

Of Late I Dreamt of Venus by James Van Pelt

Like a shiny pie plate, Venus hung high in the observation alcove's window, a full globe afire with sunlight. Elizabeth Audrey contemplated its placid surface. Many would say it was gorgeous. Alexander Pope called the bright light "the torch of Venus," and some ancient astronomer, besotted with the winkless glimmer named the planet after the goddess of love and beauty. At this distance, clouded bands swirled across the shimmering lamp, illuminating the dark room. She held her hands behind her back, feet apart, watching the flowing weather patterns. Henry Harrison, her young assistant, sat at a console to the window's side.

"Soon," he said.

"Shhh." She sniffed. The air smelled of cold machinery and air scrubbers, a tainted chemical breath with no organic trace about it.

Beyond Venus' wet light, a mantle of stars shown with measured steadiness. One slipped behind the planet's fully lit edge. Elizabeth could measure their orbit's progress by the swallowing and spitting out of stars.

Elizabeth said, "Did you talk to the surgeon about your scar?"

Henry touched the side of his face, tracing a line from the corner of his eye to his ear.

"No. It didn't seem important."

"You don't need to live with it. A little surgery. You heal in deep sleep. Two hundred years from now when we wake, you'll be . . . improved." She lifted her foot from the floor with a magnetic click and then snapped down hard a few inches away. "I hate free fall. How long?"

"Final countdown. We'll be back in the carousel soon and you can have your weight again."

James Van Pelt

The scene from the window cast a mellow light. Silent. Grand. A poet would write about it if one were here.

“Ahh,” said Elizabeth. A red pustule rose in the planet’s swirling atmosphere. She leaned forward, put her palms against the window. Orange light boiled in the clouds, spreading away from the bloody center, disrupting the bands. “It’s begun.”

Henry read data on his screens. Input numbers. Checked other monitors. Tapped keys quickly. “A clean hit, on target.” He didn’t look at the actual show beyond, but watched his sensitive devices instead. “Beta should strike . . . now.”

A second convulsion colored the disk, this one a brilliant white at its center which settled into a deep red, overlapping the first burst’s color. A third flash, duller, erupted on the globe.

“Was that . . . ?”

“Perfect as your money could buy.”

In the next ten minutes, four more hits. Elizabeth stood at the window while red and orange storms pulsed in Venus’ disk. Henry joined her, mirroring her stance. He pursed his lips. “You can see the dust. If this had been Earth, the dinosaurs would have died seven times.”

The planet’s silver sheen faded somewhat, and lightning flashes flickered in the roiling confusion.

“No dinosaurs ever walked there, Henry.”

He sighed. “Venus has its own charms, or it did.”

Elizabeth looked at him. The reflected light from the window caught in his dark eyes. They were the best part of him, the way they looked at her when he didn’t think she noticed. Sometimes she wished she could just fall in love with his eyes, but then she saw the scar, and he really was too short and so young, ten years shy of her forty, practically a child, although a brilliant and efficient one. She’d ask the surgeon on her own. Henry would hardly object to a few cosmetic changes while he slept. What else was there to do during the down time anyway except to

improve? She had been considering thinning her waist a bit, toning her back muscles.

Henry clapped back to his station, then studied figures on a screen she couldn't see. "There are seismic irregularities, as predicted, making the final calculations more difficult, but the planet is spinning slightly faster now, just a bit. We've also pushed it out of its orbit a bit. The next series will bump it back. You're one step closer to your new Earth."

She turned from him, irritated. "If Venus *only* becomes another Earth, I failed. We can make it better. A planet to be truly proud of. How are things on Earth, anyway?"

His fingers flicked over the controls. "In the twenty-seven years we slept, your corporation in the asteroid belt has tripled in size, improving the ability to redirect asteroids above projections. We're two years ahead of schedule there. The Kuiper Belt initiative is also ahead of schedule." He reread a section. "We're having trouble with the comet deflection plan. Lots of support for redirecting the Earth-crossing asteroids, but opposition to the comets. Some groups contest our aiming them *all* at Venus. There's a lobby defending Halley's Comet for its 'historical and traditional values,' as well as several groups who argue that 'comets possess a lasting mythic and aesthetic relation with the people of Earth.' The political wing of the advertising and public relations departments is working the problem, but it has requested a bigger budget."

Elizabeth snorted derisively. "Give them Halley's comet. It doesn't have as much water as it used to anyway."

"Noted." Henry sent the order. "Your investments and companies are sound."

"How is the United Nation's terraforming project on Mars going?"

"Badly. They've lost momentum."

"Too big of a project to run by democracies and committees. Too long." She sighed. "If nothing needs my attention, then I suppose it's time for bed."

