



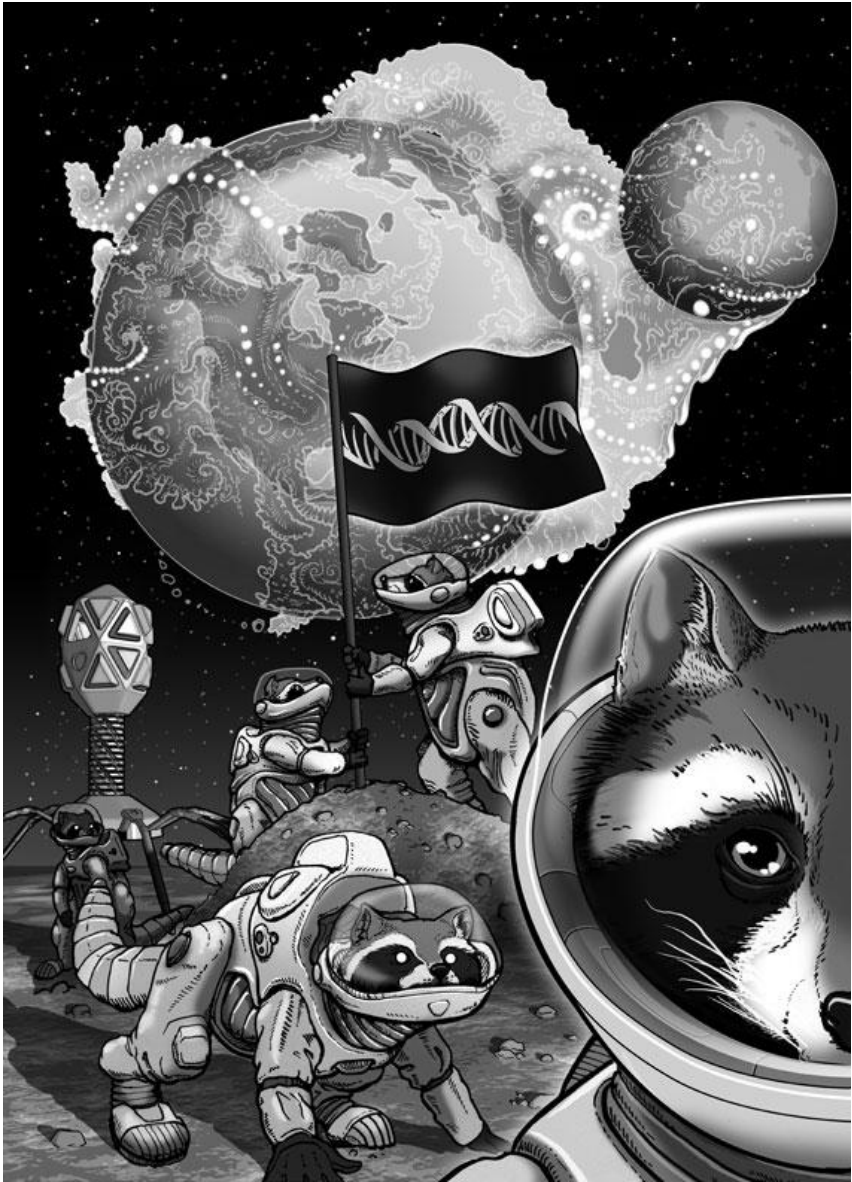
Thoughtcrime Experiments
nine stories

edited by **Sumana Harihareswara and Leonard Richardson**

For everybody.

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*“Gaia’s Strange Seedlike Brood (Homage to Lynn Margulis)”
art by Patrick Farley*

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Introduction

by Sumana Harihareswara

Welcome to the *Thoughtcrime Experiments* anthology.

Our aim was to find mind-breakingly good science fiction/fantasy stories that other editors had rejected, and release them into the commons for readers to enjoy. My co-editor Leonard writes extensively on our methodology and aims in [Appendix A](#), but the short version is: we did it. Here it is.

There isn't a theme, really, just "what we like." It turns out that we like political satire and family drama and detective thrillers and fables and fable deconstructions and the mysteries of debugging. It's all good stuff and we hope you like it.

We received many awesome submissions. You're just seeing a fraction of them because we couldn't publish them all. Appendix A is a step-by-step guide showing you how you can do it too, with a few thousand dollars and some sweat.

This is now your anthology. Everything's licensed under the Creative Commons BY-NC-SA license: Attribution-Noncommercial-Sharealike. You can remix the art, the fiction, and even this introduction. If you do cool things with *Thoughtcrime Experiments*, please let us know so we can rejoice.

Or just let us know if the anthology rocks and you loved reading it. That's what we're going for.

Acknowledgments

Rachel Chalmers liked this project so much that when we announced it she offered to pay \$200 so we could publish an additional story. And she did, and that's what happened.

Brendan Adkins helped with story selection, and then with proofreading, and then with layout.

Susie, John, and Maggie Chadwick made the cover photo possible. (Leonard took the photo itself.)

Special thanks to Patrick & Teresa Nielsen Hayden, John Joseph Adams, and Jed Hartman, for inspiration, encouragement, and precedent.

Thanks also to Zed Lopez, the Creative Commons community, Mako Hill & Mika Matsuzaki, Mel Chua, Joe Wahrhaftig, Alexei Othenin-Girard, Rohit Khare & Smruti Jayant Vidwans, Kevin Maples & Beril Guvendik, Susan McCarthy & Daniel Gunther, Julia Bernd & Michael Ellsworth, Kaolin Fire, Chris East, our families, and the Gmail developers.

Thanks finally to all our great authors and artists, and to everyone who submitted a story or announced the anthology.



*“Pirate vs. Alien”
art by Erin Ptah (erinptah.com)*

Ever since he was a kid, Leonard has loved Keith Laumer's satirical stories of Retief the galactic diplomat. Mark Onspaugh has written a story with the scope, ingenuity, and comic feel of the best Retief, but told from a very different perspective.

Welcome to the Federation

by Mark Onspaugh

Gird Mackel was dreaming of happier times when the loud, shrill alarm of his Happy Tone clock-radio assaulted him into wakefulness.

Gird had owned ten clock-radios in his life, and the first nine had been sensible enough to break when he hurled them across the room.

The Happy-Tone merely bounced off the wall and continued to bray at him. It seemed indestructible. His assistant Huri had selected it on the basis of durability when she had purchased the cursed thing at Gal-Mart ("Where the Galaxy shops!").

Gird rubbed his eyes and got out of bed, gasping when his bare feet hit the cold floor.

The heat was out again.

Gird sighed and shambled to the bathroom, mentally going over his agenda for the coming day.

The bathroom faucets belched out brown water for a good three minutes before clearing. The water got progressively colder, even though Gird had the hot tap turned up as far as it would go.

Gird cursed the plumbing, something that had become a morning ritual, then splashed cold water on his face. He desperately wanted a shower but was afraid the frigid water might give him a heart attack. He tried shaving, but his Gal-Mart Shave-a-tron 5000 shorted out with a spectacular burst of sparks and smoke. He settled for splashing his face with the aftershave his son Nuul had sent him for the Blessing of the Fish and Waters Festival last year.

It was a scent called Starduster, and it burned his face.

Gird put on his suit and chose a clip-on tie from a rack in the closet. He had never mastered the art of tying the damn things. Traditionally

the men of Covalla had kept their neck and chests bare, to show that they were honest and that their twin hearts beat true.

That was before the visits from the Federation of Worlds and the Kregaash Empire. Covalla, a tiny planet in an unremarkable system, had never had visitors from other worlds, let alone two massive collectives that spanned whole galaxies.

The Federation of Worlds had been founded by Earth and a handful of sentient worlds long before Gird's great-great-great-grandfather had been born. Because the founding worlds were on the opposite side of the galaxy, Covalla had been ignored for millennia.

Then the Kregaash Empire had conquered a neighboring galaxy known to the Covallans as Pa-uul-ahuhuyan, or "The Great Oar of Pa-uul". This region was known to the Federation as "The Large Magellanic Cloud" and to the Kregaash as "The Kregaashian Birthright". Running low on races to subdue and abuse, the conquest-happy Kregaash had been looking to expand their empire, and their reptilian eyes had fallen on Covalla.

Once the Kregaash Empire began making overtures, the Federation of Worlds decided they were interested in Covalla, as well.

Both groups sent dignitaries and presents, and both sides told the Covallans how important they were. As a welcoming gesture, Gird's grandfather Murr had led the boats out and caught a giant tren, a meaty fish large enough to feed the village and the dignitaries.

Both sides seemed to appreciate the feast, though much of their portions of tren was later found in napkins stashed under the table. Both seemed to enjoy the traditional dancing and entertainment, though the wait staff later revealed that the Federation representative had actually been asleep and the Kregaashian was surreptitiously playing something called a "video game".

The Covallans were a good-natured and forgiving people, and they shrugged off these insults. Their world was pleasant, the seas were bountiful, and they loved sharing.

If only we had been a little meaner, thought Gird.

His car was still in the shop, so Gird waited for the bus to take him from the Presidential Palace to his office. In his great-grandfather's time, all had lived in open huts on the beach. The leader, selected by rotation, showed his or her temporary position by hanging a white shell in the entrance.

Gird missed living on the beach. He missed the scent of the ocean, the cool breezes and light rains that soothed and lulled you to deep and restful sleep. He missed racing out to the boats in the morning, bringing in the catch and laughing, singing and dancing into the night.

Most of all he missed making masks and costumes for the festivals and Sagas-by-Avatar. He had been very good at it before the Federation had banned such festivals as uncivilized. They'd appointed him President for Life after his father died.

The bus arrived belching smoke, and Gird greeted the driver and the other passengers. Nobody smiled at him. They blamed him for all the changes that had come to Covalla.

Gird sighed, and took a seat near the back. It was a half hour ride to New Paris, and he had forgotten both his paper and book of crossword puzzles.

The bus went along Coastal Route 24, a four lane highway that the Federation had built to replace the first Federation road, a two-lane thoroughfare they had named Sea Front Road. In pre-Federation time it had been a small and lovely path called Minoh-Ul-kjavallah, or "The Trail Minoh the Sea God Took to Court Mother West Wind".

You couldn't see much of the ocean, any more. The clear areas had become the sites of barracks for a proposed Federation base. The enormous base had been half completed when war had broken out near Antares, and all available Federation soldiers and engineers had gone to fight the good fight.

Gird's son Nuul was out there somewhere, fighting with the other fifteen young men and women deemed draftable by the Federation Infantry.

Gird wiped his eyes thinking of Nuul. In the old days the boy would have been married and he and his wife would be part of the leader rotation. Nuul would steer his own boat and invite his parents over for tren and palm wine.

Nuul departure for the Federation war had been the last straw with Asj, Gird's wife. The moment her son had shipped out, Asj had moved back to the other side of the cove with her mother and younger brothers. A Presidential Palace, even a tiny one, is a very lonely place without a wife.

Gird wished for the thousandth time he could go back in time and advise his grandfather Fuuw not to join the Federation. They might

have been conquered by the Kregaash, but Gird wondered if that would be any worse.

The bus arrived in New Paris, a collection of dun colored buildings built around a central square. In the square was a statue of Gird's grandfather Fuuw shaking hands with Colonel Benjamin Breckenridge, the first Federation member to set foot on Covalla. Gird had always thought the sculptor had taken liberties, making Breckenridge look god-like while his grandfather looked doddering and servile.

He noted that someone had thrown eggs at the statue again.

Gird thanked the driver and got off the bus. A balled-up candy wrapper hit him in the back of the head, but he didn't turn around.

The Office of Covallan Administration and Enforcement was directly across from the spattered statue. It was marked from the other buildings by a large and stylized shell of purest white nacre, a touch that the Federation architect thought honored the tradition of the Covallans, but which most locals found ostentatious and vulgar.

Huri, his assistant, was at her desk when he arrived. She smiled when she saw him, then clucked her tongue and stood up. Crossing to him with a small shake of her head, she straightened his clip-on tie.

"Can't even master this child's formal wear," Gird said.

"You have one of the most honest and handsome chests in all of Covalla," she said, "you should be able to bare it properly."

"Federation dress code," he began.

"Federation dress code," she repeated with venom, "designed by pale, recycled-air breathers."

Gird admired Huri's fire. She was one of the few who hadn't made him the planetary scapegoat.

"Anything pressing?" he asked.

"Five more calls for you to go back where you came from."

Gird's family had helped settle the planet Covalla many millennia before, when the great god Pa-uul had guided their sky-ships to this new world. It was so long ago that Covallans had lost the technology necessary for interstellar exploration. It didn't matter, they had always had just what they needed. Gird's ancestor Ma'aluu had been the pilot of the very first ship. That Gird

He shook his head. "How can my own mother accuse me of being a Federation shill?"

was now perceived as some Federation mole and sycophant was ridiculous and hurtful.

“Anyone important wishing to deport me?”

“The Minister of Fishing and...” She hesitated, not wanting to hurt him.

“Go ahead, Huri, I’m getting used to being unpopular.”

“Your mother.”

“My...” He shook his head. “How can my own mother accuse me of being a Federation shill?”

“She theorizes the Federation took her real son and left you in his crib. She says...” Huri paused, her eyes now a bit moist.

He motioned for her to continue.

“She says no son of hers would send his only son and the youth of Covalla to fight in a distant war that has nothing to do with us.”

Gird had no answer for that one, he merely nodded and went into his office with the tall windows that looked out over the statue of his much-despised grandfather.

He spent the first part of the morning going over various reports and complaints. A study by a student marine biologist showed that the tren population was in decline, largely because of pollutants from the two power plants the Federation had constructed near the beaches. Gird’s grandfather had been among those who had said that the Covallans did not need a power plant, let alone two, but the Federation execs had smiled knowingly and continued bulldozing mylin palms.

The student hoped her report would be forwarded to the Federation Council on Indigenous Fish and Game. Gird smiled sadly at her youthful enthusiasm. Had he ever been that young, that full of fire and passion? Of course he had. He put her report into a sub-space packet to Outer Worlds Administration, knowing it would never be read. At least he could tell her honestly that it had been sent.

The sanitation workers were on strike, largely because they resented cleaning up after everybody else. In the old days, each Covallan was responsible for the area in and around his hut, and a stretch of beach five feet wide. In this way the villages and oceanfront stayed clean and free of parasites. Now many Covallans seemed to follow the Federation example, which was to leave your trash wherever you felt like it.

Gird sighed. In the old days everything had been biodegradable, there had been no need for landfills and dumps. In fact, the Covallans had no words for such things, and now had to use the fed-lac equivalents.

Gird started to read a report of children hurt playing in the partially-completed Federation base when he felt his breathing become restricted and a familiar pain in his chest. It had happened enough that he now recognized it as mere anxiety, what the Federation doctor had called a “panic attack”. The doctor prescribed Ree-Lax, a sedative carried at Gal-Mart. Gird, like many of his generation, was the first in his family to take any sedative other than warm uluunut juice.

Gird checked to make sure Huri wasn’t watching, then popped two Ree-Lax from a bottle he had hidden in his desk under a spare shirt and clip-on.

Once his heart rate had slowed and he was breathing normally, he told Huri to put a call through to the Galactic Administration Annex on Munbara IV.

A graphic showed a small silver sphere, his call, being routed and bounced from department to department as he attempted to reach someone higher up the galactic ladder.

At last the Gird-sphere stopped at a box labeled Outer Commerce, Curios and Vending Machines. The box then resolved into a frowning male from Nnnn III. The Nnnn were a race utterly lacking in compassion, which some thought made them ideal bureaucrats and loan officers.

Gird knew this because Huri had gotten him a used copy of “A Child’s Guide to the Founding Worlds of the Federation” by Uqqq’ll & Crockett. Gird’s office had been due for a whole slew of information on the other worlds of the Federation, but then war had broken out with Rigel and his world was deemed too close to the Kregaash Empire for such sensitive information.

Still, the children’s book had been helpful. It had told him that it would be easier to dance naked on the surface of the sun than to get an Nnnn to smile or laugh.

“How can I help you, Governor Nnnnmackel?” The Nnnn also liked to preface all surnames with their own. An old Nnnn saying went “Everybody follows the Nnnn, and we mean Nnnneverybody.”

“Sir, I’m not sure why I was transferred to you. I have been dealing with the Bureau of Outer Worlds and Independent Plutoids.”

“Have you been paying the taxes on sales of your indigenous arts and crafts?”

“No, we haven’t sold any arts and crafts since initial contact.”

The Nnnn scanned a screen with one of its eyestalks while the other kept a baleful gaze on Gird. “I see here that Covalla still owes thirty-seven fedcreds in taxes from the sale of a clay pot during initial contact.”

“I believe that was leftovers from our welcoming feast that we gave to Colonel Breckenridge, so that was a gift.”

“Mmmm-hmm.” The Nnnn checked more records. “My records indicate that Colonel Nnnnbreckenridge said he paid five-hundred fedcreds for that pot. It’s on his expense report.”

“Well, he was lying. My great grandmother gave him a pot she had received from her great grandmother when she was a girl. It was quite old and cherished by my family.”

“I’m sure it was,” said the Nnnn, his expression indicating that he was either growing bored or suffering from dyspepsia. “Still, if you feel the report was in error, your people should have filed a complaint immediately.”

“How could we? This is the first we’ve heard of it.”

The Nnnn shook his head. “My records indicate much of your earliest records took the form of songs and puppet shows.”

“We call them ‘Saga-by-Avatar.’”

“I’m sure you do. Isn’t it likely you people lost some of valuable records over the years when some puppet went missing or the puppeteer died?”

“Our records have always been impeccable. In fact, we didn’t have any trouble until the Federation insisted we go to computers.”

“So you did have trouble.”

Gird realized he had walked into a bureaucratic language trap. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Did you have trouble with the initial computer switch-over or not?”

“Well, yes, but I can assure you that...”

“Fines and penalties bring the current balance to...” The Nnnn did some calculating. “Eight hundred trillion, five hundred and thirty million and twenty-seven fedcreds.”

Gird gaped at him. If they sold the planet and everything on it they could not raise such a sum.

“Sir, there is no way...”

“Will there be anything else, Governor Nnnnmackel?”

“I need to speak to the person responsible for the construction of Federation troop bases.”

Now the Nnnn’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “Why?”

“Because those half-completed eyesores are ruining our view, and the power plants supplying them with unneeded power are polluting our waters, and the buildings erected for us native Covallans have neither clean water nor adequate heat, which we wouldn’t need if your rape of our planet hadn’t altered the fleeking climate!”

It was the first time in years he had dared to tell a Federation official what he really thought.

“Governor Nnnnmackel, there’s a war on. You’re just not that important.” The Nnnn terminated the call.

Gird picked up a Lucite paperweight that had been Colonel Breckenridge’s gift to Gird’s grandfather. It was a model of the ship Breckenridge had come down in, and was made in some exotic locale known as Hallmark.

Gird threw it across the room. It broke a window with a cacophonous din and sailed into the square. From the clanging he heard, Gird assumed he had hit the statue.

Huri came running in, sure he had jumped out the window.

Gird looked at her, face red and twin hearts pumping.

“Huri, get me the Kregaash Empire!”

It took Huri two hours to get the call through.

Varv Smensgssh, Pain-Giver First Class of the Imperial Kregaashan Fleet appeared on the screen. Three of his eyes had patches over them, each bearing a medal. The other six eyes regarded Gird and then broke into a smile filled with file-sharpened teeth and viscous saliva.

“Gird! Gird Mackel! How are you, you old fish fondler?” It was the politest term the Kregassh had for Covallans.

“Pretty good, Varv Smensgssh.”

“Aw, call me ‘Smensgy’, old buddy.”

“Okay, ‘Smensgy’, congratulations on making Pain-Giver First Class.”

“Well, it’s mostly an honorary title these days. What can I do for you, Gird?”

“We changed our minds.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“We revoke the Federation charter. We want the Kregaash Empire to invade.”

“Is this a joke, Gird?”

“No, sir. We want the Kregaash to step on our backs as they establish a foothold in this quadrant.”

Varv Smengssh looked down a minute, embarrassed. When he looked up, Gird could see he had flushed a deep lavender.

“Gird, we don’t do that any more. Conquer, I mean.”

“What?”

“We had an epiphany. Some guy — famous, lots of teeth — went through our system about ten years ago with this religion called The Niceties. You know, stuff like ‘it’s nice to be nice to the nice’.”

“I don’t understand.”

“It took!” Varv Smengssh exclaimed. “I still don’t know how... In fact, every time I try to wrap my head around it I get a splitting headache. One of those up-all-night-drinking-fermented-dakka-pancreas kind of headaches.” Varv Smengssh winced and rubbed his temples. “But it works! We returned all our conquered worlds to an autonomous status and have spent the last five years knitting hats and gloves for various harvest festivals around our quadrant.”

Gird pleaded with him. “Just tell the Federation you’ve taken over. Tell them we’re part of the Kregasshian Empire.”

“No can do, my fish-fondling friend. ‘Nicety #84: It’s not nice to lie, so don’t even try’.”

Gird sighed. “Okay. I understand.”

“Hey, Gird, do you guys still make that appetizer with the strip of kutrr meat wrapped around a mylin nut?”

“No, Federation took our kutrrs to Antares and chopped down all the mylin palms.”

“Too bad. I loved those things.”

“You can get something similar at Gal-Mart. Part of their ‘Almost Like Home World Cookin’!’ line of frozen foods.”

“Gal-Mart?” Varv Smengssh made a face. “Last time I ate something there they had to pump out my nutrient sacs.”

Gird nodded, grateful to talk to a friend. A friend, it’s true, who had once promised to roast Gird’s hearts with his death-dealer and eat them still popping and smoking, but a friend nevertheless.

As they were saying their goodbyes, Gird had an idea.

“Hey, Smensgy.”

“Yeah?”

“You guys used to threaten us with tales of the Ptaak. What were they like?”

Varv Smensgssh went pale.

“The Ptaak? Trust me, Gird, you don’t want to have anything to do with them.”

* * *

The call from Covalla started at Outer Commerce, Curios and Vending Machines, then was bounced to Outer Worlds Administration and was deflected (hurriedly and with many blanched and pale faces) to the Offices of Star Command, Federation Fleet Admiral Benjamin Breckenridge IV.

Various Generals and Admirals from the Founding Worlds were rounded up into the main conference room. The Covallan Emissary and the Federation Ambassador to Covalla were both summoned, and there was a monumental outburst of swearing from Breckenridge when it was discovered that neither post existed.

The Fleet’s finest took their seats and the west wall became a translucent screen.

The call from Covalla was put through.

Accounts differ on the initial reaction to the first glimpse of xCxz, Ruler of Ptaak. Some claim that several of the top brass fled from the room, some to be physically sick and others to hide while they wept like little babies. Other reports say that the military men and women stood their ground, exclaiming slogans once attributed to Captain John Paul Jones (“I have not yet begun to fight!”) and General Anthony McAuliffe (“Nuts!”).

It is agreed that Breckenridge himself stayed in his chair. Whether he soiled himself is still a matter of debate.

Regardless, the screen showed the ruler of the Ptaak at the desk of Governor Gird Mackel. No one had ever seen a Ptaak, and it was later agreed they were one of the ugliest races ever. “Face like a Ptaak” became an insult on hundreds of worlds.

“Members of the Federation of Worlds,” xCxz spat, “we of the Ptaak Infestation claim Covalla as our world. It is our first foray into your

loathsome quadrant, and we will be studying the local indigenous bipedal vertebrates to determine the most effective means of torture and the most painful method of harvesting their organs for snack cakes and children's toys. Anyone who opposes us will meet the fate of Gird Mackel, their pitiful excuse of a leader."

With that, xCzx held up Gird's smoking, severed head and shook it at the viewers. Gird's expression was one of dull surprise.

Then the screen went black.

"We will be studying the local indigenous bipedal vertebrates to determine the most effective means of torture and the most painful method of harvesting their organs for snack cakes and children's toys."

The room erupted into an uproar of righteous indignation and more catchy phrases.

* * *

Gird Mackel was reaching to shut off his clock radio when the Presidential Palace began to shake. Gird assumed that Mu'uuu'uuu-ahah, the Volcano Goddess, was making herself heard after many centuries of silence.

He and Huri went out onto the

front lawn.

The sky was black, but not with smoke.

Warships and cruisers of every type filled the skies. Gird's neighbors fled back into their homes, sure that someone meant to put poor Covalla out of its misery.

Several shuttles began to land on the lawn.

"You burned that mask, didn't you?" he asked Huri.

"Yes, and your poor severed head. That's what really gave me the creeps," Huri said.

Admiral Benjamin Breckenridge IV was the first to step out onto Gird's lawn, squashing some hgu lilies in the process.

"I'm here for the Ptaak," he said menacingly, holding both a ceremonial sword and a phasing blast pistol. His first words had been carefully crafted on the journey to Covalla, beating out "Show yourselves, alien scum!" and "Who wants some?"

"As soon as they saw you coming they ran," said Gird nervously.

A victory cry went up, cut short when Breckenridge raised his hand. “And just who might you be?”

“Gird Mackel, brother of the late Governor,” Gird said.

“I thought the dead Governor was Gird Mackel,” said Breckenridge, puzzled.

“All my brothers are named Gird Mackel.”

Admiral Breckenridge nodded paternally, accustomed to the simple ways of indigenous people out on the Wrong Arm of the Galaxy.

It was the shortest-won victory in Federation history, and one of the most lasting.

The Federation did face a PR nightmare when reporters, conservationists and Federation-founding philanthropists demanded to know who had polluted Covalla’s once blue sea and skies, who had blighted the landscape, and who was accountable for the lack of clean, hot water at the Sheraton-Galacticus. Gird saved the Federation’s bacon by claiming all these ills were the result of the cruel and inhuman Ptaak Infestation. As a gesture of good will the Federation forgave the Covallans their longstanding debt and pledged to keep the tiny world safe.

The citizens of the Federation cried for poor Covalla to be restored to its pristine state, and their government was quick to oblige.

The first building to go was the Gal-Mart (“Where the galaxy shops!”), and many Covallans not only volunteered but paid to be on the demolition team.

Within three years all traces of “Ptaakan Infestation” had been removed. The seas were almost clean and the tren were again plentiful.

By this time war had broken out in the Sagittarian Phalanx, and the Federation could not afford to leave personnel behind to watch for the return of the hated Ptaak. Gird’s suggestion to bring home the sons and daughters of Covalla for this important task was quickly embraced. It was a proud day for Gird when his son Nuul was appointed Captain of the Federation Fleet, Covallan Theater.

When the final Federation ships left Covalla, they were heavily-laden with chunks of concrete, clock radios and ten-speed blenders, frozen cocktail wieners and underarm deodorant.

That was the day the Covallans held The Feast of the Burning of the Neckties.

* * *

The crying of his son Fuuw woke Gird Mackel. He went to the child's crib and picked him up.

"How about a walk on the beach, little guy?" he asked.

Fuuw cooed and gargled that this was a peachy idea.

Gird kissed his son's head and took him out, careful not to hit his head on the white shell hanging at the entrance of his hut. Temporary Chief Huri was out on the beach, discussing the coming Feast of Plenty with some of the elders. She waved and blew her husband and baby a kiss.

After the Federation had left, the people asked Gird to consider becoming Chief for the remainder of his life. He politely refused and recommended the rotation be reinstated. When it was proposed a statue be erected in his honor, he instead asked that an offering be made to the sea on behalf of the three men and women who had been lost in the Antarean Conflict.

Nowadays, Covalla's only contact with the Federation was a coded report the reigning Chief had to send in once a month, a report that said "All is well".

Declared a Primitive Cultural Treasure by the Department of Vacations, Cruises and Xeno-morbidity, Covalla was declared off-limits to all tourists and traveling sales-entities. Gird was able to get a special exemption for Varv Smensgssh and his family, who loved to lay on the beach and fish for tren with Gird and his son Nuul. Gird told his good friend Smensgy they were always welcome as long as they left their religious pamphlets and tracts at home with their Pre-Nicety pain-givers and molar-extractors.

And to most of the Federation Covalla was just too far away and at the wrong end of the galaxy, and that was the way Gird liked it.

Now he gazed out at the sea, his baby warm and snug in his arms.

"Remember, Fuuw," he said, kissing the babbling baby's head, "in the galactic scheme of things it's good to be important..."

But not too important.

* * *

Mark Onspaugh (www.markonspaugh.com) is a native Californian who grew up on a steady diet of horror, science fiction and DC Comics. A proud member of the HWA, he writes screenplays, short stories and novels. He was also one of the writers of the cult movie favorite "Flight of the Living Dead". He lives in Los Osos, CA with his wife, author/artist Dr. Tobey Crockett. His publications include anthologies like Footprints and the forthcoming The World is Dead (with fellow Thoughtcrime author Carole Lanham).

In “Jump Space,” a family goes on a trip, and encounters the appeals — and limits — of intimacy. It’s space opera on the personal scale.

Jump Space

by Mary Anne Mohanraj

Grains of Sand Freighter. Deneb, planetary approach. Three weeks ago.

“Do you really want to stop here?” Kate sat in the pilot’s chair, twisted around to face them, with Amara nursing quietly in her lap. “We don’t have much to trade that they want — and even if we did, this planet is barbaric. I don’t want the girls exposed to this culture.”

Iniya was playing in her room. One would hope. A precocious four-year-old could get into a frightening amount of trouble, even on a small ship where she’d lived her entire life. Joshua kept an ear open, just in case — he was on Ini-watch right now. Honestly, he’d rather be sitting on the floor, playing knights and dragons with her — but the adults needed to have this conversation.

“You say culture like there’s just one,” Sarita said sharply. “What about the engineered species and their cultures?”

“Sarita, c’mon,” Joshua said. “The engineered species and their treatment here are her *point*.”

“Exactly,” Kate snapped. “The dominant culture on this world is disgusting.”

Sarita said primly, “We’re supposed to avoid value judgments.”

“Kate’s right. It is appalling, really,” Joshua said. He tried to keep his tone mild, though Sarita in uppity mode would make a saint want to slap her.

Sarita deflated, flopping down into the co-pilot’s chair. She reached out an apologetic hand to Kate, who, after a moment, took it. Joshua breathed a covert sigh of relief.

“I know,” Sarita said, “they’re awful — but it’s not as if I want to take the girls down there. You can all stay up here; I just need one more vocal grouping — and no one’s ever studied any of the genetically engineered serf-species here.”

“Because no one civilized can stand to be around them. Poor things,” Kate said.

Joshua knew Kate was right, but he also knew that Sarita would get her way. She almost always did. She wanted things so passionately, so intensely, that it became impossible to say no to her. She wasn’t even saying anything now — just looking at Kate with those big dark eyes steady, silently pleading.

Kate sighed. “*One week.* That’s it. Maybe we can find an isolated beach somewhere in the world to take the girls to while you’re working. Ini’s never seen an ocean, and this world is practically all water.”

Sarita wisely didn’t say anything more — just jumped up and wrapped Kate in a hug, careful not to disturb the baby. Joshua turned and headed back to Ini’s room, grateful that the women had worked it out with only minimal intervention from him. That seemed to work best; when a man was partnered with two alpha females, it was generally wise to keep his head down and count his blessings. Besides, there were several knights and dragons waiting for him, along with one strong-willed princess.

* * *

University of All Worlds. Pyroxina major. Seven years ago.

“Professor?” The girl stood before him, her eyes downcast. Dark skin, like so many of his students here: all the locals on Pyroxina were of South Asian descent, from the third wave of Old Earth colonists. The University drew from all the colonies, of course, but it was tremendously cheaper for the locals to attend. No space fare, for one thing, and a discounted tuition rate.

Joshua smiled gently. “I’ve told you all before, you don’t need to be so formal with me. I’m not even a real professor — just a visiting instructor. Please, call me Joshua.”

The girl ducked her head even lower, her long black braid swinging. “Sorry, professor. I forgot.”

He wished she would look up. All the local girls seemed trained not to make eye contact with strange men. After ten weeks, it had gotten pretty frustrating trying to have conversations with so many tops of heads. It also made it a lot harder to learn their names. “It’s okay. Sarita, right? What can I do for you?”

“I love this class. It’s the best one I’ve taken at University. They should make you a real professor.”

“That’s very kind of you to say.” In fact, his chair had dropped a hint that maybe he should stick around, teach some summer classes, apply for the job that was opening up for next year. But that would mean dealing with department politics, working his way slowly up the totem pole. Joshua had seen how hellish that could be in other departments, how much time it took away from your real work. He wasn’t sure he wanted to make that kind of compromise. Besides, he wasn’t ready to settle down in one place, not yet. There was so much of the universe still to see...

“I particularly enjoyed the Grommer-Twince tributary modulations. The way they evoke the musicians’ desperate sense of planetary limits, given their distance from any other system —”

Joshua cut her off, confused. “You wrote a fine paper on the subject, yes.” It was based on that paper that he’d recommended her for the grad student fellowship. “But did you have a question for me?”

“I was wondering...” Sarita looked up then, her eyes meeting his for the first time in the conversation — the first time that semester. “...would you like to have dinner with me?”

Joshua drew in a quick breath, his face flushing. Her eyes were astonishingly dark brown, almost black. Dark like the empty spaces between the stars; the vertigo was dizzying. Before he could answer with the obligatory *no*, a response Joshua was surprised to find he did not want to give, Sarita had gone on, speaking quickly, her eyes locked on his.

“You’ve graded everything except the final exam, and I’ve gotten straight A’s. I’m going to get an A on that too, and I know you have to have a second-grader on the final anyway, so even if you wanted to give me a better grade than I deserve, you can’t, so it wouldn’t be a breach of ethics to go out with me. I would have waited to ask you until the semester was over, but I checked the flight records and you’re scheduled to leave Pyroxina the day after finals, so if I waited it would be too late. So I had to ask now.”

The only thing he could think to say was, “Those flight records are sealed.”

She smiled then, a wicked grin that he would never, not in a million light-years, have imagined on her. It transformed her serious face. “Not if you know how to hack your way in.”

Joshua found himself fighting back the very unprofessional urge to laugh. “You don’t have a lot of respect for the rules, do you?”

She said solemnly, “I’m actually very law-abiding. My parents would tell you that I’ve been an obedient daughter. I only break the rules when there’s an excellent reason to do so.”

“And I’m an excellent reason?” His pulse quickened.

She hesitated — the first pause he’d seen in her since the day she walked into his class, so serious and confident. “I’m not sure.” And then she smiled again, an uncertain smile that caught at him, made him swallow. “But I think so.”

Joshua knew, knew that he shouldn’t say it. But the words came out anyway, spilling from his mouth as if spoken by someone else entirely. “You know, I’ve recently decided to stay at the university a little longer, teach a summer class or two. So if you have any questions for me once the semester is actually over...” And he was smiling too, helplessly. He had a feeling he was in big trouble.

* * *

Deneb IV, Katchari Quarters. Three weeks ago.

Sarita was in trouble. The house-master who had agreed to let her interview some of them (provided that she pay the full sexual use-fee, of course), had warned her she might find it difficult to concentrate on her work. Sarita had thought he was exaggerating, but no. She’d interviewed seven Katchari so far — five females, two males. Even when she kept her head down and focused on her notes, kept a broad wooden table between them, the pheromones still had an effect in the small, enclosed bedroom. Quite an effect.

Sarita crossed and uncrossed her legs, trying to get comfortable. It was just so *hot* here. Sweat dripped down her spine, sliding under her sari’s silk border. She took another long drink from the glass of iced fruit juice on the table, and glanced up, briefly, at the new Katchari entering the room. Gods. This one might be the most beautiful yet. Deep, dark brown fur, and a long, muscular body, at least a foot taller than she was. She had a weakness for tall men.

Professional. The key was to stay professional. She tapped the recorder, setting it going. “Name, please?”

He answered in a low voice, “Chocolate.”

Sarita glanced up, startled. “You must be joking! Seriously? Did your parents actually name you that?” They had discussed the girls’ names for months before naming them, and had been very careful to choose names that couldn’t easily be mocked.

