

Picnic on Pentecost

by Rand B. Lee

Rand Lee's third story for us this year is very different from either of his last two. It's part of a series of stories about interactions between humans and the alien D'/fy. The last story in this series, "Coming of Age Day," appeared in our Dec. 2003 issue and we've reprinted that story on our Website this month. These stories are challenging and rewarding.

The planet has a face like a dead circus performer, slag green, gray-yellow, flecked with mica tinsel. You cannot tell it is a killer, except that it has no manners. No brothers or sisters; three suns: One, Two, Three. The weirdest orbit you can think of. Every thirteen years it earns the name Pentecost.

Four of us, then: Jacques, Cora, Willem, and I. We do everything, my dears; we are practically a four-celled organism: Jacques black, West Indian (that's Earth) background; Cora, from the Europa Syndicate, vaguely Chinese from what little you can see through the machinery she calls her face; Willem, Dutch-Irish, two fathers he had, a gene-splicee of course, reared on Angel Station; and what did I call myself then? Oh, yes. Elizabeth. I grew up in the lusty halls of the Convent of the Sisters of Eternal Charity, on Masseràt. I am white as the Ace of Moons, whiter than anybody in three hundred years; gene-provenance unknown.

Cora is our Coordinator for this little jaunt, the brains that links us all and helps us work smoothly, as a unit. We are utterly, totally, completely in love with one another.

Just another survey team. The Damanakippith/fy, who are furry (all different colors), tall, look vaguely like centaurs, and are probably the sexiest beings in the outer rim of this galaxy, do it in sixes. They cannot imagine doing anything in less than sixes. Nobody has quite figured out why, since they have five fingers on each of their two hands and five toes on each of their two feet, as we do (well, as I used to). They like quartz crystals, which may be a clue. Because the D'/fy think Humans are cute, they gave us all their technology within four hundred years of their first contact with us.

That's why we can spacefold and stick our noses into other peoples' back yards. Faster than light drive is simple once you realize that light is an agreement, not a thing. We do it in fours, all linked together in the Momship, making the old romances real, real, real.

* * * *

We emerged from Dreamtime very nearly in the middle of the planet, claxons going all up and down our spines, sensors doing impossible readouts. Pentecost lay dangerously close to us, swimming in a shroud of radiation woven by her three suns, which were also doing their best to persuade our instruments that we existed only at intervals. (This is in fact true, according to the Damanakippith/fy, but uncomfortable to four Human explorers comfortable with life in four dimensions.) Jacques started sorting out the rhythm of the radiation fluxes while Willem pushed us into a more sensible position relative to Pentecost. We did not call it Pentecost till later. At first we called it That-goddamn-planet-is-trying-to-goddamn-shred-us (Jacques's name for it, which seemed to fit).

Cora readjusted our shields to compensate for the stresses on the hull, and when it was obvious that (a) we were not going to be pulled apart in a merry display of gravity flexion or (b) poisoned by the umptiple-neutron-bomb effects that the new planet seemed to be swimming in, I gave Momship the go-ahead to start relaxing us.

“What happened?” asked Cora, through a mouthful of gadgets. She was a simple, direct soul. “This is not the Vanderwettering system.”

“Indeed it appears not to be, dearest Cora,” said Willem. “Indeed we are several parsecs distant and multiple degrees west from the nearest Nightlight radial. Indeed we are in unmapped territory.”

“Ugly,” commented Jacques. Joined by Cora to the sensors, we peered at the planet in various wavelengths. It was not entirely ugly, even in the normform spectrum. The glitters were pretty, like diamonds in a mudpack. In the radio frequency, the planet was chaos. Jacques said, “No atmosphere to speak of. Some oxygen-bearing rock, however, and there appears to be—” the image flapped in my face—“an artificial structure on the what-we-will-call-for-convenience's-sake ‘night’ side.” He did not have to verbalize the fact that Mom had chosen the biggest sun as the referent for our discussions of planetary “day” and “night.” The artificial structure looked like a condom with legs.