James Van Pelt

Henry shut his monitors off, powered down the equipment. A metal curtain slid across the view window, separating them from Venus' tortured atmosphere. "Two hundred years hardly seems like going to bed. Everyone I know will be dead when we awake."

Elizabeth shrugged. "They're all twenty-seven years older than when you talked with them last. As far as they're concerned, you're the dead one."

A door opened in the center of the floor. Elizabeth looked down the ladder that connected the alcove with the rest of the habitat. The ladder rotated beneath her. She timed her step to land on the top rung, then moved down so she held the ladder, leaving her head and shoulders at floor level. The room turned slowly around her. "No second thoughts, Henry. You knew the cost going in."

He nodded at her. She saw in his eyes the yearning. The dream of a terraformed Venus hadn't brought him onto the project, made him say goodbye to everyone he'd ever known, committed him to a project on a time scale never attempted.

No, he came for her.

The rotation turned her so she didn't have to see his gaze. She continued down the ladder. Mostly she thought about the project and the long line of asteroids on their way to add their inertia to Venus' spin, but below those thoughts ran a thread about Henry. She thought, as long as he remains a reliable assistant, what does it matter why he signed up? Henry Harrison isn't the first man who worked for me because he wanted me.

Two hundred years of suspended life, trembling on death's edge, metabolism so slow that only the most sensitive instruments detected it. Busy nanomechs coursing through the veins, correcting flaws, patching break downs, keeping the protein machine whole and ready to function. Automatic devices moving the still limbs through a range of motion

every day, maintaining joint flexibility, stretching muscles, reminding the body that it was alive because really, really, Elizabeth Audrey, the richest human being who ever lived, whose wealth purchased and sold nations, whose power now stretched over generations, was mostly dead. A whisper could end it.

Maybe in her dreams she heard that deadly voice caressing her, and she would hear it for sure if she were a weaker woman, but if she did hear, she ignored it. Instead she dreamed of Venus transformed. A vision big enough for her ambition. A Venus fit for her feet. A planet done right, not like old Earth, sputtering in its wastes. A Venus fit for a queen.

Elizabeth walked spinward in the carousel, the silky robe she donned after the doctors revived her flapped against her bare legs. Two hundred years didn't feel bad, and the slimming in her waist gave her a limberness she didn't remember from before. The air smelled fresher too, less metal-washed. It should, she thought. Much of her money was devoted to research and development.

Henry joined her in the dining room for breakfast.

"What's the progress?" she asked. Bacon and egg scents seeped from the kitchen.

He smiled. "How did you sleep? How are you feeling? Good to see you? It's only been two centuries."

Elizabeth waved the questions away. "Are we on schedule?"

Henry shrugged. "As we projected, the plans evolved. There have been breakthroughs that make the job easier. We've shaded the planet with a combination of solar shields, aluminum dust rail-gunned from the moon, and both manned and unmanned reflective aerostat structures in the upper atmosphere, cooling it considerably, although we have a long way to go. An unforeseen benefit has been dry ice harvesting, which we've been selling to the U.N.'s Mars project. Venus' frozen greenhouse gasses are heating Mars. Of course, the bombardment of asteroids and

James Van Pelt

comets has been continuous.”

A young man, carrying a tray of covered plates, walked toward them from the kitchen. He wore his dark hair short, and his loose, pale shirt was buttoned all the way to his neck. He nodded at Henry as he put the tray in front of them, but he seemed to avoid looking at Elizabeth. Without waiting for thanks, he backed away.

“Who was that?” Elizabeth uncovered a steaming omelet.

“Shawcroft. He’s a bio-ecopoiesis engineer. Good man. He helped design an algae that grows on the underside of the aerostats for oxygen production. The surface is still too warm for biologicals.”

Elizabeth tasted the omelet. The food made her stomach uneasy, and didn’t look as appetizing as she hoped. “What’s he doing serving me breakfast then?”

Henry laughed. “To see you, of course. You’re *the* Elizabeth Audrey, asleep for two hundred years, but still pulling the strings. His career exists because of your investments. He won a lottery among the crew to bring out the tray.”

“What about you? He acted like he knew you.”

Uncovering his plate, Henry revealed a pancake under a layer of strawberries. “I’ve been awake for four years. He and I play handball almost every day.”

Elizabeth chewed a small bite thoughtfully. Henry’s face did look older.

“What did you think of my gift?”

Henry touched the side of his face between his eye and ear. Without smiling he said, “For a couple of years I was mad as hell. I’m sorry you reminded me.” His fork separated a strawberry and chunk of pancake from the rest.

Elizabeth tried to meet his eyes. He couldn’t be seriously angry. Without the scar, he looked much better.

He put the fork down, the bite uneaten. “Are you ready for a visit

to Laputa? You can check the facilities, and they would be honored if you came down.”