“I never knew my parents.” He stared straight ahead, his tone carefully neutral. “My crèche-leader felt *Chocolate* accurately described my fur, both in color and silky texture.”

“Well, yes,” Sarita had to admit, trying not to think about touching that fur. “Accurate, maybe. But it’s no name for a person!”

“I’m not a person, mistress. Not legally.” And there it was. He

glanced down at her from under long lashes, and on those last words, a spark of anger flashed in his eyes. The others had sung for her, just as she’d asked, and she’d recorded the songs, but they’d all been so sad, so despairing, so *broken*. Sarita didn’t know whether this one could even sing, but one thing was clear — despite his circumstances, he wasn’t broken yet. She felt her interest stirring.

“I can’t call you Chocolate. Or Choco. Umm... would it be okay if I called you Cho?”

He blinked, slowly, and then a smile curved its way along his face, taking him from beautiful all the way to drop-dead gorgeous. “I would like that.” He stepped closer, and closer yet, until he was suddenly all the way across the room, inches away, on absolutely the wrong side of the table. “I would like that very much.”

* * *

Sarita’s parents’ house. *Pyroxina major*. Six years ago.

“You don’t have to do this,” Kate said.

Sarita frowned. “What, you want me to just run off, leave the planet without even saying goodbye?”

“But they’re not speaking to you,” Joshua protested.

“Accurate, maybe. But it’s no name for a person!”

“I’m not a person, mistress. Not legally.”

“That’s *their* choice. I’ve been a good daughter. I’ve done everything I can to make them happy. I found a nice professor — ”

“—agnostic, white-skinned, and can’t even speak Tamil —” Joshua interjected.

“—introduced them to him, or tried to. Didn’t even have sex with him until we were contracted...”

“That depends on how you define sex, don’t you think?” Kate asked, lifting an eyebrow.

“...stayed in school, kept majoring in Engineering, the way they wanted — ”

“Sneaking in a second major in Music & Ethnology,” Kate continued.

“Engineering. Where I happened to meet a very nice freighter captain while interning at the spaceport.” Sarita smiled, too brightly. “You could argue that it was actually *all their fault* that I met Kate, fell in love, got you to redefine our contract as a threesome —”

“—and in the process, broke your poor parents’ hearts. Not that I’m complaining,” Joshua added hastily. He’d definitely come out ahead in that deal.

“It’s not like I’m the first in the family to have multiple spouses,” Sarita said, with just a little too much defiance in her voice.

“I don’t think I’d recommend that as your first line of attack,” Joshua said. “I’m not sure your parents will think that our situation is exactly comparable to your many-times-great-great-grandfather and his three wives, back on Old Earth.”

“They haven’t spoken to you for over a year,” Kate said. “What makes you think they’ll be willing to talk now?”

“I *don’t* know,” Sarita said, her voice finally breaking. “But they’re my parents, and I love them. I have to try. Okay?”

“Okay,” Kate said, her own voice shaking a little. She reached out and took Sarita’s hand in hers.

“Okay,” Joshua said, taking a deep breath. “Let’s do this.” He reached out to push the doorbell, bracing himself for the coming storm.

* * *

Deneb IV, Katchari Quarters. One week ago.

Sarita sank down into the bed. “They’ve agreed to stay another week. It took some convincing, but Josh told Kate that it wasn’t unreasonable for the work to take another week, especially if it was going well.”

“When was the last time you actually recorded a song?” Cho asked, his face unwontedly serious.

She smiled. “Two weeks, six days, and seven hours ago. Just before I met you. Unless you count the noises you’ve been making...”

“Have you told them about me?” He curled around her, his hands reaching to massage her back, claws retracted.

“Not yet. But I will.” Sarita’s eyes closed, involuntarily, at his touch. They’d trained him in massage, but it was more than that — Cho seemed to have an instinct for exactly the right places to touch. *Animal instincts*, she thought. But she would never say that out loud.

“You don’t have to tell your family,” he said.

“I want to.” She opened her eyes, reached out to stroke a finger across the short creamy fur of his cheek, marveling again at its softness.

“It’s pointless.” His voice was dark, empty.

Sarita reached out, trying to hold as much of his long body in her arms as she could. “Shh...” She didn’t want to talk about that, didn’t want to think about the end that was inevitably coming. Racing towards them, like the nose of a great ship, diving through space towards a Jump gate.

Cho said softly, “As you command, mistress.”

She stiffened. “Don’t ever call me that. Never, never, never. Do you understand me?” Her voice rose; her fingers clenched, digging into his pelt.

“Shh...” Now it was his turn to pull her into an embrace. They sank deeper into the bed.

* * *

Grains of Sand Freighter. Deneb, fourth planet, stable orbit. Two nights ago.

“Amma. Amma. Amma.”

“Amma’s not here, baby. Shh... Do you want me to read you your story?” The girl’s father sat by her bedside, stroking her forehead.

“Amma! Amma amma amma amma amma!”

Joshua glanced over to where Kate stood in the doorway, her hands twisting together in front of her. She was the calm one, but she’d never

make a good poker player. Her hands always gave her away. “Maybe Mommy will sing you a song?” They were usually careful not to break the routine — bath, book, song, bed, in strict order. The adults had long ago agreed that the children needed as much routine as possible in their itinerant lives. But Sarita hadn’t come home for three nights now. The story was *her* job.

Kate came forward, her voice lifting in a low croon, soft and wordless. The baby quieted. This would be enough for her, for now. It wasn’t the first time Sarita had disappeared for a night or two, after all. Sarita had warned him when he met her — she wasn’t the type to settle down. Joshua understood that. And it wasn’t as if she was in any danger — the planet might be cruel to the engineered species, but as a Pyroxina citizen Sarita should be well protected. But still — three nights. Three days and three nights. What the hell was she doing?

* * *

Grains of Sand Freighter. Saltair Expanse. Four years ago.

“Try this,” Sarita said, bringing over a bowl to Kate’s bunk. “My mother sent the recipe; she swears by it for nursing mothers. Of course, she’s not happy that I’m not the one nursing Ini, but still — can’t let her only granddaughter starve, can she? It’s a white curry, full of coconut milk. Milk to bring in the milk, they say. Although it’s actually the fenugreek that does the trick; stimulates milk production.”

“Can’t I just take some pills?” Kate asked. “I’m not hungry.” She lay sideways on the bunk, eyes closed, Iniya curled naked against her chest.

Sarita poked her arm gently. “That’s just the exhaustion talking. Who would have thought the tough freighter captain would be laid low by a little baby! C’mon, try a bite. For me? It took me hours to find all the ingredients on that last planet we stopped at, and they cost a fortune.”

Kate opened her eyes, sighed, and then opened her mouth and let Sarita spoon the curry in. She chewed wearily and swallowed. “You’d think after all these years they’d have found some better way to feed babies.”

Sarita kept feeding her, one bite after another. “*You* were the one who insisted on breast-feeding. Joshua and I would have been fine using formula. They’ve duplicated the ingredients found in breast milk, you know. Perfected it two decades ago.”

“It’s not the same,” Kate insisted. “I can’t prove it, but I’m sure it isn’t.”

“And so we bow to your motherly instincts,” Sarita said, smiling. “After all, you’re the one who has to wake up every three hours and stay awake until she’s done eating. We’re just the support team.”

Kate bit her lip. “Neither one of you has gotten any work done in months; I’m so sorry...”

“Shh...” Sarita brushed damp hair away from Kate’s forehead. “That was the deal. It’s *fine*. We knew what we were getting into — as much as any parent does, anyway. Besides, the little monkey’s actually kind of cute.” Sarita put down the bowl and gently scooped Ini up into her arms, bending down to smell the baby’s hair. Vanilla. She’d swear Ini’s hair smelled like vanilla.

Kate yawned and rolled over onto her stomach, her eyes closing again. “If they could just figure out a way to make babies’ stomachs bigger, so they could eat more at a go. It ought to be a simple engineering problem.”

Sarita laughed. “How about you work on that when you wake up, okay? After another hour or two of sleep, I’m sure you’ll be able to solve it.” Sarita bent down and pulled the blanket up to cover her partner, dropping a kiss on her forehead.

“Okay,” Kate said, and went to sleep. Sarita walked away, carrying Ini up to visit Joshua in the pilot’s chair. Three more weeks until they made planetfall again. Three more months until they could start the baby on solids. She thought they would make it. Probably.

She had *no* idea how two-parent households survived.

* * *

Deneb IV, Sea of Frustrated Desire. Yesterday.

Kate checked her comm unit again. “She’s not even answering now.”

“Stop worrying. Probably ran out of power; she always forgets to charge it.”

Kate called out, “Ini, stay where we can see you!” The sleepy baby on her chest muttered, “Amma.... amma.”

“Hush, baby. Hungry?” Kate offered her breast, and Amara took it peacefully enough, though she didn’t look happy.

Joshua blinked at the peaceful picture — Kate with light-brown Amara bare against her pale skin. Thinking again how lucky he was. “She’s always hungry. She’s going to be tall, I think, like her mother.”

“Her mother who ought to be back by now.” Kate’s voice was even more acerbic than usual.

“Aren’t you enjoying our little seaside vacation? Pink sand, turquoise water.”

“Three weeks of vacation is plenty. Why hasn’t she called?”

“Deep in her research, probably. You know how I get when I’m working on a project.”

“And what about your work! Selfish, that’s what she is.”

“I’m mostly on paternity leave now anyway, you know that.”

“You love your work.”

“I do, but it was miserable enough trying to work when Ini was an infant — I didn’t need to do that again. Tenure is a wonderful thing. Be patient with Sari; it’s different when you’re still in grad school — much more anxiety-provoking. And she’s been a grad student a long time now.”

“Where’s Ini?” Kate sat up. “Ini? INI!”

Joshua jumped to his feet, scanning the sand and ocean around them. No sign of the child. He started walking, then running in the direction they’d seen her last, clambering over a rocky outcropping. His heart was racing; he couldn’t breathe. But somehow he was still shouting out her name, “INI! INIYA!”

“Papa?” And there she was, toddling back around the rocks, not so far away after all.

Joshua swept her up in his arms, hugging her sticky, sandy body close. “We told you to stay in sight! Foolish child! You could have been drowned! Or eaten by dragons!”

Ini just giggled. “There aren’t any dragons here, papa.”

He carried her back to Kate in long strides, sinking down on their blanket with Ini still cradled in his arms. Kate scanned her for injuries, and then, finding her daughter intact, lay down again. Joshua relaxed his own grasp a little. “What were you doing, going so far without us, monkey?”

“Looking for Amma. I want her to come home.”

Joshua swallowed. “Us too, monkey. She’ll be home soon, I promise. But you can’t go wandering off like that again, okay?”

“Okay,” she said, nodding her head several times.

“Good. Now go play in the water.” He thumped her bottom and sent her off towards the gentle wavelets. The water here was incredibly calm — the most peaceful shore he’d ever seen. He said, “Sea of Frustrated Desire. Why do you think they called it that?”

Kate sighed, her eyes closed. “They probably had children. Or a wife.”

* * *

Grains of Sand Freighter. Deneb, fourth planet, stable orbit. Five minutes ago.

“I signed a term contract,” Sarita said. She stood silhouetted in the open hatchway, gasping for breath as if she’d just run a mile, the stranger behind her. She hadn’t even called up first — just banged on the hatch door until they all came running, Joshua and Kate trying to keep Ini behind them until they looked out the porthole and saw Sarita there. Then they couldn’t get the door open fast enough, but this was not what Joshua had expected to hear.

“You what?” Joshua asked.

Iniya clung to her leg, murmuring ‘amma amma amma,’ and Sarita stroked her hair as she talked, her voice low. “Shh... baby... shh. It’s okay. I missed you too, monkey.” She looked at Joshua. “It was the only way to get him out. I signed over five years of my service, in exchange for thirty years of his. Engineering work only, which they value highly. That’s specified in the contract. I’ll be fine.”

“Like hell you will!” Joshua said.

Kate frowned. “Josh, hush. Iniya’s upset... we can finish this conversation later.”

“Kate — this concerns the kids too. Whatever she’s got to say, she needs to say it in front of them.”

“Josh, no. You’re angry, and you’re wrong. Ini, sweetie, c’mon.” Kate bent down and peeled Iniya off Sarita’s leg. The poor kid immediately started howling, and Kate shushed her as she walked away, down the corridor. Sarita stared after them, looking lost, her hands clenching and unclenching at her sides, as if she wanted to grab Ini back. The alien brought his hands together in front of him and laced his fingers together, as if he wanted to reach out and touch her, but was deliberately refraining.

Joshua was grateful for that — if the man said or did anything, Joshua wasn't sure *what* he would do in response. He bit his tongue, waiting until Ini's wails quieted down before asking in a fierce whisper, "Sarita, what possible excuse can you have for all this?"

She squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, then opened them. "I couldn't leave him there, like that. I love him."

"You *lust* after him. That's what he was built for." Joshua had never been attracted to men, but even he could feel the pull of the cat-man, with his lithe, perfect body. His soft fur was chocolate brown streaked lightly with copper. He looked utterly edible. But that was programming, biology, pheromones. It didn't mean anything.

Sarita insisted, "It's *not* just lust. That's why you haven't heard from me, the last three days — I needed to enter the bondservant quarters where no comms are allowed. I needed to live with him, to be sure. It's love. The real thing."

How could she betray them? Joshua couldn't even think, he was so angry. He wanted to shove the man out the hatch, drag Sarita in, by her damned hair, and take off before she could say one more idiotic thing. "How long have you been seeing him?" He was proud that his tone was steady.

Her voice was soft. "Three weeks. Since the day we landed."

"You've lied to us for three weeks!" All this time, when they thought she'd been working, she'd been going down to the planet every day to see *him*. Those last three days, she hadn't even bothered to come back up...

"I know, I know. And I'm sorry, I really am. But I had a good reason. I *love* him."

Joshua found himself shouting, "You can't love him — you barely know him!"

Sarita smiled then, a smile with tears in it. "I barely knew you, or Kate. But I knew who you were, deep down. Was I wrong?"

Joshua's hands were shaking. "None of this makes any sense. Why did they even let you leave the compound with him? Do they have a tracer on you?" His mind was spinning with questions. How could she do this to them? How could she betray them like this, within even a warning? Had she ever really loved them?

Sarita bit her lip. "They didn't let me leave. I hacked the security codes on the gates. Spliced in a tape of us in bed. It should hold them

about an hour, and then they'll realize. It took us twenty minutes to get here — we ran. So Cho and I need to go back, now." She took a deep breath, and Joshua could see the tears in her eyes. "I — I wish we had more time."

Cho was silent through it all, a quiet presence at her back, his eyes and stance saying that he would follow her anywhere. Sarita whispered, "I just had to say goodbye. Let me say a proper goodbye to the girls, and then we'll go. I'll comm you from the surface, so you can reach me to fill out all the paperwork. I'd like to stay in touch with Ini. And Amara. If it's all right with you both. You can send me holos of them, and I'll send holos back to them, I promise."

"*Holos?* As if that's a replacement for a mother? Never mind about us — how can you do this to them? You have responsibilities!" Joshua slammed a fist into the bulkhead, barely feeling it split the skin on his knuckles. He was glad to have an excuse to hit something.

Now the tears broke, flowing down her face. "I know — but I can't leave him. Not to that life. The girls — they'll be okay without me.

"I just had to say goodbye.
Let me say a proper
goodbye to the girls, and
then we'll go."

They'll have both of you, a mother and a father, a perfect little family. You'll all be okay without me, and he won't. Can't you see I don't have a choice here!"

Sarita hesitated, as if she wasn't certain whether to continue. But she'd never lacked courage. She said, her voice dropping again to a whisper, "You — you don't *have* to dissolve our contract. It's only five years. Depending on how you felt, at the end of the term, you could come back here..." Her eyes were wide and her hands were balled into fists at her sides, as if she were afraid to open them, afraid that asking was going too far.

It was. Joshua was ready to let her go. Just take the goddamned cat-man who had screwed up their lives and get off the ship for good. Joshua opened his mouth to say so, to squeeze the words past the choking lump in his throat, but before he could say anything Kate stepped out of the hatchway to stand beside him. "Don't be an idiot," she said. "You're not going anywhere with him."

* * *

University of All Worlds. Pyroxina major. Five years ago.

Joshua rolled over in bed, sliding his right arm under Sarita, pulling her close. "I want a baby."

She tucked her head in his shoulder, in that spot where she fit so well. "What, right now?"

"No, not right now. But soon. What do you think?"

Sarita raised an eyebrow. "Do you think we're stable enough?"

"We've lasted almost two years. It's the longest relationship I've ever been in. Feels stable to me."

"Me too." Sarita grinned. "If Kate's up for it..."

Kate raised her head from the far side of the bed, where she lay curled against Sarita's side. Her face was drawn, ten years older than it had looked moments ago. "I can't have children."

"What?" Joshua asked, startled. He'd assumed that Kate would be the one...

"I tried. Miscarried four times. The last time, uterus ruptured, almost died. So that's it." She lay her head down again, turned away, so they couldn't see her face. "Maybe you two should go ahead, do this without me. Always knew this was too good to last. Probably time for me to be lifting off again anyway, head for the empty stars. The short hauls were starting to get to me."

Sarita thumped a gentle hand against Kate's head. "Don't be crazy. I don't want to be a mom."

Kate turned back, confused. "But you just said..."

"Not the *main* mom. I'd like to help, but I'm not ready to be tied down, feeding some brat twenty-four/seven. I've got years of fieldwork to do, and itchy feet."

"But you're willing to bear a child..."

"I guess. If I have to. But as soon as that thing is born, it's all you. You take the hormones, get the milk pumping, feed the kid, sing it songs, change the diapers, the whole bit."

Joshua interjected, "I can sing songs and change diapers too."

Sarita sighed, fluttering her eyelashes. "Oh, I *suppose* I can change a diaper or two. Once in a while."

Kate was silent, her fingers twisting. Sarita took her hand in hers, interlacing their fingers, stilling them. After a long silence, Kate said, in a voice almost too soft to hear, "So you're both in this. For the long haul."

“Looks like it,” Sarita said, squeezing her hand.
Kate glanced at her — then looked up at Joshua, finally smiling,
“Well, they say that the gods bless lovers and fools.”
“Does that mean yes?” Joshua asked.
“I suppose so.” She bent down, dropped a kiss on Sarita’s cheek.
“Yes.”

* * *

Grains of Sand Freighter. Deneb, fourth planet, stable orbit. Now.

Grains of Sand, come in. Come in, star-freighter Grains of Sand. You are not cleared for departure.

“Josh, shut that damn thing off.” Kate’s voice was tense as she worked the pre-Jump checklist, flipping switches, turning knobs. Joshua reached up to the far right of the co-pilot’s chair, shut down the ship-to-planet comms.

Sarita stood behind their chairs, saying tensely to Kate’s back, “You don’t have to do this. Please, please don’t. We can go back.”

Kate turned her head, raised one eyebrow. “It’s true — Amara would forget you soon enough,” Kate said, deliberately cold. “But Ini is too old. She’ll always remember that her mother didn’t love her enough to stay with her. She’ll always know that her mother *abandoned* her.”

“I don’t *want* to leave her!” Sarita had tears in her eyes again, which made them look even larger and darker than ever. Space between the stars.

“So don’t,” Kate said softly.

“But your ship — nine years of work to buy this ship, another nine of sweat and tears building up the business... to risk losing it all?” Sarita gulped. “I can’t ask that of you.”

“So you’d ask us to let you go instead.” Kate took a deep breath, trying to steady her voice, but despite her best efforts, it cracked on the next words, “Are you *trying* to break my heart?”

“I’m sorry, Kate, I’m so sorry!” Sarita was sobbing now, great gasping sobs that had to make it hard to breathe.

“Just go!” Kate snapped. “Get in back, check on the kids, prepare *him* for his first Jump. Jump in ninety.”

Sarita turned and fled out of the cabin, leaving them alone with the screens.

Joshua waited until she was well down the corridor, out of earshot, before asking, “You were a little hard on her, weren’t you?” His hands moved automatically through the final checks. The first wave of fury had passed, once he realized that they weren’t actually going to lose Sarita. He didn’t know how he felt now. Relieved. Numb. Worried.

Kate shrugged, frowning. “She’s made us all into criminals. We’ll never be allowed back into this system, that’s for sure. If it weren’t for the fact that nobody else likes these folks, I’d be seriously worried for the business.”

Joshua raised an eyebrow. “You didn’t tell her that. She probably thinks we’re going to turn pirate.”

“Good,” Kate said sharply. “Let *her* worry for a change. Once we get through this Jump, I’m going to tear some strips out of her hide for scaring us like that. She is *never* going to go out of contact like that again. Idiot. And god knows what we’re going to do with *him* — I don’t even know where we’re going to put him. He’s going to have to sleep on the engine.”

“But you were never going to leave her here.” Joshua said the words as if he had no doubt — but if Kate hadn’t stepped in, he would have let Sarita go, would have thrown her out, off the ship, out of their lives. Maybe.

Kate paused a long moment. Then she sighed and said, “Of course not.”

Joshua nodded, feeling the tension sliding away. “It’s in a good cause, anyway.”

“What? True love?” Kate looked as if she wanted to spit, if there had been anywhere safe on the control board to spit. “Bet it doesn’t last a month. She barely knows him.”

Joshua frowned thoughtfully. “I’m not so sure. Remember when you two were like that? All she could talk about was you.” He could tease about it now, but he remembered how he’d felt at first. Angry. Scared. If he’d known then what he knew now — well, maybe he’d be just as scared. But he wasn’t sorry. “I was ready to scratch your eyes out; I was sure you were going to take her away with you, up to the stars on your big, fancy ship.”

“Don’t mock my ship,” Kate said, frowning a warning. “It’s saving your butt.”

“I would never mock the ship — or its beautiful, gallant captain.” Joshua blew her a kiss from across the cabin.

“Oh, hush. Idiots, the both of you. Sometimes, I don’t know why I bother.” She flicked the last switch, poised her finger over the final button. “Prepare for Jump.” She paused, took a deep breath, and said, “I love you.”

And that was why. They always said it before a Jump. Jumps had been mostly reliable for close to a century now, but still. Just in case. They always said the words. Joshua flicked on the intercom, so they could hear the rest of it throughout the ship. Sarita, the children, and now this new one, this stranger. Beloved of Sarita, gods knew why, and so. “We love you.”

Kate’s steady voice read out the final count. “Jump in five. Four. Three. Two. Jump.”

* * *

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We're far enough into the postmodern era that there's a traditional way to subvert the Santa Claus mythos. It's the one you see in "Futurama" and in Weird Al Yankovic songs, and honestly it's getting kind of old. Alex Wilson has written a holiday satire that's original and full of clever detail while still being funny as hell. And ultimately heartwarming, if that's what you're into.

The Last Christmas of Mrs. Claus **by Alex Wilson**

Betty was thirty-eight and still believed in Santa Claus. But sometimes he could be such an asshole.

She leaned against the kitchen counter, picking dried glaze from the wrinkles in the back of her hand. From the wireless headset that dangled from her neck, her old marine buddies called to her with joyous profanity and the bass of digital gunfire. The Xbox was upstairs. Her buddies were in San Diego and Cleveland. Satellite coverage in Santa's Village was just another Christmas miracle, like faster-than-light travel and stuffing oneself through gas fireplaces with neither explosions nor lawsuits nipping at your heels.

It was six o'clock. Santa had said he needed to leave at eight. So Betty had made Christmas Eve dinner while listening to—instead of participating in—the big special ops campaign game online. She'd garlic-salted the yams to the tune of Gomez unloading his Glock into a drug dealer. She'd painted the ham with maple glaze while Williams punctuated Patty Smyth's "Goodbye to You" with bursts from his assault rifle. "Her boys," as she called them, didn't take a lot of eggnog in their rum.

Santa had spent his day opening envelopes from North American children and falling asleep watching the Pittsburgh-Cleveland game in the media room. Now he was in the kitchen, awake and on his way out the door, because suddenly spending fifteen minutes eating dinner with his wife had become too much of a burden on this most wonderful night of the year.

His white V-neck undershirt was tucked into his pants in front, pulled taught over his belly. It stretched the neckhole halfway down to his happy trail. His hands were finding their way through the armholes of his robe.

“It’s just that there are more children in the world now,” he said. “And Santa’s not getting any younger, ho ho ho.”

“Don’t get much *older* either,” Betty said. Santa’s first wife had died centuries ago, but he always just dismissed the question of his own mortality. Betty never knew how naughty she should feel about wanting to strangle him sometimes. “You’re seriously going to let me eat alone again on Christmas Eve?”

“Don’t think of it like that, doll,” Santa said. “Think of the children.” He slung his belt around his back, and gave it a quick tug. His waist shrunk from dangerously obese to barely jolly. A few crumpled bills in American currency fell out of his pocket. Santa bent down to pick them up, mumbling about “emergency money.”

“Can’t you get dressed in the bedroom like a normal person?” Betty asked.

Distorted shouting erupted from Betty’s headset. She imagined red and yellow mosaic bursts lighting up the sunless snowscape outside, as if there was an HDTV behind the blinds instead of their kitchen window. One of her boys probably stepped on a landmine. Williams, she guessed. She thought she could hear Gomez laughing.

She picked up the pans in which she’d made the potatoes and maple glaze. She put them in the sink to soak. The gingerbread batter bowl could wait a day, even though it would take longer to clean tomorrow. For now, she appreciated its fight to cover the ham-stink that coated the room.

The jingle bell chimed on Santa’s cell.

“Nutcrackers,” he said. “Santa can’t reach it, and it’s probably Ginny. Would you be a doll?”

“Your secretary’s calling, and you need me to answer it? How efficient.” Betty wiped her fingers on a hand-towel. She lifted her headset’s microphone to her mouth. “Moroz out. Back in five.”

“Copy that,” Gomez said on the other end. “It’ll take that long to put Humpty back together again anyway.”

Betty switched off her headset mic. She unclipped the cell phone from the back of Santa’s girdle, and pushed the button with the green

arrow, serrated to look like a double-edged diving knife. Or a Christmas tree, if that was more your thing.

“Hey Ginny,” Betty said into the phone.

“Oh hello, Mrs. Claus,” Ginny said. “Merry Christmas.”

“For heaven’s sake, call me Betty.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Claus. Has Mr. Claus left yet?”

“On his way,” Betty said. “He was just thinking of the children. One at a time. He’s very thorough.”

“How wonderful!”

Betty liked Ginny, even though Santa said they shouldn’t have favorites because his elves were all “pretty much interchangeable.” But the year Betty arrived at the Pole, a rabid timber wolf mauled and killed Ginny’s parents. Ginny was a year old. Betty was twenty-three. She’d helped place the girl in another elf home before heading off to track down the animal.

Betty was no hunter by trade, but she was better in a crisis than she was in the kitchen. She relished those two nights alone on the icy wasteland, along with the two shots it took to put the beast down. It was the most sense of purpose she’d had since leaving the Corps.

To this day, hearing Ginny’s voice made her feel useful, though the elf was now sixteen, old enough for conscription in Santa’s Village. It was Betty’s final act of usefulness to keep Ginny out of the factory, and this marked her first Christmas as Santa’s new assistant.

“But what are *your* plans, dear?” Betty said presently. “I’ve got this great big ham here, and Santa’s saving room for milk and cookies.”

“Oh thank you ever so much,” Ginny said. “But this is the most wonderful night of the year. It’s Christmas Eve!”

“Really? Must’ve missed that email,” Betty said. Santa was rubbing white cream into the dirty gray of his beard and eyebrows. “But what kind of monster makes you work on Christmas Eve?”

Santa shook his head. He added blush to his cheeks.

“I don’t mind, Mrs. Claus,” Betty said. “I love Christmas.”

“Of course you do,” Betty said. Everybody loved Christmas in Santa’s Village. They put it in the water with the fluoride. “Ginny, Santa hasn’t ever mentioned to you anything about being a patron of prostitutes, has he?”

“Saint!” Santa said. “Patron *Saint* of Prostitutes, Betty! Jesus.”

“Oh, that’s right. I forgot what a good Catholic he is,” Betty said. “Someday I’ll tell you about our miraculous wedding. No priest for miles, and yet here we are!” She’d thought of that joke in August. Gomez had thought it was funny.

“Patron Saint of all of Bari, thank you very much,” Santa said quietly. “So there’s prostitutes in Italy. That’s my fault now?” He leered at his reflection in the microwave. It was more a bedroom smile than something appropriate for children.

“Mrs. Claus, would you tell Mr. Claus that Mr. Dandridge will be staying at the lodge tonight?” Ginny said.

“Copy that,” Betty said. “And maybe I’ll see you tomorrow?”
“Why?”

“Well,” Betty said. “It’d just be nice to see you, that’s all.” She didn’t know how else to answer that question. She thanked Ginny for calling and pressed the red gumdrop button to end the call.

“She didn’t want to talk to Santa?” Santa said.

“She said one of the postal workers is staying up here for the night.” Betty clipped the phone back onto his belt.

“Doesn’t he want to get home to his family?”

“I don’t know,” Betty said. “Can you think of a reason why someone wouldn’t want to spend even part of Christmas Eve with his family? Even when his wife got everything ready by six like he said?”

“Well, these are the sacrifices Santa must make.”

“Huh,” Betty said.

In her headset, there was a flurry of gunfire. Then an explosion, intermingled with a CGI terrorist’s scream. Then laughter. If she had to guess by sound alone: Gomez lobbed a fragmentation grenade at a bad guy, when an elegant cap to the head via sniper bullet or shuriken would have worked just as well. She so needed a television in the kitchen.

“Will you at least take a sandwich with you?” Betty asked.

“Jolly. Santa would like that.”

Betty opened a drawer and frowned. “Foil’s missing again.”

Santa shrugged. He didn’t care what she wrapped the sandwich in, so long as it got wrapped. But to Betty it was the principle of the thing. Elves shouldn’t take things without asking. And if they did, then Betty should be able to put a lock on their front door, like she could anywhere else in the free world. And what did they want with so much foil

anyway? Or bleach or cheesecloths, for that matter? Elves stole the craziest shit. Probably didn't need to keep her birth control in the upstairs safe, but why risk it?

She opened the pantry door to get a replacement roll, which she'd hidden behind jars of pasta sauce. She switched her microphone on again. "Moroz back online."

"Oh, man. You missed some fucked up shit, Betty," Williams said.

"So I heard. Live to fight another day, I guess."

"Dude, we should run an Arctic mission sometime."

"Why?" Betty said, though she could think of a few things she'd like to frag.

"Hey. Gomez has to log off, but my girl's taking a nap. I could run a lightning round with you, if you want."

"Oorah. Give me ten minutes. Out." With a carving knife, she liberated three slices of ham from the larger hunk. She tucked it in a hoagie with some baby spinach.

Santa leaned over her shoulder. "Santa wants some barbecue on that," he said.

"It's got a maple glaze," Betty said. The man was seventeen-hundred years old; at what point would he get sick of smothering barbecue sauce over everything?

"Just a little bit," Santa said. He ran a finger along the insides of the gingerbread batter bowl. "And maybe some cheese, ho ho ho."

"And a bottle of rum, you old pirate," Betty said quietly. She pulled the condiment bottle and some preshredded cheddar from the fridge. She wrapped the sandwich and three gingerbread men in foil. Santa liked his food in neat little packages. "Unwrapping is half the fun," he liked to say, which was exactly what her father used to say when the presents sucked.

Santa donned his cap and gloves. He winked at Betty. He opened the door and disappeared in a whistle of wind and snow.

Damn, it was cold. Betty shoved the door closed behind him, too fast even to wish him safe travels or merry anything. Except for the dull static from her headset, the mansion was suddenly quiet.

Betty used to love the cold. The first thing she did when she finished her two years at Camp Doha outside of Kuwait City was go off camping solo in the Pennsylvania mountains for the holidays. She was thankful then for the solitude and chilly nights. She ate corn pasta and

fruit leather and thought not-quite-seriously about scaring a college admissions officer for fucking with her financial aid, ho ho ho.

But somewhere between midnight and dawn, Betty had heard a rustle outside her tent. Her bear bag was strung up from a tree a few yards from camp. She caught her future husband pawing at it.

She shot Santa twice in the belly with her .22. It would have been more if she hadn't needed to reload after each one. But before she got her third round into the chamber, Santa convinced her he was no animal. He was just a hairy, hungry old man, as unthreatening to Betty as her practice rifle was to him.

It was a strange affair. Christmas was never a big deal in her family. And nothing against a little meat on the bones, but the last time she'd made love to an almost-as-overweight staff sergeant while still in the Corps, she found it smelly, sticky, and ultimately unfulfilling. But then, outside the sack, that guy hadn't been a very good staff sergeant either.

Santa was a more generous lover. With him it was more like playing in cookie dough. He smelled like it, too. His rolls of fat were sweet to taste, and were almost completely covered in a soft, white fur that tickled as much it comforted. It was no wonder she'd mistaken him for a bear.

But shit, she thought presently. That was Christmas Eve. That made tonight the fifteenth anniversary of their first meeting. Santa wasn't big on remembering dates either, but Betty's mother had hammered anniversary themes into her brain since she was a little girl. Fifteen was crystal.

Santa was bugfuck for crystal. Her wedding ring was crystal because diamonds were just "tarted-up coal." He called frostbite a "crystal caress." When he saw ice melt for any reason, he said the crystals were crying, and that was his chief complaint against global warming, too. "Poor little crystals" were ever a higher priority than his elves drowning or his Village sinking into the ocean.

So a crystal anniversary would be important to Santa, to their marriage. If she hurried, she might be able to catch him at the stable

Santa was bugfuck for crystal. When he saw ice melt for any reason, he said the crystals were crying, and that was his chief complaint against global warming, too.

before he pushed off, and at least give him a quick crystal kiss good luck. And anything beat spending another second in the kitchen right now. The smell of ham was reminding her of that staff sergeant.

“Williams?” Betty said.

“Yo.”

“I’ve gotta bail.”

“No big,” Williams said. “I started without you anyway.”

“Asshole.”

“Merry Christmas, devil dog.”

Betty put on snowpants. She pocketed her headset, wrapped a scarf around her neck, and grabbed her boots and coat. She went after Santa in the night.

* * *

Winter held less promise in the North Pole than it did in Pennsylvania. The faint sun retreated completely by October and wouldn’t be back again until March. There was no grass—dead or dormant—compacted under the ice and flurries.

The snow fell heavily enough to obscure Santa’s footprints in the candycane streetlamp glow. It was sluggish going, with snow up to her shins—and snowpant padding making it hard to figure out exactly where her shins were—but it was still preferable to what she remembered of humping tools and water around a desert base. It took her fifteen minutes to reach the stables.

Larry, one of the elf VPs at the factory, greeted her outside. He wore the traditional green and white overalls, cut off at the knee to expose frumpy, hairless legs that were somehow immune to those crystal caresses. His yellow curls up top had no texture, and in the dim gaslight Betty was more convinced than ever that his hair was actually a toy piece he snapped onto his head every morning.

“Merry Christmas, Mrs. Claus,” Larry said.

“Hi Larry. Santa still here?”

“Nope.”

“Must have just missed him, huh?”

“Yes,” Larry said cheerfully. “You must have just missed him.”

“He get off all right?”

“Well...”

There was a snort behind Larry, coming from the stables.

“Was that Donner?” Betty pushed past him, and slid open the wooden door. It smelled even more like shit than it should. Donner shuffled his feet in greeting. The rest of the reindeer stared back at Betty, expectantly. They were still in their individual stalls, with balls of crap piled up at their hooves. They weren’t even harnessed.

“Where’s Santa?” Betty said.

“Oh,” Larry said. “I’m sure Santa’s on his way.”

“But you said I just missed him.”

“It’s Christmas. I didn’t want to argue.”

Fucking elves. “He left ten minutes before me, Larry. How did I beat him here?”

“Exactly.”

“Does he take a different route?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know, or are you just being agreeable?”

Larry winced. “Merry Christmas?”

