which leads to plot and subplots. It always begins as one story. I like to have the ending decided upon before I start, and write an outline. Then I consider whether that story needs to be divided into more than one book or not. If it does, I'll look for ways to make each book relatively self-contained. All of the characters' journeys ought to reach a conclusion of sorts at the end of each book in a series.



What is the biggest challenge in the forthcoming books? Can you tell us about your plans for the next few books?

The next book I'm planning to write, *The Magician's Apprentice*, is a stand-alone. The only reason it is a stand-alone is because it suits the story better. It's a prequel to the Black Magician Trilogy, set several hundred years before the events in the trilogy. I'm looking forward to regressing the technological and social state of the land I created to a less sophisticated one. I'll be taking it back to a more familiar medieval level of technology. I also find this amusing because of the occasional disparaging or ignorant comments I've read about my books being 'medieval fantasy'.

After the prequel I'll start the Traitor Spy Trilogy — the sequel to the Black Magician Trilogy. It's set twenty years later and the main character this time will be male. That'll be fun.

Another sort of balance is with fan and writing communities. How do you balance writing and giving fans the nourishment/attention they demand?

Ah, fandom. When I was a teenager I always ended up being the one who explained and demystified periods, sex and contraception to other girls. Nowadays I seem to be the author who ends up explaining and demystifying Fandom to new authors.

I suspect when new SF authors hear that there are conventions dedicated to SF every year — sometimes a few times a year — they get excited. Writers festivals are hardly supportive of genre fiction, so when they hear about cons they picture a writers festival dedicated to SF, with extra film and TV stuff thrown in. They'll be promoting their books to the very people who most want to know about them. The airfares and accommodation and membership will be worth every cent.

Reality can be very cruel.

If they're lucky, they'll meet some nice people. And that's what I go to Fannish gatherings for. I make myself available to the fans (of the books) as well as contributing to Fandom by volunteering for panels and such. If I manage to sell a few books in return, that's a bonus, but I'm also there to socialise with people I have interests in common with. (And you'd be amazed how many SF fans are also knitters!)

I only subscribe to one online writing community: Voyager Online. I've looked at others, but found their format somehow less welcoming and accessible. My website is another great way to provide information for fans. I've spent a lot of time over the years writing html code, scanning sketches and artwork, writing advice and information pages and keeping it all up to date. Mind you, there's always someone who bypasses it all, goes to the guestbook and asks for information that's obviously available on the site. When that happens I just grit my teeth and post a nice little reminder in my blog about all the wonderful information available on my site.

Retro-Review

...Ben Cook reviews the cult,
the classic and the craptracular

The Dark Crystal

Henson Associates, Incorporated Television Company, Jim Henson Productions, Universal Pictures, 1982

Why does he keep reviewing kids' stuff? I hear you ask (I have good hearing). Well for starters, I like kids' stuff, but more than that, a great deal of speculative fiction—written, televised and movies—is for children. Perhaps because of the common perception that only children would be interested in that kind of junk. That's not true, of course. Even if it once was, the children who were once into the *Twilight Zone*, *Time Tunnel*, *Buck Rodger*, *Flash Gordon*, etc. are now adults.

Nonetheless, I'm doing the *Dark Crystal* anyway. Like *Labyrinth*, the *Muppet Show* and *Farscape*, it's a Jim Henson production. That company was behind the original Yoda too, and his voice appears (appears?) several times throughout the *Dark Crystal*.¹

Unlike other Henson movies *The Dark Crystal* features no human actors. Everyone and everything is a puppet or completely enclosing costume. Even the Gelflings, elfin humanoids, are puppets. It's like an animated feature, but with the animation done a different way.

The story follows Jen, supposedly the last of the Gelflings, as he tries to fulfil the quest given him by his dying master: find the shard that was broken from the great crystal 1000 years ago, and reunite it with the crystal before the conjunction of the world's three suns. This done, the world, which has fallen into chaos, will be set to rights.

He gets rhyming instructions too, which is how you can tell it's a proper quest, with a prophesy and everything:

*When single shines the triple sun,
What was Sundered and undone
Shall be whole, the two made one,
By Gelfling hand, or else by none.*

It wouldn't be much of a movie without conflict, and the emaciated, birdlike Skesis, who like chaos, try to stop Jen. They have an army of huge, rather frightening crab

things; Jen begins with only his wits and a flute.

He soon meets Kira, a Gelfling girl and her pet, Fizzgig (a furball with teeth) who aid him on his way. He also gets help from Aughra (a witch who gets some of the best lines in the movie),² some landstriders (beasts of burden, aka guys in really uncomfortable costumes) and a whole lot of podlings (what Fraggles turn into when they grow up).

The plot is simplistic, but the strength of the movie lies in the sets, the puppetry and the attention to detail. As in *Labyrinth*, Henson created a totally believable world, where you forget the characters are puppets and accept them as people. Unlike *Labyrinth*, the baddies (the Skeksis) are more outright evil. They look nastier, and they do nastier things. Sucking the life force out of podlings and drinking it to preserve themselves, for instance.