“Laputa?” She relaxed in the remembering, not realizing until then that she’d been tense. After two hundred years, so much could have changed. When she let the doctor hook her to the complicated devices, she had thought about unstable governments, about unplanned celestial events, about changes in corporate policy. Who could guarantee that she’d wake up in the world she’d designed? This was the great leap of faith she’d made when she started the project. The plan for her to see it to the end would be to outlive everyone around her, and the way to do that was to be the test subject for the long sleep. Henry, for obvious reasons, accompanied her. “You really named the workstation that?”

“A city now. Much more than a station. The name was in your notes. I don’t think Jonathan Swift imagined it this way, though.” He pushed his plate away. “It’s quite a bit bigger than the initial designs. The more functions we built in, the more cubic feet of air we needed to keep from sinking into the hotter regions of the atmosphere. It’s the largest completely man-made structure in the solar system. Tourist traffic alone makes it profitable.”

The trip from the carousel to Laputa took a little more than an hour under constant acceleration or deceleration except for a stomach lurching moment midway when the craft turned. Out the porthole beside her seat, she could see Venus’ changed face. Where the sun hit, it was much darker, but the sun itself was darker too, fuzzy and red, partly blocked by the dust umbrella protecting the planet from the heat, cooling it from its initial 900 degrees Fahrenheit. Henry offered a glass of wine. She sipped it, enjoying its crisp edge. Wine swirled in the bottom of the glass. She sipped again, held the taste in her mouth for a few seconds before swallowing. “I don’t recognize this.”

He sat across from her. The wine bottle rested in a secure holder in the table’s center. “It’s an eighty-year old Chateau Laputa. One of the

James Van Pelt

original bottles of Venusian aperitif. Bit of a gamble. Some of this vintage didn't age well, but it turns out being thirty percent closer to the sun makes for excellent grapes. They grew them in soil from the surface, heavily treated, of course." The ferry shuddered. "Upper edges of the atmosphere. We'll be there soon."

Through the porthole, Laputa appeared first as bright red glimmer on Venus' broad horizon, and as they grew closer, revealing details. Elizabeth realized the glow was the sun's reflected light. And then she saw Laputa truly was huge, it felt like flying low over the San Gabriels into the Los Angeles basin, when the city opened beneath her. But Laputa dwarfed that. They continued to travel, bumping hard through turbulence until the floating city's boundaries disappeared to the left and right, and then they were over the structure, their shadow racing across the mirrored surface.

Inside she toured the engineering facilities where they built floating atmosphere converters to work on the carbon dioxide gasses that trapped so much heat. She met dozens of project managers and spoke briefly to a room full of chief technicians. They didn't ask questions. They didn't act like the groups of upper management she was used to working with. There was no jockeying for position, none of the push and pull of internal politics that made corporate board rooms so interestingly tense. None of the high stakes adrenaline she was so used to. They listened. They took notes. They answered her questions, but they were quiet, attentive. Worshipful, almost.

Henry drove her in a compact electric cart to the physics labs that controlled the steady rain of Kuiper Belt objects bringing water to the planet, even though it still boiled into vapor on the scalding surface. In a large presentation room, dominated by a map of the solar system alive with lights, each representing a ship or a station, the chief geologist finished his speech. A long line of dots represented asteroids and Kuiper Belt objects in transit tracing a curved path through the system ending at

Of Late I Dreamt of Venus

Venus. “Fifteen years from now, liquid water will exist at the poles. We should have northern and southern hemisphere lakes by the time you inspect again, perhaps the beginning of an ocean if the weather patterns develop according to the models.” He bowed when he finished and kept his eyes lowered.

Everywhere they went, and everyone they talked to treated her with the same deference. Only Henry would meet her gaze. “You are *the* Elizabeth Audrey,” he said again when she complained. “Maker of worlds. Come with me. I think you’ll enjoy this. We have transport waiting.”

They walked out of a physics lab, leaving behind obsequious scientists and engineers. Henry led, and Elizabeth noticed as she had before that he was a short man. If he were only six or seven inches taller, he might earn more respect. Their next sleep was scheduled to last four hundred years. If she talked to the doctors, they could do the work and Henry would not need to be bothered with the decision himself. After all, if he was going to be her sole representative in the future where no one knew her except as the ultimate absentee boss, then he should look the part.

“This is it,” he said as the car sped from between two buildings. He stopped and sat beside her while she took it in. A wall of structures a mile away loomed over a plain, a part of the huge circle that enclosed the space. High overhead, Laputa’s roof arced to the far horizons. The sun glowed sullenly, a red bright spot in the dark sky. Away from the city’s artificial light, red tinted her arms, the metal edges on the car, Henry’s face. She turned her hands over. Even her palms took a red shade.