“Get the reindeer harnessed. Santa will be here any minute.” Were elves that dependent on Santa for every bit of micromanagement? No wonder he kept having to pull more and more all-nighters, and why he’d had to leave early tonight. Why’d she have to be so hard on him? The stalls looked like they hadn’t been cleaned in months. She hoped Ginny demonstrated more competence than that. “Get them ready to fly. I’ll go find Santa.”

“All right then,” Larry said. “Merry Christmas.”

Betty tried his cell while retracing her already-disappearing tracks back towards the mansion. She stayed to the streets, because if she strayed she was just as likely to get lost or step through a hole in the ice as any civilian would. Even the cellphone’s GPS was useless up here, with the winds and ocean currents constantly shifting around the iceplates which passed for ground. She got his voicemail. She tried again.

By the time she was a hundred yards from their home, she found little indication of her own previous bootprints, much less Santa’s. Must have been snowing harder than she thought.

She stopped in place and looked out into the darkness. There was something a few yards off the path. Was it a silvery object or a trick of the light? In a perfect world, she would have had a walking stick to test

the ground before her, but she risked the half dozen steps to investigate anyway.

It was the ham hoagie and two of the three gingerbread cookies she'd wrapped in foil for her husband.

Santa wouldn't get far without food. Was there some emergency that took him off the path? Or worse, had something happened to him? He'd had a few beers watching the game, but he hadn't seemed tipsy. She tried his cell again. This time she left a message asking for a callback in no uncertain terms.

She doubletimed it to the stables. She handed Larry the sandwich. "Look what I found!"

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Claus," Larry said. "Your gift is coming. I chose the two-day shipping, but you know how it is."

"No, Larry. It's Santa's. I found it in the snow. I think something's happened to him."

"I'm sure you're right," Larry said.

"Balls."

"But I'm sure he's fine."

"I mean it would take something big to keep him," Betty said. "Tonight's all he talks about all year."

"Yes. Christmas is wonderful."

"What if someone grabbed him on his way to the stable?" Betty said. A horrifying thought, but she wouldn't let herself imagine Santa falling through the ice. "You know what this means?"

"Yes?"

"It means someone's trying to ruin Christmas."

Larry gasped. He even touched an open hand to his chest.

Betty marched into the stables. The reindeer were out of their stalls, wandering aimlessly aloof from the elves who were trying to harness them. The elves sang carols as they worked, but not all of them got the words or notes right. It was like Christmas was crumbling all around her.

Betty took her .308 Winchester off the wall, mounted high enough that curious elves wouldn't have been able to reach it. In the back of the stable she kept a crate of copper-jacketed ball ammunition. She grabbed three magazines of twenty rounds each.

It was all heavier than she remembered, and felt foreign in her gloved hands. She hadn't picked up a firearm in years, not since she had to put

down poor Rudolph to keep his pink-nose infection from spreading to the other reindeer. And she hadn't actually hunted since taking down Ginny's timber wolf.

"But who would want to ruin Christmas?" Larry said. His face darkened as he mouthed: "The Jews?"

"Don't be an asshole, Larry," Betty said. How many times had she told Santa to watch his mouth around the elves? But no. He always insisted that a little joke never hurt anybody. "Is there anyone in Santa's Village we don't know?"

"You mean besides elves?" Larry said.

"Are there any elves we don't know?"

"No."

"Then yes. I mean besides elves. What about this Dandridge character? The postman? Ginny mentioned something about him staying at the lodge?"

"Oh yes. There's him."

"Anyone besides him?"

"No."

"Worth checking out then," she said. "I'll cover that. You gather everyone you can and search the village for Santa. Be careful, though. And search in groups." She told Larry where she found the sandwich. She told him to watch for holes in the ice.

"You're not going up to Mr. Dandridge's room alone, are you?" Larry said.

"Sure. Why not?" Betty said.

"It's just..." He looked at the ground. He shuffled his weight from foot to foot.

"What?"

"People might talk," Larry said. "A married woman going up to a postman's room?"

"I'm Mrs. Fucking Claus, Larry. What are people gonna say?"

* * *

Betty tapped on Dandridge's door with the butt of her Winchester. She'd always thought it would be nice to greet the postal workers, the humans, who delivered children's letters to Santa, but Christmas Eve was such a hectic time for everyone that it never worked out. And tonight? Her heart just wasn't in it.

“Mr. Dandridge? This is Mrs. Claus. A word, please, Mr. Dandridge?”

The door opened sleepily. A squat, short-haired man in his early forties answered. He wore a white undershirt and yellow and black plaid pajama pants. Betty hadn't seen another human since her mother came to visit three Thanksgivings ago. The realness of his hair—with its separate strands and lack of plastic gloss—seemed harsh and wrong.

Betty scanned the room behind Dandridge. No sign of foul play, but she didn't know exactly what to look for anyway. Gomez had participated in house-to-house searches when he re-upped for the second Gulf War, but his stories were always more gossipy than educational.

“Oh, hi,” Dandridge said. “I expected someone...”

“Older? Frumpier? Thank you,” Betty said.

“Yes. I was going to say older. Or unarmed.”

“This?” Betty crept her grip towards the rifle's trigger. “Yes, sorry. My husband's missing and we're all just a bit on edge.”

“Santa's missing? That's terrible,” Dandridge said. He put on his glasses. “And it's Christmas Eve, too.”

“Is that tonight?” Betty said. “Crap. You know if any stores are still open?”

“Right. Please come in. How can I help?”

Betty stepped forward, eyes narrowed. From video games, she half-expected enemy combatants to storm out the ventilation ducts. It wouldn't be the least plausible shit she'd seen in Santa's Village.

But Dandridge's room was eerily normal. The television showed some sitcom with a laughtrack drowning out a married couple's argument. There were cigarette butts in an ashtray by the bed. There was an open hardcover book straddling the armrest of a chair next to that. She couldn't read the dust jacket, but unless it was about kidnapping or ruining Christmas, she doubted the title would be of much use anyway.

“You can start,” Betty said, “by telling me anything you know about his disappearance.”

“Sorry, I don't know anything. Was there something on the news?”

“It's just suspicious, that's all. You choosing to stay here on Christmas Eve at the last minute?” Betty stepped close enough to feel the warmth of Dandridge's breath. The second biggest thing she learned

in the desert—the first being how sand loved the crotch even more than her boys did—was how Americans, herself included, could panic when somebody got up in their personal space. It was a miracle she'd lived this long without shooting anyone other than her husband. But panic was perfect for interrogation. "You want to talk about it?"

"Not particularly."

"Where have you been in the last hour?" Betty said.

"Right here," Dandridge said.

Betty extended the rifle coolly past Dandridge, toward the television. She poked at the power button with the business end, only turning it off on the fourth try. She bit her lip at the awkwardness. It'd seemed so much more Eastwoodesque in her mind.

"Why. Are. You. Here?"

Dandridge shrugged. "Look, it's no big secret. Just making things easier on Beth. My daughter. We're separated, my wife and I. We didn't want to cause any more confusion for the holidays, so we thought it'd be best if I just had to work. Okay?"

"And what's your daughter going to think when Santa doesn't bring her any presents this year?"

"Santa never brings her any presents."

"Why?" Betty said. "Is she really bad?"

"What? No."

"No? Well, what kind of fireplace do you have?"

"Look. Sorry," Dandridge said. "We don't do the whole Santa Claus charade. No offense or anything. I mean, I think it's great that he reads the letters and all, even though we generally discourage people from sending cash through the mail."

"Sending what?"

"Well, we don't open your letters or anything, but sometimes quarters'll tear out of an envelope if they're not taped down properly. If it was anybody but your husband, we'd have to worry about pyramid schemes, and we can't be held responsible for—"

"That's so sweet," Betty said. "Kids wanting to help Santa out with their little contributions." He'd enjoy hearing about that, too. She looked forward to telling him, and to the way he'd smile when something he did brought out the best in others. She blinked the thought away. First, she had to find him. First, he had to be okay.

“Okay,” Dandridge said. “So we figure telling our daughter about Santa will just make her feel worse when her friends get nicer presents than she does.”

Betty wondered how this man could fail to see the holes in his story. And saw a possible motive. “And why do they get nicer presents if she’s not bad?”

“Because their parents have more money. I mean—we do okay, but we live on the edge of one of those zip codes, you know? The kids she goes to school with...”

“Yeah, but Santa doesn’t care how much money someone has.”

“Santa doesn’t buy the presents,” Dandridge said. “We do. The parents do.”

“So Santa’s toys aren’t good enough for you people, and you feel you have to supplement with mass produced bullsh—”

Fucking commercialism. Here was something she did not want to tell her husband about. “So Santa’s toys aren’t good enough for you people, and you feel you have to supplement with mass produced bullsh—”

“You know, this is exactly the talk I wanted to avoid with my daughter?”

Betty shook her head and stepped toward the door. Dandridge was useless. And, in spite of a marked lack of Christmas spirit, he was too stupid to be her man.

“Sorry for wasting your time,” she said. “And my own.”

* * *

Larry was waiting for Betty outside the lodge. “The reindeer are harnessed, Mrs. Claus.”

“Oorah,” Betty said. “Walk with me.” She stepped past him.

Larry followed, wide-eyed.

“I don’t think he knows anything,” she said. “But I want an elf at his door just in case.”

“Okay.”

“Wait, Larry. Why are you here? Didn’t I tell you to fan out and look for Santa?”

“Yeah, we can’t find him.”

“Balls.” No matter how horrible an idea a kidnapping was, the alternatives were far worse: falling through the ice or getting attacked by a wild animal. And only the latter, terrible option could give her much hope at all.

“All right, Larry. I want elves traveling in packs of at least three. We might have another rabid wolf on our hands.” She stopped suddenly. “Where’s Ginny?”

Larry shrugged. Betty grabbed him by the shoulders, very near the neck.

“Did Ginny come into work tonight?” she said.

“Yes?”

Betty let go of him. She pumped her snowpantlegs toward the residential district.

“Wait,” Larry called from behind her. “Where are you going?”

“To Ginny’s.”

“Why don’t I go get her?” Larry said.

“No. I want her by my side. When she hears there might be a wolf, she’s gonna be out of her mind.”

“Are you going to leave us?” Larry asked.

“For heaven’s sake, Larry. What are you talking about?”

“Nothing.”

She looked back at him. He was shaking. Betty had been so caught up with her own worry that she hadn’t realized what effect her panic might have on the little elves. She walked back and placed her hand again on his shoulder, gently this time.

“I’m sure Santa’s fine, Larry. And we’ll both be here a long time. But we’ve got to stay calm, okay?”

“Okay,” Larry said.

“And I’m sorry I shook you. Keep trying his cell, okay?”

“Okay,” Larry said. He smiled. “I’m sure he’s fine, too.”

* * *

Like every door at the North Pole, Ginny’s had no lock. So Betty knocked, waited two seconds, and kicked in the door. She could apologize later, though elves never seemed to take offense at anything.

She ran through the dining room. There was Elvis Costello on the stereo, barely covering the sound of the television from the living room. There was a wineglass on its side, but no stain on the tablecloth beneath

it. There was a half-devoured venison steak on a plate, smothered in barbecue sauce.

“Oh, Ginny,” Betty mumbled. “Did Santa teach you that?”

She heard a yelp from the living room. She clicked the safety off on her .308. She opened the door.

It was no wolf. It was a polar bear! But how the hell did it get in here?

“Ginny!”

The bear’s back heaved violently. It was pouncing on the couch. Ginny was under it, on her stomach. Her blouse was half-torn from her midriff. She cried out.

Betty should have hesitated. But here, so far and long removed from the real world, she felt the recoil and heard the round leaving the chamber before realizing she’d even squeezed the trigger. Jarred into the present, she finally saw what she was shooting at.

The second round was more intentional.

Ginny screamed at her to stop. The polar bear collapsed on top of the little elf.

Betty dropped the gun and kicked its enormous mass onto the floor. Ginny jumped on top of it, as though it really was a polar bear and she thought hugging it was the best way to avoid getting mauled. She was crying.

“Stupid cow,” the polar bear said.

* * *

When Santa calmed down, he said the .308 stung far worse than the .22. He said the .22 hadn’t actually hurt at all; he was just going for the sympathy fuck. He said that a lot of children were going to be disappointed this Christmas because of what Mrs. Claus did tonight. He said he hoped Mrs. Claus was happy.

It was almost morning. Not that you could tell by the light. Betty had wanted to be alone, so of course Larry followed her to the toy factory. The windows were blacked out. There were garbage bags and empty containers of antifreeze piled up outside the door. She hadn’t been to the Village’s workshop district since she’d given her mom that tour three years ago.

“You knew about this, didn’t you?” Betty said.

“Are you going to leave now, like the others?” Larry said.

“The others?”

“The other Mrs. Clauses. They always leave when...”

“When they find out Santa’s been fucking his elves?”

“Err, yes, Mrs. Claus.”

“How many have there been?”

“Oh, not many. Usually it’s only one or two times each week. It’s just that around Christmas, he’s extra stressful. A man has certain needs, and it wouldn’t be very giving to make his dear wife shoulder the entirety of that responsibility when...”

Betty closed her eyes. They never missed a word, did they? “Thanks for that, but no. I mean how many other wives?” Santa had only ever mentioned the one. Martha. He’d said it crushed him when she died.

“Not many, Mrs. Claus,” Larry said. “He didn’t usually marry the humans he picked up. But I think he really liked you. He stopped cruising at all for a while there.”

“Is Santa still even *in* the toy business?” Betty said.

“Yes?” Larry said.

“Huh.” She indicated the factory door with her rifle. “Open it.”

Larry frowned. “Yes, Mrs. Claus.”

Betty’s missing cheesecloths, yellow-stained and greasy, were strewn about on the factory floor between propane tanks, coffee filter boxes, and empty five-gallon water jugs. On the dusty conveyer belt sat hot plates and glass beakers, burnt out from the inside. The chemicals smelled like animal urine.

Betty took her gaming headset out of her pocket. She switched it on. “Williams? Gomez? Either of you still online? Can you hear me?” She’d never used the headset this far from the mansion, but North Pole reception kicked all kinds of ass.

Larry began picking up aluminum foil squares and putting them in a garbage bag. “It’s not Santa’s fault,” he was saying. “Kids don’t want toys anymore. We even tried gift cards, but...”

“Don’t touch anything,” Betty said. She slapped a sheet of burnt foil out of his hands.

Her headset crackled. “You’re up late, Betty,” Gomez said finally. “What’s up?”

“Yeah, what do you know about methlabs?” Betty said.

“I know they blow up something fierce,” Gomez said. “You that bored?”

“They explode?” Betty said.

Larry nodded solemnly. “They explode.”

“Quiet, you,” Betty said.

“Yeah, let me get my laptop,” Gomez said. “There was this article or something? About how sometimes the first sign is when a motel room or trailer goes kablooey?”

Betty grabbed Larry by the upper arm and yanked him out the factory door. But what was the hurry? And what good was running? An explosion on the sensitive arctic ice could sink the whole of Santa’s Village in minutes.

“There’s safer options, if you want something to pass the time up there, Betty,” Gomez said.

Betty didn’t answer him. She didn’t look at Larry. She crunched through the snow, marching the elf further and further from the factory.

“Larry, I need you to tell me you’re not sneaking drugs into children’s stockings.”

“We’re not,” Larry said.

“And I need it to be true,” Betty said.

“Oh, it’s true,” Larry said. “Santa says only the first taste is free. And we almost never do deliveries on Christmas anymore.”

“Gomez, call Williams,” Betty said into her microphone. “I’m proposing an Arctic campaign. A real one. But it’s gotta be done soon.”

“What are you going to do, Mrs. Claus?” Larry said.

“Call me Betty,” she said. “Mr. Claus is presently between Missuses.”

“What are you going to do, Betty?” Larry said.

She froze. Her name sounded foreign to her, coming from this elf. It should have been more distant, or at least digitized as it ever was in her headset. And Larry’s voice sounded deeper—human even—when he said it.

“I’m sorry,” she said finally. “I have to undo this.”

She had to. Crisis first. There’d be time for crying later. There was no other explanation for why she was in the North Pole in the first place. She certainly wasn’t going to be any good at explaining the concept of “evacuation” to a people who hadn’t stepped outside the Village in generations. This was her purpose. It would do.

“Why?” Larry said quietly.

Betty didn't think she'd ever seen an elf not smiling before. Even frowns held onto traces of smiles. But Larry wasn't frowning, either. He just wasn't smiling. His face looked real. Chances were, he wouldn't be so agreeable in the sunnier world outside Santa's Village. He'd sing no carols as he highballed it south. He'd find less cheer in that complicated life. But suddenly Larry's face lit up.

He smiled as though he was hearing about Christmas for the first time. He tried to answer his own question with another one: "Because unwrapping is half the fun?"

"Balls," Betty said. One didn't play a mediocre campaign game for fifteen years without having certain expectations about the crystal explosions at the end. "It'd better be more than half."

* * *

Alex Wilson (alexwilson.com) writes fiction and comics in Carrboro, NC. He runs the audiobook project Telltale Weekly and publishes the minicomic/zine Inconsequential Art. His work has appeared/will appear in Asimov's, The Rambler, Futurismic, The Florida Review, Weird Tales, Outlaw Territory II (Image Comics) and LCRW.



*“Times Square”
art by David Kelmer (davidkelmer.blogspot.com)*

William Highsmith has written a story in one of our favorite SF subgenres: people doing cutting-edge science to make money. Or in this case, to avoid losing all their money. On the Mohs scale of SF this is the "hardest" story in this anthology, and William sells it with witty, naturalistic dialogue.

Qubit Slip

by William Highsmith

The elevator halted between floors, its indicator lights blinking too stupidly for a showcase smart building. Bob Torrent winced and dialed his office on his cell phone, but there was no cell signal. Even the elevator's emergency telephone line was dead.

Bob pounded the door, then sat down. He started to work on a presentation for an upcoming meeting, but his laptop wouldn't power up. This was a bad sign because his company manufactured the laptop. He stared at the blank screen, trying to connect the two failures.

A couple hours later, the elevator car lurched in spasms. It stopped and two burly hands forced the doors open. Bob jumped two feet down to floor level.

"Thanks, Brad. I was about to make a puddle in the corner. By the way, most everything in that elevator is broken."

The maintenance man smiled half-heartedly. "You were safer in there. Most everything is broken everywhere. Take a look outside."

Outside, police officers were managing accidents in two intersections. That was a little unusual, but not unprecedented in Washington, DC. But Bob had never seen traffic lights stuck on green in both directions.

Cable television was dead in Bob's office, but broadcast radio was working, reporting an odd assortment of failures: trains, air traffic control, building management systems, and ground traffic control.

Bob peeked at *QPC #1* on his bureau, the first quantum PC off Strategic Computing Labs' production line. The screen mocked its creator with "Internal error, code 0x10003aff."

When CEO Sal James entered, his face confirmed Bob's suspicion. SCL was the world's majority supplier of quantum computers, from microcontrollers to supercomputers. Suddenly, that was no longer a bragging right. It was a disaster.

* * *

The morning sun illuminated a Metrorail schedule board a quarter-mile from Bob Torrent's condominium. He couldn't read the lettering, but could tell Metrorail was running today. This wouldn't be a bicycle day. Since the quantum crash, Bob was more fit than he had been twenty years before at MIT.

Bob arrived at the station forty-five minutes early for the 8:10 cross-town. The crowd was still fighting for seats on the 6:15, which had not yet arrived. When the board showed 6:15 *Crystal City: Canceled*, he decided it would be a bicycle day after all.

* * *

Bob pedaled around protesters as he approached Strategic Computing Labs Foundation, established to help mitigate the quantum crash. He laced through the crowd unnoticed in his jeans and pizza-delivery shirt. He paused in the lobby to watch a news story of a Washington Beltway professor from George Washington University.

"Twenty years ago, shares of any company that could spell 'quantum computer' topped the investment charts. Now, you couldn't trade them for a bucket of spit."

"Geez," muttered Bob, as he went upstairs. He found Sal resting between the fourth and fifth floors.

"It's tough getting old, huh?" said Bob.

"If you could trust elevators...." Sal flexed his left knee. "I used to be able to straighten that one."

"Some trains are running now. Maybe elevators are next."

"If that's a hint, it won't work."

"Getting the airlines back in the air is more important?" In Bob's circle, that amounted to wry humor. "We could hijack the conference room on this floor."

Sal's face showed obvious relief. "That would be lovely."

* * *

“Public safety?” said Sal. “Rafael?”

“Push-to-talk radio service should be online in a week, but there is no inter-service voice networking, except for fire and police supervisors.” Rafael glanced over his glasses nervously at Sal. “Seventy percent of the EMT crews are active.”

“That’s real progress, Rafael. How about mobile Internet access for my police and sheriffs?”

“Well, uh, maybe a month?” Rafael cringed. “No, two months.”

“The correct answer is *one month*.” Sal quickly wrote one of his patented check marks in his notebook, which made his statement an irrevocable contract. “Critical infrastructure? Meredith?”

“Power distribution...is an issue,” said Meredith. She glanced at Rafael, but he looked away.

“Power distribution is not an issue,” said Sal. “If it were an issue we’d all be out of work. Is it really an issue, Meredith?”

“Well, I guess not. Or soon won’t be. I’ll need—”

“Done. Hedley, make sure Meredith has everything she needs by Thursday. Meredith, make sure I am happy a month after that, okay?” Sal checkmarked his notebook twice.

Hedley saluted. “Yes, sir, the unstated task will suffer no unseen problems, because—”

“Fine, Hedley. How about power generation, Meredith?”

“Power gen equipment is grossly outdated, so it works great.”

“Wonderful. Water management?”

“Wastewater management is an issue with the tropical weather season in the South fast approaching. I’ve run out of warm bodies—”

Sal stretched his arms out in mock outrage towards ponytailed Hedley. “Why doesn’t Meredith have more warm bodies, Hedley? Did you hear the passion in her voice? I’m in tears here.”

“Sal, my friend, was it not you who stole hers last month for Transportation?” Hedley crossed his Birkenstocked feet on the conference table for emphasis.

The correct answer is *one month*.” Sal quickly wrote one of his patented check marks in his notebook, which made his statement an irrevocable contract.

“Hedley, it is not your job to make me out a fool; that’s my job. It is your job to get temps for Meredith.”

“Shall I—”

“No, do not steal them back from Transportation. Find some fresh ones.”

“O-kay.”

“Bob, you saw how I suffered climbing the stairs to this conference room,” said Sal. “You will not rub salt in my wounds, will you? Now, give me your spaceborne computing platform report.”

“There are no new issues—”

“Great!”

“—but all the old ones have worsened.”

“Bob, you are a jackass.”

* * *

Bob and Sal took a chance on the elevator lottery and won. Life would not be worth living if the press learned that the nation’s director of strategic computing had succumbed to his own monster: quantum computers in the embedded systems. Sal didn’t mind that the lights, heating, and air conditioning were wonky. But misbehaving elevators were unforgivable.

“You didn’t answer my question, Bob. What about my spaceborne computing platform?” Sal thumped his notebook. “See, no check marks in weeks.”

“I’m comparing the quality of the spacecraft’s conventional telemetry link to its quantum broadband link. It’s a measure of, um, *quantum misbehavior*. It’s not an ideal test, but taxi service to the platform is—”

“Dead in the water.”

Bob noticed the news feed video screen. “Look, it’s that guy again, that jackass from GWU.”

“Oh, him,” said Sal. “He prances around at every news service in town that will give him ten seconds to trash us.”

“He trashes well. Hey, who’s that guy in the back?” Bob planted a finger on the screen on a figure in a ball cap, trench coat and sunglasses. “See his sign? ‘Are Zeilenger bit spaces clumpy?’”

“What if they are?” said Sal. “Whatever they are.”

“Um, if quantum bit spaces are clumpy then we’re screwed. Our quantum microprocessors assume bit spaces are nice and regular. Get him for me, Sal.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. That’s why he’s hanging on the news hog’s coattails.” Bob peeked out the window. “Never mind, crowd’s gone. It’s a ten-minute bike ride. See ya.”

Bob peddled to the Library of Congress. The crowd had thinned, and he saw a likely figure with a sign at a street corner. The trench-coated quantum protester had an unexpectedly feminine and attractive face.

“Hi, I saw you on TV and biked here quick-like-a-bunny. I liked your quantum protest sign a lot.”

She smiled and handed him her card. “And you are...a physicist, right?”

“Bob Torrent, chief scientist at the labs, uh, Strategic Computing Labs Foundation.”

“I know you. You’re an MIT brat, too. I’ve read a stack of your papers.”

Bob looked at her card and laughed. “Miss Marcia Quan, Physicist. That’s all it says.”

“If I had a life it would say more, Dr. Torrent—”

“Oh, puh-lease. Call me Bob.”

Bob invited Marcia to a coffee shop to reminisce about MIT. Marcia had recently finished her doctoral program and was doing some post-doctoral work and teaching.

“Okay, Marcia, tell me why I care about clumpy Zeilenger bit spaces.”

“They broke your little computers, I think,” she said. “I researched the idea that bit spaces are non-uniformly distributed. At the time, that was a mathematical curiosity, like *what if some exotic particle had negative mass?* But when I squeezed some of the little buggers between germanium slices, they decohered as expected, but inconsistently.”

“So that’s how my quantum computers became fuzzy computers. Quantum states are no longer predictable. There can be areas with less....”

“*Information potential* is the best term I’ve come up with,” said Marcia.

Bob sighed. “A lovely project, even though you’ve shot me through the heart.”

“Thank you,” said Marcia. She emitted a snort that she covered with two fingers. “That means a lot to me...coming from you.”

“So, how far apart are your clumps? Centimeters? Light years?”

“Millions of miles, I guess, since your computers ran fine for twenty years.”

“Good point. And, we don’t have a clue when or if they will end. Marcia, how would you like to investigate the scope of the clumpiness for a while?”

“That sounds fun.”

* * *

Bob thumbed the entry system to the network control center and ushered in Marcia.

“I got visited by several gray-suited gentlemen, but didn’t get asked out once.”

“Ah, a security interview...the only possible explanation for your lack of being hit on.”

“Neckties, white shirts, polished shoes...everything I find frightening.”

“Sorry, this is a secondary facility, but we can move spacecraft here.”

Bob demonstrated the ground-to-ship telemetry links and quantum broadband links for the spaceborne computing platform, the SCP. It relayed experimental data among research and military spacecraft and surface stations.

Bob showed Marcia his experiment to compare the SCP’s traditional radio link with its quantum radio link.

Marcia’s face lit up with the possibilities. “Oh, you’ve found a clean way to compare old technology to new.”

“My bag of tricks includes polar-orbit satellites, equatorial spacecraft, planetary explorers, and a deep-space probe or two.”

“And with surface ships and airships,” said Marcia, “we could map the pockets of resistance in your quantum rebellion.”

“I especially liked the we in that statement.”

Marcia fought off a smile. “What, we physicists? Or we boys and girls?”

“We boy physicists and girl physicists,” said Bob.

* * *

Marcia cataloged every thirty-second window during which a spacecraft had a line of sight with another craft. Bob identified which of Marcia's candidates were useful, considering the crafts' missions, power systems and the safety of modifying their software. Bob spent the next few weeks with domain experts developing scripts on a simulator to support the experiments.

Bob and Marcia met later and began a data-gathering marathon.

* * *

"You've heard about winter brownouts in the northeast sector," said Meredith, poking Sal's chest. "Some of your cannibalized equipment was substandard. Riots tend to discourage temps, so turnover is high. Training costs are killing me."

"Hedley, find some training and conflict resolution consultants for Meredith," said Sal.

Bob stood up to leave.

"Where are you going, Torrent?" said Sal.

Bob shrugged.

"Please, stay a minute longer. I've got some unpleasantness."

"Oh...sure." Bob made a quick call and sat down. The faces in the room turned sullen.

"Speaking of Congress—"

"Who was speaking of Congress?" said Hedley.

"Guys, Congress slashed my budget. I have to cut one program. No one thinks twice about the year it takes to resurface a mile of roadway, but when the entire infrastructure needs an overhaul, they must have it *now*."

"What are you cutting?" said Hedley.

"Transportation. I have a gut feeling that we'd lose that to the feds, anyway, just as we lost Energy. Harold—"

"Yes." Harold tensed up in his chair.

"I've got some bad news...you're going to have to work with Meredith."

Harold blinked for a second. "No!" he said. Relief unfolded in his face.

"That's not funny," said Meredith. "Well, I could use the help. Water, power and electric is a lot...for a girl," she said with a smile.

“Thanks, Meredith. You’ve been an inspiration. I was going to offer Bob’s Girl Scout a job, but that’s obviously out the window.”

* * *

“We need more spacecraft,” said Bob.

“I was hoping work wouldn’t be mentioned tonight. When do you suppose the movie projector will start working?”

“You’d know better than anyone on the planet, Marcia. It’s probably the broadband feed that failed.” Bob took his pen from his pocket and nervously drummed the armrest of his theater seat.

“What’s wrong?”

“We need more samples to prop up our report. It feels thin.”

“We’ve run out of craft to bounce signals off,” said Marcia. “We crudely measured the migration and size of quantum holes. It is what it is.”

“Yeah.”

“We have nor’easters of increasingly low information potential passing through our space-time coming generally from the center of the galaxy.”

“It is like weather, isn’t it?” said Bob.

She leaned against his shoulder. “Heavy quantum precipitation will fall on the polar regions with drought conditions prevalent along the equator for the next six months—”

“I love it when you talk physics.”

“The Northern Hemisphere will have partly cloudy quantum weather for two years. As with all weather predictions more than six days out, caution is advised.”

“That’s it then, microscopic as it is,” said Bob. “Beats what we had before.” Bob raised the armrest between them.

Marcia then shot up from her seat. “What an idiot!”

“What?” Bob’s face turned red. “I’m sorry. I thought it would be more comfortable—”

“No, silly. What you said...I just had a quantum epiphany. We did great macroscopic measurements, but we need to do microscopic ones. Suppose the clumps are clumpy?”

Bob scratched his chin.

“Suppose our large clumps are composed of bazillions of microscopic clumps.”

“Okay, how is that effectively different?”
“Maybe we could do something about it.”
“No, seriously...?”

* * *

“Bob, have you logged any billable hours this month?” said Sal. He flashed a twisted smile in Marcia’s direction.

Bob snorted. “We’re busy doing the work of the empire, Sal. You’d be impressed if we charged you what we were worth this month.”

“All I’m getting out of this so far is free beer and bad puns,” said Marcia.

Bob turned red again. “Oh, and this woman here, Miss...?”

“Marcia Quan.”

“Miss Quan is helping, too, a little.”

“Then I’ll buy her lunch and a nice hat,” said Sal.

“Sal, I got your naïve memo about saving semiconductor foundries,” said Bob. “Why fight that losing battle when we can change the rules?”

“I’m waiting to be impressed,” said Sal.

“This woman and I have assessed the present *quantum storm* as we call it. Here’s your report.” Bob tossed a printed report into Sal’s lap. “I know you won’t believe it unless it’s written on a dead tree. In short, we think the present misbehavior of quantum computers is a natural phenomenon, not a design flaw of the computer.”

“You’re blaming God? Does He give refunds?” said Sal.

“Think of it as passing rain.”

“And when will the sun shine again?” said Sal.

“Best guesstimation: two years.”

Sal sighed. “Couldn’t it be two weeks or twenty years? Must it end at the same time as the Quantum Retreat Program?”

“Sorry, Sal.”

“When will the next storm arrive?”

“The present one is the only storm we’ve noticed since the first experimental qubit was lit up in a lab. We could have had hundreds of tiny storms—”

“I get it. You’re clueless,” said Sal.

“That is where the weather analogy weakens,” said Marcia. “Earth weather is a closed system, if you include the effects of the sun and

nearby objects. The quantum storm is not closed, unless you consider the entire universe—”

“Let’s not,” said Sal. “God, physicists are annoying. Is this a pathetic plea for research funds, Bob?”

“It’s not pathetic. It’s strategic. Marcia and I are going to fix it.” Bob crossed his arms emphatically.

“Of course you are,” said Sal with a laugh. “Marcia, please don’t take my oafish grumbling for lack of appreciation. Your help on this is greatly appreciated.”

“This is part of his people-skills act,” said Bob. “Next, he’ll ingratiate himself on you by telling you what a slug he is and how indispensable you are.”

“This is part of his people-skills act,” said Bob. “Next, he’ll ingratiate himself on you by telling you what a slug he is and how indispensable you are.”

“Weren’t you listing, Torrent? I already told her what a slug I am. Now you’ve ruined my spiel. Marcia, thanks a hell of a lot.”

“It’s been lovely.” Marcia let a nervous sigh escape.

Bob gathered Marcia under his arm. “Don’t underestimate us, Sal.”

“Really? If you’ve got something, spill it,” said Sal. “We need some good news.”

Bob squeezed Marcia. “We believe—”

“Not yet,” said Marcia. “We need more time.”

* * *

Bob was revising his “Quantum Information Potential Assessment” report by adding references to Marcia’s earlier work. He received a call from Marcia, who told him to turn on the TV. Bob’s stomach wrenched.

An industrial accident had disabled one of only three factories that produced special resins needed by semiconductor foundries around the world. One of the other two had closed indefinitely for review since it used similar processes.

“Are you ready to talk, Marcia? This baby’s going to pop any minute.”

* * *

“Critical Infrastructure?” said Sal. “Meredith...never mind. It’s reboot time. Our schedule is kaput until we assess the damage to our plans. Frankly, I wouldn’t be surprised to come in some morning to find the doors padlocked.”

A group gasp filled the room. Sal rarely spoke so negatively.

“Twenty-twenty hindsight informs us that we should have heeded the 1993 accident at one of these same resin factories. That episode crippled the electronics industry and fanned a recession.”

Hedley stood up. “How bad will it get?”

“Dreadful. The economy’s worse now than in 1993.”

“*¡Madre de Dios!*” said Rafael, kicking the empty Energy chair across the room.

“The quantum semiconductor industry is shutting down while the conventional semiconductor market is starting back up. Now, the fuel of that shift has been sucked dry. But our mission has not changed: to return our infrastructure to...uh, excuse me?”

All eyes turned towards the door.

Four District of Columbia police officers, some suits, and a congressman entered the conference room.

“Sorry Sal,” said Congressman Bennett. “Nothing I could do about it. I wanted to be here so you’d know I still support you.”

Sal knew the drill. No one could remove papers from their offices. The Strategic Computing Labs Foundation program was over.

“Sal, Congressman, I have a very strong recovery program to pitch to you,” said Bob. “This is the worst possible time to do this.”

“It’s already done,” said the congressman, plainly. “All work products remain property of the federal government, according to your employment contracts.”

* * *

Bob convinced Sal and the group to meet in a nearby hotel lobby.

“Okay, guys, that was painful,” said Bob. “Maybe it doesn’t matter.”

“Sure,” said Hedley. “You’ve got no kids.”

“Hear me out, Hedley. You might want to sit down, Sal.”

“I’ll hate it that much?”

“Oh, yes.”

Sal sat down and the others smiled for a moment.

“Here’s the deal: Sal, I need your yacht.”

Sal laughed nervously. “Um, okay, but could I hear a bit more?”

“Of course. My plan was to scuttle this group before someone did it for us, so—”

“That’s easy to say now,” said Sal. “Makes you look like a genius.”

“No...it’s true,” said Marcia.

“I wanted to leave you and Hedley in place,” said Bob, “a profile small enough to go under the radar. You’d keep the organization alive for a year and a half. You know...baffle them with bullshit...send them more reports than they could absorb—”

“That’s what I do now...did,” said Sal.

“I know that, but you weren’t supposed to admit it in front of the kids.” Bob eyed the others. “Your real job will be to run our new semiconductor company. In a year’s time, we’ll produce a new generation of quantum microcomputers that can retrofit up to forty percent of the existing products, and will be the only choice for new product development.”

“Jesus, Moses, and Mohammed,” said Sal. “Is that all?”

“No. While we organize, you’ll contact foundries and set up a distribution channel. You’ll also grease the path for us to wow the world with our ability to unbreak things. Even with the year on hiatus, we’ll take years off the original schedule you had, Sal.”