As such, *The Dark Crystal* is probably a little more frightening for young children than *Labyrinth*, although it's still rated G. The lack of any humans makes it slightly more difficult to engage with *The Dark Crystal*, but no more so than any animated movie. For a child, *The Dark Crystal* is a strong quest story with clearly defined sides. For an adult, it's worth watching just for Henson's technical brilliance.

Television—Space: 1999

Group 3 Ltd, Incorporated Television Company, Radiotelevisione Italiana, 1975–77

Apparently having seen *Space: 1999* is worth about 10 geek points. I wouldn't know, because I'm not a geek. I'm more like Bruce Wayne, and since there's no photo, for all you know it's true.

Space: 1999 was created by Gerry and Sylvia Anderson, more famous for *Thunderbirds* and *Captain Scarlet*. But unlike those shows, *Space: 1999* involves live action. There are real actors, special effects, the works. There are also a lot of model spaceships, and if feeling uncharitable, one might think that more time was spent on the models than on the scripts.

As I've noted elsewhere, the art of television storytelling has evolved a lot over the years, and *Space: 1999* is why. The acting is generally wooden, and the dialogue stilted. The pacing is terrible, and the music...well let's just say I was expecting the BBC Radiophonic Orchestra and got Deep Purple instead. The sets are pretty impressive though.

To be fair, I've only seen about half of the first season (after that I needed a rest). I am told the acting and pace improve, and that the second season is a lot lighter and easier to cope with.

The series was originally conceived as a new season of Gerry Anderson's *UFO*, but eventually evolved into a separate entity. By 1999, all of Earth's nuclear waste is stored on the moon. On September 13 of that year, a magnetic storm causes the waste to explode, flinging the moon out of orbit. The show follows the crew of Moonbase Alpha, led by Commander John Koenig and Doctor Helena Russell (Martin Landau and Barbara Bain, parents of Juliet Landau, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*'s Drusilla) as the planetoid hurtles

through uncharted space.

Their chief concern, of course, is survival, but after that, getting back to Earth. Frankly, after a nuclear explosion in orbit that blew 7.35×10^{19} metric tons of rock way out of the Solar System, I'd be pretty surprised if Earth was in the same shape they left it.³ And that's before the tectonic activity starts.

Be that as it may, the moon does zoom off into space, getting shunted around through space warps, almost captured by planets, and meeting lots of weird and wonderful aliens. And weird is the correct term. There are a few "standard" (i.e. *Star Trek* type) aliens, but there are plenty of episodes that leave the audience with the feeling that whatever the hell just happened, it was certainly alien.

In that way, and in the constant failures to achieve any of their goals beyond survival, *Space: 1999* is heavier fare than one might expect. This is no *Star Trek*: it's frequently bleak, rarely humorous, and there's always a feeling that the crew of Moonbase Alpha are fighting a war of attrition with the vacuum of space.

Books—The Weirdstone of Brisingamen

Alan Garner, 1960

Yes, it's another kids' book. I'll do something else next time, I promise.

Like most of the fantasy I enjoyed as a child, after first meeting the genre in Lloyd Alexander's *Prydain Chronicles*, *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* based heavily on Celtic and Viking mythology. The title itself is a reference to the necklace of the Brisings, of Norse origin. The baddies — witches and sorcerers — identify with the Celtic gods of Britain. Their hoards, the svarts, are the svart-alfar, dark elves of the Norse.

In some ways *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* is reminiscent of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*: the central characters, Colin and Susan, are not related to the family they are staying with, the Mossocks. To my mind they are city children, sent to the country — evacuees. And like the Pevensy children they drawn into the magic of the place.

In other ways it is more like a *Famous Five* adventure gone mystical. Healthy outdoor exploration. Caves. Even lashings of ginger beer!

Alderly, in Cheshire, is one of the locations given for Arthur's buried knights, who wait sleeping until they are needed. In Garner's book they play a central part, although they remain asleep the whole time. Because of them, the place has also become a haunt for those who oppose them. When Susan and Colin arrive, the forces of evil turn their attention to them.

This is not merely coincidence. Mrs Mossock was nurse to Colin and Susan's mother, and through her Susan came to have a bracelet containing the weirdstone of the title. It is the bracelet the coven wants, and it leads them to chase the children miles across the countryside, through caves and mystic realms.

The children are not alone. They are aided by the Mossocks, by a wizard, and by dwarves. But the forces ranged against them are formidable: an army of svarts, a coven of witches, and something called the Mara, which as a child, I was fairly glad we never got a good look at.

The book is simply written, much in the style of Enid Blyton. The subject matter is darker though: there is a real feeling of danger in many places. The caves are claustrophobic, the villains exhibit real power and real menace. And the Mara is extremely frightening.