(Condoms are artificial penile coverings once used to prevent fertilization of the Human female and to prevent transmission of disease to whomever. You will now find them featured prominently in the sexkits of back-to-the-landers and other primitivists.)

So the “night” side was the side of the planet currently facing away

from Sun One. This is not to say that it was in any sense unlit. When we got there, the mud was still flecked with bright little micabits, but the predominant color was not green or yellow, it was a saturated electric blue. That was because although Sun One and Sun Two were sort of yellow, Sun Three—the one whose orbit kept it opposite Sun One's—shone azure. This was nice to look at in the visible spectrum, if you like mud that looks like fluorescent bread-mold instead of assorted bruises. Mom landed and we all got out.

Three local days later, Jacques and Willem were dead, and what was left of Cora could not even stutter in binary. And I only am escaped alone to tell thee.

* * * *

Thirteen. It changes, the sky; they shift, the Three; time passes. I dance for Jacques and Willem. Ululating, I eat the silver dust, which seems to suit me just fine, now. It is nice nice to go without Momsuits. Dance, I do.

I am glad there be no mirror in shuttlesides. Lingo slips; hemispheric aphasia, hemidemisemiquaverings along my spatulate nerve-runnels. Goddess-God, what it was like, seeing the fire come down and watching my dear loves change!

Alive, I dance thirteen commonyears away.

There be others here. Indigenes, I think them then, pretty, gossamery, sweet-things. Never do they come down to Earth—or, rather, Sludge, or Pentecost, my name for our find because of the way the fire fell and what it did to us. Float, they do, far above in the winds of the blue heights. During the times I cannot speak, or think in linear terms, I watch them fly, my fairies as I have come to perceive them, floating above the hollow in the hills where the Momship shuttle landed. Their wings, like mica sheets, capture the light of the three. I have no idea what they eat. Dreams, maybe.

Thirteen years after we are captured and changed, the second shuttle ship arrives. I know it is thirteen years later because Momship, kept alive above me by the oversuperhyperabundant solar radiations, tells me so, through Cora. Have I mentioned that Cora is alive, still, too? In a manner of speaking. The shuttle, hatches fused by the firefall while we three poked around outside, sealed her in with only our nerverlink for company. For years she seemed comatose; no words passed between us. (I am so different now, I cannot tell if it is I or she whose new physiognomy barriers our love.)

Our link, however, stayed open, and through it Momship sent me pictures of the new scout, which has come looking for us.

Looking! For! Us! I twinkle in all my shiny new members.

Thirteen. The planet has gone through the blue night, and the yellow-green-brown-bruise morning, and the golden afternoon, and green sunset hits as blue slides over the horizon again. During those years of isolation, I observed myself doing odd things. My new body scampered and capered and ate the mica, and what I excreted was soft and moldable in the glare of One and Two. I myself felt no heat; mirrored, I reflected much of it away, and I suspect my nerve endings were so changed I cannot feel infrared anyway. The shuttle grew pink at high noon, eight years after the Change, and Cora, trapped inside but not safe from either the firefall or the suns' radiations, heaved in my heart like a fetus trying to abort itself. I dreamed of ways to kill her swiftly, but she was armored against everything but pain. And I observed myself making things from my excretions, and I did not understand what, oh Goddess-God, what I was molding of the mica with my not-hands. The condom seemed to be directing me.

Perhaps, I think, as night falls at last after thirteen commonyears, *the new ship will know*. I watch it, a blare in the ultraviolet (which I now perceive without Momship's help) to join its dot with the dot of our Cora-laden orbiting scout. I hear, with the help of Mom through CoradearestCora whom I have longed to kill, communications spatter. Hailings; shiptoship relays; approaches, latching-on; boardings. My guts (do I have guts? I must) flutter, as though the new ship were sorting through my intestines instead of Mom's memory banks. Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

Help help help, I scream, and laugh inside myself; it is so silly. Help whom? Help what? *Help help*, I scream. *Save us!* I have nothing better to do with this silence. In the blue-green dusk I peer and listen. *Don't go away*, I beg the new ship, my mouth full of silver sand. *Please come down, look for us, look for wreckage, look! Don't! Go!*