“And the yacht?”

“Seed money. There isn’t one dime of venture capital now, especially for quantum computing.” Bob breathed deeply. “I’ll throw in my condo...and Marcia’s, too.”

Marcia slapped him on the arm. “The hell you will.”

“Your stuff is that good?” said Sal.

“That’s why I keep Marcia around,” said Bob. “She figured out that quantum clumpiness is of a microscopic scale and then designed a semiconductor geometry that would compensate for the non-uniformity.”

“That’s why I keep Bob around,” said Marcia. “I wouldn’t have a clue how to exploit the technology in the real world.”

“I assume you’re preparing patent applications,” said Sal.

“Already filed.”

“Whose names are in the inventors’ field?” said Sal.

Bob smiled. “The intellectual property is Marcia’s alone. She’s been consulting with me, for fun.”

Sal hobbled around the room for a while. “You’re adequate scientists, but you’re both complete Nimrods if you attempt this.”

Bob’s face went slack. “But...Sal?”

“Why work so bloody hard when you’re doomed to fail? Kids these days....” Sal clucked his tongue at them until their crestfallen faces stabilized. “You kids haven’t a clue what it would take to pull this off.”

Bob slumped in his chair.

“Fortunately, you have me,” said Sal. “If you’re right about your secret sauce, I can license it in five or six months to companies with resources to do this properly. Large companies with people and money. *Serious* money. And worker bees staring at idle production lines. That is what it takes, kids. Major resources. Not the chump change a yacht and a condo will raise.”

“Oh.”

“How the hell do you think Strategic Computing Labs took off?” said Sal. “Because you had a great idea on a sheet of paper?”

“We had you?”

“That’s right, pal. Now, after I do it *again*, we can all re-form our little group as a self-funded leisure hobby. We’ll meet once a month on the yacht. The rest of the time we’ll manage our relationships with our license partners. None of us will suffer, believe me.”

“Including us?” said Hedley.

Sal put his hand over his heart. “Hedley, that really hurt. Of course, all of us. We’ll be busier than ever. What do you think, kids?”

“Sweet!” said Bob.

“That’s why we all keep you around, Sal,” said Marcia.

“Um, your secret sauce won’t stop working if the quantum storm goes away, will it?”

* * *

William Highsmith is a software engineer in the radio communications industry, and does not consider writing punishment. Therefore, he's published non-fiction articles for technical journals and quite a few "user manuals" found under coffee cups and in metal file cabinets. (You wouldn't want to read those.) His publications include Abyss & Apex, and Flash Fiction Online.

This sweet bit of middle-class urban fantasy was one of the inspirations for Thoughtcrime Experiments itself. Andrew Willett presented “Daisy” at a writing group he attends with Leonard, and it was the first time Leonard read a story and thought “why don’t I buy this?” When Andrew submitted it to Thoughtcrime Experiments, we were afraid that we’d raised our standards, that “Daisy” wouldn’t hold its own against the other stories we were considering—but it does.

Daisy

by Andrew Willett

It was Sunday in snowy Manhattan. Jenna was in the tub, and I was doing the Times crossword, listening to the clang of the radiators and the swish of the taxis on the slush outside, when my coffee-scented reverie was broken by a loud squawk from the bathroom, and a splash, and a flesh-upon-cold-tile sort of thump.

“Go away! Shoo! Get out of my bathroom!”

I threw down my pen and dashed down the hall. Jenna was picking herself up off the floor of the bathroom. In the bathtub, a bar of soap was gaily chasing a nylon scrubby thing around the surface of the water.

“Damned *pixies!*” Jenna said, smacking the bathtub’s drain lever. “*Again!* I am so *tired* of these things!” A piteous squeak came from the scrubby thing as the water began to swirl down the drain. A translucent little head poked out from behind a pot of organic-sugarcane exfoliating body polish, and looked at me with exaggerated puppy eyes and a trembling lower lip.

“Sorry, kids,” I said to the bathtub.

“Don’t humor them, dammit,” Jenna said, and stomped, still naked, still wet, toward the phone in the kitchen. She’d be irritated by her own wet footprints on the battered wood of the hallway floor later, but right now she had blood on her mind. Or water. Ichor. Whatever it is that the common Manhattan water-pixie uses for blood.

I couldn't say I blamed her. She got the brunt of the pixies' odd sense of humor much more than I did, because she's the one who likes to take baths. Although I will say that a pixie hiding in the sink among the dirty soup bowls makes doing the dishes an adventure.

"Ramon? Hi. It's Jenna McMasters in 5C. Ramon, the pixies are out of control. You've got to do something about — yes, I know — Ramon, the equinox isn't for weeks and weeks. Really, we need you to do something sooner... Well, I'm just not ready to wait that long. We may have to try something on our own, then. Goodbye, Ramon. You've been a huge goddamn help."

She hung up the phone.

"Man, he's useless," she said.

"On the other hand," I said, "he's the first super we've had who keeps the boiler, the door buzzers, *and* the electrical system in perfect working order." I took the robe I'd brought from the bathroom and wrapped it around her shoulders. "What is it they say in yoga class? Take a deep cleansing breath. Spiral out from your navel center, and stuff."

"Robert, this sort of thing never happened in San Francisco."

"No," I said. "In San Francisco we got earthquakes, and there were wood sprites in Golden Gate Park. Welcome to New York."

"I keep trying to tell myself that this is *cool*. But then they come at me on a Sunday morning, when I have no work to do and I'm trying to relax and I'm *naked*, and I just lose it..."

"And you take it out on the super," I said.

"And now I'm gonna have a bruise on my butt, too," she said.

"Well, that's karma for you. Now stretch out on the couch, and I'll bring you coffee and rub your feet."

Jenna smiled. "Just make sure there are no pixies in the coffee pot, is all I ask."

Ugh. That was our previous Sunday morning adventure: most unpleasant, and marked by the death of a new French-press pot. I realized that I, too, hated the pixies.

"We need a plan," I said.

* * *

Faced with apartment issues, we did what any modern couple would do: we got out our laptops and looked on the net for solutions.

Poisons were useless. Traps, mostly ditto: if you didn't keep a very close eye on them, they tended to overflow, and then their prisoners all got loose at once. Water-pixies couldn't be appeased: no dishes of milk or stuff like that.

Good old-fashioned violence was cathartic, but the minute you picked the phone book/running shoe/rubber mallet back up, they just reformed themselves from the puddles to which they'd been reduced. Plus, you never knew if they were going to be amused or annoyed by your attempts to chase them out. And annoyed water-pixies were even worse than the usual kind.

"Says here," I said, "that we could try to entice a brownie into staying here for a while."

"Oh, honey," Jenna said. "I'm not ready to adopt a 9-year-old girl. Pigtales or no. I mean, where would she sleep?"

I glared at her. She smirked and returned to her own research.

"I'm just saying, it would keep the vermin out," I said. "Help out Ramon. Maybe make us some new shoes, even."

"Yeah, sure. My god, if there was a brownie in this building? They'd double the rent for all of us — Aha!"

"What?"

"Yes!" Jenna said, not looking up from her laptop. "Oh, this is... oh. That's brilliant. Put on your shoes, my dear, because we're going out."

"We are?"

"We're getting a *cat*."

* * *

There are things I never knew you could buy on the Lower East Side. Schoenfein's Useful Goods was full of them, and what we brought home was definitely one of them, but from what we could tell it had a devoted following in its obscurity. It was a rectangle of pale sunny yellow, like a stiff piece of thickish cardboard, wrapped in an eighth-generation photocopy of a set of instructions.

"Okay," I said, opening a container of kosher salt we'd bought on the way home. "Salt, check; dish, check; one cup of warm water, check. Where's the Sharpie?"

"I've got it here," Jenna said, holding up a sheet of paper she'd covered with black squiggles. "Just practicing."

I made a circle of salt in the bottom of the dish. Jenna placed the yellow cardboard thing in the circle, then carefully inked the Hebrew letters from the instruction sheet onto its back in small, neat forms. We held hands and dumped the water into the dish.

Remember those stove-top popcorn dishes? The ones where all of the sudden the little flat tinfoil skillet would mushroom up into this huge thing and it was like watching magic happen? It was like that. Only instead of a big tinfoil balloon, we stood in our living room watching a piece of cardboard stuff in a Pyrex dish expand into a big yellow kitchen sponge about eight inches tall and shaped like a dainty cat. It had neat Hebrew letters across its back in black ink. It blinked its eyes at us.

“Cool,” I said.

“Mao,” the cat said.

“I think we’ll call you Daisy,” Jenna said.

* * *

“Here I am!” I said, as loudly as I could. “A human filling a tub! Dum-de-dum-de-doo! And also I have the taps running because I am *shaving!* I am a human who has lots of water running in the bathroom!”

“I am the human’s wife!” came Jenna’s voice from the kitchen. “I think I will make soup now! I am filling pots of water! Oh, how I love soup! And oh, look, there goes the cat, headed for the bathroom!”

I tried to stay casual, looking at the bathtub spigot in the mirror. A pair of shimmering forms sat atop it, watching two others skip lightly across the surface of the water. They were groovy, sure, but I was tired of unexpected puddles on the bathroom floor. So I was thrilled to see Daisy’s pale yellow form slink smoothly through the doorway and across the tile.

Daisy padded noiselessly to the bathtub, ears high. She could hear something, even if I could not, and right away she was crouched against the outside of the tub, her body coiled and compressed in a way that would have been quintessentially feline if it had made any allowances

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for a skeleton. Her tail flicked restlessly — her head peeked slowly over the rim of the tub — she sprang into the air —

And then all hell broke loose. Splashing and thrashing and twisting, jets of water everywhere, the whomping sound of a heavy kitchen sponge slamming against the sides of an old bathtub. The pixies vanished into her mouth like... like so much water into a sponge.

The last of the pixies squirted itself through the air and into the sink. Daisy quickly wrung herself out (most disconcerting to watch) and jumped into the basin after it. By the time she got there, the pixie had squeezed itself into the tap, but Daisy easily wedged her soft yellow head right behind it into the one-inch opening. Her tail twitched, once, and then she pulled her head back out, her soft yellow tongue licking her soft yellow lips.

“Holy hell,” I called to Jenna, turning off the taps. “You shoulda—”

“If you’re done with her in there,” Jenna said, “I think the word has gotten out—” There was a loud crash from the kitchen. Daisy looked up, eyes wide, and took off down the hallway. I followed.

There were at least six pixies in the kitchen, launching silverware around the room on jets of water. One of the soup pots lurched across the stovetop toward the floor.

The little bastards never stood a chance.

“Good kitty,” said Jenna, scratching Daisy between the ears. Daisy wrung herself out where she stood in the sink basin and accepted Jenna’s affections. I went to fetch the mop.

* * *

“You know,” Jenna said a few days later, “Daisy is the first good thing that’s happened since we came to New York.” She handed me a plate to dry.

“Oh, come on,” I said. “You know that’s not true.”

“Bah,” said Jenna. “Do you know how long it had been since I washed dishes without getting squirted in the eye? New York sucks. I don’t know what you see in this place sometimes.”

“But you were so excited to get here! You got your dream job —”

“I was hired to do my dream job. And now that we’re here in this city you love so much, the industry is on fire and the economy is going to hell and my project has been backburnered and I’m doing the exact

same thing I was doing before, only with exciting new forms of vermin.”

“But —” I said.

“And the food’s expensive and it’s too loud and crowded and I hate the cold weather and everyone spends insane amounts of money for teeny tiny apartments and *nobody seems to mind* how crazy the rents are and you spend a fortune and your apartment still has pixies in the water pipes.”

“I beg your pardon,” I said. “We do *not* have pixies in this apartment. Not anymore. Isn’t that right, snookie?”

“Mao,” said Daisy.

“Hmmp,” said Jenna.

“And besides,” I said, moving Daisy off the counter, “you have a job, which lots of people in your business — including people we left behind in San Francisco — can’t say right now.”

“Hmmp,” said Jenna.

“And just think what it’s going to be like up on the little roof deck when the weather gets warm. You could take off your shoes in the sunshine,” I said. I put down the dishtowel and put my arms around her waist. “We could sip wine by candlelight.”

“That does sound nice.”

“Baby, it’ll be great. Don’t let the winter make you give up on spring.”

“Mao,” said Daisy, on the counter again.

Jenna looked at me, and at the cat. “You two make it hard to stay cranky, you know that?”

Day-to-day life with a sponge golem was pleasant. Daisy needed no litter box or exotic foods: just a dish of clean salt water to keep herself moist. She never felt soggy, just damp, like the flesh of a banana. She would (rather adorably) wash herself in the sink or the tub when she got dirty.

Once, when she made my cousin Martin stumble and spill his pilsner on her back, she wobbled hilariously around the living room for twenty minutes before we took pity on her and rinsed her out in the sink. She got underfoot, as cats do, but it was reassuring to know that stepping on her would do her no serious injury.

Every now and then she’d perk up and dash into the bathroom or the kitchen and press her nose against a drain, or stare wild-eyed into the

toilet for two minutes before losing interest and wandering off. She enjoyed sitting nearby when we'd bathe or wash dishes, hoping for a quick meal. After a successful hunt, she would snooze in her baking dish atop the living-room radiator, which not only steamed off her excess fluids but hydrated the dry winter air in the apartment as well. She kept our apartment so free of vermin that we even lent her out to lovely old Mrs. Forbush in 5D, when we realized that our share of pixies had moved in next door.

Daisy liked to eat ice chips from Mrs. Forbush's hands, which was something she would never deign to do with us, sweet-natured though she generally was. Every now and then Daisy would start to smell mildewed, as sponges do, but we'd just pop her in the microwave for a couple of minutes and she'd be fine.

So I was surprised when one day in late February I got a call at the office from our building's management company.

"Mr. Elias?" This is Pearl McPhee at Superior Rentals. I'm afraid this is about your... cat."

"I see," I said. I had just come out of a meeting, and there was a post-it note on my computer monitor. CALL JENNA NOW, it said. Uh-oh. "What seems to be the trouble? We didn't think she fell within the no-pets rules, I mean, she's made out of —"

"No, sir, it's — well, there have been complaints about the noise. I'm afraid she's —"

"Noise? But she's made out of sponges! She meows a little sometimes, but who can hear her when she's inside the apartment?"

"That's exactly the problem, sir. She's no longer in the apartment. She's inside the walls somewhere."

I called home as I left my office, and when Mrs. Forbush answered I knew things were bad.

"Just tell Jenna I'll be there in ten minutes," I said. For once, the C train was waiting on the subway platform just as I arrived. Entering our building, I ran into Ramon in the hallway. "Very bad," he said. "I'm getting the big snake."

"Snake?"

"Metal thing. Clears out pipes."

"Oh. Oh, god. Okay, I'll — I'll see you upstairs." I dashed up to the apartment. On the third floor I started hearing the sounds: a horrible yowling, the sound of something either very frightened or very injured

or very both. Jenna and Mrs. Forbush were in the bathroom. Jenna sat on the edge of the tub, looking stricken. Mrs. Forbush stood over the toilet in her purple cardigan, shaking a handful of ice chips over the bowl and calling Daisy's name.

"Robert!" Jenna leapt up and grabbed my hands. "She went into the damn toilet after the pixies! There were, like, 30 of them standing in the bowl and she chased them into the pipes and she's been in there for two hours and she started making this horrible noise and I don't know if she's stuck or scared or hurt or what and she won't come out and

Mrs. Forbush stood over the toilet in her purple cardigan, shaking a handful of ice chips over the bowl and calling Daisy's name.

Ramon is getting the snake...."

"I know," I said. "I saw him."

"Robert, we just can't leave her there, we have to get her out, I mean, the man on the phone said she'll live until the marker gets all blurry, and who knows how long that could be, and, oh, oh god..."

"Okay, okay. Here's Ramon.

Okay? Oh, dumb cat. C'mon, Daisy. Come on, sweetie, come out..." But Daisy just kept making the horrible noise.

Ramon had a long jointed-metal coil that he pulled out of a heavy plastic bag. It had a big mass of pointy blades at the end, and Mrs. Forbush blanched upon seeing it, but Ramon detached the blades and plugged in one of those grabby claws instead, like the thing you use to pull teddy bears out of the box at carnivals. He started to feed it into the toilet.

About 20 feet in, the snake hit something, and Daisy's moans changed. Ramon tightened the claw and reeled the snake back in as gently as he could, coiling the muck-encrusted snake up in the bathtub.

Eventually, Ramon brought Daisy out of the pipe.

"Mao," said Daisy.

There was no way to tell what had happened to her — snagged on something jagged, somewhere in the darkness? The water-pixies? Rats? — but it had been bad. Three of her legs were missing, seemingly torn off in a single go along with a strip of her belly.

She didn't appear to be in any pain. We rinsed her gently in the tub and put her in her baking dish on the radiator. Mrs. Forbush gave her

some ice. But I called the guys at Schoenfein's, and they confirmed our fears. There was no way to repair her.

Jenna and I sat with Daisy for a while, stroking her soft, moist head. And then I got the Sharpie.

"I don't think I can do this," I said.

"I'll do it," said Jenna. She took a deep breath.

"Sorry, sweetie. We loved you. You were a great cat, weird as you were."

"Mao," said Daisy.

And then Jenna took the Sharpie and drew a heavy line through the letters on Daisy's back, and she stopped moving. Suddenly, she was just half a beat-up sponge. And that was the end.

* * *

That was the beginning of what Mrs. Forbush described as the Great Pixie Peace. We didn't see a single one anywhere in that building until June. Whatever had happened in those pipes, Daisy taught the pixies a lesson it took them a good while to forget. And the spring came, and Jenna got a new, better job, and although I was prepared to move us out to Brooklyn if that would have helped to keep us out East and in the city I love, we never had to do it. Maybe if we have kids — probably when we have kids — but not until then.

And I think we owe our present happiness to Daisy. Weird as she was, she was a great cat. We've had others like her since: they are charming companions, and all sentiments aside this is still Manhattan and Ramon is still Ramon and the water-pixies do come back eventually. But Daisy was our first.

And we still miss her.

* * *

Andrew Willett (www.strangeradiation.com) grew up in San Francisco, but he has lived in New York City for 15 years, and he shows no sign of leaving anytime soon. Nobody is more surprised by this than he is. This is his first publication.

We received many future-noir stories—way more than we expected—but “The Ambassador’s Staff” was the one that best combined a gritty urban feel with science-fictional premises and plot twists.

The Ambassador’s Staff

by Sherry D. Ramsey

I considered the kid in the threadbare armchair on the other side of my desk. Shaggy-cut brown hair, clothes on the edge of shabby, two dull metal earrings looped through one ear and a stud in his lower lip. Sitting up straight, though, and looking worried. It had been a while since I’d had much to do with teenage boys—not since I was a teenage girl. I didn’t remember them being this quiet.

“Most people come to see me because they’re in some kind of trouble,” I prompted.

He shook his head. “No—at least, I don’t think so. I’m just—I want to do the right thing.”

“That doesn’t usually require the help of a private detective.”

“No.” He chewed his lip for a second, the stud clicking against his teeth. “I need some advice.”

“Fair enough. What’s your name, kid?” I tapped my temple to activate my implant, blinked through the heads-up display options, and started a recording. Implants were pricey, but this one had been worth it.

“Seetharaman Warren, but everyone calls me Seeth. I live out in the Crops, with my mom.” The rest came in a rush. “This morning I found this out there. In the street.”

He reached inside his jacket and came out with something wrapped in a thin beige towel. My heart ramped up for a second, adrenaline reaction. He set the towel gently on the desk and glanced at the window, the walklane outside in full view.

I shook my head. “Don’t worry. It’s one-way.”

He nodded and unwrapped the contents. I stared, not comprehending what I was seeing, and then it clicked and the adrenaline shot off another round. A big one this time.

“Is that,” I breathed, “the Ambassador’s staff?”

“I think so. What’s left of it, anyway,” he said, staring, like me, at the three jaggedly-broken crystalline shafts. My eyes put them together easily enough—*there’s the bottom, look at the way one end is capped, and it broke apart from that middle section there, and here’s the top, with the curved head, perfectly polished to fit into a man’s—a particular Martian man’s—hand.* It was really more of a cane or a walking-stick, but the Ambassador himself had always called it his staff, and who was I to argue? Whole, it had appeared pearly and luminescent, as if lit up from the inside by some arcane alchemy. Broken, it was dead white stone. Scattered dark stains marred the surface.

“They said on the tri-V,” I said slowly, “that the Martian Ambassador died in his sleep. In his hotel.” It had been the only news on any channel all morning.

Seeth must have felt my eyes on him, and looked up to meet my gaze, reading the question there. He nodded. “I know, ma’am, I don’t understand it, either. I found this on my way home from work, and I knew right away what it was.”

I believed him. Anyone who’d ever seen the Martian Ambassador would recognize it, the way he wielded it like his staff of office.

I frowned at Seeth. “So how does the Ambassador’s staff wind up broken on a street in the Crops, when the Ambassador is dying peacefully in his hotel room?”

“I guess that’s what I need you to find out.”

“Me?”

He stared at me, his eyes blue and clear and as absolutely honest as any I’ve ever seen. “I can’t take it to the police. They’ll think—I don’t know what they’ll think, but it won’t be good. I haven’t heard a word on the news about this thing being missing.”

I nodded. “You’ve got a point.” The police wouldn’t be falling over themselves to believe a story like this from a kid from the Crops.

“But—there could be a reward or something.” He almost whispered it, like it was too much to even hope for, like he shouldn’t even say it because it would somehow become less likely if he gave it voice.

“Okay,” I said briskly. I folded the broken bits of the staff back up into the towel and shoved them into the bottom drawer of my desk, and locked it. “They’re safer here, right? I’ll write you a receipt.”

Seeth nodded, although I could tell it worried him to let it out of his hands.

“I’ll see what I can find out first from the police, and we’ll decide where to go from there.”

“But you won’t tell them where it came from.” Trusting strangers doesn’t come easy to folks from the Crops. It had obviously taken him most of the morning just to decide to come and see me.

I smiled. “I’m not even planning to mention it,” I told him. “I’m just going to see what they know and what they don’t know. And what they’re keeping quiet, maybe. I won’t get you into any trouble.”

“Great,” he said, getting up. “Thanks, Miss Thompson.” He hesitated. “We didn’t talk about money—”

I shook my head. “Don’t worry about it yet. Now that I’ve seen that —” I gestured to the locked drawer and grinned, “I won’t sleep until I know a little more, anyway. And please, just call me Rachel.”

“Great,” he said again. “If it turns out there’s a reward—”

“We’ll work something out.” I followed him to the door and he headed into the street. I watched him through the window, weaving his way through the folks milling around the spaceport, a few going to or from jobs, more just wandering—the street vendors, the homeless, the dealers and the Levelers.

One of those was sprawled in the doorway of Kugar’s video shop across the walklane, and I could tell the way he just stared, not moving, not blinking, that he was Leveled ’way up. Kugar wouldn’t like that, but if he wanted the Leveler moved, he’d have to pick the guy up and carry him away. Once that white liquid finds its way down their throat or into a vein, they’re living in an alternate reality, and they don’t see, hear, feel or care anything about this one until they come back down.

I sighed and turned away from the window. The joke is that Leveling is the furthest you can get from Earth without actually boarding a ship. If I’d gone off-planet when I’d had the opportunity—well, who knows what would have happened. But chances are I wouldn’t be living in a tiny apartment above my office in a place like Cape City. Even if it was my own office.

The tri-V was on in the outer office, still squawking about the dead Ambassador, and I stopped, intending to switch it off. They were replaying yesterday’s speech, where he was trying to sell us on the benefits of Mars ceramic. He stood on a dais in the heart of the spaceport,

unmistakable in his red and gold robes and one of those little square hats the Martians love, waving his staff around for emphasis as he spoke. The crowd, as usual, looked enthralled. The man had oozed charisma.

The benefits of Marseramic can indeed stretch all the way from our red planet home to yours, our kindred of Earth. A Free and Fair Trade Accord will allow the people of both our planets to share technological advances and improvements. Advances in medical equipment. Advances in manufacturing. Advances in space transportation.

His pearly staff was made of Marseramic, so it was pretty as well as useful, but it could mean trouble for a big sector of Earth's economy. For that reason, it was subject to a massive tariff, and the Martians were pissed. The Ambassador's number one job seemed to be rousing the rabble to put pressure on the governments to change that.

According to the endless coverage on the tri-V, a heart attack in his sleep last night put an end to that undertaking.

I listened to him for a minute more with my finger on the power button. He was animated and passionate, waving the staff around for emphasis, the light catching on the swirling substance inside it, making it look like a living thing in his hand. His color was good, energy was practically sparking off him, and he looked like he'd never been sick a day in his life. Watching him there, I just didn't buy it. *If that guy had a heart attack, I thought, I'll sell out and leave the Cape. Hell, I'll move off-planet. Really, this time.*

Which left me with two big questions. If it wasn't a heart attack, what was it? And like I'd said to the kid, how did the staff end up broken in the street?

Seemed like a good time for a walk. I switched on my avatar to take calls and mind the office, and headed down to the community police kiosk to see if my old friend Singh was around.

* * *

Arturo Singh wasn't overjoyed to see me. Reception at the police kiosk was full: at least three Levelers sprawled in various states of their highs, a too-young kid in garish gang colors darting scared glances at a big guy who must be his father, a couple of hookers not even bothering to try and sweet-talk their way out of trouble. I was trying to convince Carmel, the receptionist, to buzz Singh for me when he happened to

open the door of his office and glance out. Too late, he saw that I'd noticed him. He frowned, and motioned me over. Carmel rolled her eyes.

"I'm busy, Rachel-ji," Singh said as he shut his office door behind me, barely waiting until I was inside his office. He's a tall man but thin and wiry, no telltale coffee-and-doughnuts bulk for him. There's some grey peppering the dark triangle of his beard now, but he's still years from retirement. I knew if he was using my first name he could spare me five minutes.

"Quick question," I promised, and it was his turn to roll his eyes.

He didn't invite me to sit but I did, and waited until he settled resignedly in his own chair.

"What happened to the Martian Ambassador?"

Singh leaned back in his chair. "Heart attack. Don't you watch the news? Or did you have to pawn your tri-V to pay the rent?" He grinned at his own joke, his teeth very white in his burnished-copper face.

"Haha. I mean, what really happened to him? He wasn't heart-attack material."

Singh shrugged. "You can tell by looking now? Maybe you should have been a doctor."

Even with a room full of problems waiting for him outside, Singh could make jokes at my expense all day. Maybe I could shock him a little.

"You know that staff the Ambassador always had with him? It's sitting in a locked drawer in my office. It's broken. And maybe bloodstained. Kid found it in the Crops this morning. I still have my tri-V and I have to say, I haven't seen anything on it all morning that would explain that."

Singh narrowed his eyes at me. "Straight?"

I nodded.

He shook his head. "Official word is heart attack. His people are looking after everything—we're not involved at all. No need. No autopsy, nothing. Diplomatic blah-blah, they're taking his body home to Mars, end of story. No doubt his replacement will show up in a month banging the same gong about Mars ceramic and fair trade."

Now it was my turn to frown. "But it doesn't make sense. How'd his staff end up in the Crops, smashed?"

"You're sure that's what it is you've got?"

“Absolutely. You ever see him without it?”

“As a matter of fact, no.” Singh looked through me for a minute. It’s a weird habit he has, like when there’s something on his mind you just fade into nothingness and he can’t see you anymore. I used to think he was trying to politely let me know it was time to leave, but I’ve discovered it means he’s thinking deep thoughts. And it’s usually best to stay quiet and let him think them.

The phone buzzed and he picked up, listened for a minute, sighed and said “I’ll get on it,” and hung up. “Body in a dumpster out in the Crops. Head bashed in. How unusual. You want to take odds it’s a Leveler? Or a dealer?”

I grinned and shook my head.

He stood up to let me know he had to get back to work. “Go. Promise you’ll come to me if you find out anything I should know about the Ambassador, okay?”

I barely kept my mouth from dropping open. “Aren’t you going to tell me to stay out of this?”

“Nope. Like I told you, we’re not involved in the Ambassador’s death. So I have no reason to tell you to stay away. Far as I know, there’s nothing for you to stay away from.” He didn’t even crack a smile.

“No warnings, nothing you’re holding back. I can just go and investigate on my own?” I asked, incredulous. “This isn’t my birthday.”

“Try to stay safe,” he said, “Just in case there is anything—wrong. I doubt it, but you never know. And if staying safe means coming back to me—”

“I will. Thanks.”

He shrugged again. “I didn’t do anything.”

“You didn’t tell me to stay out of it. That’s something.”

He shook his head while he opened the door. “Well, don’t make me regret doing nothing, okay?”

Out on the walklane, I realized I didn’t know a single thing more than I did going in. Except that the police weren’t involved. Which didn’t seem like much of a lead.

* * *

My next logical stop was the Ambassador’s hotel. If I got lucky I might find someone there who’d be willing to talk to me. And if I didn’t

get lucky, I could bring up the matter of the missing staff. Surely that would get someone's attention.

The ambitiously-named GalaxyPort Hotel is one of the oldest buildings in Cape City, built in the first concentric ring of businesses that sprang up around the original spaceport when it became obvious the port was going to be a success. The GalaxyPort has managed to maintain itself well, despite its age, and it's got that stately, cosmopolitan air that suggests old money and impeccable service. The young desk clerk looked frazzled, no doubt in part because of the milling crowd of tri-V and Web and HUDnet reporters dirtying up her nice clean lobby. And of course, an Ambassador dying here the night before.

I didn't waste any time, just quietly showed her my PI's license and told her I was here to speak with the members of the Ambassador's staff. Her eyes got big for a second and then she nodded, told me in a low voice which descender to take and how far to go down. Naturally buildings this close to the spaceport were built down, not up. You don't want to get any closer to landing spacecraft than you have to, and you don't want to stick anything up in their way.

Getting in was just that easy.

None of the reporters gave me a second glance, since I was careful not to look like anyone important. And I guess the desk clerk didn't consider that I could have been a reporter pretending to be a detective. Well, she was young. She'd learn.

I guess the desk clerk didn't consider that I could have been a reporter pretending to be a detective. Well, she was young. She'd learn.

The descender stopped at the tenth level and I followed the clerk's directions to the Ambassador's suite. There were only three suites here, so they all had to be pretty big. I knocked, and the door opened surprisingly quickly. A young blonde woman with eyes red and puffed from crying said, "Yes?"

"I'm sorry to bother you, I know what a difficult time this must be," I said in my most sympathetic tone. I meant it, too, because she was obviously distraught by the Ambassador's death. I pulled out my license again and showed it to her. "Is there someone on the Ambassador's staff I could speak with? It's important."

Confusion showed on her face for a moment, followed quickly by a flash of something else I couldn't identify. But she opened the door wider and I stepped inside. "Mr. Olara," she called into the recesses of the suite.

I'd expected the suite to be nice—no, I'd expected it to be really nice—but I wasn't prepared for such lavish elegance. Cape City is a spaceport city, after all. Most of the people who lived here were on their way somewhere else or stuck here, like me, for reasons personal or financial. Even before it had turned out to be a perfect geographical spot for a spaceport, it had been a poor area. I know I gaped for just a second before I caught myself. I really didn't think places like this existed in Cape City.

Mr. Olara came hurrying out from the depths of the suite, looking harried and annoyed. He ran a hand distractedly over his salt-and-pepper brush cut. His eyes were not red from crying.

"Yes?" he asked, clipped and brusque. He shot the red-eyed woman a dirty look.

There'd be no point trying to impress Olara with my license, so for him I took a different tack. "I'm a private investigator, Mr. Olara, and I'm sorry to bother you. But there's a matter involving the Ambassador's death that I think we should discuss." I let him see my eyes flick towards the young woman. The glance said, alone.

A frown creased his face and I saw the internal struggle. He didn't want to talk to me, but could he risk not knowing what I was talking about? "I don't have long," he said, "And honestly, I don't see—but all right. Follow me." He turned on his heel and headed down the hallway, apparently expecting me to follow. Not wanting to disappoint him, I did. The young woman slipped off to another room without a word.

At the end of the hall was a "sunroom"—sunlight seemed to flood in through the windows, although I knew the view outside them was holographic since we were ten stories underground. The sunlight was piped in via super-reflective solar collectors, or some mix of sunlight and artificial, anyway. As long as the customer thinks it's real, right? This room was just as elegant and imposing as the rest of the suite. Olara closed the door behind us but didn't offer me a seat in any of the blue and white toile-covered chairs.

“The Ambassador’s death was unfortunate but natural,” he said abruptly. “I don’t know what game you’re playing, but there’s nothing in this for you. Nothing.”

My right hand itched to smack him across the face, but I held back in the interests of punching him with something that might hurt more.

“The Ambassador’s shattered staff is locked in a drawer in my office,” I said. “I believe there are bloodstains on it. I thought that might be of interest to someone here. If not, I’ll be on my way.” I turned to go.

“Wait,” he said in a thin voice.

I turned back, my face carefully neutral.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I had the wrong impression. Please sit down, Detective—?”

“Thompson,” I said. “But just Miss Thompson. You only get to call yourself ‘Detective’ if the police department is paying you.”

“Miss Thompson,” he repeated. “We’re all understandably upset here. The Ambassador—well, he was a great man. The whole embassy staff is devastated.”

“I can see that,” I said, although Olara didn’t look devastated. He looked stressed and disgruntled, but not brimming with grief. “I’m only here because I thought the staff would be important to someone. It’s a mystery, and when there’s a mystery, I tend to investigate.” I flashed him a smile. “It’s an occupational hazard.”

He twitched his lips but didn’t smile. “Of course. The Ambassador lost that staff yesterday, after his speech. You might have seen him speaking on the tri-V. He was distraught about the staff, but somehow in the crowds—you know how these things happen. This entire trip, it’s been one problem after another. But it wasn’t something he cared to cause a fuss about, so we didn’t report it or anything like that. I expected someone would turn up with it eventually, looking for a reward, but with all that’s happened, I simply forgot about it.”

“What else has gone wrong?” I asked. I didn’t really need to know, but I’ve found that if you keep people talking, about anything, interesting things sometimes turn up.

Olara ticked items off on his stubby fingers. “The Ambassador’s luggage was mislaid somewhere between Orion Station and here—it wasn’t on the shuttle when we arrived and they still haven’t tracked it down. The suite here wasn’t as large as we’d been expecting, so I had

to scramble to make alternate arrangements for several functions we had planned. There were protesters waiting at three of the Ambassador's speaking venues—he had to cancel the last one yesterday because of them—and he wasn't feeling well into the bargain, and then losing the staff—" He shrugged and sighed. "That all seems so trivial now."

"And was there a reward?" I asked, because it was what I'd promised Seeth I'd find out.

Olara shrugged. "I'm sure the Ambassador would have paid one, had the staff been returned intact. But if it's broken, as you say, and with the Ambassador gone..." He left the sentence hanging.

"He doesn't need it back," I finished for him. "I understand. I had to ask, on behalf of my client."

He looked at me more sharply. "You have a client? I'm not sure I understand."

"My client is the one who found the staff," I explained.

"Oh. Well. I assumed you intended to return the staff here regardless," he said severely. "To go back to Mars with the Ambassador's things."

"So I should tell my client that there may be a reward after all?"

Olara tried to stare me down, but I wasn't looking away. If he wanted the thing back, it seemed fair that he give the kid something for his trouble. Seeth could have left it lying in the street, after all, and no one ever would have known what happened to it.

"I'll have to get back to you about that, Miss Thompson," he said finally.

"No problem," I said. "Of course you have to consult with others about it." I handed him one of my cards and told him he could reach me, or my avatar, at the number on it anytime. I could tell he didn't like my implication that he couldn't make a decision about the reward on his own authority. That was okay—I'd only said it to get under his skin anyway. I just didn't like the guy.

I decided to find Seeth and break the bad news that there was probably no reward in sight for the pieces of the staff. I stopped at my office and changed into scruffier clothes. You didn't want to attract undue attention out in the Crops.