“What is this place?”

“Blister Park. Come on.”

As soon as they stepped out of the car, Elizabeth saw. The floor was transparent. Beneath their feet swirled the clouds of Venus, almost black in Laputa’s shadow, but far away the city stopped and sunlight came

James Van Pelt

down, illuminating a smoky show of reds and oranges and browns. They moved farther from the car, away from the building, and soon the illusion that they were walking on air seemed almost complete.

Below, in the shadow, bright red and yellow lights twinkled.

“Volcanoes,” said Henry. “Venus was volcanically active before, but our asteroid and comet bombardment to spin the planet provoked eruptions. The atmospheric technicians tell me this is good, though. They use the new chemicals in the air to catalyze out what they don’t want and to create what they do. There will be a breathable atmosphere before they are done.”

“Keeping in mind the improvements in technology, how long until I can walk on the ground unprotected?”

“Still another thousand years or so. If we engineer ourselves instead, it would be much quicker. We need heat tolerance, and a system that uses less oxygen.”

“For the workers, yes. The ones that prepare the way, but Venus will not be complete until it is the planet that Earth should have been.” She could picture it, a surface rich with forests, and an ecosystem in balance, humanity appropriately humble in the face of a world done right.

“But this has a beauty of its own.” Henry moved beside her. The light from below cast shadows on his face.

“It was ugly when we started, Henry. Almost no rotation. Hundreds of degrees too hot. Too much carbon dioxide. Pressure at the surface equivalent to being a kilometer underwater. No life. Nothing. The least attractive spot in the solar system, and it’s still ugly now. It will be beautiful when I’m done. When I’ve reshaped it.”

Elizabeth walked toward the middle of Blister Park. She held her hands away from her sides, palms down, like a tight-rope walker. If she didn’t look up, all she saw beyond her feet were clouds and the volcanoes’ dim pulsing. Surprisingly, she felt no vertigo. She moved on the invisible

surface as if she'd been born to it. "I'm a god," she said.

In a four hundred year long dream, knowing she was dreaming, Elizabeth ran down a long hill with her brother. She hadn't known her brother. He died at childbirth, one of the thousands who didn't make it through the still birth plagues where children were so warped in gestation they couldn't draw breath on their own. It became simpler and more merciful to let them die, death after death. Science took just a few years to find the cause of the plague that killed her brother, the first of the toxic-Earth plagues, but it was too late for him.

In the dream, though, he ran beside her toward the stream that flowed through cool grasses. At the edge, they stopped. No frogs today. No crawdads hiding under rocks. She didn't know why she'd expected frogs and crawdads; they were never in the dream, never, but still the same disappointment washed through her. A boggy flat stretched from both sides, and the reeds that poked up through the smelly muck were brown and broken. A mass of cardboard stuck out of the water, covered with a noxious-looking slime.

Elizabeth held her brother's hand as they walked downstream, careful to keep their feet dry. Around the corner the stream ducked under a fence and into a park. They pushed open a gate. Here, a closely clipped lawn painted the hill to a cement curb lining the stream, which now flowed through an open culvert. Signs warned them to stay out of the water, but her brother lay on his chest, reaching down to touch the ripples. In the dream, Elizabeth tried to shout, but her throat constricted. His fingers brushed the water, and then he turned to look at her, his eyes serious and dark (where had she seen those eyes before?). A scar marked the side of his face. She wanted to rub it away, but when she dropped to her knees to touch him, his skin had grown cold, like a statue. And then he was a statue, a bronze of a boy lying on his side by a stream, his clothes a solid metal, a patina of corrosion in the places that were not

James Van Pelt

buffed smooth.

Elizabeth sat beside him, beside the contained stream. In the sky, no clouds, but a dozen contrails crisscrossed each other, like a giant tic tac toe game. The air smelled of city and too many people piled on one another, story on story in high rises beyond the park. A clatter of metal against metal clanged in the distance. More construction. On the stream's other side, flowers in unnaturally neat rows filled a garden held behind a plastic border. She looked back beyond the fence where trash filled the water. Neither was right. She knew neither was right, but it was too late to shout. Her brother was dead, and she had no breath behind her scream. The statue couldn't hold her hand.

Elizabeth couldn't breathe. She choked and then coughed, an unproductive spasm that didn't give her a chance to inhale before she coughed again. Her chest hurt. People bustled around her, but she hadn't opened her eyes yet. She was suffocating. Someone held her hand. A mask went over her face, and pressure built up within it, pushing against her eyeballs.

“Relax, Eliza. Let the machine help you.”

She opened her mouth, allowing the pressure to force open her throat, filling her lungs. The air tasted sweet! She could feel tears pooling where the mask wrapped her cheeks. The pressure relented and she exhaled on her own before it built again, respirating her at its own pace.