So they go. Detach, winky-blink, into transit and gone. Mom continues orbiting, unperturbed, and I get the first clear thought from Cora in thirteen years: *What?*

Surprised, sleepy, just waking up, as it were, from a juicy nap between Jacques and me. No pain, apparently, not anymore. *Cora!* I babble. *Cora Cora my Goddess-God oh my dear oh are you all right*—how *could* she be “all right”?—*oh God I’ve been so lonesome!*

Cora: *Elizabeth?* I howl up at the Three. *Elizabeth, what’s happened? I only feel you on the link, and you’re out of phase. Where are Jacques and Willem?*

And the blue fire falls.

* * * *

I eat, I excrete, with my changed hands I shape the silver slime I excrete, and I watch all this as I have watched it for thirteen years without understanding or, now, caring. The artificial structure we first sighted has grown under my care. My work has changed it from a condom with legs to a network of channels, running out into the mica-strewn waste, silver channels etched complexly, running out not straightly, but curved and angled in a manner that my mind, admittedly not at its sharpest, cannot fully comprehend. Cora has stopped trying to talk to me and is talking to Mom instead. She by now realizes that it is not the same blue night she recalls from our landing. Whatever her body now looks like within the firefall-sealed shuttle, her brain must be intact, and I am glad for this. That means she is still herself, or so I comfort myself by thinking.

Happening now, it is. Firefall it is. Thirteen cycles it is. Blue night it is. Rushing rushing down over along the silver channels, energy from the firefall beams up through the condom into space. *What?* I think. *A beacon? Is that what it has made me make?* I scream, the fire catches me, tongues like before, why did I not think to burrow hide erect a shelter? Flesh melting, I scream, Cora asking, *What? What?*, and I am fire, all fire, and I change oh Goddess-God I change, growing up and high and legs off arms off feet wriggling away smoke burning blue genitals gone, running into mica slag like Jacques’s face and along my spine a scream of youth.

Wings, I sprout wings. Pushing, tearing out of me, liberated by the flame, the condom at the center of the wheel I have built singing the wings out of me. I can hear it singing now, and my cells responding. It is taking up the blue light into itself and it is singing and my flesh answers yes and my wings answer yes and my bones thin and my chest expands and my heart, huge, swells and my eyes open so wide and up I am riding on the blue winds, up. *Elizabeth! Don’t leave me!* Cora is weeping, but that is not

music. And I soar.

Up, up, catching the wind, buoyed by the firefall, up. Lighter, lightest. The dark mountains are beating their drums, the desert is rattling its cymbals. From the farthest peaks, where we four never went, the fairies sing in answer, not in words. I am conscious that somewhere in my unutterably altered anatomy I am still neurolinked through Cora to Momship and she is recording all I think and feel. Then I forget this, because the music is too beautiful.

Up, soaring, higher. Peaks all around. Fairies—no *word* for them; a *song* for them, rather—fairies, the Fair Folk, wafting 'round me. I fly more clumsily than they; I seem an atrocity in my bulk compared to them; they help support me. Their song caresses me, and I realize that their song is absolutely and precisely a mirror of the runnels I have built in the sand around the condom with my own mica excretions. *Come! Here!* the beacon calls to the sky. *Come! Here! Life! Come!* And so do my fairies.

We join, they and I. Ah Goddess-God, ah Jacques, ah Willem, ah dearest Cora, ah long sobbing loneliness, ah silkflesh to notflesh. We join, and the joining is like the wheel I have made, too, and in the joining the fairies rip me open, rip me top to bottom and I help them rip me and I say take and see and taste and consume. And we feast upon one another without fear, until the firefall ends.

* * * *

Elizabeth! Don't leave me!

Pentecost swings into yellowish daylight. Cora is in my head still, a long wail, then nothing, cut off sharp as butter under the knife. I am great. I hang in a cave. I make things come out of me which my sisterbrothers feed upon. They say, *What is Earth?* They say, *What is Momship?* They say, *What songs are these, the manform and the womanform?* They do not say any of this, of course, not in words, but how else can I transcribe for you their songs? That which comes out of me has given to the fairies thoughts, memories, and feelings my brain has collected, and now, hanging in the cave like a gigantic mutant opossum, I have never felt my mind to be so clear.