The Crops were what might once have been called a shantytown, one of the outermost rings of the spaceport. Some of the houses were

scrapped spacecraft, propped up on blocks and sporting haphazard additions; some were ancient mobile homes; some seemed to be not much more than lean-tos constructed out of castoff cargo pods and sheet metal.

But they all had the dignity of an address, and I found the one Seeth had given me without too much trouble. It actually wasn't a bad-looking spot. The base of the house was formed from an old payload module that was a pretty good size, with a big porch of aluminum sheathing hammered on to the front. Whoever had fitted the windows had scrounged them from a low-orbit shuttle and done a good job of setting them in. It would be weather-tight at least, a definite consideration since our winters swung down as low as -55° sometimes now, in sharp contrast to the $40^{\circ}+$ days of the summers. Cape City used to have a more temperate climate, but that's just one of the many things that have changed since my grandfather's time.

There were a few people on the street. I had the eerie sensation of eyes on my back, but I didn't try to figure out which curtained window they might be behind. If I lived in the Crops, I'd be wary and curious about strangers, too.

I stepped up and knocked on the door. It was answered after a few moments by a woman I assumed to be Seeth's mother. She was perhaps my age, quite possibly beautiful once, but her face was gaunt and her breath came in painful-sounding rasps. Her eyes were suspicious and she opened only the inner door. "Yes?"

I smiled. "Good afternoon, I'm just looking for Seeth. Is he at home?"

"He's not in any trouble." It wasn't a question. She was telling me something she knew with certainty. Even living out here in the Crops, her boy was a good boy. Period.

"No, he's not." I showed her my license. "Seeth is my client, and I wanted to report to him."

She raised one eyebrow and drew a wheezy breath. "Come in, Miss Thompson," she said, pushing open the outer door and stepping back to make room for me.

"Please, call me Rachel," I said. The place was nicer inside than I'd expected. Whatever had happened to the Warren family to land them out here, Mrs. Warren was obviously determined to make a home for Seeth. Every surface was clean, the furniture old but not scruffy, and

the walls hung with bright tapestries of paint and threadwork. A small tri-V flickered in the corner, although the sound was muted.

She motioned me to a table in the kitchen area. "I'm Sally. Will you have some green tea?"

"My husband and I were crewing on an asteroid miner. Same old story, company not following the regs, health and safety procedures not enforced." Her face hardened as she poured the tea for us.

"That would be great," I said. I hoped she wasn't going to ask me what Seeth had hired me for, since I had to keep confidentiality. If he'd told her about it, that would make it easier, but she'd have to bring it up.

She moved slowly making the tea, her breathing slow and labored. I itched to offer to help but sensed that would be an affront to her dignity. I wondered what kind of Herculean effort it took her to keep the house

this clean.

"I expect it's about that staff Seeth found," she said. "He was hoping there might be a reward."

I nodded. "I spoke to one of the Ambassador's people earlier. He wasn't sure what they'd do about it."

"Probably denying the man had ever been in the Crops," she said, setting the tea on the table next to a pair of delicately painted cups. "Sorry I'm so slow," she added. "Vacuum burn in my lungs when Seeth was just a baby."

"Wow. How did that happen?"

She shrugged. "My husband and I were crewing on an asteroid miner. Same old story, company not following the regs, health and safety procedures not enforced." Her face hardened as she poured the tea for us. "At least I made it back to Earth alive. My husband wasn't so lucky."

"I'm so sorry. What about compensation?"

She shook her head. "Blamed the accident on my husband, so they wouldn't pay anything for him. Me, I got my back pay and a settlement, but hardly enough to support the two of us. I couldn't do much for a long time." She glanced around the room. "We've managed, but it hasn't been easy. That's why Seeth was hoping there'd be a reward for the staff. He's already working two jobs and going to school."

I sipped my drink, savoring the pleasant swirl of sweet honey over the slightly bitter tea. “You guessed they’d deny that the Ambassador had ever been in the Crops. You’re right. I was told the staff disappeared after his speech yesterday morning.”

“I suppose it doesn’t much matter, then, if that’s their story.” She shrugged. “I thought they might want to cover something up, and they might pay to do that.”

I looked at her curiously. “You think they’re lying? That the Ambassador actually was here? Why?”

She looked out the window for a long moment, staring through the thick pane at something that I couldn’t see. “My husband,” she said slowly, “was a Leveler, Miss Thompson. A mind-Leveler. You know what that is?”

“I’ve heard stories,” I said slowly. “A handful of people react to Level differently from everyone else.”

She nodded. “The government would like to keep that quiet. In mind-Levelers, the drug makes them smarter, more charismatic. They’re stronger, faster, better problem-solvers, better at almost anything.”

“So...Level really makes them the way the other users just feel,” I said.

“You could put it that way,” she said with a humorless chuckle. “The cost is just the same, though. After the effects have worn off they crash just as hard as anyone else.”

“But while they’re under the influence of the drug—”

“They can achieve almost anything,” she finished for me. “And that Ambassador...from the first time I saw him on the tri-V, I said to myself, that man’s a mind-Leveler.”

“But how could he hide it? In the kind of position he held?” I protested.

Mrs. Warren sipped her tea. “They’re good,” she said simply. “I know—I lived with one for ten years. And if the Ambassador had a few trusted staff members, just one or two—”

“To run interference for him when he needed them to—”

She nodded again. “It could be done. And anyone looking for Level in Cape City, they’d likely end up out here.”

I still couldn’t quite get my head around the notion that the Martian Ambassador could have been a Leveler, but I didn’t want to argue with her. It also wouldn’t really explain why he’d be out in the Crops trying

to score a hit of the stuff. He'd bring his own with him, or send someone out to get it for him.

I finished my tea. "Thanks for telling me all this, Mrs. Warren," I said, and stood to leave. "Will you tell Seeth I was looking for him?"

She nodded. "Drop by if you find out anything else," she said, and for just an instant I saw in her eyes how hungry for company she was.

The air was still warm outside but I shivered as I walked back towards the inner rings. If that was what going off-world could get you, maybe I'd made the right choice after all, staying on Earth.

Still, in a way, I envied Mrs. Warren. She'd had a chance at life beyond the planet, working in the dark reaches of space with her husband. Me, I'd been too scared to take the chance.

I took a deep breath of the warm spring air and thought of her raspy, painful breathing.

* * *

I stopped for some supper and it was late by the time I got back to my office. I spent the evening scouring the Web and HUDnet for every available scrap of news footage covering the Ambassador's visit, watching vid and HUD images until I had a headache. It paid off in the end, although I almost missed it.

Olara had mentioned one appearance the Ambassador had to cancel because of protesters—the last one of the day, he'd said. I found a few brief images of the Ambassador leaving the venue, looking slightly pissed and being hustled into a waiting limo by anxious-looking security guards.

Because of the camera angle, it wasn't easy to see, but in one fleeting shot, the Ambassador's staff was clearly still in his hand. This would have been hours after Olara claimed it had been lost.

So Olara had lied to me—but why?

I could confront him with that in the morning, but even if he'd let me in, I'd need more information first. I wanted to know if there was anything in Mrs. Warren's ideas about the Ambassador being a Leveler, and there was one person who might know. I'd go to her first. If, after our last meeting, she'd even speak to me.

Porsche Violetta wouldn't be anywhere I could find her until at least noon, so I spent the next morning catching up on paperwork and tidying the office. Okay, so that took about fifteen minutes, and the rest of the

time I spent in a VR sim exploring faraway worlds. If I ever did get up the courage to go off-world, at least I'd already know what it looked like.

A little after one I left the office, looking considerably different than I had for my visit to the Crops yesterday. Porsche was big on appearances, so I paired a bright red turtleneck with my best black leather jacket and black jeans, boots with silver toecaps and a pair of red-framed sunglasses that screamed "diva." I walked, because it was only two rings in toward the center. It was still a world away from my office.

The doors were locked at Porsche's club, Xeviosity. What doesn't happen at Xeviosity gets talked about there, and Porsche pulls a lot of strings in Cape City. I'm not on the end of one anymore, which was why I wasn't sure of my reception.

I knocked and waited. Finally one of the lugs Porsche employs to watch the rabble opened the door a crack. "She in yet?" I asked.

He stared at me for a minute with eyes that were all iris in the dim light. I caught a glitter behind one that could have been an implant, but I didn't want to stare, even behind my own dark lenses. I could almost hear his brain trying to match my face with some internal file. "Office," he said finally. I wondered what might be in that file.

Two more goons stood outside the office but they let me in without any questions. Porsche had likely been watching me on hidden vids ever since I got within half a click of the place.

She was at her desk. Her long, tiger-striped hair was loose around her shoulders and she twisted one silky strand around her crimson-tipped fingers. Her eyes, smoky and mysterious, watched me cross the room. Porsche knew the art of wearing makeup so that it didn't look like makeup, just perfect, perfect skin.

I flipped off my shades and sat down in one of the big faux croc chairs facing her desk. "Thanks for seeing me, Porsche."

She leaned back in her chair, still silent, then shrugged. "I stopped being mad at you for turning down my offer," she said. "And if you're here, it must be important. Which could also mean interesting. And you know how I love interesting."

"Hope I don't disappoint. I'm really here for asking, not telling." She merely raised her eyebrows, so I continued. "The Martian Ambassador."

Porsche nodded. "He was more interesting when he was alive."

"You knew him?"

She pulled a half-smile. "Not personally. Xeviosity's not exactly the Embassy. No matter how well he might have fit in here."

I pursed my lips. "The man seemed pretty squeaky clean, to all appearances."

"Maybe you should just tell me what you want to know," she countered. She might not be angry any more, but she wasn't going to make my life easy, either.

"Okay, straight," I said. "I think the Martian Ambassador was a Leveler, and that he didn't die peacefully in his sleep at his hotel. I think he was murdered, and I want to know if Level had anything to do with it."

Porsche flipped her hair away from her face and sat back, smiling. "And you think I'd know. I'm flattered."

"Flattery aside, can you help? I know you don't deal, but you know who does."

"You on a case?"

I shrugged. "Sort of. I'm helping a kid from the Crops, and I smell something wrong in this business with the Ambassador."

"And you can't let it go now that your nose is on the scent. The faithful bloodhound," she teased.

I grinned. "Woof, woof. Any answers?"

She traced an intricate design on the desktop with one long red fingernail for a moment. "The Ambassador was definitely a mind-Leveler. You familiar?"

"I know a little. The drug actually makes you as good as most people only think they are on it."

Porsche nodded. "It was the Ambassador's ticket to greatness. I have it on good authority from a Martian...business acquaintance. The man got where he was thanks to Level, and that's what kept him at the top."

It was almost shocking to have my suspicions confirmed so easily. But it didn't give me all the answers I needed. "So why would he be out in the Crops looking for a score? If he was completely dependent on it, he wouldn't go anywhere—let alone off-world—without an adequate supply."

"Well, you're the detective," Porsche said with a shrug, "you'll have to figure out that part. Something must have gone wrong, some problem

he didn't anticipate. Seems like there's always some kind of screwup when you travel. I guess even ambassadors aren't immune to that."

"You're right there," I agreed. "Apparently he was having one of those trips where everything goes wrong—" The words died on my tongue as something Olara had said came back to me. Just one more problem in the litany of things gone wrong, too-small hotel suites and protesters making things difficult—*The Ambassador's luggage was mislaid somewhere between Orion Station and here—it wasn't on the shuttle when we arrived and they still haven't tracked it down.*

Would he carry his supply of Level in his luggage? Of course he would. An off-world ambassador wouldn't have his baggage searched, wouldn't be suspected of bringing anything contraband with him...but if it got lost, he'd be just as helpless and frustrated as any other traveler.

I stood up, my mind racing. Porsche was grinning at me. "You've had a brainstorm."

"I think so. I—" Without warning, my implant pinged. *Unauthorized access* flashed on my HUD, practically blinding me in one eye.

Dammit. Someone was breaking into my office.

"Porsche, I gotta run." I didn't wait for her to say goodbye, just threw "Thanks!" over my shoulder as I left the office. I hoped she wouldn't end up mad at me again.

I ran almost the whole two rings to my office, although I thought it was going to kill me. Everything looked fine from the outside. I let myself catch my breath, then opened the door cautiously. The outer office was intact, the door to the inner office closed, just as I'd left it. Then came a muffled thud, like wood splintering. I tapped my implant and blinked through the HUD to send a call to Arturo Singh, although he'd take time to get here. Wishing for my gun, I tiptoed to the inner door and eased it open.

Olara was bent over my desk.

I opened the door wide and said, "I didn't know we had an appointment."

He jerked upright, and I saw that he held the towel-wrapped pieces of the staff. He didn't appear to be armed, which didn't surprise me. If I'd taken him for the kind of guy to carry a piece I wouldn't have startled him.

I stepped inside and shut the office door, leaning against it and crossing my arms. "Breaking and entering, willful damage to property,

just to avoid paying a little reward money? I would have expected the Martian government to be above this sort of thing.”

He glared at me. “What about you—and your client—trying to extort money to keep this quiet?”

I was dumbfounded. “What?”

“I know how this sort of thing works,” he snarled. “I’ve run into it before. You ask for a ‘reward’ or maybe money to keep quiet, but then it isn’t enough. You try to get more, and threaten to go to the press if we don’t come across with it. Try to turn this into some kind of sordid mess, which it isn’t. You never would have given me the staff.”

“You’re the one who’s turned this into a mess,” I retorted. “You’ve got it all wrong.”

He came around the desk toward me, not belligerently, just determined-looking. I didn’t move. He wasn’t a big guy and he wasn’t in great shape. I was pretty sure I could take him down if it came to that.

“Move. I’m leaving,” he said.

“No way. I’ve already called the police on my implant. You can explain the whole thing to them when they get here.”

He sneered. “I have diplomatic immunity. They can’t touch me.”

I smiled. “I paged a friend at the tri-V station, too, and a newsblogger. I don’t think diplomatic immunity means much to them. Not when there’s a story to be had.”

I’ve learned a few valuable lessons in the course of this job. Sadly, they’re always in the form of “mistakes-I-won’t-make-again.” I learned another one that day. Just because you don’t think a person is armed, doesn’t mean they’re not.

Olara’s face contorted with rage and he moved as if to hit me. I put out an arm to block him. Unfortunately, under the towel he’d been holding a syringe, and he plunged it into my raised forearm before I could react. I caught just the merest swirl of the pale, luminescent liquid in the barrel before he hit the plunger. In a weird bit of displaced memory it reminded me of the Ambassador’s staff.

“See how you like Leveling, bitch,” Olara spat at me. “No-one’s going to believe the word of a drug addict. And by the time you’re coherent again, I’ll be off-world.”

I yelled in pain and jerked away, but it was too late. My skin stung where he'd stuck the needle, and my entire arm already tingled and burned. I blinked as my vision blurred.

"Once I take care of your 'client,' too, that will be the end of this nightmare," he said, watching unconcernedly as I staggered. "I don't think she'll give me much trouble. The Ambassador wouldn't listen to me when he was alive, but at least I can clean up this one last mess for him."

My knees buckled as he turned the door handle, and all I saw as I toppled forward were his shoes walking out.

* * *

It seemed like only moments later when I woke. I glanced at my watch, checked my HUD; less than five minutes had passed. Judging by the utter quiet of the office, the police hadn't even arrived yet. Typical.

I didn't try to move right away, but my mind was racing. What had Olara said just before he left? That he was going to "take care of my client"? But how could he know who my client was? I hadn't mentioned a thing about Seeth...and Olara had said "she."

The answer clicked into place like a jigsaw puzzle piece. He must have followed me out to the Crops after I'd talked to him the first time, saw me talking to Seeth's mother. Thought Sally was my client. And he was headed out there to "take care" of her. The bastard.

That was why I'd had the feeling of someone watching me. He'd probably followed me to Xeviosity, too, then tried to race me back to my office. He'd have succeeded if my HUD hadn't alerted me to the breach.

I had to get out to the Crops and help Sally. I started for my desk to get my gun and stepped on something. The Level syringe Olara had dropped. I stared at the thing. That much Level should have incapacitated me for hours.

The image of the Leveler outside Kugar's shop rose in my mind. Sprawled and staring, unmoving, unblinking, while a completely different, drug-conjured life played in his brain. My heart thudded painfully in my chest.

Is any of this real?

I bent to pick up the syringe and stared at the trace of pearly white liquid clinging to the inside. That's what it would do, right? Make me

think I was the best damned detective ever, figuring things out, rushing to rescue people. When all the while I might still be just lying on the floor of my office, drooling.

I took a deep breath and pinched myself. It hurt. Okay, maybe I had some time before the Level really kicked in. If I hurried, maybe I could still get to Sally in time. I just had to stay focused, make sure I didn't slip under the influence of the Level. I wrenched open the drawer of my desk and jammed the gun into the back of my waistband, then left the office at a run. *Just let me get there before the drug takes me down.* I pumped my legs harder, sprinting for the Crops. People stared as I passed. The firm weight of my gun against the small of my back was oddly comforting. Surely Level wouldn't make me imagine a detail like that?

I ran faster.

As I ran, all the pieces slotted into order like tumblers in a lock. The Ambassador had gone out to the Crops to try and score some Level, since his stash was lost in the missing luggage. He probably had Olara with him, but he'd have gone himself, because whatever his shortcomings, he'd been the sort of man who took personal responsibility for his actions. Something had gone wrong, they'd run into more than they could handle, a dealer, maybe, who got greedy when he saw who his customer was. There'd been an altercation.

Arturo Singh's phone call about the body in a dumpster fit into the story perfectly. It was as plain as a tri-V scene in my mind: the dealer—maybe more than one of them—making the wrong move, Olara grabbing the staff and using it as a weapon...just too late, since the Ambassador had been killed. If Olara had killed the dealer, even in self-defense, he'd keep it quiet—he had the Ambassador's reputation and his own to consider. Olara could have gotten the Ambassador's body back to the hotel, but the broken staff had been overlooked in the street. It all made sense.

But was that me, or the Level? And why was I breathing so hard? Was I tiring, slipping? Buildings sped past me, the rings blending as I

That's what it would do, right?
Make me think I was the best
damned detective ever, figuring
things out, rushing to rescue
people.

flew through them. Maybe adrenaline would keep the drug at bay long enough.

I wished I knew more about Level. I'd have to ask Sally if this kind of delayed reaction was normal. And ask her more about going off-world. Why had I made such a big deal about that? It would be as simple as stepping on a shuttle.

It was the drug, trying to distract me with another imaginary life. I had to fight it long enough to get to Seeth and his mother. Somehow I found the strength to run even faster. Folks on the street seemed blurry, slowed. I wondered if my perception was deteriorating.

By the time the Warrens' converted home came into view, my lungs were burning like I'd tried to breathe vacuum. In the back of my mind I knew I should not have been able to run this far, this fast, this steadily, and fear clawed at my mind again—*none of this is real*. I shoved the thought aside. Either this was reality and I had to keep going, or it wasn't and I was still in my office imagining it all. The only logical thing to do was play out the scenario as well as I could. At the very least, I'd hallucinate a happy ending.

The street was quiet, the door to the house closed. I dodged behind a corrugated aluminum fence and scuttled along in its shadow until I was close to the house. A quick dash took me to the front corner, and I sidled along the wall, ducking low under the window, until I reached the door. I pulled the gun out of my waistband, kicked the door open, and surveyed the scene.

I was too late.

Sally Warren stood over Olara, who cringed on the floor cradling the bloodied side of his head. She had him more than adequately covered with a Creighton 220 HandLaser. She looked up, startled, when the door burst open, but the gun didn't waver. Sally smiled. "You the cavalry?"

I grinned, although my legs felt watery. This must be reality; I couldn't have dreamt up this scene. "Like you need it. You and Seeth okay?"

She nodded and pulled a rasping breath. "Seeth's at school. And once you've been a space jock, the reflexes don't go away. Who is this?"

I pulled up my HUD and blinked alternate instructions to Singh, sending him my coordinates before I answered. "An idiot who thinks he's above the law," I said. I walked over to Olara, barely resisting the

urge to kick him. “He injected me with Level, but I don’t think it worked.”

“Level?” Sally sucked in a breath and said in a different voice, “Rachel, are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I said. “I was worried at first, but I’m okay now. I guess it didn’t work on me,” I said again. I stood staring down at Olara, not really sure what I wanted to say to him. I thought I’d have more questions, but I’d already figured it all out, or at least enough to satisfy me. “Did you put the body in a dumpster?” I asked him finally.

“Go to hell,” Olara said through clenched teeth.

I chuckled. It sounded really loud, even to me. “Yeah, you did. There’ll be evidence somewhere.” I explained to him, and to Sally, everything I’d figured out, the way it all fit together, made perfect sense. Singh would see it, too, once I explained it to him. It was all as clear as the skies over Cape City had once been.

“Rachel,” Sally said again, more urgently this time.

“You know, you could have avoided all this,” I said, squatting down beside Olara. I wobbled a bit, then caught my balance. “It all would have gone away, if you’d just coughed up a little money as a reward for a kid who found something and wanted to do the right thing. But no, you were too stupid. Stupid,” I said, and stood up. I hadn’t realized before how unbearably stupid he was. The man was such an idiot, he disgusted me.

“Rachel, sit down on that chair over there,” Sally told me sternly.

I smiled at her. Why was she using her “mom” voice on me? But Sally wasn’t stupid. She was my friend.

“Sit. Down. Now,” she said, and I did, because it seemed like it would make her happy. It was a good thing, too, because as I sat I noticed my legs getting wobbly again.

Singh and some other policemen arrived then, and there was a short period of confusion. I know I explained everything to him very clearly, but it seemed to take him a long time to get it, and he kept looking at Sally with a strange expression on his face. And then I must have been tired from all the excitement and dozed off for a while, because when I woke up it was back to just Sally and me.

I had the worst headache of my life, and my eyes were two burning pits in the front of my head. Sally kept the lights out and made me sip

green tea in silence for a while. The only sound was the steady rasp of her breathing.

Then I got the shakes. They lasted a long time.

Then I threw up. More than once. I lost track.

Then we went back to the green tea.

“What the hell happened?” I whispered finally.

“Olara injected you with Level,” Sally said. “Do you remember that?”

I snorted gently, then regretted it when my head gonged. “Yeah, but he didn’t do a very good job of it, or it was a weak batch. I kept thinking it was going to kick in, but it hardly even affected me. Well, except for making me sick.”

She just stared at me for a long moment. “You’re a mind-Leveler, Rachel. The Level affected you, all right. You must have run over here at lightning speed, and you put all the clues together—”she chuckled a little. “And you kicked in my door. Didn’t you realize what was happening?”

I swallowed hard, green tea burning all the way down my throat. My protest died without ever getting out of my mouth. It made perfect sense, in hindsight. Olara had stuck me with the needle, I’d had an initial brief reaction that put me out, and then I’d turned into the classic mind-Leveler. Smarter, faster, stronger. The best damn detective in Cape City.

“You crashed fast, probably because it was the first time,” Sally said. “I could see what was happening right away.”

“Olara?” I managed to ask.

“In custody. Your friend the policeman was confused at first, and you were explaining things too fast, like you were in hyperdrive,” she said with a smile. “But he put it all together in the end. There’s going to be a full investigation into the Ambassador’s death.”

I didn’t know how to feel about that. Suddenly I had a certain amount of sympathy for the late Ambassador.

* * *

So I’m still trying to come to terms with the fact that I’m a mind-Leveler. Don’t misunderstand me—I never want to touch the stuff again. But I’m haunted by the memory of what it was like to feel that confident. To have an entire messy, complicated problem laid out and

see where every part fit, how it all came together. To act on instinct guided by reason and do everything right.

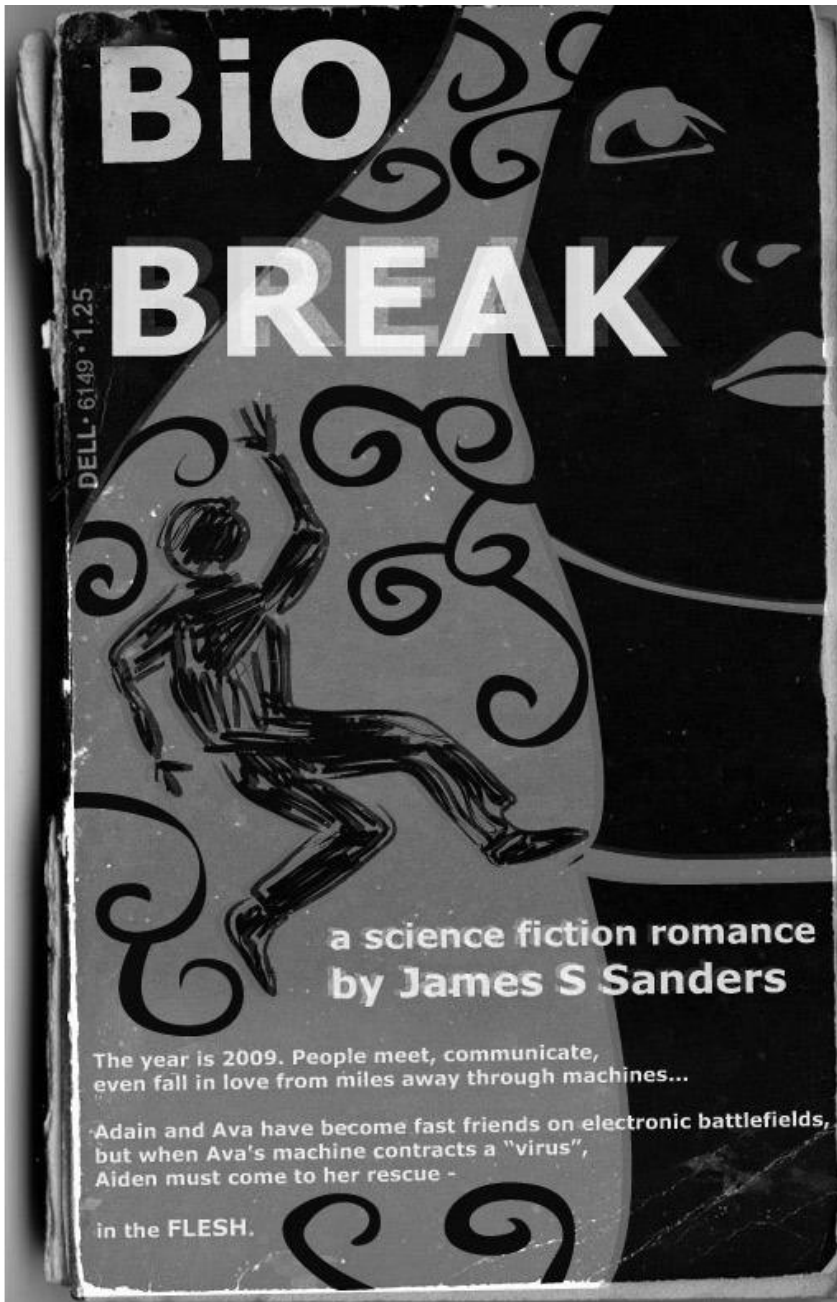
It's a tempting prospect for a private detective. I just keep telling myself that if I can do it Leveled, I should be able to do it straight. I figured some things out without the drug, after all. That has to count for something.

Seeth and Sally Warren each got a small reward for their part in the case, and I've ditched my avatar and hired Sally to be my secretary. She's a lot better company and the clients like her more. I know more than one who thinks her raspy voice is sexy. And she knows how to deal with the occasional Level-head who wanders in to the office.

And sometimes at night I stare up at the stars and try to recapture that brief moment when going off-world seemed as simple as stepping onto a shuttle. That one...well, that one is the most elusive.

* * *

Sherry D. Ramsey (sherrydramsey.com) never expected to become an Internet geek. However, after publishing a web magazine for ten years, creating websites, copyediting for the Internet Review of Science Fiction, networking with writer's groups online, and becoming part of a writing community in Second Life, she fears it's an inevitable conclusion. Her stories have appeared in On Spec, Oceans of the Mind, Neo-opsis, Speculative Realms, Undercurrents, and elsewhere. Sherry is a member of the Writer's Federation of Nova Scotia and SF Canada, and a founding editor of Third Person Press.



"Bio Break"
art by Brittany Hague (www.brixpicks.com)

“Goldenseed” is at heart a fable. This story has the feel of a century-old folktale, but its fundamental tension is very modern.

Goldenseed

by Therese Arkenberg

Xanathan Kurtler didn't die because of greed. Not his own, anyway. It wasn't greed that made him plant those trees.

I know that's how the rest of them tell it. I'm not the rest of them, and I'm the one you asked to tell the story.

I met him traveling through what had been until recently Tuscroean country. The reason I was traveling isn't important. If I told you everything I did in those days, I'd just give you ideas, and this isn't a story about me, anyway. This was just after the War of Ekandrian Expansion—and I'm showing my age, telling you that—and by then the land was mostly inhabited by settlers.

Sparsely inhabited, though. There was no village in miles as far as I could tell, but because the land around was so quiet I didn't fear the prospect of spending the night under the stars, alone. In fact, I was sort of warming to it. I was young in those days, and thought that adventure was a thing you should seek out sometime.

So I was kind of let down when I saw the fire. If it was friendly, there went my plans for sleeping out alone—and then there was also the possibility that it wasn't. Now, I sure loved living, but by that time I was *tired*. So I crept closer and was disappointed, but not too much, when I saw above the firelight a good-sized, sandy bucket hat.

The man beneath the hat was the same sandy color: sandy tanned skin, sandy yellow-brown eyes, sandy hair going snowy. Only his teeth weren't sand-colored; in fact, they nearly threw my reflection back at me when he smiled.

“Hello there,” he said. “Didn't expect to see a young person here. Particularly not an Ekandrian one.”

“Seen many Tuscroes?” My fingers were looped in my sash, where I carried a light lady's pistol and a small knife. I noticed the sandy man was unarmed.

He shook his head. “Haven’t *seen*, but they’re out there. And when you’re hearing footsteps beyond your firelight, well, Tuscroe’s far more likely than any white girl.”

“Sorry if I scared you.”

“You didn’t scare me, miss. Maybe startled a little bit. Nothing a youngster need apologize for. Here, sit down. “

I sat. “You’re camped pretty far back from the road, sir.” He was. I didn’t mention that before? Way far back. I can’t guess, maybe a hundred feet, or a hundred and fifty.

“I wanted to sleep among the trees.” He gestured around us with a smile.

His fire was in the trees, right enough, but it wasn’t a forest like you’re probably thinking. I’d had been able to see his fire from the road, despite the distance, because the trees were too small and slender to block it. And they were spaced out in a way that wasn’t natural. There wasn’t any undergrowth, just some grass and a few weeds—goosefoot, plantain, dandelion. It looked a lot like an orchard.

“I’m Xanathan Kurtler,” the sandy man said. “Most people call me Xanny, or sometimes Xan.”

In those days saying what your friends called you was an invitation to do the same, so I said, “Hello, Xan. I’m Andra Nattinsen.” I looked around. “Say, what kind of—”

“These are Orel trees,” he said. “I planted them myself.”

Yes, that’s what he said!

I was about as surprised as you are now—actually, more, because I had never heard the tale of Xanathan Goldenseed before. I just walked right into it.

He laughed at the look on my face. “They really are. Go on, look them over.”

I rose and went to one of the trees. I knew something of apple trees—we’d started the Nattinsen orchard recently. The Orels looked pretty similar, and if they were as they appeared, they were young. Maybe five years old. It was late summer and there, weighing down the branches, peeking through the dark green, tiny leaves, were some of the first fruit.

All made of gold. It shone a deep yellow-orange in the light of the fire, a little darker than Xan’s sandy-amber eyes.

“Pick one if you want,” he said. “I planted them, so I guess they’re mine to give if they’re anybody’s.”

So I picked one. It twisted from the stem easily, almost slid off. It was cool, about the size of an apple, and very heavy.

“Wouldn’t want to bite one of those.” Xan chuckled at his own joke.

I smiled and shook my head. “Guess not. But it’s very pretty. Thank you.” I sat back down across the fire from him and polished the fruit on my skirt. An Orel, I guess you’d call it; I’ve never told this story before so I never thought of it. “I didn’t know Orel trees were real.”

“They almost weren’t,” he said. “I spent seven years searching, and by the time I found one on the shores of the Middle Sea, it was nearly the last Orel tree alive.”

“What happened to the rest?”

“There never were many. They don’t die easily—I’ve heard that once you plant one, leave it alone and it’ll live near forever. So it’s *planting* them that’s the trouble.”

“How is that?”

“Well, first you need seeds. They aren’t in those.” He nodded to the Orel in my hand. “After all, how would you get seeds from a golden fruit?”

And I asked what you just did. “How do you get them, then?”

“You chop down an Orel tree.” He sighed. “You cut it and the sap bleeds out. As it does it puddles like boiled maple sapsyrup, turns into tiny golden grains...those are the seeds. To get them, you have to kill the tree.”

“That doesn’t sound natural.”

“It isn’t. Nothing about Orels is natural.”

The fire crackled. I looked around the orchard. “So you planted all these?”

“Yes.”

“For the gold?”

“Mostly because they’re beautiful. But also for the gold.”

“You want to become rich?”

“Not at all.” Xan shook his head grimly. “No, I don’t want to

become rich in the least. But I want more gold in the world. Look.” He gestured at the trees. “I’ve planted orchards like this all across the West. They’re all open, unguarded. I don’t care if people take golden fruit by the bucketful. In fact, I *want* them to take it.”

“No, I don’t want to
become rich in the least.
But I want more gold in the
world.”

“So everyone can have gold?”

His head bobbed. “Yes. Free for all.”

“But...” I frowned. “Say someone was poor, with no money, and picked one of these—” I hefted the Orel—“and took it to the store in town. But why should the shopkeeper give him anything, when he can walk out here and pick a fruit himself?”

“There’s no reason he should,” Xan said. “No reason at all. By putting out gold like this, I’m making it utterly worthless. Oh, it’ll still be pretty, good for jewelry, but no path to wealth. That’s what I’m hoping for—though I pity the poor man in your example.”

I looked down at my Orel and felt a sudden urge to throw it away. It wasn’t that I hated Xan’s idea, not exactly, it was just so *strange*. “But without using gold, how will people buy anything?”

“You’re a city girl, aren’t you?”

“I am not!”

He stared at me patiently.

“I...all right. Maybe I’m from a pretty large town.”

“People don’t always use gold out here. And they didn’t in the old days. People bartered useful things instead of giving each other yellow metal.”

“But...” Finally I shrugged. “All right. I see how that could work.”

“A lot of people don’t.” He looked into the depths of the fire, cooling now from pale blue to dull orange. “I have nothing against trade, see. I know it’s important. I don’t have anything against a person wanting to be well-off, wealthy even. But when people get a lot, they want more. And when they get greedy they get mean.

“Think of all the violence, the robbery, the highway murders—all over something as useless as gold!” He laughed in a funny way that didn’t sound quite happy, maybe amused, maybe even that nasty kind of amused people call cynical—but I don’t think Xan was like that. “I think it would be a great thing if by planting these orchards, I wound up making *apples* more valuable than Orels. Apples, at least, you can eat.”

I rolled the fruit in my hands. “That sounds pretty ambitious.”

“Isn’t it?” He seemed to take it as a compliment.

“Yeah, it’s—” I broke off, yawning. “Sorry.”

“No trouble, no trouble. Probably I should be apologizing for keeping you up this late, talking on and on like I do.”

“It was interesting talk.” But I couldn’t help yawning again.

“That’s all right. You get some sleep, now.” He lay back himself and folded his arms beneath his head. His hat fell half-off. “I might not be here when you get up.”

“Okay.”

He wasn’t. The fire was smoking itself out when I woke, and his place beside it was empty. But as I rose and started crossing the orchard towards the road, I caught sight of him wandering through the trees.

“Decided to stay after all?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Never can tell myself what I’ll do from one day to another. I figured on leaving today, maybe going west, but this morning I saw the sun on the Orels and thought...hell...maybe I’d stay.”

No, I don’t think he was foolish, making that decision. Remember, he didn’t know what would happen. I didn’t either, or I’d have told him not to stay.