She took slow breaths, each one quivering on the trigger of another spasm, but breath by breath the urge to cough subsided until her lungs moved easily. “I don't need this,” she tried to say, but the mask muffled her. She tapped the hard surface with her finger. The mask came off. She was in the awakening room. A doctor stood to one side, the mask clasped, ready to put it back if her breathing struggled. Beside him, a technician bent over what looked like a small clipboard. When he turned, she saw information flashing across the surface. Her

information, she assumed. Henry sat on the edge of the bed, holding her hand.

For a minute she inhaled and exhaled carefully, testing each movement. Then she looked at him. “Did you call me Eliza?” Her voice cracked and felt dry in her throat.

He let go of her hand. “Sorry. Emotional moment.”

“Don’t let it happen again.” She shut her eyes. “Where are we?”

“Laputa, but we’ve anchored. The floating city’s era has passed. Not enough pressure in the atmosphere.”

Later, Elizabeth and Henry walked a hallway in the infirmary. Her steps were unsteady. When they turned a corner, she almost fell. Henry grabbed her arm to hold her upright. They had dressed her in a white robe with stiff, exaggerated collar and cuffs. Change of fashion she guessed.

“It was harder this time.”

“We’re into new territory in long sleep. Others have been packed, but it’s just until cures for their diseases are found or they outlive their enemies or they want a one-way trip to the future. If they’ve got the money, they can buy the bed. The arc ships heading to the Zeta Reticula system use long sleep too. It’s a 4,000 year trip, but they’re waking up every one hundred years for equipment maintenance. Only you and I have slept so long uninterrupted.”

Elizabeth shook her head, trying to clear the fuzziness. “Am I damaged?” She took longer steps as if she could force strength upon herself.

“I hope not, or I’m damaged too. They’re still testing me, and I’ve been up for six years. I told them I was okay after a week.” They turned another corner in the hall. Henry held her arm again, making Elizabeth feel like an old woman, which she was, now that she thought about it. “We’re walking to an auditorium now. There will be a ceremony. The people want to see you.”

James Van Pelt

“Public relations never goes away.”

Henry looked diplomatic. The extra years he had been awake gave his face more character than Elizabeth remembered. A map of tiny wrinkles sprung from the corners of his dark eyes. “Well, the situation’s a bit more complicated than that. We should have foreseen.”

Elizabeth moved steadily forward, already a more confident, eager to see how much closer they were to her goal. “Complicated how?”

“Lots of changes. Governments have risen and fallen. Politics went through several evolutions. The business environment metamorphed during the time.”

“They didn’t nationalize me, did they?” Elizabeth stopped. The idea that she might have lost control frightened her. Her stomach knotted. The companies, the investments, the foreboding weight of her multi-industrial empire might have fled her grasp in the years she slept. Anything could have happened while she slumbered. “They haven’t taken my assets?”

Henry gazed down at her solemnly. Elizabeth realized the doctors had done their work. He was now at least two or three inches taller than she. His hair matched his eyes, still black. Some grey there would give him more distinction. She made a note to herself to order the change for him, maybe a deeper timbre to his voice to give him authority.

“We should have known that a corporation couldn’t last for hundreds of years, Elizabeth. Even a dozen decades would be asking for a lot, but your CEOs, multiple generations of them, made decisions to preserve your initiative. We’re still on schedule.”

“I can talk to heads of state. Solidify our position.” She pictured the crowded board rooms, the private conversations over expensive dinners at exclusive restaurants, the phone calls and e-mails, all with her at the center, pulling threads, massaging egos, handing down favors with imperial aplomb.

“You won’t need to.” He led her to a set of double doors. Inside,

two lines of exquisitely dressed men and women gave them a hallway to walk through. Many of the people bowed as Elizabeth and Henry passed. Elizabeth still didn't feel completely focused. A surreal air hovered about the scene. "Madam Audrey," one man said as he touched the back of his hand to his forehead and bent at the waist. No one else spoke. At the hallway's end, an ornate set of doors that reached to the high ceiling swung open. Elizabeth slowed. She couldn't see the other side of the dark room beyond, but it seemed huge, and there was movement in the dark. Lights flooded a stage that she and Henry stepped onto. She shaded her eyes, and the roar began, hundreds of thousands of voices, cheering, cheering, cheering, and they were cheering for her.

Henry leaned in, cupped his hand around her ear, "They arranged for you to become a religion. It's the only organization that would last long enough to see it to the end."