They drink from me my memory of the ship, how we came. They drink from me Jacques and Willem. For the first time, feeling them drink, I experience no sorrow, and no sorrow over Cora, who lies comatose on the

other side of the world, the mind-reviving energies of the firefall beyond her mind's help for another thirteen-commonyear day. Momship can keep her alive, but not conscious without the firefall's extra energy boost. I now know what has killed us, and what that killing means. I let my brothersisters feed until the torpor comes upon me, and I sleep.

When I awaken, I feel Cora again. The blue light sings in the cave mouth. My sisterbrothers are gone; I am alone again. Cora: *Willem? Elizabeth? Jacques? Report, please.* I am immobile. I seem to have become part of the cave wall. I cannot feel differentiated limbs; I rather sense that my human brain and limbic system are still in there, somewhere, preserved by the artistry of the alien construct to which my flesh has been joined. Cora: *Elizabeth? I am receiving a faint signal. Please attempt to boost.* Outside the cave, the azure fire explodes and dances and pinwheels and pulses on the slag plains.

I call: *Cora? This is Elizabeth. Do you read me?*

I read you, Elizabeth. Report your condition. My data is incomplete. Have you any contact with the others?

I cannot tell her they are dead. *Negative, Cora, I reply. They seem to be out of range. Repeat, out of range. Unable to locate. What is your condition?*

The shuttle appears to have sustained damage, Cora replies. She sounds puzzled rather than alarmed. I seem to be locked in. I have no clear sense of my own body, and my memory appears fragmentary. Where are you, Elizabeth?

In a cave, I reply. I estimate twenty kilometers to the northwest of your position.

How in hell did you get way over there?

I'm not sure, I say.

What is the condition of your life support? Mom is giving me no clear data.

I can see my suit lying where I had sloughed it off onto the mica slag outside the cave. I say, *Life-support appears intact. I don't think I can move, however.* I do not tell her that my body has changed from that of a

mutant opossum to something resembling a beehive with bat ears.

Elizabeth, says Cora. Mom reports severe radiation fluxes. The plane appears to be some kind of amplifier or transducer. Mom has located extensive artificial construction in the immediate vicinity of the downed shuttlecraft, and said construction is emitting a powerful signal along a wide frequency band. Unable as yet to interpret, but it might attract attention to us eventually.

I shriek, I gnash my nonexistent teeth, I strain peculiar muscles, I try to rip myself out of the cave wall. *It mustn't!* I scream. *It's a trap! Cora, it's a trap! Trigger Mom for a wideburst sweep and destroy it! Cora?*

And silence again. And dawn again. And sleep again.

* * * *

Motherfatherparent, say the little ones in my womb, tell us a story. They do not say this in words. They secrete it. I open my mental eyes and realize that I have become the mountain. It is blue dusk outside; the fire has not yet fallen, but it will fall, soon. The infants lining my innards, drinking of my flesh, are bright sparks in the lower left center of my consciousness. I feel like an apartment building. Where my head would be, had I a head, the wind howls around my peaks. Where my hands would be, the mica slag plain cracks into sparkling gulleys, which run twenty kilometers to our original landing site. My spine seems to have flattened, curved, and split, so that I receive a constant flow of untranslatable impressions up the core of me from near and far away. It is as though I have become a kind of Momship myself.

To my children I sayingscrete: *The blue night is come, and the fire will soon fall. Prepare dear ones for birth, and do not fear the winds.* And they suckle, gathering their strength.

Already I can sense the radiation surge. I cast out for Cora. I feel huge, powerful. Nothing. I cast out for Momship. Nothing. Has her orbit deteriorated? Is she on the other side of the planet again? I cast as far as I can, and a distant echo of a response flicks a remote tongue. *Cora?*

In the radio frequencies, the storm begins, and the fire begins to fall.