“Well, good day to you,” I said.

“Morning, Andra.” He tipped his sandy hat. Last I saw of him, he stood with his hands in his pockets, watching the Orel boughs rock in the breeze.

I had the golden fruit he gave me in my pocket, still. I touched it now and then as I walked. It was warm from being close to my body, and for a moment it felt alive. Just an illusion, though. On the tree they grew as if living, but once you pick an Orel, it’s dead. Dead gold.

I had slept well, and the morning was fresh and clear, the kind of morning you expect good things to happen on. When I reached a town after about two hours of walking, I just laughed. It seemed just like Xan to sleep outside even when a roof was only hours away.

There was a tavern, and since I hadn’t eaten breakfast I went in to grab a bite. I paid for my hash in coin, as any ready traveler does, but it felt almost wrong putting down gold after my talk with Xan the night before.

Something must have shown on my face, because a young man at a table near mine said, “Anything wrong, miss?”

I shrugged. “You meet funny people on the road, sometimes.”

“What sort of funny?” He was sitting with a bundle of his friends, and at his question they all sat up a little straighter. A good town, I thought, eager to defend a young woman from trouble.

“Nothing improper,” I said. “Just strange. I stopped last night at the fire of a man named Xanathan Kurtler—”

“Old Goldenseed?” The young man whooped. “Spending the night out with his orchard?”

“Wish I knew where he got the seeds,” another muttered. “Nice-looking, they were—maybe real gold. Seems a pity he buried them.”

“I dug around the orchard, back five years ago,” the young man said. “Found nothing. And every time I passed by there since then—just trees.”

“When was the last time you passed by?” I said.

“Before last winter.” He scratched an ear. “That road doesn’t lead to much, I hardly take it often. Why do you ask?”

I took the Orel from my pocket and held it up for them to see.

No, Xanathan Goldenseed didn’t die because of avarice. I guess you could say he died because of high spirits, eagerness to share a discovery.

I was young then.

Before I blinked, the men were crowded around my table. One of them whistled a word in surprise that wasn’t proper for a lady’s ears.

“The old man’s for real,” the young man whispered. “I’ll be...”

“The trees are all full of these,” I said, turning the Orel over in my hand.

“What’s he gonna do with all that gold?”

I shrugged. “He let me have this. Said he wanted everyone to have gold. So that...it wasn’t worth anything anymore. If gold grows on trees, he thinks, it won’t be worth fighting over, or...”

They didn’t seem to be listening to me.

“Dad’s orchard had six hundred bushels this year. If they were gold...”

“Set like Ekandria’s kings.” The man who spoke leaned over my shoulder, closer to the Orel. From his breath, he’d been drinking something strong, and far too much of it for this time of the morning.

“I don’t think...” I started, but I couldn’t continue with all of them staring at me. They looked like hungry men staring down a full meal, and though I knew I wasn’t the meal in question, my gut couldn’t tell the difference just then. It twisted in knots as my mouth went dry.

“You think Goldenseed’s still there?” the young man asked.

I nodded.

“Always wanted to speak with the old loon,” he said. The other men nodded.

“He’d give you gold if you ask for it,” I said. “Just ask. He’d be glad to offer it.” I was going to add something like *There’s no need for...* but I wasn’t sure they were planning something there was no need for.

They just didn’t look like men getting ready to ask politely.

“How much would he give?”

“I don’t know. Probably lots,” I said.

“I think you should go have a talk with him, Tomael,” one of the young man’s friends’ told him. “We all could go.”

Someone clapped a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t worry, miss. We’re just curious. Sounds like something to see.”

“Yeah,” I croaked.

“So let’s go see!”

They crowded back around their old table, just long enough to take up their coats and hats and lay down the coins for their drink—which they did with a too-cheerful laugh. I tried to finish my hash, but couldn’t swallow.

The tavern-keeper reemerged from the kitchen at the sound of the door opening and closing. She looked at their plates, some still half-full. The beer mugs were all empty.

“I never,” she said. “What’s go them up and running?”

“I do-don’t know,” I stammered. I gave up and pushed the hash away. “I, um, I have to go.”

She said something I didn’t quite catch, because the door was already closing behind me. I looked up the street in the direction I had come from this morning. No sign of the men. Cowardly, I was glad. I didn’t want to see them, or have them see me. But I did follow them.

I had some thought of warning Xan, if I could find a way to reach him before them, but I never did. The road was bordered by fences when it passed tilled land, and tangles of forest where it didn’t, and either way I couldn’t get off it to pass the men by without being seen. Truth be told, I couldn’t even keep up with them. My insides hadn’t untangled enough for me to breathe.

The Orel orchard was easier to spot in daylight, with the trees spaced evenly and dotted with spots of golden shine. I couldn’t see anybody from the road, but I did hear raised voices. Not quite angry, but the tone a person has when they don’t get the answer they want, and want to see if asking louder will bring more success.

Of course, it was one of the men asking, and Xanathan Kurtler not answering the way he wanted. I knew that even before I followed the sound of voices to them. Xan was surrounded, standing with sandy cap doffed, rubbing a hand through his snowy hair.

“Now, you can take some, I’m not saying anything against that. But you can’t just clean out the orchard—”

“Don’t you have other orchards, old man?”

“Plenty. I’m not worried about you taking these for my own good. But you’ve got to share alike. I didn’t plant this orchard just for you, see—”

“What I see,” the young man said, shoving his way forward, “is that you’re being miserly, Goldenseed. Let us have this crop, right? You can always grow more.”

I should have stopped forward then, told them to leave him alone. Maybe they’d have listened out of respect for a young woman. They weren’t angry-crazy, just crazy with thoughts of gold. See, maybe Xan could have done something—or he could’ve not done something, could’ve shut up and let them take the gold, just this one crop, there would be others—but bless him, he kept talking.

“Don’t you see? You take all the gold into your own hands, and there’s no point in having an orchard here like this. You don’t need that much. Just a little, and—”

**They weren’t angry-crazy,
just crazy with thoughts of
gold.**

An ox-built young man pulled something from under his coat. A hatchet, a little tool hatchet farm workers sometimes carried in those days, good for chopping through pickets or cutting things loose in an

emergency, but to my eyes it was big as a Tuscaroe’s battleaxe.

Xan stepped back. “This isn’t worth a fight.”

A man removed his hat and started filling it with Orels.

Xan nodded. “Fine, good. Just no more than—”

“Shut up,” the man with the hatchet growled.

Xanathan Goldenseed stared him down. “Now see here, boy. I’m letting you have your gold, the least you could do is show some respect. There’s no need for violence as well as greed. It’s just some asinine little fruit, it’s not worth turning into a fool brute for—”

The man threw the hatchet.

Poor Xan. If he had just *shut up*—what he had to say wasn't all that important—things might have been okay.

The hatchet flew at him, and he couldn't duck fast enough, and he wound up pinned by an arm to the Orel tree behind him and his red blood mixed with the golden sap pouring down.

My God, that tree was full of gold.

I'll say the men went wild after that, because in truth I don't remember the details. They stripped the trees of fruit, and the man grabbed his hatchet with barely a look at Xan and started chopping the bark from another tree.

Xan slid to the ground.

Finally, I came forward. I ran to him, and knelt down and tried to use pressure to stop the bleeding, but all I really did was mop up blood.

It seemed like such a small cut. It just wouldn't stop bleeding.

The golden sap pooled around us, and then the pools began to curdle, until most of the puddles had sort of dried into little bright nuggets.

Xan's eyes flickered open. "Andra..."

"Those are the seeds, aren't they?" I grabbed up a handful. I wanted so badly to hold them; I'm not sure why, but maybe it was because they were like Xan to me, and Xan was slipping away.

"Good," he whispered. "Take them."

I slipped the seeds in my pocket. With my other hand I pressed my handkerchief harder against his shoulder. "Xan, I'm sorry..."

"Huh? It's all right. You're all right, Andra...not like them...not..."

He never knew I was the one who said the things that led to his death. It really was my fault. The boys were greedy, and he should have shut his mouth, but that doesn't excuse me. I should have known better.

I was holding him when he died, bled to death. I don't want to talk about it. I never saw a man die before then, and it's a terrible piece of business I don't like to remember. Anyway, if I told you details you'd just remember those, and that's not what this story is about.

He died while the young men were destroying his orchard, plucking fruit and chopping into trees. One stopped and stared at me, and then the others followed. I shrank back and reached for my lady's pistol. For a moment their expressions said they wanted to do murder, and then they looked at Xan and realized they already had.

"Oh God!" the man with the hatchet cried. "Is he—I didn't mean—"

“Damn loon,” the young man said. “It was just a scratch, wasn’t it? He shouldn’t have—”

“Shouldn’t have—”

“Now look here, miss,” another one said, pointing at me. “This was an accident, hear?”

“An accident,” the hatchet-man said miserably.

“I hear,” I said. “Now go away. Leave us alone.”

They nearly ran. It wasn’t because of all five feet of me or all five inches of my pistol, but because of what they’d done. They hadn’t meant to do wrong, much less to do murder. Maybe it was hunger for the gold, or anger when Xan called them brutes, or all that and something else, something buried and dark that everyone has—I’ll stop in a moment, because I’m not a philosopher, but I felt it too for a moment, when I wanted to take my little pistol and shoot them as they ran away.

I don’t want to, can’t, think that it was all about the gold.

I had to leave Xan there. I didn’t have the tools or strength to bury him. But before I left, I straightened out his clothes, and in his pants pocket I slipped the Orel he had given me.

I don’t know if his dream would have worked, even if he’d lived. He couldn’t watch over every orchard all the time, and word’s been that many of them were picked clean, then chopped down when someone realized the sap inside was golden, too. There was no one to stop them, and no reason to wait and let someone else take the gold instead. It was every man for himself, and I’ve heard it was terrible.

I’ve preferred barter since then, and I don’t travel anymore. So all I know is what I’ve heard, and lately I’ve heard that Xanathan Kurtler deserved to die, that he was a rotten miser who would’ve used his wealth for wicked purposes.

Strange purposes, maybe, impractical, but not wicked. He meant so well, and if it’s anybody’s fault he died, it’s mine.

I planted the golden seeds. There was only one sprout, the one that grew into the tree out there. I put the walls in the garden when it was about five years old.

Yes, when they came out. Do you want one? Well, I don’t see the harm in it. Just one, mind.

There’s no harm in a little gold, provided you don’t value it too much.

* * *

Therese Arkenberg is a student from Wisconsin, though she studies only in the most extreme circumstances and most of her stories are at least drafted in the classroom. Her work has appeared in Lorelei Signal, Labyrinth Inhabitant, and Kaleidotrope.

When we read this story the first thing that happened was, we were blown away by the prose. The second thing was, we noticed it includes many of the same themes and elements as a very well-known work of fantasy. We and Ken want to acknowledge this debt up front. “Single-Bit Error” is not a parody or homage, but a new story with a unique take on some ideas that may seem familiar.

Just to be safe, Ken got in contact with the author of the original work, who had no objection to our publishing this story. Ken cites his inspirations in an author’s note at the end.

Single-Bit Error

by Ken Liu

Before he met Lydia, Tyler’s life, like the lives of most people, involved the steady accretion of names:

— “What happened next?” “Nothing,” Grandmother said. “They just lived happily ever after.” “Forever?” “Forever.”

Until Grandmother read him “Sleeping Beauty,” Tyler thought every story ended the way his parents ended them: “And they lived, sometimes even happily, until the day they died.”

— Tyler and every other kid avoided the new boy because he was bigger than all of them and stared at everyone like he was looking for a fight. But the only empty seat in Mrs. Younge’s Art class that day was next to Tyler, and that was how Owen Last and Tyler became best friends.

— Tyler looked at her until the music stopped. He was just about to ask her to dance when her date showed up. “So it is possible to fall in love in half an hour,” he thought. He wrote “Amber Ria” on a slip of paper and sealed it in a beer bottle with aluminum foil and threw the bottle as far into Long Island Sound as he could.

— Whenever somebody said “Tyler” they both looked up. But then the thin boy with a scar on his chin stopped coming to class and Tyler never found out what his last name was.

— San Francisco was just a dot on the map until he saw the seals sunbathing by Fisherman’s Wharf.

— At the coffee house open mike, he read a poem called “Allure, Obsession, Desire and Devotion.” Tyler could not understand why all the women were laughing until the woman sitting behind Owen showed him the perfume advertisements in the magazine in her hand. Lena Lyman and Tyler dated for exactly two months. Her favorite scent was Envy.

— Tyler didn’t know what that bright star in the sky was called until he moved into his new apartment and found an abandoned star atlas in the kitchen, next to a bowl of fresh clementines. He tasted sweetness on his tongue whenever he thought about Sirius, the Dog Star.

* * *

The first time Tyler saw her was in a dumpster behind the Wholly Place two blocks from his apartment. He had gone around the back of the store to look for some empty boxes to carry his organic potatoes and free range chicken breasts home (the Wholly Place believed in neither paper nor plastic).

She was standing up in the dumpster, her hands lifting into the sun a giant jar of olives that had just passed their expiration date. A dark blue cotton tank top showed off the creases and dimples on her elbows. Her sun-bleached, ginger-red hair was pinned into lopsided coils on top of her head with a black barrette. A scattering of freckles gave color and vibrancy to her pale face.

She turned to him, putting the jar of olives down on top of the pile of other things she had fished out of the dumpster. She had chapped lips, the sort of lips that came from smoking cigarettes and laughing at statistics. Her eyes were the color of moth wings. *She’s going to smile*, he knew, and he wanted to know if her teeth were white and crooked.

Tyler thought she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

“You know that most of the stuff they throw out here is still good for at least another week, right?” She beckoned him closer. “Come and give me a hand.”

Yes, she was smiling.

* * *

We think we know a few things about the way memory works. We think that memories of things that actually happened, such as what you ate for dinner, things that could have happened but didn’t, such as the

smart retort that came to mind too late, and things that simply could not have happened, such as the way sunlight might reflect from an angel's eyes, are encoded the same way at the level of neurons. To distinguish between them requires logic and reason, and a level of indirection. This is troublesome to some people in so far as they believe that our construction of reality is based on memories. If you cannot tell these kinds of memories apart, then it seems that you can be made to believe anything.

The consolation of philosophy and religion both was that they helped men classify the types of memories and keep their hold on the fragile authenticity of their waking lives.

* * *

When Tyler was very young, his grandmother was his favorite person in the world because, unlike his parents, who believed that children should always be told the truth as adults understood it, she would fill in the gaps in his knowledge — Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, God. His parents were always too busy and often a little too serious, but his grandmother had a sense of peace about her, a lightness that lifted his spirit. A few times, when Tyler's parents were away, she took him with her to church. He remembered liking the singing and the colorful windows, and how safe he felt there, in that large, empty space, sitting on a hard bench next to her warmth.

When she died, grief overwhelmed Tyler. But like most adults, when he grew older he could only recall the intensity of that love in childhood in an abstract way. He made the common error of identifying maturity with worth, and assumed that the love he had for her as a young child must have been lacking in strength and depth.

For many years after her death, however, Tyler was tortured by the memory of a certain visit from her. He was five or so, and they were playing some board game at the kitchen table. As he swung his legs in his excitement, he kicked her repeatedly in the shins. She asked him to stop, and he refused, giggling. When she finally frowned at him and threatened to stop playing if he didn't stop he told her to go to Hell.

In Tyler's mind he could see her face grow taut, lose color, and then, for the only time he could remember, she began to cry. He also remembered his own utter confusion. His parents did not have much use for religion and so for him *Hell* was a word without much mystery

or power. At that time he knew only vaguely that Hell was a place you did not want to go, like the dark basement or the even darker attic. He remembered feeling resentful that she was crying and he did not even understand why.

Tyler felt the guilt of this memory even in his teenage years. For him it summed up all his insecurities and fears about his own cruelty, ignorance, and the possibility that he was, in reality, not a good person. The fact that he had caused someone who loved him such pain with so little effort and understanding troubled him deeply.

One day Tyler looked through an old family photo album, and in it was a picture of the kitchen in the house they used to live in. He was surprised to discover that the small kitchen contained a central island, and had no space for the table in his memory at all.

With the discovery of that single error in his memory came a cascade of other revelations. Now he remembered that they always ate in the dining room, and when they did play board games, it was always on the coffee table in the living room.

The memory that had caused him such pain over the years could not possibly have occurred. Somehow, he must have manufactured the whole scene in his imagination.

It was not very hard to explain what really happened, he thought. The death of his grandmother had probably caused in him feelings of abandonment and guilt. In his confusion he had taken elements from storybooks and imagined out of nothing this memory to punish himself. This was the sort of fantasy that could have occurred to any young child who lost an important relative. With that realization, the image of his grandmother crying faded in his memory and became less and less believable.

Tyler thought he was very lucky to have discovered the single error in his false memory, which enabled him to reason his way into distinguishing between reality and fantasy. He felt that it was a coming-of-age moment.

Nonetheless, he admitted to himself that he was a little sad also at the discovery. For however imaginary that memory was, it was also a part of his love for his grandmother. When that memory lost its compelling

The memory that had caused him such pain over the years could not possibly have occurred.

aura of truth, it was like another part of her died with it. He had no name for the emptiness that remained.

* * *

The best pistachio ice cream in the world was served in Dora's Ice Cream Parlor in the town of Los Aldamas. Tyler knew this because it was while they were there, with the air conditioner cooling the back of his neck and the sunlight streaming in through the cracks in the dusty windowpanes, while they shared a small cup of pistachio ice cream, that Lydia said to him, "Yes, of course I will. Let's."

A month earlier he had helped her carry the olives and bread and grape juice she had salvaged from the Wholly Place dumpster to her apartment, which turned out to be in the same building as his, only on the floor below. What little furniture there was in the apartment was made from cardboard boxes with sheets draped over them. It was like being on the set of a minimalist play.

Lydia spread a blanket on the floor and they had a picnic in the middle of the afternoon in her twelve-by-ten studio. She broke the bread into pieces and handed the pieces to him, and they drank the grape juice from the bottle.

"The Eucharist," Lydia said, "à la Lydia." She said it with the same tone one would say, "Pollo Calabrese, my grandmother's recipe." It didn't sound like a joke. She offered him an olive from the jar.

It had been many years since Tyler had last gone to a church with his grandmother, and he didn't know what to say. But he wanted to stay with her and look at her face, which, though it broke into smiles only occasionally, was suffused with a happiness that Tyler felt as a wave of heat.

He told her about his job as a database programmer at a bank, and about his nights scribbling in his notebook and reading in smoke-filled coffee houses to other young men and women with dreams like his own. He told her a selection of the most important names of his life and the stories behind them. While he spoke, he marveled at her face, and how he was already crazy about her.

Tyler asked her questions. He wanted to know the life of the woman he was falling in love with, to understand *her* collection of names.

Lydia had grown up in New Camden, one of thousands of other towns just like it, exurbs cast adrift along the highways between Boston

and New York. She was named in honor of a grandmother who died before she was born. When she was little her mother called her “Peapod” because she was chubby and loved the sun. Her father called her “Princess” because that was what he thought all fathers called their daughters.

For much of junior high she did not know who she was. Her parents fought and when they finally stopped fighting her father wanted her to continue to be called Lydia Getty, and her mother wanted her to be called Lydia O’Scannlain. She spent her summers at her father’s new home in Arizona, where he took her to meet his friends at night. They called her “Baby Shark” because she beat them at poker. At school the girls called her Lydia O’Hara because her favorite color was red. The boys did not have a name for her because, as far as they knew, she had not yet kissed anyone.

In high school she was Lydia the Pothead, and she was popular with the boys for all the wrong reasons. Her mother called her names that she would rather not remember. Once a boy drove her to a building in Boston, where angry men and women waving signs and placards lined the driveway as she walked up, alone, and called her names that made her shiver. Later, as she lay in a small white room, recovering, a nurse told her to ignore the noises outside and to try to imagine herself as A Very Brave Young Woman.

She fell asleep, and was startled awake when she felt the room shake. Her life was transformed at that moment because she was visited by the angel Ambriel, the angel with eyes the color of moth wings.

Contrary to most accounts of angelic visitations — Lydia told Tyler, who did not yet quite understand what he was hearing — angels do not engage in conversation with the visited. The power of the visitation comes entirely from the presence of the angel itself, which is a fragment of the being of God.

Like that of millions of other people, Lydia’s life, though not filled with extraordinary suffering, had had enough disappointments and betrayals by that point that she had lost what little faith the church had been able to instill in her. God had the same status in reality as neutrinos.

Now, Lydia looked upon the angel, and felt Ambriel’s light punch through her eyes and fill her mind, and the pain was so glorious that she could not even conceive of closing her eyes. Everything she had ever

learned about anything was simply wrong, irrelevant. Ambriel's light illuminated the deafening silences between her parents, the old and fresh scars from that zero-sum game known as social life in a high school, the humble, confusing and desperate inconsistencies of an ordinary life. In that light, all of it was coherent, sensible, and above all, beautiful.

In that moment Lydia was made anew. She was filled with such love for God that she finally understood why Hell is really the absence of God, and has nothing to do with fire or brimstone.

Tyler learned then what it was he saw in Lydia's face that so pulled at his heart. He saw in that face the signs of that species of happiness we used to call *blessed*. To be blessed is to be without fear, which is just another name for desire left unfulfilled. But the very presence of God, even through the intermediary of an angel, made unfulfilled desires meaningless for her. The only fear left after a visitation was the fear that one might be denied the presence of God. But since the only requirement to reach God is to love Him, and it is not possible to *not* love Him after having experienced the joy of His presence, Lydia's salvation was guaranteed.

At that moment, Lydia learned who she was. She was one of the Saved. This did not mean that she had to give up drugs and swearing, or that she had to put on a white robe and roam the streets stuffing pamphlets under people's doors. It simply meant that she could now go on with her life and everything she did in the future would be full of joy because she loved God.

And so Tyler was in love with Lydia because God's light, dim though it was by the time it was refracted through Lydia onto him, nevertheless dazzled him.

He took Lydia with him to poetry readings, where Lydia met his friends who wanted to write poetry and congregated in those smoke-filled basement cafés. When Tyler read from the cocoon of the spotlight, he sought out her luminous face and bright halo of red hair in the dim light of the café because she smiled when she heard him read and he loved to see her smile.

Because she couldn't tell an iamb apart from the Lamb; because she smelled of soap and sunlight; because when she told him she would go look at stars with him she really meant it; because when he made fun of people who said "irregardless," she made him look it up in a dictionary

so that he learned that it really was a word; because he knew that he could always tell when she would laugh a fraction of a second before she did.

Although Tyler's friends didn't know quite what to say at first when they heard Lydia tell her story of her encounter with Ambriel, they soon came to like her because she was nothing like what they would have expected from someone who claimed to see angels. She could hold her drink better than any of them — even Owen, who still looked like he would rather be out on the road on a motorcycle than in an office — and she would wink at Tyler when she was drunk and whisper, "I'm dangerous, and I'll eat you like air."

On Sundays Lydia did not go to church. She never went to churches because they had nothing to offer her, and in any case most churches in the city were embarrassed by her story. Instead, she brought him to meetings of people who had been visited by angels and people who wanted to be visited by angels. These meetings occurred in the basements of churches and libraries, and they involved a lot of folding chairs and stale coffee, as well as a lot of desperation and phrases cribbed from the self-help aisles. Often Tyler wondered why he was in these meetings at all until he saw the light in Lydia's face as she told her story.

On other days they wandered the streets of the city after work. They took short road trips to small towns up and down the Pacific Coast. They talked about everything and nothing at all, and all the while Tyler gazed into Lydia's face and wanted to believe.

That month between the day he met her in a dumpster and the day she said yes, she would marry him, while feeding him pistachio ice cream was the happiest month of Tyler's life.

The only trouble was, he still did not believe in God.

* * *

On their way back from Las Aldamas, Lydia fell asleep in the passenger seat. The road was straight and smooth, and the traffic was light. Tyler put the car on cruise control and stretched his legs. He reached for Lydia's hand and turned his head to glance at her sleeping form.

Later, when Tyler tried to recall what he felt, as he watched Lydia slowly die in the seat next to him, her body upside down and held in

place by the seatbelt, her back twisted at an impossible angle, the collapsed roof of the car trapping her arms, he was surprised to find that he could recall no pain from his own body at all.

But that could not have been the case. Both his legs were broken, and the heat from the flames must have been intense on his side of the wreckage, judging by the burns covering his face and arms. When he finally recovered enough to sit up on his own in the hospital, he also found that the blindness in his left eye would be permanent.

Be that as it may, the fact was that all Tyler could remember was how calm and unafraid Lydia was as she told him that she knew she was going to die, that she was not in any pain, and that she would see him in Heaven.

Then her eyes got wide, and she said, "Hello, Ambriel."

Tyler tried to twist around in his seat so he could see what she was seeing, even though he knew that he would see nothing. The steering wheel got in his way and he gave up after a few seconds. He would regret those few seconds later because he took his eyes off Lydia's face, and during those few seconds she died.

* * *

If Tyler were religious, he could have been comforted by the promise of reuniting with Lydia in Heaven. Or he could have been angry with God, and railed against Him until he could come to accept his life the way Job accepted his. But Tyler did not believe in Heaven or God.

But neither could his lack of faith give him comfort, for he loved Lydia for that light in her, and he had no name or explanation for that light except what Lydia told him. Her faith was what he loved.

To continue in his lack of faith would be to assert that Lydia's joy was an illusion, and that would kill the very heart of his memory of her. But to believe would require him to break down the barriers between fantasy and reality in his mind and embrace as fact what seemed to him a hallucination. While Lydia was alive he could delay that decision for as long as he was in love, but her death meant that he had to choose.

* * *

When Tyler finally got out of the hospital, he locked himself away from his friends. He quit his job and he unplugged his phone.

What he did was to find out everything he could about the accident, and to try to understand what happened. This was difficult because there was little the investigators could find out, and there were many blanks to be filled in. But Tyler had lots of time.

* * *

Much of a programmer's job — Tyler read — consists of untangling the web of links bridging the level of indirection between variables and values.

Variables are the electronic memory equivalents of names. Instead of working with individual bytes, a block of memory can be given a name with a variable. Variables can be made to name anything: throttle settings, social security numbers, a subroutine to wipe the disk.

Unfortunately, there is no way to tell if a variable is pointing at what it claims to be pointing at, or if it's pointing at anything at all. At the level of bits, the number of butterflies in Costa Rica looks just like the velocity of the tropical storm off the coast of Australia.

This is troublesome to every programmer because the correspondence between variables and values lies at the foundation of any program's tenuous claim to correctness. If you can convince the computer that a variable names something real when it really points into the void, all bets are off.

In order to help programmers maintain the distinction between solid reality and fantastic disaster, type systems were introduced. These were mathematical constructs embodied in programming languages to ensure that a variable meant for the throttle setting would not point to, say, the current acceleration of the car. Type systems imposed the consolation of infallible order against the madness of an amoral sea of bits.

* * *

Like many other modern cruise control systems, the one in Tyler's car relied upon a microcomputer running a dedicated program.

Obviously it was very important that this program did its job correctly. The program in Tyler's car was written by a careful programmer who understood that lives depended on him getting it right. But more than that, the program was written in a language that had a very strong type system. There was a mathematical proof showing that no matter how clever or careless a programmer was, a program that

passed the type-checking would be *guaranteed to never* allow a variable declared to point at the fuel level to point at the subroutine for shifting gears. This was as close to infallibility as you could get in the world of bits.

All this is to say that Tyler had good reason to relax and lean back in his seat.

* * *

About two thousand years earlier — Tyler read some more — around the time of Christ, there was a star in the region of the sky dominated by the constellation Cassiopeia. The star was old and dying, and one winter night, it went supernova.

Out of this explosion emerged countless protons and neutrons traveling away from the wreckage of the old star at great speed. They are called cosmic rays, and most of them will go on hurling through the void of space till the end of time, and their fates need not concern us.

But one proton in particular arrived on Earth that sunny July day after traveling through the dark for two thousand years. It plunged through the ionosphere, gracefully dodging the lines of the Earth's magnetic field, and then straight through the thickening air, barely slowing down. It would have gone on and sunk itself straight into the California desert on that day, but something got in the way.

At that moment, Lydia was asleep and Tyler had his eyes off the road for a moment to look at her. Even in sleep, her face held that blessed quality of light. And their car intercepted the path of the lone escaped proton from that long ago death of a star.

The proton paid little attention to the metal casing and the plastic polymers interested it even less. It ripped right through them and, for a moment, it looked as if it would go on with its journey. It seemed that way until the proton came upon an infinitesimal bit of silicon, and for the first time in two thousand years, it took an interest in tangible matter and decided to knock the electrons out of it.

* * *

That bit of silicon happened to be a part of a capacitor. There were millions of other capacitors and transistors just like it, all of them parts of the integrated circuit that made up the memory of the computer running the program controlling Tyler's car. The absence of those

electrons was an insignificant anonymity by any measure in the scheme of things, but it was enough.

The loss of those electrons meant that the bit that used to represent a 1 would now be interpreted as a 0, and that bit happened to be located inside a memory cell that held a variable. The flip in that bit meant that the variable, which was supposed to give the address of the subroutine for computing throttle settings, was now pointing at the value for the fuel flow rate, 1024 bytes away from where the variable was supposed to be pointing.

The type system of the language in which the program was written was designed to prevent just this sort of violation. A variable meant to point to a subroutine should never have been able to point at numerical data. Once that had happened, anything else was possible.

* * *

If a single-bit error on a circuit board could breach the mathematically perfect type system of a programming language, Tyler reasoned, wasn't it conceivable that a single-bit error in the brain could break down the system of distinctions between nurses and angels? All it would take was for one neural connection to be broken and randomly reattached somewhere else, somewhere it had no business to be connected to, and all the walls between the types of memories would come crumbling down.

Lydia's vision of Ambriel, and indeed her faith, was then simply the consequence of a misfiring of the neurons, a misfiring that could have been triggered by fatigue, by stress, by a stray elementary particle, indeed, by anything at all, on that long ago day in the clinic in Boston. It was really the same process that had conjured up his memory of making his grandmother cry.

In order to reason your way to faith, Tyler thought, all you needed was a single-bit error.

Contrary to what you might expect, this theory did not cheapen or degrade Lydia's faith in Tyler's mind. For this explanation allowed Tyler to understand, rationally, Lydia's life. Calling Lydia's *faith* an *error* was a level of indirection that bridged the gap between their worlds.

Moreover, errors, once understood, could be induced. The technically proficient could breach the best software security systems by

deliberately inducing errors in the hardware. Couldn't the rational induce faith in themselves the same way?

Tyler decided that he would try to induce a single-bit error in his own brain. If the only way for him to meet Lydia was to go to Heaven, then rationally, he had no choice but to make himself believe in God.

* * *

The technically proficient could breach the best software security systems by deliberately inducing errors in the hardware. Couldn't the rational induce faith in themselves the same way?

One possibility was to weaken the body. Starvation, dehydration, exposure to the elements. Errors were more likely when the body's defenses were down. This was the path of the mystics of the desert. Tyler decided that he would try that first.

He drove the rental car south and then east until he was in Arizona, close to the border with Mexico, the edge and then the heart of the Sonoran Desert. He drove until the roads were no longer roads and then he walked. He walked until he decided he could no longer find his way back, and then he walked some more. Eventually he found himself surrounded on all sides by clumps of saguaro cactus. He was very hungry and thirsty by then, so he sat down and waited for his body to fail.

"Don't take this the wrong way," Owen had said to him before he left. "But I used to think that you were never going to make it as a poet. I thought you didn't have enough imagination. And now I think you have too much."

Tyler had not seen Owen for a few weeks while he was locked in his own apartment trying to understand Lydia's death. They were sitting in their favorite coffee shop, and it was raining outside, a rare autumn shower.

"Programmers are not really numbers people," Tyler said. "We are words people. The numbers people work in hardware."

"It won't be like real faith," Owen said, instead of telling him to stop acting crazy and get on with his life. Tyler appreciated that. "Even if it works. Even if you get visions of angels singing hosannas."

“How do you know what real faith is like? You don’t believe in God either.”

“I don’t need to believe in God to tell you that you’re going to fail. You want to believe in God because you love Lydia. But you’ve already decided that believing in God is an error, a mistake, without ever having experienced it. You want to force yourself to accept as true what you have already decided to be a lie. That’s a gulf that cannot be bridged.”

“You have not worked through the logic,” Tyler said. “What good is a rational explanation for faith if I do not test the hypothesis?”

Owen shook his head. “Some things cannot bear to be directly examined. If you are looking for a faint star, you will not see it if you look directly at where it is. You have to look to the side, and let it catch your eye unawares.”

“A level of indirection then,” Tyler said to the saguaro cactus beside him, and he began to laugh. *How long had he been sitting in the desert?* It seemed like days. Night was coming. It was going to be cold.

“You always think too hard,” the cactus said.

“Lydia, is that you?” *This is a good sign*, Tyler thought. Auditory hallucinations always came first, didn’t they? But the voice didn’t really sound like Lydia. It was too distant and too fine, like a glass harmonica. He looked around for an angel.

“So you think my brain was broken? A missed connection, that’s all it was?” The cactus said.

“No, not broken.” That was the wrong name for it. That was the problem. He needed the right name.

He wanted to tell her all about variables and single-bit errors and the type system of memories. He wanted to explain to her how he wanted to experience what she did so he could be with her. But he was very hungry and thirsty, and he felt dizzy. So all he said was, “I miss you.”

Bright lights were approaching him in the dark. He waited for the feeling of being pierced by the light, of being overwhelmed by the certainty that it was all going to be okay, of love, of being saved. He waited for the walls in his mind to collapse.

The light stopped in front of him. Several figures appeared in the light. Their hair were halos of light and their bodies were limned in fire. He was a little surprised that the light was not as bright as he had

expected. It was painful to look into the light, but not like Lydia had described it. *Which angels are these?*

“Maybe it’s because I have only one eye now,” he said to himself.

“It’s okay now,” Owen said. “Everything is going to be all right.”

They carried him into the back of the ranger’s car and began the long drive back.

* * *

He tried drugs, but the effects were not permanent. Meditation just made him tired. He read up on electroshock therapy, but no psychiatrist would agree to his demands. “You don’t need therapy,” they told him. “Go home and read the Bible. Besides, I would lose my license.”

He even went to the churches. But their faith seemed empty to him. He felt nothing sitting in the pews, mouthing the words to the hymns, listening to sermons that seemed devoid of meaning.

I want to believe, and I can’t. He looked around; no one had the kind of light in their faces that he had seen in Lydia. *You think you believe, but you don’t. Not really, not like Lydia.*

Owen never said, “I told you so.”

Eventually Owen managed to convince him to come out again to the cafés at night. He thought the poems being read were wretched. Why wasn’t anyone writing about the lack of that light? Why wasn’t anyone writing about the persistence of memory or the type system that was at the same time so fragile and so difficult to breach? Why wasn’t anyone writing about the pain that came from not being able to believe?

He got a new job programming databases at a bank, and he started to write again. He even managed to get some of his poems published. His friends took him out to celebrate. He was excited and happy, and a girl who looked nothing like Lydia took him home, despite the scars on his face.

“What’s your name?” he said.

“Stephanie,” she said, and turned off the light. And he would always remember her as Stephanie-Who-Looked-Nothing-Like-Lydia.

He moved on.

* * *

“Would you go get Lydia for dinner?” Jess said to Tyler from the kitchen.

Tyler was cleaning up the last few paper plates and napkins and popped balloons in the living room left over from the birthday party earlier. He walked downstairs and into the garage. The garage door was open, and through it he could see Lydia lying on the front lawn, looking up at the winter evening sky.

“Hey kiddo,” he said as he walked up next to her, “time for dinner.”

“Just a couple minutes more, please?”

He lowered himself and sat on the grass next to her. “It’s getting cold. What are you waiting for?”