The next morning, Elizabeth joined Henry in a vehicle garage where a heavily insulated truck waited for them. "First," said Henry, "I want to point out that we are going to exit through those doors and into a Venus morning. Thirteen hours from now, the sun will set. Your original plan was for a twenty-four hour day/night cycle, but after four hundred years of asteroid and comet bombardment, the terraformers saw that we were getting diminishing returns. At some point, each collision produced more problems for them to undo than they were solving, so they decided to stop and leave Venus with a longer day."

Elizabeth frowned. "I don't like compromise." She did feel steadier on her feet than she had yesterday, and climbed into the car before Henry could give her assistance. "What's second?"

"Best I show you." He pulled the truck into an airlock. When the outside doors opened, a red, dusty light flooded the bay. Elizabeth slid close to the window. A graded road led into a series of low hills that faded in the hazy red air. The car pulled out of the garage, and for the

James Van Pelt

first time, Elizabeth could see first hand what her efforts had produced. A brisk breeze whipped dust off the road ahead of them.

“Still warm, still too much carbon dioxide, still too much surface pressure, but we’re very close, Elizabeth.” The truck climbed the first hill, and from the top, as far as the dusty air allowed, similar hills reached all around. “The final changes go the slowest.”

In front of them, the morning sun glared red and unbelievably large. The truck lurched through a turn as it ascended a second hill.

“I thought there would be more evidence of the meteor strikes.”

Henry laughed. “Oh, heavens, there is, but it’s all on the equator. We have created a badlands like nothing this solar system has ever seen. Some of the strikes broke the tectonic plates, bringing up rock from thousands of feet below the surface, liquefying, vaporizing, shattering. Venus’ equator regions are already legendary. Anything could get lost there or hide there. It truly is untamable. See this?” He held out his wrist. A shiny black bracelet set with green and yellow stones caught the sun light. “The metal is carbon nanotubes. If you need it made out of carbon, Venus can make it. Every space ship hull in the solar system is manufactured here. The jewels were mined in the badlands. Ah, we’re here.”

He stopped the truck on the hilltop. Before them, a lake rippled in the wind, filling the valleys so that what she had thought were other hills earlier she could see were islands.

Elizabeth gasped. “Liquid water.”

“Do you want to go fishing?”

“Really?”

Henry rested his forearms on the steering wheel and looked out onto the lake. “Kind of a joke. No, not this time. There are thermophilic shrimp, though, and adapted corals, engineered crabs, modified algae, mutated anemones, evolved sponges, and dozens of other heat-happy organisms who like water just short of boiling. About

the biggest thing out there that we know of is a heat tolerant eel that grows to a foot or so. I've been boating at night. Almost all the species we introduced bioluminesce. It makes them easier to keep track of. Blues, yellows, greens. The boat's wake is a trail of fire." He sounded meditative. His fingers dangled, nearly touching the dashboard. Elizabeth had never noticed before how strong his hands looked. Calluses marked the fingertips. A line of dark grit was under his fingernails. "On land, we've introduce lichens, soil bacterias, nothing complicated. They do best near the lakes. Rain is undependable."

"How long did you say you were awake before you woke me up?"

He didn't turn his head. "Six years. I wanted to make sure everything was ready for you."

She looked at the lake again. A film of black dust piled at the corner of the window like a soot snow drift. The wind picked up, tearing froth off the tops of waves, and it moaned, passing over the truck. Elizabeth couldn't imagine finding anything attractive in the desolate landscape. Dry, toxic, inhospitable except for the most primitive of life. She pictured its surface in six hundred years, when she awoke. Brush would cover the hills and heather would fill the valleys. Willows would line the bank of this heated lake. What did Henry see in it now?

Henry said, "The doctors are worried about putting you to sleep for so long. Your system didn't respond the way they would like."

Outside a bank of clouds moved across the sun, casting the lake and hills into a weird, maroon twilight. Dust devils twirled off the road before beating themselves into nothingness in the rocks higher on the hills. If the wind uncovered a bizarre version of a cow's skull, dry and leering, by the road, Elizabeth would not have been surprised. Nothing was right about the planet yet. Nothing was done.

"I can't stay here, Henry. I have to see it to the end."

Henry nodded, but before he put the truck in gear to take them back to Laputa, he faced her. "Do not try to change me again as we sleep.

James Van Pelt

Do not, ever, be so impertinent again.”

For a second, Elizabeth thought she saw hatred there, just a glimpse that flashed in the back of his dark eyes, and she respected it.

But two weeks later, when it came time to sleep, she met with the doctors. She gave orders. Just a touch, a tweak, a fine tuning. Henry wouldn't mind, she thought, if he loved her like she knew he did, he wouldn't mind at all.

In the six-century dream, Elizabeth, watched the rain from comets covering Venus. The water ice started beyond Neptune's orbit, like ghostly icebergs drifting in space so distant that the sun was merely a bright star among other stars. Gently nudged, they began their long journeys inward, finally, catastrophically for them, exploding into Venus' atmosphere, contributing water to a planet long without.