On the plain, the alien transmitter which I have built in my earlier incarnation explodes into action, thrusting its beacon skyward. Pain sears

me. I divide, split. Blue axes hack at my mountainflesh. Oh Goddess-God, there is no pain like the pain of giving birth; it is a ripe pain, a release pain, but do not imagine there is nothing of loss in it. My babies cry and cry and leap and push and out! Out! Out! Dropping like fruit from my flesh, burning bursting blue in the firefall, screaming as their cells proliferate, evincing new patterns, writhing themselves into shapes I only dimly recognize. Fairies? Not fairies. Something new. Once they were my brothersisters, and we joined for the sake of Art; and now something new is coming into being from the flesh we have shared. What?

They writhe, all twenty-eight of them. Limbs burst from central balls of shuddering flesh. Blue flame licks digits into differentiation. Fingers, toes, pseudopenises, scrotal-like sacks, pseudolabia, monster clitorises. With a shudder, heads, and oh my oh my such beauty babes, dear Jacques and Willem and Cora and Elizabeth

No!

As the fire falls, the four of us come into standing position in the cavern light, all four of us, seven times multiplied. New Jacques, New Willem, New Cora, and New Elizabeth stand up in my cavernous womb and turn their perfect faces to the sky. For an instant, we are linked once more, my dearest dears and I, jewels in one setting, calm to our marrow, love flowing unimpeded through our shared veins, and in my memory we are tumbling again in sweet joy, and we will never be alone again. Then we begin to die a second time. Radiation rakes us. Our human cells, unprotected, cannot withstand it. Willem's brain bursts from its pan and runs down into bright blue flowers on the floor of me. He claws, trying to find his eyes, as he did on the mica slag plain that day, when I watched him in his beauty erupt into putrescence. Jacques simply shrivels, withers, combusts, popping into showers of sparks while his wail rises and rises and falls. Cora's guts kick out of her as though they have taken on lives of their own, flailing furiously in the mush of her pelvis. I think, *This is what would have happened to her if she hadn't been up in Mom*, but only part of me is thinking it; the rest of me is trying to pull the mountain that is myself down around us. For now I see me.

Seven Elizabeths caper in the blue light. Seven Elizabeths slough off their skins. Seven Elizabeths turn bright as mica, spatulate-handed, huge-eyed, their hair weaving itself into carapaces around them, jaws melting into feeding-tubes for the sucking up of slag. The Willems and Jacqueses and Coras expire on the floor, but the Elizabeths keep dancing, singing, capering in the blue flame as it falls from the sky. And I cry, *Why?*

Why was I spared? Why could I adapt when the others could not?

And the Elizabeths hear me. They pause. Shimmering, attenuated, they form a circle, fingers intertwined, and they speak to me. *Thank you, genepartner, they say. Thank you for this great work, this song of songs! For seventy-seven cycles, since last the winged ones came to us, we have waited for the suns to bring us new beings with new songs to share.*

The fairies? I think.

Our last visitors. We rejoiced to join with them, for the sake of Art, but it has been so long. Now you have made of the remains of their ship a beacon to call others to us, and it will not be so long this time.

I made it? I cry. I?

We, reply the Elizabeths, and the thought-burst I receive shows me Cora, linked with Momship and the techdata stored in Mom's memory banks. It is why Cora has been kept alive, and why she is alive no longer, having served her purpose. It is good to have a purpose. Now that they have reshaped my body to build the beacon, and joined with my flesh to learn their new song, will they discard me, too?

The question is meaningless to them. I am, it seems, part of them forever, now, for that is the essence of their Art: the total sharing of spirit, soul, and flesh without loss of individual identity. *It is a great expansion, the Elizabeths sing. We have greatly learned through our collaboration. It has been a delight to create with you, genepartner.*

The Elizabeths dance on while the beacon roars into the sky. I search for Cora, but she is not there anymore. I search for Willem and Jacques, but they are not there, either. I send my wail out over the hills, and my longing out into the plains, but my beloveds are gone, ground to dust like used charcoal sticks. And as the firefall slows, and Pentecost turns again into the bruise-colored dawn, I wonder to what new song I will awaken, and what new death of love.