“I’m looking at Sirius. It’s eight-point-six light years away, so the light we are seeing now left Sirius eight years and seven months ago. I’m eight today, and Mom said I was born nine weeks premature, in the evening. I want to catch the light that left Sirius the moment I was conceived.”

“The moment you were *conceived*?”

“You gave me the book, remember?”

He was going to point out that although she was born in the evening it didn’t necessarily mean that she was “conceived” in the evening. Then he stopped himself. Some details could wait.

“That is worth waiting for,” he said.

They waited together, shivering a little. It was still early winter, but you could already tell that it was going to be a cold one. Tyler sometimes missed the warm California winters.

“I think I’ve figured out why my bed has so much dust under it,” Lydia said.

“Why is that?”

“I read that dust is made up from meteors burning up in the sky. Since my room is in the attic, it’s closer to the stars than the rest of the house, so it makes sense that I get more dust than you and mom.”

He looked at her, and was overwhelmed by his love for her. She was so like him, rational, clear-headed, not afraid of the facts. Her fairy tales had star dust, but not the magic kind. She did not believe in God, and he was glad of that. Like him, she would be immune to single-bit errors.

“If I have to tell the two of you to get in here one more time, no one is getting dinner tonight.”

Jess was standing in the garage door, the light from the hallway behind her made her luminous.

“Look, mom looks like an angel.” Lydia got up and ran towards the light.

Tyler stayed where he was a moment longer. He looked at Sirius, the Dog Star, and the other burning, exploding stars in the sky, all that light coming at him from different distances and therefore from different times. He realized that he was being bombarded simultaneously by protons and photons generated at the moment Lydia was conceived, at the moment Lydia, *that other* Lydia, had died, at the moment he was born, at the moment Saint Augustine stole his pear, and at the moment Christ was crucified. He felt a little lightheaded.

Ambriel chose that moment to visit him.

* * *

So this is what it feels like.

Tyler was filled with such love for God that he trembled. The beauty of God’s design made him weep. He understood why he met Lydia, why she had died, and why he had failed to come to Him before that moment. He yearned to feel that light forever. He longed to be in Heaven. It was the happiest moment of his life because by experiencing what Lydia did, he was finally with her. To remember what it was like when he was in love with Lydia was better even than falling in love in the first place. The type system was breaking down.

But one detail was wrong.

He remembered looking at Sirius just before Ambriel appeared. For a fraction of a second Sirius appeared to glow a little brighter, barely perceptibly. It was a very slight twinkle. It could have been anything: an atmospheric distortion, a wisp of cloud passing, a trick of the eye.

Or maybe it was a solar flare on Sirius at the moment, eight-point-seven-five years ago, when Lydia was conceived. Maybe a proton from that explosion travelled through the emptiness of space for those years, paying nary a mind to anything in its path. Wasn’t it possible that it had plunged through the earth’s ionosphere, its stratosphere, its clouds and the wings of birds? Wasn’t it possible that it finally entered Tyler’s eye on that winter evening, piercing him to the depth of his being, and, while passing by the hypothalamus, decided to knock some electrons out of it?

It was a small error, just a bit off from the usual. But it was enough. It was enough for him to tell reality apart from illusions.

As soon as he realized it, Ambriel was gone. The type system held. Tyler knew then that he was doomed. For the rest of his life he would remember that feeling of rapture, that love for God, that sweetness of being. He had believed, even if only for a moment. He had been with Lydia, but then he had looked. And then there was the absence of God.

He would always have that moment in his memory, and he would always know it was a single-bit error that had given him the memory and then taken its reality away from him.

He lived, sometimes even happily, until the day he died.

* * *

Author's Note: *Three sources inspired this story: Ted Chiang's short story, "Hell is the Absence of God"; Heather O'Neill's prose-poem, "Before It Had a Name," which she performed on This American Life; and Sudhakar Govindavajhala and Andrew W. Appel's paper, "Using Memory Errors to Attack a Virtual Machine"*

(www.cs.princeton.edu/~sudhakar/papers/memerr.pdf).

Because this story addresses themes similar to those explored in Ted Chiang's story, I sought and obtained Chiang's permission before publication.

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Ken lives in the Greater Boston area with Lisa, his wife, and their two cats. Someday he would like to write a story about the Internal Revenue Code and programming in Lisp.

We leave you with Carole Lanham's story, the longest in this anthology and the one with the longest title. Hers is the first piece we received that made us think this anthology thing might work out after all. The prose is gorgeous, the characters closely observed and the story very bittersweet.

Friar Garden, Mister Samuel, and the Jilly Jally Butter Mints by Carole Lanham

To understand the altogether unbelievable and sometimes perfectly dreadful power of a Jilly Jally Butter Mint, one must first understand my sister, Estrella Calliope June bug Padora. She sounds odd, I know, especially the June bug part, which she made up and gave herself as her *middle* middle name.

Don't ask.

The important thing to know is this: Estrella is not an idiot and she is not an imbecile. We had her tested a few years ago and, good news! Estrella is a moron. Dr. Clumpette says she has the brain of an eight year old but that's not so awful, is it? Clumpette has seen worse.

My name is Esme Padora, plain and simple. No middle. No *middle* middle. I like it that way. I've been related to Estrella since I was born but even so, I didn't have much interest in her until the day she reached in her pocket and tossed a fistful of Lady's Mantle pips into mine and Sam Bell's face. Flower seeds aren't supposed to twinkle but these did and we both itched our noses and sneezed and sneezed as though the seeds were part ordinary and part something else entirely.

"Caught you!" Estrella said, blowing one last improbable sparkle straight for our heads. After that, Sam and I didn't go anywhere without her.

Sam, I should say, was Miss Judith's son and Miss Judith was Mum's nurse. He and I were great friends. Estrella wished to be friends too so she pushed him up against the hazel tree and began separating sparkles from the freckles on his nose with the tip of a wet finger. "Just

like Breezy Boy!” she said of Sam’s hair, *Breezy-Boy* being the palomino pony our father should never have bought her.

Sam was one of those people with tell-tale ears and his tell-tale ears were a hot, wild red the day Estrella caught him. I always thought they were a real hindrance but, it turns out, the ears were nothing. In due time it would be shown that Sam Bell’s single greatest misfortune was the fact that he was a boy.

“Would you like to smoke?” Estrella asked us, after she grew tired of rubbing slobber around on Sam’s face.

I could scarcely believe my ears. Estrella was a lot of things but she was not usually a rule-breaker.

“Sure,” we said, quick as you please, because Sam and I were a lot of things and rule-breaker was at the tip top of the list.

“Goody,” Estrella said. “We’re going to catch Dragon Hornets today!” With that, she pulled a canning jar out of mid-air.

“Dragon Hornets?” Sam said.

Estrella opened the jar and pivoted on one toe. In seconds, the whole garden reeked of damson jam. “They only come round the first time someone eats a Jilly Jally so we mustn’t miss our chance.”

Sam looked to me for an explanation. “She’s special,” I said.

“Very,” Sam agreed.

Then Estrella brought out the mints.

Sam and I were fourteen back then; that summer marking the first of many that Mum would be on her death bed. Estrella was sixteen.

Which brings me to this: My father once said that if three friends stand under an umbrella together, one of them is sure to get wet. He and I tend to think alike when it comes to being suspicious but if I had the chance to it do all over again, I’d change all that. “Ignore the umbrella blither blather,” I’d say to me, and that’s just one of many things I’d tell myself, if only I could go back.

Here are some others:

- Never catch a Dragon Hornet with your bare hands.
- Avoid sleeping with Spartans and/or elephants at all costs.
- This goes double for mermaids.
- Most important of all, if someone should ever happen to offer you a Jilly Jally Butter Mint, say “No thank you!” Run away and don’t ever look back. Keep on running until the day you die.

“Would you like a mint?” Estrella said.

Sam looked at me and I shrugged.

We both held out our hands. "Yes please."

His was green and mine was pink and we counted to three and kicked them back at the very same second.

"Buttery," Sam said.

"Minty," I said.

"Stick out your tongues," my sister said, and she pushed our faces over *Epiphany Pool* until our hair dipped in the water.

Sam had eaten a green mint yet his reflection revealed a tongue pink as a rose. My tongue was green all the way down my throat.

"How can that be?" I wanted to know.

Estrella said: "Don't ask."

We were in Friar Garden, I forgot to say. Friars used to pray there so that's the reason for the name. It was a brambly, knotty, tangled-up place full of all sorts of little hand-painted signs telling you how to find *Vesper Rock* and *Rock of Ages Rock* and *Testimonial Trail*. *Epiphany Pool* had a sign too except it was so old, Sam and I had no trouble at all scraping off the "1" one afternoon when there was nothing better to do.

It was commonly believed that the birds in the garden built their nests with the old Cincture knots the friars wore to remind themselves of their commitment to poverty, chastity, and obedience. Not a very comfortable bed, if you ask me, but everyone thought it a sacred place. From the start, Sam Bell and I had delighted in defiling Friar Garden, carving perverse words on tree trunks with his Wharncliffe whittler, and practicing a made-up form of witchery that involved mixing wizard spells with DeLaMano's magic tricks. It's fitting the Dragon Hornets came to us there.

Estrella said; "Before we begin, you have to say one thing that's a problem for you and promise to turn it into something good. Otherwise there can be no magic."

"One thing?"

Picking one thing that was a problem for me was a test all by itself. In the interest of getting the ball rolling, however, I dug down deep. I came up with a good one too. "I'm hopeless when it comes to sharing."

Estrella nodded because she knew it was true. I'd broken a *Pete the Pup* doll once rather than let her have it for an hour. A penny bank as well.

"Sometimes," Sam admitted, "I'm too sneaky for my own good."

I patted him on the back. “Nice choice! I’d have gone with fibber for you but you really are a dreadful sneak.”

“And I should not drink Moxie soda pop,” Estrella declared, slipping her finger inside her nose and pulling out a sparkle. “It makes me burp.”

So there they were; our spiritual tests (some more spiritual than others), a string of sins laid out like knots tied around a friar’s girth. Our own *Rule of St. Francis*, if you will, as stated on the mossy *Rule of St. Francis Stone* that I leaned my hip against.

A stern Christian always remembers...

The necessity of penance.

The danger and punishment for vice.

The honor and reward of virtue.

Never mind that Sam and I had long-since scratched his favorite curse *ball-licker* over *Christian* with a stolen salad fork. The mints would lead the way, or so my sister promised. We would enter the garden like our holy brothers before us, and seek to change ourselves.

See how noble it all was?

The word “burp” acted as a signal. After that the hornets came. They were about the size of a walnut and scaly with four sets of wings and they flew very very fast. The first hornet zipped past Sam’s ear and I reached up with my hand at the same moment that Estrella scooped in with her jar.

“Caught you!” Estrella said, slamming on the lid.

“Ouch!” I said. A blister popped up on the hill of my first knuckle. “It stung me.”

“Oh dear,” Estrella said. “That will never go away either.” She gave the wound a kiss. “Better?”

Somehow it was.

“Catch them with this,” she said, giving me her jar.

Sam and I fogged up the glass, looking at the angry bug.

“What’s coming out of its mouth?” Sam asked.

“Fire,” Estrella said, rolling her eyes like we were the ones with feeble minds. “Tonight Mister Samuel will put the jar by his bed and he’ll have a funny surprise in the morning.” Mister Samuel is what my sister called Sam.

The little beasts proved irresistible. Once I managed to snag one, Sam had to snag one too. You have to be fast though when there’s fire

involved. More than once, we splashed into *Epiphany* to put out our smoking sleeves. Estrella singed off part of her hair.

Daddy liked to say, “If you play with fire, expect to get burned.” I wish I’d listened to that one. Soon the jar was too hot to touch and whirling with little clouds of steam. After an hour of jumping around, we’d only caught one hornet a piece. Still, it seemed like those few were enough to burn up their little glass world.

Estrella wrapped a muslin pleat around the jar and carried it back to the porch with her dirty knee showing. My hand throbbled like the devil.

“I’m going to look them up in *Bailey’s Guide* tonight,” Sam said.

Estrella smiled at that.

Earlier that afternoon, we’d been wallowing in self-pity, sure the whole day was doomed to be as dull as the day before. Now Sam’s shoe laces had been turned to cinders and I had a hole in my new apron.

“Isn’t smoking fun?” Estrella said, dousing her own smoldering apron with a mouthful of spit.

We both agreed it was wonderful. Fantastic! Better than tobacco - which, incidentally, is exactly what dragon fire smells like.

“Thanks,” Sam told Estrella, scratching his golden head. Like me, he was shocked to realize that Estrella had potential.

“Don’t thank me, Mister Samuel. Thank the Jilly Jallys.”

That night, Sam Bell went to bed in his little room in the muggy belvedere on top of our house; the three Dragon Hornets huffing and puffing away on the wardrobe trunk by his bed. He’d looked and looked, he told me later, but there was nothing on fire-breathing hornets in *Bailey’s Guide* or *The Exciting World of Insects*.

At breakfast the next morning, he passed me something under the table that I could only explore within the confines of my fist until every bite of my roly-poly had been chewed up and swallowed down. It was smooth like a rock, whatever it was. Bumpy. Molten. It made my blister heat up and sting all over again, yet I didn’t drop it. I wanted it, despite the pain. I held it tight inside my palm.

Come what may.

“Could I be excused, Daddy?” I said when my plate was clean.

“Isn’t smoking fun?”
Estrella said, dousing her
own smoldering apron with
a mouthful of spit.

He nodded.

“Mum?” Sam said.

“Go on then, but don’t forget the chimneys.”

Washing the chimneys on the kerosene lamps was Sam’s most dreaded chore but he didn’t even grumble. We ran out the door so fast, Miss Judith and Daddy actually noticed one another, which was not normal, if you must know, seeing as Daddy read the *Wilt Dailey Reporter* each morning and Miss Judith was just the nurse.

Out in the yard, I opened my hand and looked at the little rock. “What is it?” I whispered.

Sam took his treasure back and held it up to the sun.

Inside the bubbly lump of glass, the three little fire-breathers looked back at me like mosquitoes trapped in a drop of amber, their tiny wings melted to goo.

Oddly enough, the day before was already fading to a furry blur and we got headaches just thinking about Estrella Calliope June bug Padora. It felt as though someone had peeled open our skulls and stuffed them like pillows until our fool brains got lost in the fluff. Sam and I spent the better part of the morning checking the undersides of wormy stones, kicking the petals off snowdrops, and furiously mashing anything that turned out to be a toadstool.

“I don’t understand it,” Sam whined. “There must have been ten hornets here yesterday.”

Over and over again we reminded ourselves what Estrella said about the hornets coming only once. Still, it put us in a foul mood to find the magic gone.

“Do you think it’s because of me?” Sam asked. “I’m prowling for dragons when I should be cleaning chimneys.”

“That’s probably it,” I said.

At noon, my father yelled for me. Sam’s mum yelled too. I was sure he was in a fix for neglecting the chimneys but when we ran inside, my father held up my apron and wiggled his finger through the hole.

“Explain.”

Miss Judith had taken to doing the laundry and she said our clothes stunk of *Dill’s Best Cut* and what did we have to say about that?

Well! I looked my father right in the eye and Sam looked his mother right in the eye and together we proceeded to unreel one whopping fish-tale of a fib. They let us get all twisted up in it too before Daddy

slapped his briar pipe down on the table and put an end to that. "I found this in your sister's pocket."

Sam and I, it should be said, had the ability to communicate without so much as a word, a nod, or a scratch of the arse passing in between us. This being the case, I opened my hand behind my back and, just like that, Sam slid something into my fingers.

"Have a look at this," I said.

Blister juice ran down my knuckles as Daddy held it up to the window. "What am I looking at?"

"Dragon Hornets, sir."

Sam and I exchanged a proud look, waiting to be congratulated on our big discovery. Daddy was a botanist. He had a winter propagator named after him; the wholly inedible, spiky-balled *Padora Bramble Nut*. Maybe they would name the hornets after Sam and me? I knew exactly what we would call them...

"Horse shit!" Daddy declared. "Must you always lie, Esme?" No matter how he held the glass, the dragons looked like dirt to him. Consequently, he bent me over the sideboard for a strapping, and Miss Judith let him bend Sam over too.

To block the pain of what was about to come, I made myself focus on the badminton scar that weaved along the curve of Sam's chin as we stood there shoulder to shoulder, waiting. You could scarcely see the scar by this point, unless you wanted to. I thought of the way it bled in a criss-cross pattern all over his shirt the day our class backhanded him with their rackets. Even Ralph Smallwood gave Sam a whack, and Ralph was one to know about the sting of such things. Before this, Sam and I had been strangers eating at the same breakfast table but when the mob ran off and I saw him there with his checkerboard chin and his cold angry eyes, I gave him a hand up.

"Ball-lickers," he said.

I peeled the WHORE SPAWN sign off his back, plucked a shuttlecock from his hair, and decided Sam Bell was my kind of boy. From then on, he was all mine.

When the strap came for me, Sam licked his lips, gave a nod, and grit through the blows right along with me. Then it was his turn. Sweat broke out all over his checkerboard. He clenched his teeth. I gave him the same nod. The crack of leather that followed hurt more than my own whipping.

You might think we'd never be dumb enough to eat Jilly Jallys again. You'd be wrong.

The next day, Sam and I found Estrella picking a bouquet of Wake Robins by the workshop. When I say workshop, you probably picture an old shed full of mud-caked trowels and dusty jars of rat poison. Daddy's workshop was a gingerbread cottage. Star jasmine tendriled through the fretwork and a snowy cloud of Bristol Fairy kept the path a secret so that the only regular visitors were the White Woods and the moorhens. From the outside, you'd never guess it was the headquarters of *Brother Paul's Triply Blessed Liver Suppositories*.

Other such enterprises might have been guarded over by a full-time watchman or a half-dozen snapping hounds. My father entrusted his life's work to a nodding batch of cup and saucer flowers and an ancient stable door. With the exception of Friar Garden, it was the only part of Sheepsfold left intact from the priory days.

Somewhere within those cobbled walls lie the cure for soft heads and aching bones, Daddy was sure of it. "One of these days, I'll fix them both," he vowed. This was why we'd moved to Sheepsfold in the first place; to save my sister and my mother from their afflictions. But don't let the flowers and the moorhens fool you. Peeking in the window was crime enough to make Daddy rip off his belt.

"We'd best keep away from here," I warned Estrella.

In actuality, there was little danger. Daddy was off to Chipping Norton for the day to meet with Edgar Carey, the face behind Brother Paul. On weekdays, Mr. Carey put on a scapular and rosary and went about laying hands on people, touting *Holy Vinegar for the Hopeful*. "It's good on cod too!" Mr. Carey liked to say. Daddy thought him a buffoon but sales were up. On this particular day, he was bringing Brother Paul a fresh supply of vinegar so the "ministry" might be expanded to Cubitt Town.

Estrella slid a bloom behind my ear and reached into her pocket. Somehow my simple-minded sister had managed to get her hands on the key to Daddy's workshop. Before I could grab the thing, however, she shut it in her fist. "First we have to eat a mint."

"No thank you, dear. Give me the key."

"Don't worry, Esme. The Dragon Hornets won't be back. This time we'll just float around."

I laughed at that.

The cups and saucers froze on their stalks.

Estrella opened the door, and raced inside. Sam and I followed.

“Gosh,” Sam said, spinning in circles as he looked around the place. Electrical wires spanned the room, looping doorknobs and curtain rods before diving frayed-head first into a cloudy pickle jar; a jar which, upon closer inspection, contained a pickled fetus. “That’s not fair,” Sam said, because we didn’t have electric in the house.

On the shelves, medical books flopped open beside *Ridley’s Work on Herbs*. Honeysuckle shared a dish with mouse droppings. Mason jars were home to “Female Complaints”, “Venereal Warts”, and “Diarrhea”.

I must warn you not to confuse Dr. Pierce and his nasal douches with what my father was doing. Daddy truly believed in better living through medicine. He bought Sheepsfold for Friar Garden after he learned it was the only place in the world where Hogswallow grew. Mum had yet to come down with the sore joints that would send her to bed screaming, but Daddy was sure he could cure Estrella. He sold his remedies to fund his work, choosing the name *Brother Paul* after discovering that medicines like *Fast Back-Fixer* failed to pull in the business.

Daddy didn’t care about Brother Paul and his interests ran well beyond the normal ailments Dr. Pierce targeted. My father sold something called *Blessed Peace of Mind*, a concoction of Solomon’s Seal and prune juice that, when taken twice daily for a week, could help a man make difficult decisions. The only thing phony about *Peace of Mind* from Daddy’s point of view was the “blessed” part. His most popular nostrum that year was a pill that made your nose bleed if your lover was being untrue.

“Look up,” Estrella said.

We looked up at the rafters two stories above. A ratty cobweb waved at us.

“I wrote my name by that nest up there.”

She pointed.

We squinted.

“That could be an ‘E,’” Sam allowed.

“Or bird doot,” I said.

Estrella held out the mints. “Float up and see for yourself.”

It was impossible, of course. The ceiling was ridiculously high. Still.

This time around, I took the green and Sam took the pink, but when we stuck out our tongues afterward, I was still the green one.

“I don’t seem to be floating,” I told Estrella.

“You have to wait for the blackbirds.”

Then it started.

“Wheee!” Estrella cried. At first, I only saw her pink toes wiggling as they lifted off the floor. Her arms were out, but dangling at the elbows, and a long curl of hair was sticking up off the top of her head. She smiled like an angel as she went. I held up my arms and waited.

Nothing happened.

“Ow!” Sam hissed, but he was going up too, and now I could see why. Two birds clipped him like clothespins, pinching separate tufts of hair on opposite sides of his head. I should have died laughing if I weren’t so horrified. Another bird swooped in and pecked up a shoulder seam. Still another went for the seat of his britches. Bottom out, Sam rose and rose, whisked heavenward by his horns.

“I don’t like this,” Sam said.

“Make it stop, Estrella!” I demanded. I grabbed for Sam’s foot as he swung by but he was already beyond my reach.

“Relax,” Estrella said. By now, the birds had made a maypole of her head, circling with ribbons of hair. A bird fluttered up the bell of her dress and bit down on one of the beads Estrella wore around her ankle. It flew aloft, anklet in beak, drawing her foot up as it went.

You’ve never seen such grace.

Birds gathered at her elbows, her buttons, a bow at her waist, and here’s the strangest part of all: Every blackbird was white.

“Close your eyes, Mister Samuel, and hold out your hand.”

Sam was still kicking but he did as she said. Damned if his birds didn’t fly over to Estrella’s birds and deliver his hand to hers. “Don’t be afraid,” she said.

The birds seemed too busy to bother about me and I wasn’t completely sorry. “Does it hurt?” I asked, wanting to hear that it did.

“I’m okay,” Sam said.

“We need more birds,” Estrella called down. “I’ll eat another mint.”

I was never one to miss out but I might have been willing this time had there not been so much laughter going on up there. In Sam’s effort to hold on to Estrella, he’d scratched her arm and yanked the buttons off her sleeve, sending them raining down on my head. The way those

two carried on, you'd think they'd never seen anything so funny as buttons bouncing off my face.

Estrella ate another mint and the birds came for me at last, appearing as if such creatures could squeeze up through floorboards or rise from a petri dish - albino blackbirds with gold rings around their eyes and jaws as strong as hedge-clippers.

To properly picture this, you need to know that my sister had been born with hair like no other. Mermaid hair that yielded gifts from within like lost paperclips or pebbles that glitter when you hold them in the sun. Fig Newtons had been known to pile up in there. Once, she shook her head and a little brown toad tumbled out. Sometimes Estrella's tresses seemed to writhe of their own accord, like octopi, and it was a known fact that certain pale strands were green all summer long and turned pumpkin orange in November.

I do not have mermaid hair. It is not green or orange. It holds no hidden treasure. Should birds decide to pluck at it, there's every chance I'd go bald. I mention this to show what a brave soul I am.

Fortunately, I was bound upward by a cuff, an apron string, and both of my boot laces. It could not have been pretty, but I got to keep my hair. There was no enjoying the ride up, however, until Estrella and Sam each grabbed a wrist and drew me into the circle.

"Look!" Estrella said, jerking her head at the doves nest. "I told you I wrote my name up here."

Estrella had written more than her name.

ESTRELAH CALOWPEE JUN BUG PADOORAH LUVS MESTER SAMULE

"She doesn't know what she's saying," Sam reminded me later when we were doing the chimneys. The Franciscan order had left behind an aviary and this was where we did the job. We'd pluck a dirty lamp from the seed hopper, give it a quick scouring, and leave it on a nest box to dry.

"You better be careful, Sam." I'd seen his ears when he read my sister's misspelled declaration. "You're flattered that she likes you."

"Don't be stupid." He reached in the neck of a chimney, grunting as he scrubbed.

"She doesn't call you *Bastard Boy* like all of the other kids do so maybe you like her too?"

Some towns, I should think, have plenty of bastards to go around but Wilt had only one and Sam was it. Poor Sam. Everyone liked him perfectly fine until word got out that he had no father. God as my witness, if there had been an easier way to make friends, I should never have whispered the truth to a big mouth like Ralph Smallwood.

“Go to Hell,” Sam said. He had a smudge on his nose, but I didn’t tell him that. Let him walk around all day with a dirty nose. It would serve him right for dropping buttons on my head!

The reason Sam loathed the chimneys was this: He hated how people would walk out of a room and leave a lamp burning, the insides growing scorched and black for no practical purpose. The mess was worth it, Sam said, if you were burning it to see. Otherwise, you were just dirtying things up for nothing.

I thought of Sam twirling through the rafters with Estrella and I worried he was going to burn up all for nothing.

“Where do you get the Jilly Jallys?” I asked my sister after I’d washed my hands of Sam for the day. Estrella was swinging on the garden swing and I was pushing. Sam had stalked off to his room to paint.

It was Sam’s dream to go to art school someday. He had a tray of *Winsor and Newton* tubes and four sable brushes and that was all, so he painted the walls in his room over and over again. The belvedere was his Sistine Chapel. As I pushed Estrella high into the cherry leaves, I pictured Sam painting knives in my eyes across the dome of his Sistine Chapel.

“Come on. I’ll show you,” Estrella said, kicking the branches and leaping off. Pink blooms settled in her hair. A startled butterfly emerged on sulfur wings.

Estrella skipped all the way to *Froggedale*, which is what we called her room. She collected every kind of frog there is; carved frogs, stuffed animal frogs, porcelain frogs. I had to step on frogs to get to her bed. At that particular moment, the night table was peppered with Jilly Jally Butter mints. They rolled under the frog lamp. They spilled on the frog rug. “All I have to do is ask for them when I say my prayers and I wake up with more on my table,” she said.

I reached out my hand to take one. “Not now, Esme,” Estrella said. “It isn’t proper without Mister Samuel.”

We ate an awful lot of mints that summer and yet, my memories crack like a broken mirror whenever I try to get a peek at them. Only fractured pieces remain. Often, I would come into myself with grass in my hair or my feet scratched up, and I wouldn't remember where the scratches came from. Though only a single hour may have passed, I would be left with broken shards instead of whole memories: a cricket crawling across my forehead, a talon on my arm, my face under water. There were more odd creatures too but sometimes only the look in their beady eyes stayed clear in my head. Once, I thought I remembered feeling Sam's tongue in my mouth. He tasted like pears. When I woke up the next morning, there was an empty bottle of perry by my bed. "Did you kiss me yesterday?" I asked Sam.

"I'd remember that," he said.

I don't know how many times I turned those words around, poking at them like puzzle pieces you don't know what to do with.

When school started, we were jittery, distracted students. People still called Sam *Bastard Boy*, but this year a lot of girls were starting to look sorry for him. Estrella was sent off to *Miss Litton's School for Educable Morons* to learn how to keep out of the workhouse. We missed her more than I can say. Sometimes we tried praying for butter mints but they never showed up. In October, we turned fifteen.

That same month, Daddy enjoyed a kind of hero-status around town after coming up with a brew of cotton lavender for Constable Langtry who nearly died from a spider bite. *Serpent's Bane*, Mr. Carey was calling it, and it was flying off the shelves. For all Daddy's efforts though, my mother stayed in her sickroom, growing no better or worse. "Give me another cup of my elixir," she would say, her pupils big as Black Beauty marbles. Looking at her was like looking into a pit. I didn't know my mum anymore and she didn't know me. Worst of all, she didn't seem to care. I cared but, whenever I got to thinking about it too much, I made Sam go steal a Dairy Milk with me or set a bush on fire.

Shortly before Estrella was due back, I went up to Sam's room and saw the mermaid on his wall. At the time, he was in the corner painting a pool of yellow blood around a crushed beetle, but I didn't give two cents about the blood. I was jealous of Sam's mermaid.

If you'd seen it, this might not sound half so silly as it does when you write it down. It was different than Sam's other stuff. All of his best work was grim. Persians flung themselves on Spartan spathas around his sagging bookshelves. Redtail hawks devoured snakes on his floor.

Persians flung themselves on Spartan spathas around his sagging bookshelves. Redtail hawks devoured snakes on his floor. His specialty was bloody teeth.

His specialty was bloody teeth. The mermaid swam amid the carnage, her pale flesh glistening with droplets that sparkled like Lady's Mantle pip. There was a secret concealed in her right hand too. It was amazing work. A green tail rippled across two walls. Rainbow hair fanned the dome. Two wet lips blew a kiss at his pillow, aiming for the empty imprint left by

his big head. This was his Mona Lisa. His Hamlet. His Ninth Symphony!

"You pig," I said. "You've painted Estrella."

"Look closer."

"I am looking, you pig."

Sam sighed. "Remember when I asked if I could paint you?"

"Don't change the subject." I had tried letting Sam paint me once but it was just too miserably dull. He got mad because I wouldn't sit still and I got mad because he got mad. That's usually how it worked with us. I shouldn't have cared who he painted on his walls but it was hard to see my sister wiggling her tail across his bedroom when I was used to having Sam all to myself.

"I'd paint you if you'd let me," he said.

"Did Estrella *let* you?" I growled.

"No, but Sara Moody did."

"Sara Moody?" I took a closer look. "I should have recognized that bosom."

"It is nice," Sam said, looking up at Sara's bosom.

"You're in love with Sara Moody now?"

"She let me kiss her."

"So you had to paint her big as the sky all over your ceiling?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. It was fun."

"What's in her hand?"

“She brought me a periwinkle from Birkenhead. They went there on holiday.”

“The last I knew, she was still calling you *Bastard Boy*.”

He dabbed blood on a mandible. “Well she likes me now.”

I sat on his bed. My eyes teared up. Sam looked at me like I was crazier than Estrella. He rubbed his eyebrow. He rubbed his chin. His ears lit up. “There,” he said, stabbing at my nose with his paintbrush, marking me with a stripe of *Cadmium Lemon*.

“What are you doing?”

“Painting you.” He ran his wet brush across my cheek.

I jumped away.

“Sit still,” he said, pressing down on my shoulder hard enough to hurt. The tip of his tongue glided over his lip as he painted ticklish strokes around my mouth. He leaned back to observe the results.

“Beautiful,” Sam said. He gave me a quick kiss.

Except for maybe, possibly, the time we mixed our mints with perry, Sam had never kissed me before.

“What about Sara Moody?”

His smile was smeared with my mouth paint. “I like her a lot.”

“Pig.”

“I like you better. We’re not kids anymore, Esme.”

“We aren’t?”

His ears were really fired up now. “When I asked if I could paint you, I had this whole big plan, but you wouldn’t sit still. I thought I’d never figure out a way to kiss you, so I gave up. Then Sara started writing me notes on her Emily Dickinson stationary.”

“Emily Dickinson?”

“*My river runs to thee*. That’s what it said. Anyway, I thought maybe I’d kiss her instead.”

“You gave up that easily?”

“Does your river run to me?”

“Sara’s brain is the size of a pea.”

“Do you want to kiss me or not, Esme?”

I rubbed the lemon off his lips. “Let’s see.” I kissed him. “It’s very weird.” I tried again. “It feels funny.” One more time...

This was a long one.

“I want you to do something for me before we go any farther, Sam.”

“Name it,” he said.

“Paint my head on that mermaid.”

“Okay.”

“Leave the bosom. It’ll give me something to strive for.”

That’s how Sam and I started kissing. I loved him more than anything. I always had. Kissing him was weird, funny, and wonderful. By the time Estrella came home, we were doing it a lot and she had to throw more sparkles on us to get a moment of our attention.

The next time I ate a mint, I was surprised to realize how much smaller it looked in my hand. Beneath its melty minty taste, there was a slight flavor of turned cream that I’d never noticed before. Had the mints changed over the last year? Or was it my tongue? I thought of all the wonderful daydreams I’d been having about dragon hornets and tried to swallow the bitterness away.

We were sitting in the honeyberries behind the barn. Inside the barn was an empty bridle hook and an unused tin of saddle soap. I found myself wondering if Estrella even remembered about that saddle soap. Or what happened the day Daddy let her ride her new pony to town.

“Be gentle with the Mama Mias,” Estrella instructed. “They hurt easily.”

“What are Mama Mias?” we asked.

“They’re Italian.”

Something touched my ankle and I laughed because I thought it was Sam. A vine, red as my burn, began slithering up my shin.

“Mama Mia!” Estrella exclaimed, petting my vine. A red shoot wrapped around Sam’s leg too and he tried to kick it off. Estrella put her hand on his knee. “Don’t fight it, Mister Samuel. It feels good.”

Vines were slinking up my skirt, around my waist, and under my arms, to tickle me. My instinct was to fight them but they moved so sinuously, I quickly lost the will. An hour passed. I remember nothing but the caress of those vines. They stroked shyly. Cleverly. Like human fingers. They covered my eyes with leaves. I lost track of Sam and my sister, but I could hear them murmuring to the vines.

Later, I stumbled from the Mama Mia’s, dizzy and on fire. This was not like the dragon hornets at all. I wanted to be fourteen again, staring into a jar with my mouth dropped open. But I was not fourteen.

“Come here,” Sam said, appearing suddenly, one vine still twisting around his foot. He shook it free, pulled me into the barn, and kicked the door shut. Usually he was a nervous kisser, working away at my

mouth until the inside was raw for days after, torn up from our teeth. After the vines, he groped me blindly, kissing everywhere. I couldn't see him in the hot black barn, but I could feel him. Somewhere, a horse snorted. Or maybe that was Sam.

Estrella knocked on the door. "I want to come in too!"

Sam froze for a moment.

"Forget her," I said. We hit one wall, and then another, rattling the soap tin to the ground. I bumped my head on something sharp and Sam kissed the spot as if he knew exactly where I hurt. He breathed my name. *Esme*. I held on tight.

Knock. Knock.

"Don't let her in," I said as I undid his buckle.

"Open up!" a man's voice ordered.

"We were looking for the potato riddle," I told my father.

"Well leave the door open next time."

I smiled because I thought I was off the hook.

Daddy jerked me by the arm. "Don't make me fire his mother, *Esme*. Mum needs her too badly."

And, as he stormed away: "I'll expect mashers for supper tonight."

We were done with the mints. We both agreed. If Daddy saw us together for any reason at all, he scowled until we each went to opposite sides of Wilt. The vines had made us lose our heads. Sam and I were a lot of things but we weren't *that* crazy.

"Maybe next summer," I said, with respect to going crazy.

"Or this winter," Sam said.

"But not now," I told him.

"No, not now," Sam agreed. "Maybe in July."

Sad to say; Once you've experienced the *Mama Mia's*, you can't un-experience them.

Estrella followed like a puppy everywhere we went. "Shall we have the *Jilly Jallys* now?" she always asked. We always said no but some days were harder than others.

One day she followed us into Five Choirs Vineyard where ancient grapevines soldiered on amid wild bands of rabbits and weeds. Sam picked a black Barbera and wiped it clean on his shirt. "Eat these instead, *Estrella*. They're better for you." She ate right from his fingers and licked the juice off his thumb.

“Mister Samuel is yummy,” Estrella said. “You should taste him, Esme.”

Sam held a grape to my lips. “Taste me, Esme.”

The grape was a mix of flavors. Licorice. Plums. Sam. “Delicious,” I said.

“He’d go well with a mint,” my sister pointed out.