Rain fell. It fell in spurts, in squalls, in flurries, in long sizzling sheets that worked their way into cracks beneath the surface, nourishing the alien life planted there, until there came a time when the rain didn't just fall on rock. Plants grew, their leaves upturned, catching the water as it fell, spreading it to roots.

The rain eroded. Cut through stone. Carried silt. Formed rivulets, creeks, streams, rivers. Gathered in pools, ponds, lakes, seas. Evaporated, formed clouds, fell again.

And then, finally, in the highest of high places, appeared the first snow.

Elizabeth saw herself standing in Venus' snow, the perfect crystals falling on her bare arms, one by one pausing for a moment as petite sculptures before melting. Snow cleared the dust and smelled crisp as a fresh apple. She ran through the white blanket, splashing her legs as she ran, looking for her brother. Where was he? This was water he could play in. This water wouldn't harm him. She'd made it safe in her dream. At a lake's edge, she stopped, looking both directions as far as she could,

but he wasn't there, just the silent snow falling onto the red-tinted water. Each snow flake, when it met the lake, glowed for a second, until the water's surface itself provided the only light in the dream. Plenty of light to see him if he was there, but he wasn't.

She stood at the lake's edge for centuries.

"She's awake."

Soft light fell all around, like snow. Time passed. Darkness. Light again. I'm under the snow, she thought. Darkness.

"She's awake."

Her arms were moved. Light was provided. A question was asked. A tube was pulled from her throat. She was hurt. All very passive. Darkness.

"She's awake."

Elizabeth forced her eyes open. An older man sat on the bed beside her, holding her hand. Beside him stood a medical technician in a lab coat. The man holding her hand had a haggard face. Worry lines across his forehead. A little baggy in the jowls. It wasn't until she blinked her vision clear that she could see his eyes.

"Henry?"

He mouthed a silent, "Yes."

"How long?"

He patted the top of her hand. "Six hundred years."

She tried to sit up. Before she was half way, though, her calves cramped.

"Probably easier to lie still right now," Henry said. "The doctors here have some wonderful treatments. Since you've made it this far, you should be up soon."

Breathing softly, Elizabeth considered what he said for a moment. "There was a doubt?"

"Big one for a long time."

James Van Pelt

The ache in her legs dwindled to a dim reminder, no worse than the one she felt in her neck and back and chest. She squeezed his hand. “Henry, I’m glad you’re here.”

“You can take care of her now,” he said to the lab-coated man.

For the next two days, doctors came and went. They wheeled her from one examining room to the next. Most of the time she couldn’t tell what they were doing. Strange instruments. Peculiar instructions. Doctors nodding to each other over results that didn’t make sense to her. Even their conversation confused her, speaking with a dialect too thick for her to decipher. Although she did have one moment of relief when one asked her to stick out her tongue and say, “Ahh.” The tongue depressor even appeared to be made from wood.

They weren’t subservient, however. Brisk, efficient and friendly, but not servile. When she saw Henry again, she asked him about it. He met her in a sitting room where other patients sat reading or visiting quietly. The medical techs insisted she stay in a wheel chair, although she walked quite well in a physical therapy session earlier in the day.

“All that I’ve learned from our strange journey, Elizabeth, is that time changes everything. You’re not a religion anymore. Actually, now you’re kind of a curiosity. I expect someone from the history guild will want to talk with you. Marvelous opportunity, you know, to actually chat face to face with the Elizabeth Audrey.”

Something in the way he said it caught her ear. “What about my holdings? What about the corporations?”

Henry covered her hand with his own. “Gone, I’m afraid. Long, long gone now.”

The tears came unbidden. She thought of herself as a strong person. Finally, she shook the tremors off and dried her face. “We need to get to work then to get it back. How close are we to finishing the project?”

Henry smiled. She’d always liked his eyes, but now the years in his

expression set them off beautifully. “I’ll let you judge for yourself.” When he stood, a medical tech who had been waiting a few seats away, rushed over to help.

“That’s okay. I’ll take her,” Henry said.

“Thank you, sir,” said the tech. “I’ll be close if you need me.”

Elizabeth looked from the tech to Henry and back again. She recognized a power order when she saw one. “How old are you Henry? How long have you been awake this time?”

He turned her chair toward the exit and began rolling her toward the door. “Twenty-two years. I’m sixty-two now.”

The door opened into a wide space. A ceiling a hundred feet above enclosed the multiple levels and balconies she saw on the other side. Pedestrians walked purposefully to and fro.

“What is this, a mall?”

“More like a business park, but you’ve got the right idea.”