The heroes — wizard and dwarves — are suitably heroic, but also sensible. The children, while brave, are still children. Their motivations are clear and understandable to readers of any age, and their fear believable. All in all, despite its age *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen* is an excellent choice for any child with an interest in fantasy, or any adult who likes children's books.⁴

Footnotes

- 1 In fact, Frank Oz was one of the producers, and a long-time associate of Jim Henson, so it's hardly a surprise to hear his voice. Still, it's always disturbing when you find yourself expecting Yoda to tell Luke off for eating cookies in bed, or a Skeksis to say "oh, Kermie!" At least he doesn't sing.
- 2 Aughra: Where is he?
Jen: He's dead.
Aughra: Could be anywhere then.
- 3 Or that the moon or anyone on it survived.
- 4 There is also a sequel, *The Moon of Gomrath*.

About the authors...

Rick Kennett is a life-long resident of Melbourne. His stories have appeared in *Aurealis*, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, *Weird Tales*, and in many local and overseas anthologies. Author of *13: A Collection of Ghost Stories* (Jacobyte 2001) and co-author with A.F. (Chico) Kidd of *472 Cheyne Walk: Carnacki, the Untold Stories* (Ash Tree Press 2002). He is owned by a manic whippet and includes naval history and wandering cemeteries (necrotourism) as interests. The genesis of "The Dark and What It Said" can be found on page 233 of Richard Davis' *The Ghost Guide to Australia*.

Like the main character in "Rest Stop", **Marissa K Lingen** is a Minnesota girl who spent some time in northern California. Unlike her, Marissa has escaped back to the snow and frost. She lives with two large men and one small dog, and is working on a fantasy novel from the perspective of the Evil Regent and her proto-socialist cook.

"Polish" marks **Kaaron Warren's** 60th fiction sale. Some of these stories never saw print, due to sudden failure of magazines and anthologies but they still count, right? Her short story collection *The Grinding House*, published in 2005 by CSFG Publishing, edited by Donna Maree Hanson, was nominated for four Ditmar awards, winning two and won the ACT Writers and Publishers Fiction Book of the Year. Kaaron recently moved from Canberra to Fiji with her lovely family. She takes all her bad temper out on her readers, with nasty stories which aim to upset. She was described as a Canberra Mother in a recent news article which can be viewed at www.catspark.net/kaaron/index.htm. Kaaron will be the local (not so local) guest at Conflux 4.

Chris Barnes lives in Sydney. He's a writer, a graduate of Clarion South (where "Sweet Potato Woman" was written), one-time director of the now sadly defunct Magic Casements festival, and a student of historical swordsmanship. One of his short stories was shortlisted for a 2004 *Aurealis* Award. You can find other stories of his in *Dark Animus*, *Encounters* (CSFG), *Daikaju! Giant Monster Stories* (Agog!), and *Shadow Box*. Find him online at his blog, chrisbarnes.livejournal.com, or his website, members.optusnet.com.au/cdbarnes.

Ben Cook might best be thought of as an evil underlord: while he has the passion for domination, uniforms and general evil, he is so far lacking in minions. Those wishing to apply can contact him via *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*. To keep in practice, he wields powers over dozens of other people's children (not so much minions as simply mini), collects uniforms and thinks evil thoughts.

David Clements is an astrophysicist and science fiction writer based in London. By day, he examines the role and internal physics of dusty galaxies in the history of the universe. The rest of the time, he's a mild-mannered fan (admittedly wearing very bright waistcoats) who has helped organise more conventions than you've probably had hot dinners, and exemplifies derring-do by riding his folding bicycle through London traffic on a regular basis. You'll find him online at www.hastur.org.uk/blog

Gillian Polack writes novels, short stories and anything else that can be captured in prose form. Alas for humanity, her captures reach print from time to time. The first Gillian-novel in captivity (*Illuminations*) contained footnotes and the second will have dead morris dancers. Stray information on her writing life and even her teaching life can be found on her blog (<http://gillpolack.livejournal.com>) and much more interesting stuff on food history can be found on her other blog (www.foodpast.com). Gillian herself can be found in Canberra ACT, which she claims is the centre of the known universe.

Tansy Rayner Roberts is a fantasy writer and a doll merchant. Her children's novel *Seacastle* will be published by ABC Books in May 2006. Tansy reviews for *ASif*, is on the board of the shared world webzine *New Ceres*, and is one of the editors of *Shiny*, a YA ezine that will be launched later in 2006. She is currently working on a YA novel based on the strange and twisted world of "The Bluebell Vengeance," and when not doing any of those things, she blogs at <http://cassiphone.livejournal.com>.

Since writing "Grace", **Ian McHugh** has moved from Canberra to Perth to Canberra, done the easy bit of co-producing a child, and graduated from the 2006 Clarion West writers' workshop. His fiction has also appeared in the *All Star Stories: Twenty Epics* anthology and *AntipodeanSF*, and stories are forthcoming in *Challenging Destiny* and the anthology *Blood & Devotion*. This is his second appearance in ASIM.

Gail Kavanagh lives in Queensland, Australia, where it's easy to imagine other worlds. After all, it is the Land of Oz. She has been writing forever and still isn't famous, but she intends to keep on writing and, hopefully, getting published. Fame would be nice too.

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