A pair of women dressed in dark, functional leather long-coats walked past them. One laughed at something the other said. Pale clean circles surrounded their eyes in faces that were uniformly filthy.

“Prospectors do a lot of trading here,” said Henry, as way of explanation.

He wheeled her to a garage a level lower and helped her into a car. This one didn’t appear nearly as heavy as the truck she’d ridden in with him what seemed like a lifetime ago.

“It’s time for you to see Venus in its glory,” said Henry.

A half hour later he parked the car on what might have been the same hill he’d taken her to before, but now the burgundy sun rested low on the opposite horizon, and where before the landscape was marked by wind, rock and water, plants grew everywhere. Thick-stemmed vines clung to the rocks beside the road. Low bushes dotted the slope to the water’s edge. Here and there, short pine-looking trees poked from the soil, their trunks all leaning the same way and their branches pointing

James Van Pelt

away from the lake. And there was color everywhere. Not only were there the grey and black rocks she remembered, but also tans and browns and yellows. Across the face of the hill to their left, a copper sheen caught the sun, and on the hill to their right, the mossy clumps growing between the rough stones were a vibrant blue.

But no heather covered the hills. Where she imagined a world with waterfalls, there were only sharp-edged stones. Where she hoped for soft yellow light on fields of flowers, there was a red sun, bloated as a toad on the horizon. She saw a rough land.

A figure dressed in a leather long coat, goggles covering the eyes, walked past their car, saw Henry and tipped his leather hat as he continued on toward the lake where a small complex of buildings serviced two long docks and a dozen moored boats.

Elizabeth tried to contain her disappointment. “This is not even close to what I worked so hard for. I wanted a world that was what Earth should have been, what it could have been if we hadn’t ruined it. Venus could have been paradise!” The outburst left her short of breath. In the car’s confines, her breathing sounded loud and harsh. “I had a brother . . .”

“You were an only child.” Henry sounded quizzical.

“No, I . . .” Panic rose in Elizabeth’s throat. She *did* have a brother, didn’t she? It took a second for her to sort it out for herself. A thousand years of dreaming could feel more convincing than a few decades of reality.

“We have to get out of here. Take me back.”

“Wait,” said Henry. He reclined his seat a little before folding his hands across his chest. He watched the sun setting on the lake’s other side. Elizabeth leaned back in her chair, her heart thudding hard.

The sun slipped deeper into the hills behind the lake. Elizabeth relaxed. Could she get the money back again? She knew no one. The game was surely different now. A wind scurried across the water, rocked the boats, and then rushed up the road to toss sand against the car.

Shadows lengthened. She felt so tired, so truly, truly *old*.

“You know, I talked to the doctors before I went to sleep the last time. It took considerable persuasion on my part, but I discovered you’d told them to work on me again. For a while, I thought the best action would be to go to your bed and kick out the plug. It was tempting.”

Henry didn’t move while he spoke. His hands stayed still as he watched the setting sun.

Elizabeth floundered for a moment, unsure of how to reply. When they’d started this project a month ago (“No, a thousand years ago,” she thought), he would have never spoken to her like this, and she would have had no trouble telling him what she thought, but this wasn’t the same Henry, not by any measure. “I’m sorry, Henry. I didn’t think you would mind, really. They were changes for your own good.”

“I loved you once, but you have a mean sense of perfection, Liza.”

The sun’s last glimmer dropped out of sight. “Watch now,” he said. The horizon glowed like a campfire coal, then, as sudden as a sunset can be sudden, low clouds that had been invisible until now picked up red edges, their middles pulsating cherry gold, and the air from the horizon line all the way to nearly directly overhead turned a deep purple with scarlet streaks, changing shades even as she realized they were there.

A half hour later, still in silence, they watched. Stars appeared in the moonless sky. A boat left the quay, trailing a bioluminescent streak behind it.

Elizabeth found she was crying again. “My, god, it’s beautiful, Henry, but it’s not what I was trying to make. It’s not better than Earth.”

“It’s Venus,” he said. “It doesn’t have to be better.”

By now, night had completely fallen. There were no board room meetings to attend. No calls to make. No projects to shepherd to success. Elizabeth felt very small sitting in the car with Henry. Her muscles ached. She suspected she would never be physically as capable as

James Van Pelt

she once was. A thousand years of long sleep had taken their toll.

“What about you, Henry. You said you loved me once. Will you stay with me?”

She couldn't tell in the dark if he turned to look at her or not.

“You couldn't shape me into what you wanted either.”

He started the car, which turned on the dashboard controls, but made no noise. The light revealed his hands on the wheel.

“My days of shaping are done, Henry.”

He drove them the long way home, over hills and around the lake. They didn't speak. Neither knew what to say to the other, yet.