“Let’s do it,” said Sam. “We could use a little fun.”

“No,” I insisted. Someone had to be strong. It had been eight days since Daddy caught us in the barn.

“Maybe Sam and I will have one then?” Estrella proposed, and she wasn’t even being tricky.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “Just because you’re a party pooper, that doesn’t mean we have to miss out.”

All winter, we had longed for Estrella to return and liven up our lives. We’d dreamt of the mints. Now I edged up to the boy with the delicious fingers and said: “Don’t you dare, Sam Bell.”

Before Daddy found out that the nurse he’d hired was bringing along her bastard, the belvedere on the roof was just an open look-out. To make it habitable, he’d put rippled cylinder glass into the windows and cleaned out the dead leaves. Sam could see to Christ’s Cross if he squinted hard enough. Best of all, his floor was my ceiling and he could stomp messages to me. I had to climb up on Grammy Fogg’s old chain-stitcher and use my church shoe in order to reply, but it worked. Six stomps meant, “I’m bored.” Four meant, “Come quickly.”

The night after the grapes, I was asleep in bed when I heard: Stomp. Stomp. Stomp. Stomp.

I wasn’t to visit Sam’s room anymore, but the clock read two a.m. so I decided to risk it. Up the rickety ladder I crept; creak creak creak. Through the creaky door.

Sam ran at me.

My feet left the floor as he twirled me around, giving me a deep kiss. “I can’t sleep,” he said.

Moonbeams filtered through Daddy’s cheap panes, smearing the room like a watercolor. The stiff-spined Spartan on the wall melted into a peaceful Athenian and his sword became a lyre.

“Look what I’ve got,” Sam said, opening his hand.

You might well guess what was in there.

“Did you pray for them?” I asked.

Sam laughed. "Sure I did. Then I reached in Estrella's pocket and grabbed some."

In the old days, I might have appreciated his ingenuity more, but the mints scared me. "I think you ought to toss them out the window this instant."

"No way," Sam said crossly. He sat on the bed and popped one in his mouth. "If you don't want yours, I'll eat them both."

"No!" Good heavens. "When Estrella ate two, we got double the birds." I raised the candy to my mouth. "What if it goes badly without *her*?"

"We're in my room. It's safe enough."

I doubted that. I ate mine anyway. "Estrella always seems to know what's coming," I said.

"I know what's coming," Sam said, and he gave me another kiss. "Wasn't that nice?"

It was. We did it some more.

"The mints aren't working," I said.

Sam kissed my neck while I looked for white blackbirds.

"I don't feel anything. Do you feel anything?"

His lips paused on my throat. "I feel a little something."

I smacked him. "I mean the mints."

Sam touched the button on my nightgown and looked into my eyes.

"In case you didn't know it: I love you, Esme."

Hm. Actually I didn't know it. He'd never said so before.

"Do you think we'll get married?" he asked.

"Mints have a funny effect on you."

"It's not the mints," he said. Then he knocked me on the floor.

At first, I only heard the swoosh of the Spartan's sword. Previously that sword had been stuck in an Athenian helmet. Now it dripped blood and brains as it hacked the wardrobe trunk in half. But for that last minute shove from Sam, the sword would have chopped off my head rather than the pineapple on his bedpost.

"Under here," Sam called, pulling me beneath the bed. But there were other evils down there.

A stampede of miniature elephants was taking place across the floorboards. To avoid the little buggers, I had to squeeze up next to a corpse with really nice bloody teeth. Meantime, the spatha was decimating the rest of the room. Flat on our bellies beside the dust

bunnies and the corpse, I completely lost my temper, “You should paint nicer things, Sam.”

“I didn’t know!”

“You should never have taken those mints from Estrella.”

The elephants hurt, even if they were small, and I couldn’t quite get away from them. They pounded across my shoulder blades, trampling over each other and landing on their tusks. Just when I thought I couldn’t take one more horn in my flesh, a voice spoke to us from beyond the mattress.

“Climb on my tail,” it said. Shiny green hair reached under the bed and scooped us up like a giant hand.

“Return to your homes, you beasts,” the mermaid said, and amazingly, the “beasts” obeyed.

Clinging to her paint-chip scales, we shuddered with relief. One heartbeat later, the room was still.

“Be good,” she said, setting us on the bed and swimming back up to the ceiling.

“Help me, Esme!” Sam said, grabbing a paintbrush and turning the Spartan’s face into a messy Cobalt splotch. “Get the beetle.”

But I was staring at the mermaid. “I knew it,” I said. “It’s Estrella.”

Learn! Learn! Learn! I told myself. The mints were bad news! If our run-in with those paintings was not lesson enough, Sam and I had a huge fight afterward.

“Why do you see Estrella’s face instead of your own?” Sam shouted at me.

“Why don’t you see Estrella’s face?” I’d shouted back.

He’d painted the mermaid’s eyes green and given her big ears but that didn’t make the mermaid me.

“You know what you are, Esme? A jealous, black-hearted ball-licker.”

“Sometimes I could really kill you, Sam.”

He rammed my face against the shaving mirror. “Stick out your tongue.”

“No.”

The elephants hurt, even if they were small, and I couldn’t quite get away from them. They pounded across my shoulder blades, trampling over each other and landing on their tusks.

He squeezed my cheeks until I tasted mirror. "Green," he said.
"Always green."

"It's the Jilly Jallys."

"Is it?"

"You sleep with Estrella over your bed!"

"Go away," Sam said, pointing at the door. "I don't want to marry you anymore."

"Good!"

"Great!"

Without saying so, we decided never to speak to one another again.

"Tell Sam those chimneys better be done by noon or, I swear, I'll skin him alive," Miss Judith said.

It had been four days. It had been forever. I was tempted to tell Miss Judith that I couldn't tell Sam anything because we were never going to speak again. I was also tempted to keep her threat to myself and let her skin him alive. For a whole ten seconds, I considered doing the chimneys for him. Where was he these days anyway? Except for the mermaid swimming around in blue blotches, his room was utterly empty. He was not in the barn, the privy, or cleaning the chimneys. He was not floating around the workshop.

That left the garden.

Two sets of footprints led me to the vineyard. Maybe it was only the whoosh of moon daisies whipping past my knees, but I thought I heard a ghostly friar warning me to turn back. Then the vines started to giggle. "Mister Samuel is yummy," they said. I peeked through the grape leaves and there they were, my sister and Sam.

He was on his back with his shirt flung open, lying on a bed of pincushion flowers. The tip of his tongue was pinker than the pincushions. Estrella was on her knees beside him. "Mmm," my sister said. She touched her wiggling tongue to his nipple. "Yummy yummy yummy."

To what degree Sam was yummy; I did not wait and see. Fiery tears poured down my cheeks as I tore through the garden. Daisy petals flew in my wake; *He loves me. He loves me not...* "I warned you," the friar said.

It was all ruined now. Sam Bell, the only thing I loved, had been eating mints without me.

He wrapped the dragon hornets in Christmas paper and left them on my bed.

I gave them back.

He followed me into the privy.

I slammed the door in his face.

He slid a note in my lap at breakfast.

I burned it unread.

“Talk to me,” he begged and begged. “I miss you, Esme. I need you!”

I was a cyclone of fury, whipping around the house. Try as I might, I could not stop blowing. Sam had to physically pin me up against the barn one day, and even then, I continued to roar. “I saw you in the vineyard with Estrella!” I cried, my voice a Herculean wind.

He dropped my wrists, he was so surprised. He thought I hated him because of the elephants.

“What did you see?”

“As if you don’t know!” I sneered, wanting him to think the worst.

“I don’t know, Esme.” He slumped in the honeyberries and threw his head against the wall. “I can’t remember anything.”

“Anything?” I asked skeptically.

He rubbed his eyes. “There are bits and pieces, of course. There always is. We ate some grapes. Estrella tied flowers in my hair.”

“You remember more than that because you look scared out of your wits.”

“I don’t know what I did with her, Esme. That’s the truth. There were grape juice stains all over my stomach afterward but that doesn’t mean I touched her.” He held up a palm inked with honeyberry guts to make his point. I smacked his hand away.

“You stupid pig,” I said, slumping down beside him.

“You know how it is with the mints, Esme. You know!”

“That’s the worst part about it, Sam. You know how it is too, yet you ate one with her anyway.”

He stroked my arm with a shaky blue fingertip. “Can you ever forgive me?”

I was no better at forgiving than I was at sharing. I pulled my arm away.

When you have a moron for a sister, your father has to like her better and give her a horse whether she deserves one or not, but the sneaky

boy you're in love with should not give her anything. Maybe not even friendship. I had to know the truth, one way or another so I went to Estrella.

"He touched my heart," she told me cupping one hand over her breast.

"I'll bet he did."

Things were growing more wretched by the day. Mum was drinking her "elixir" every chance she got. Estrella was wishing for more mints than she could use. Sam and I couldn't look at each other. The garden teemed with fruit and butterflies but in my mind, the peaches all became Sam's skin and the Wood Nymphs were Estrella's tongue.

Most days, Sam hid in the belvedere, stomping out messages that I ignored. Some days, I saw them together. Once, he laced her boots for her. Another time, she helped him do the chimneys.

I gave him the cold shoulder for weeks. Months. It was easy when I saw him kneeling at her feet. I read books instead of kissing Sam. I even read to Mum. I'd think of Estrella in the aviary wiping his smudges with her hair, and my soul would wither all the more. Share my beloved Sam with Estrella? Never! I'd rather not have him at all.

One thought kept running through my head. *If only there was some way to get to the bottom of what really happened that day in the vineyard.*

Then, one morning when school was about to begin, Estrella floated into my room on tiptoe and woke me with a kiss. She stretched and yawned, the buttons on her nightgown straining to reveal little pink ovals of flesh sticking out in between. I ran my hand over her belly. It was hard and small and a little bit round. "Tummy doesn't feel good," she said.

"What's in there, Estrella?"

She poked her bellybutton with her index finger. "Gas bubbles that won't pop."

Sure, it looked like an ordinary case of gas, and yet I felt betrayed. When I thought of what else it might be, the feral patter of something cold and dark crept into my head.

For years I'd been curing Estrella's stomach aches with two spoonfuls of *Brother Paul's Amazing Miraculous Release* yet I didn't reach for miracles this time. Instead, I sat Estrella down on my quilt and gave her the velvet pouch of marbles that she so loved to dig through.

While Cat Eyes and Aggies clinked together in her hands, I thought about that stupid vow the three of us had made in the garden over mints.

It seemed a long time ago to me now and yet, some things remained unchanged. Sam, the dirty little louse, had made no progress at all. Lord knows, he was as sneaky as ever. Estrella was still bringing gas bubbles on too. I was the only one who to make a proper attempt at improving myself. I'd tried sharing Sam with Estrella and look where it got me.

"Thank you for sharing," Estrella said. She poured the marbles out onto her aproned lap and ran her fingers through them. "You never let me play with your things."

All right. So maybe I was still as selfish as ever. Maybe I only let Estrella come around when it suited my purpose to do so. The three of us were equally pathetic, I decided. No wonder the magic disappeared. I gave myself a hard rap on the head for not trying harder.

Estrella scooped a shiny Oxblood from the pile and held it to her eye. "Pretty!" she said. Quick as that, she popped it into her mouth, hiding it from me on the right side of her jaw.

"Stupid vows," I said out loud. "Who needs magic anyway?"

I led her into the kitchen where my father was reading his Dailey Reporter and Sam's mum was cooking our breakfast. I took his hand off the newspaper and put it on Estrella's stomach. "We should have this checked," I said innocently, fully aware of how bloated Estrella's stomach could get.

My father was not a calm man but he looked into my sister's eyes and blinked ten times and spoke as kindly as I'd ever heard him speak. "Has a man come into your life, Estrella?"

"Oh yes," she said, thrilled as can be.

Daddy took a very deep breath but still he was calm and kind. "Who is he, June bug?"

My sister grinned and clapped her hands. "Mister Samuel," she said.

Daddy slammed his fist down on the table and made the dishes dance. "Fetch me Dr. Clumpette!" he roared.

After that, things happened in a Jilly Jally way. Sam's mum burned herself on the frying pan and I felt the pain in my own knuckle and sucked on it to cool it.

It wouldn't cool.

To look at him, you'd think someone had smashed my father with a mallet. "Did he hurt you?" he whispered.

Estrella tapped her finger against her lip as if she were trying to remember. “One time he pulled off all my buttons but it only bled a little.”

The dishes did another dance.

“Bring the constable, Esme.”

Like buttons showering on my face, the magnitude of what I’d done hit me all at once. A year before, there was a man in Wilt accused of raping a girl. He “beat himself to death” in his cell with a baton. At the time, Constable Langtry had called it an unfortunate but inevitable outcome, given the circumstances.

I climbed on top of the chain-stitcher and pounded my church shoe against the ceiling. I wasn’t at all sure if he would come, but he did. “He’s sending me for the Constable, Sam. You have to run away.”

“The Constable?”

I licked my lips and grit my teeth, waiting for the strap. My strap. His strap. “I’m sorry,” I said.

Without a word, a nod, or a scratch of the arse, Sam Bell pulled something from his pocket and put it into mine.

Then he ran.

Twenty minutes later, Constable Langtry creaked up the stairs holding his baton. “You might want to see this,” he called down, and we all hurried up the ladder to join him in Sam’s room.

That the bedpost was still pineapple-less did not surprise me in the least, nor did the crack in the trunk. What hurt my heart were the blotched walls of the once glorious Sistine Chapel.

Langtry wore a big handlebar mustache that drooped in a permanent frown. He pointed his stick at the ceiling and frowned. “He painted her picture over his bed.”

“Look closer,” I said. “That’s me up there.”

Imagine that. In the end, I was the only one who could see my face on Sam Bell’s ceiling. Maybe this was because I wanted it to be my face. Or maybe this was because it was mine all along.

You can’t diddle a girl who has the brain of an eight year old. That’s what Langtry told my father. Estrella was not responsible. Regardless of what happened, my father must press charges.

Watching his furry frown twitch with indignation, I felt certain Langtry wouldn’t give a rip about the mysterious powers of Jilly Jally Butter Mints, nor would he care that it was my sister who fed them to

us in the first place. At any rate, the constable assured my father, it was no bother to hunt the boy down. “After all,” Langtry said. “I owe you my life.”

As the constable set off sniffing after Sam, Dr. Clumpette rode up on his mare.

I took my sister to her room. “The doctor wants to have a look at you,” I told her, helping her into bed. I gave her Greenie Frog to hug and she drank down two teaspoons of *Miraculous Release* and smiled a milky smile.

When the doctor was done, he called my father back into the room. “This girl is innocent as the day she was born. There are no signs of violation.”

“What?” my father said.

“Pop!” Estrella said.

At that same moment, a gun fired. Twice. We ran to the window just in time to see the constable dragging Sam from the garden. Red leaves covered his dirty clothes and one looked bigger and redder than the rest. I cranked open the window. The big leaf was blood.

Instead of seeing Sam lying on the ground, I saw broken banks and dolls with faces cracked by a foolish girl’s tantrums. I shook my head hard and it was only then that I saw the boy I loved again. As I watched, the constable bent down to wipe something off Sam’s cheek with the tip of his glove. He blew on it and it spiraled away, drifting skyward in a whirlwind of sparkles. Then it disappeared.

“There now,” my sister said, knocking over a bottle of Moxie on the table. “My gas bubbles are all gone.”

I slid my hand into my apron pocket, expecting to discover Dragon Hornets, but finding a hole instead.

* * *

Busy keeping house and raising a family, Carole Lanham (horrorhomemaker.com) originally began publishing short stories between diaper-changes and making cookies. Recently, she set aside the Desitin and her spatula to write full-time. At long last, her chewy, half-baked tales of terror can be told. You can find her most recent work in Fantasy Magazine, Apex Magazine, On the Premises, History is Dead, Tales of Moreauvia, and the upcoming anthology The World is Dead (with fellow Thoughtcrime author Mark Onspaugh). Carole lives in the St. Louis area with her family and an enormous collection of aprons.



*“Robot v. Ninjas”
art by Marc Scheff (www.dangermarc.com)*

Appendix A: How To Do This And Why

by Leonard Richardson

Like the best science, *Thoughtcrime Experiments* was born of hubris and a desire to show them all. As a writer, I was aggravated at the existing SF markets, for the usual writer's reasons. As a reader, I appreciate that markets exist to separate the good stuff from the bad, but a market runs on the taste of its editors. Sumana and I felt that our tastes weren't being represented.

In December of 2008 I began to daydream about an ideal market for short speculative fiction. It would pay reasonable rates, it would publish online to reduce overhead, it would liberate stories with a Creative Commons license that allowed for derivative works. Most of all, it would publish only stories that *I* thought were great. I realized that 1) there was no reason I couldn't do this, and 2) even in my daydream I was implicitly the one doing it, because how else is the editor supposed to know what I think is great?

Old science fiction sometimes handwaves society's problems away to get to the plot. "Everyone realizes" that pollution is killing the planet or "everyone decides" to move to Social Credit. In real life this strategy will not solve society's collective action problems, but when there are only one or two people involved, it works great. I told Sumana about the plan, and she liked it, and we did it.

This appendix shows how we did it. It was not difficult but it did take a lot of time spread over four months. I write this appendix in the spirit of the old *Whole Earth Catalog*, in the hopes of inspiring other people to put in some time and money and produce their own anthologies of the fiction that tickles their fancy. We also hope that we have interesting data to present about the state of the market.

The Gathering

I initially described this idea as a "one-shot webzine". Sumana pointed out that such things are called "anthologies". We were making

an anthology!

The first step was to put up a web page with a teaser cover and submission guidelines. We registered a Gmail account and told prospective authors to send their stories to the Gmail address. We said that we preferred plain text, but that any format was fine.

We offered 200 USD for first electronic rights and the rights to distribute a story under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Sharealike license. We asked for no reprints or simultaneous submissions. We promised a kill fee of \$75 in case we bought a story and for whatever reason weren't able to deliver the anthology. We said that we preferred stories that had been rejected multiple times; this was to test the oversupply hypothesis (see below).

Announcing the anthology

After putting up the web page with the guidelines we announced the anthology to online market lists and other places authors find out about anthologies. Over the time we were open to submissions, we sent out about forty announcements to writing groups and market lists.

The two most useful market lists are [Ralan's Webstravaganza](http://www.ralan.com) (www.ralan.com) and the [specficmarkets community](http://community.livejournal.com/specficmarkets/) on LiveJournal (community.livejournal.com/specficmarkets/). When we submitted to one of these market lists, we got a surge in submissions the next day. You should announce your anthology in these two places and also on [Duotrope's Digest](http://duotrope.com) (duotrope.com).

We wanted to get racial and gender diversity among the submitters (and, hopefully, the final authors). So Sumana searched for writers' groups for women and people of color, and sent them emails requesting submissions.

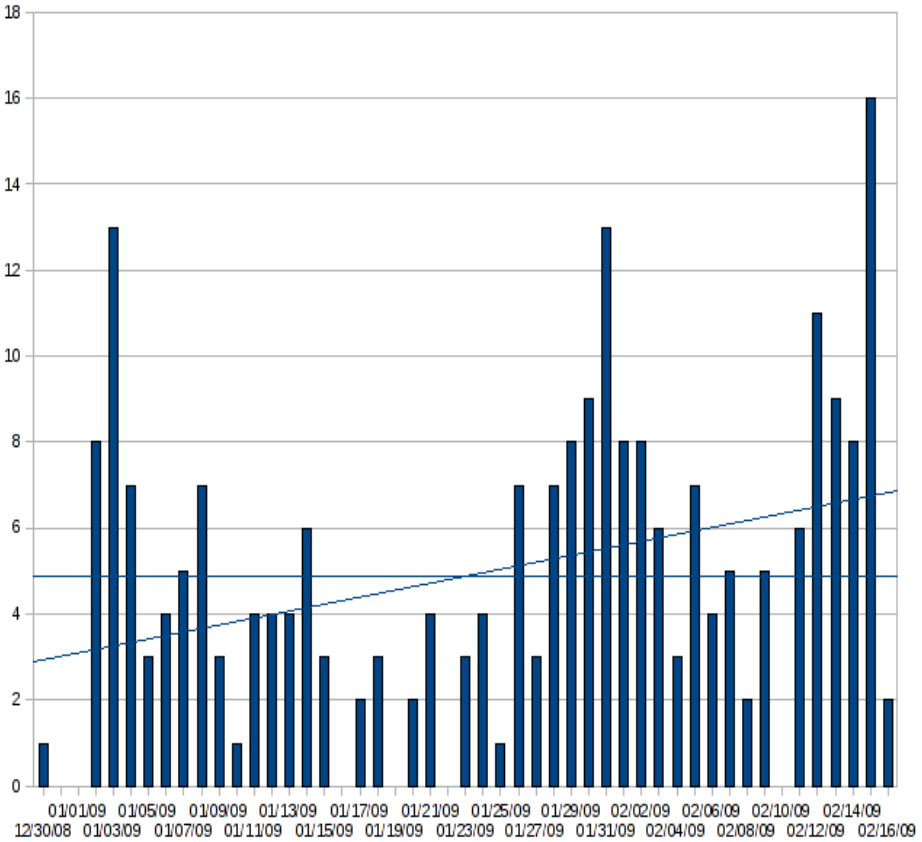
The original closing date for submissions was March 31st, "or until full". On February 1st, looking at the entries we'd received, we moved the deadline forward to February 15th. We originally intended to publish five stories. If you offer the rates we offer, you announce in the places we announced, and you're serious about only publishing five stories, I estimate you should keep submissions open for one month.

We changed the deadline on our site, and notified Ralan and similar sites, but some places (like SFWA) had publicized our initial request for submissions in paper or email newsletters, and didn't update their

readers when we changed the deadline. So we got a few straggler submissions in late February and March. Sumana told them we'd filled the anthology and they reacted okay.

The Submissions

We received 241 submissions between December 31, 2008 and February 16, 2009. Here's the graph of submissions over time. The mean submissions per day was 5.0 in January and 6.7 in February.



The spike right after January 1st came from ralan.com and the spike at the end of January came from specificmarkets. Of course, the busiest day was the last day we were open for submissions.

As stories came in, we read them. At first both Sumana and I read slush, but after it turned out we were duplicating effort, I stopped and Sumana took over. Here's Sumana's description of this process:

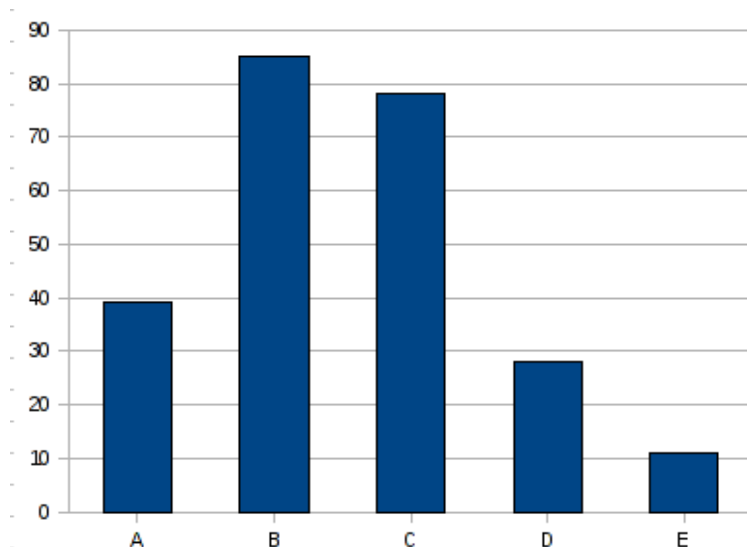
“To get a batch of stories I went into the Thoughtcrime Experiments Gmail account, downloaded all the stories that we hadn't yet read, and tagged that email with the 'unread' tag. These went into a folder called 'to-read'. Most of the stories were plain text, RTF, or Microsoft Word documents, so I could read and annotate them in TextEdit, a lightweight editor application on my Mac. Others were PDFs or OpenOffice documents, which I could also read fine. Only twice did I have to write back to an author and request another file format.

“I was doing a lot of traveling at the time, and with the stories on my laptop, I could read slush on the road, without needing a net connection. Sometimes a quick skim gave me enough data to reject a story, but I read most stories all the way through. Sometimes I added some notes in italics at the top of the story file about what I especially liked or had problems with.

“When I finished, I classified the story into one of five quality tiers. From A to E the tiers were 'God no,' 'no,' 'maybe,' 'pretty good,' and 'Oh my God we have to publish this WOW.' I put each story file into the A, B, C, D, or E subfolder of the 'read-already' folder on my hard drive.

“Once I had a net connection again, I went through my folders and opened up the Gmail account, looking at emails tagged 'unread'. I tagged the initial submission email with a Gmail tag indicating what tier the story fell into.”

In retrospect, we only needed three tiers (“no”, “yes”, “yes!”). But we didn't know how many good stories we would get! We thought we might have to make fine distinctions between “okay” and “pretty good.” And having five tiers made it possible to give you this cool-looking graph of how much we liked the incoming stories:



After tagging a story, Sumana either rejected it or flagged it for my attention. When she flagged a story, she also started a draft email telling me what she liked and didn't like about the story. This draft email was never sent, though its contents often became feedback that was sent. It was just a convenient way of attaching a conversation to a message in Gmail.

I read all the stories in tiers D and E, and some of the tier C stories. We discussed the stories by appending back-and-forth comments in the Gmail draft associated with the original submission email. We used “for Leonard” and “for Sumana” tags to send the “message” back and forth. We also had face-to-face conversations about the stories, which became more frequent and intense as we rejected better and better stories.

In this way, once the deadline had passed, we converged on a small set of twenty-four stories that we had a positive desire to publish—not “I could see this in a magazine” or “this could be great with some work” but “let's publish this.”

We tweaked the submission guidelines over time to affect the mix of stories we received. The main problem had to do with the title “Thoughtcrime Experiments”. To me, the phrase has a playfully sardonic, *Dr. Strangelove* sensibility. Many writers saw it quite differently. Mark Onspaugh (“Welcome to the Federation”) commented: “The title... seemed very dark and somber.” We received many depressing stories of Orwellian dystopias and forbidden medical

experiments. I now see why so many magazines nowadays explicitly request stories with a light tone, or at least not stories that are fricking depressing. I did the same, changing the guidelines near the end of January to ask for stories with a light tone. This seems to have worked.

I also added to the guidelines that I wanted to see more stories with space aliens, because space aliens are awesome. However, only two of the stories we're publishing include space aliens. By contrast, there are four fantasy stories in here (five, if you count "Single-Bit Error"), even though in the guidelines I said "it's not as likely I'll pay \$200 for a fantasy story." Go figure.

Although the guidelines said we were open to horror stories, in reality only one horror story got as far as tier C. It turns out we don't like horror.

Sending rejections

Sumana spent a lot of time—sixty to eighty hours—writing personalized rejection notices. Honestly, that's about ten times as much time as I would have spent. She got a lot of appreciation from authors for her trouble, and, when we requested them, many repeat submissions. Thirty people sent in more than one submission. Many second, third or fourth submissions made it to the final stage, but six of the stories in this anthology are the first and only story the author sent us. Only two were second submissions. (One author sent us two stories and we chose the first one.)

One useful side effect of this work is that I no longer take rejection notices at all personally.

Sumana describes the rejection process:

"I sent immediate rejections to stories in the bottom two tiers, and deleted those files from my laptop. After about a month of reading, we'd accumulated enough stuff in the top two tiers that Leonard and I decided to reject all the stories in the middle tier.

"When we received a story in the top two tiers, I sent a reply ASAP indicating that we had received the story, enjoyed it, and were putting it under strong consideration." [This was to stop the aggravating guessing game of 'are they really considering my story or have they not gotten to it yet?', which I dislike as a writer. -LR]

“When rejecting stories in the top three tiers, I sent a message saying ‘this didn’t quite make it, but do you have anything else?’ This was how we got multiple submissions.

“Rejection is touchy. Since I had the time, I tried to personalize rejections, always telling the author something I liked about the story, or explaining that we, for example, weren’t really into horror.

“Even personalized notes contain a lot of boilerplate. I recommend the ‘Canned responses’ feature of Gmail, currently available from the ‘Labs’ tab in the Gmail settings configuration. Here’s one base for a rejection letter:”

Thanks for submitting your story to Thoughtcrime Experiments. Though it is a strong piece, I’m sorry to say we’ve decided not to buy it. Best wishes for your future writing projects, though.

Regrets,
Sumana Harihareswara
Editor
Thoughtcrime Experiments

“In many rejections I said that, if the author asked, I could provide suggestions for improvement. About forty took me up on it, so (mostly after we’d chosen the finalists) I spent about forty hours writing critiques of rejected stories. Several authors were very grateful. In a few cases, I took a chance and gave some criticism in the initial rejection letter (like, ‘the plot needs a better payoff’).

“Either because we were a tiny fish in the pond, or because only net-savvy authors found us and wrote to us, or because I tried to be nice, I got only 1 jerky reply to a rejection.

“For about 10 stories, we asked the authors to consider revisions. Leonard and I discussed our suggestions for revision before emailing or telephoning the authors, and we gave a deadline for revisions that was a little past the regular submission deadline. Some of those stories made it into the anthology and some didn’t, but the authors seemed glad to discuss them with us even if we ultimately rejected the stories. In one or two cases miscommunication or a tardy reply meant that time ran out on our deadlines before the author could make a revision that she wanted to submit, but I think there were no hard feelings.”

Culling the Herd

Okay, so we got it down to twenty-four stories that we really liked. Now we had to get it down to five. Our first way of dealing with this was to increase the number of stories we planned to publish. We brought it up to the present nine. We thought that more than about ten stories would overwhelm today's flitting, web-based readers. With nine stories we could publish more of what we liked, while staying in single digits.

Up to this point the decisions were pretty easy. The only stories we'd had any difficulty rejecting were ones that were extremely well-written but flawed in a way the author couldn't promise to fix. But now we had to reject stories we loved and could have published. Sumana says: "I cried a little bit rejecting a story whose author had worked with us to edit and improve it."

Rather than gradually whittling away twenty-four to get to nine, we switched to the opposite approach. We wrote tables of contents trying to find sets of stories that worked well as a group. We tried to balance serious and funny stories, stories by women and by men, and (apparently) fantasy and science fiction stories.

Artwork

Unlike the stories, the artwork for this anthology was commissioned. We emailed artists we knew or that were recommended by friends, and offered \$100 for a full-page black-and-white illustration.

Although we approached many artists whose work we've enjoyed, we only got good results from artists with an explicit commission policy. Other people we contacted were too busy or never wrote back. The exceptions are Patrick Farley, who doesn't have a commission policy but who we know personally; and Tom Tomorrow, who responded to our unsolicited email, but whose price for a full-page illustration we couldn't meet.

We briefly considered asking the artists to illustrate the stories, but rejected this idea because it would have drastically slowed down the anthology. We would have had to commission the art after choosing

which stories to publish. Instead, we basically told each artist to draw something awesome.

This was probably too general a rule. Although each individual illustration is great, taken together they don't have the same variety as the stories we picked for the anthology. If we do another anthology, we'll work with the artists to ensure more variety. But giving the artists free rein meant that the art was ready before we'd chosen which stories to publish.

We also commissioned the five pieces of art before deciding to publish more than five stories. We'd like this anthology better if there was more art.

After Choosing

Once the stories were chosen we thought we were almost done, but it wasn't even close. First, we ran through this checklist for each story:

1. I sent out the contracts via email, asking for two signed copies via mail: one for me to keep, one to countersign and send back. I also asked for a short bio and list of publications. (I actually did this later, which was a sign that I wasn't thinking ahead. There's no reason not to do this up front.) See Appendix B for the contract we used.
2. As the contracts came in, I counter-signed and sent them back. (I also offered to do an informal contract over email instead of a paper contract, which three authors preferred.) I then paid the authors via PayPal.
3. Most of the stories needed revisions. Only three needed significant revisions. Once any revisions were done I did a line edit, using the OpenOffice Writer equivalent of Word's "Track Changes" feature. One story was submitted in plain text, and I sent revisions as a diff.
4. Sumana and I wrote introductions for each story, and edited the author bios.

Then it was time for one final push. I converted the revised stories to HTML and wrote a stylesheet for the anthology. I tried a number of ways of doing this. I ended up saving them as HTML from OpenOffice

Writer and then using regular expressions to simplify the HTML and replace non-ASCII characters with HTML entities.

It was tempting to save the files as Docbook files, which are very easy to convert to HTML, but I don't recommend it. OpenOffice's Docbook conversion stripped italics and other emphasis markers from the stories.

At this point, the nine HTML files became the master copies of the stories.

I put the HTML files online, along with the introductions and bios, and gave the authors one more chance to spot errors. I chose pull quotes for the stories: three pull quotes for the really long stories, two pull quotes for the others.

Sumana wrote the introduction, and I wrote (most of) this appendix.

Once the authors had a chance to look at their stories (finding many more errors), it was time to lay out the PDF and print-on-demand versions of the anthology. We futzed around with desktop publishing programs for a while, and then I decided they were a waste of time. I'd already done the layout with CSS, and OpenOffice Writer could import the HTML files with the layout intact. I had to spend a couple of hours tweaking things, but it was less time than we'd already spent trying to learn desktop publishing.

Budget

We paid \$200 for a story and \$100 for a piece of art. Thanks to print-on-demand and do-it-yourself, that was our entire monetary expense. For the record, here's the math:

Stories: \$1800

Art: \$500

Total: \$2300

Our friend Rachel Chalmers put up \$200 to sponsor a story, so our out-of-pocket expenditure was only \$2100. That's an amount we can afford to spend on a big multi-month hobby project, but it's not a trivial sum for us. And most of the stories in this anthology didn't even get paid a pro rate! \$200 is the SFWA pro rate for a story of 4000 words; only "Daisy", "Goldenseed" and "Qubit Slip" are under that threshold.

If we'd paid five cents a word for all the stories in this anthology, the stories alone would have cost \$2435!

You can see why most markets don't pay very well. If we'd paid \$50 for stories and \$20 for art, this anthology would have cost \$550, a much more manageable sum, and one we possibly could have recouped by selling copies of the anthology. Would we have gotten as many good submissions? Probably not. But if you'd like to run a lower-budget version of our experiment, it would be great to see what happens.

Our time investment was considerable. Some very rough estimates:

- 200-300 person-hours responding to stories that were ultimately rejected
- 20 person-hours talking to artists
- 25 person-hours doing contracts, revisions and line edits
- 40 person-hours doing layout, website design, and POD setup.

That's not counting time spent doing promotion, which will happen after this essay is written.

The oversupply hypothesis

Even if you don't like all the stories in *Thoughtcrime Experiments*, I hope you'll agree that they're of similar quality to the stories you see in big-name print magazines. The "experiment" behind *Thoughtcrime Experiments* was to verify the existence of such stories floating around in editors' slush piles. To get a firsthand look it was necessary to become editors.

If you listen to editors complain about unsolicited submissions, you'll get the impression that pretty much everything that comes into the slush pile is terrible. That simply writing a grammatical story with a plot puts you in the upper half of the slush pile.

This makes beginning writers feel good, and in fact our experience shows the upper-half thing to be true, but it's an illusion. A story that's better than 80% of the slush gets rejected. You can't shoot for the upper half of the slush pile, you have to shoot for the top five percent.

Of the 241 stories we received, we put thirty-nine into tiers D or E. That's 16%. Only one of every fifteen stories we got made us think "it would be cool to publish this" for any length of time. And we were able to reject fifteen of those thirty-nine stories without really hurting. We

were left with twenty-four stories, or 10%. Remember Sturgeon's Law: "Ninety percent of everything is crap."

From that 10% we could have made three anthologies. We ended up publishing nine stories, or about 4% of the total. It's true that we got some really bad stories, but we also got a lot of great stories. And almost all of the stories we published had been rejected from somewhere else.

I asked the authors we're publishing for details on their stories' previous rejections. All in all, nineteen markets rejected one or more of these stories. The mean number of rejections was 3.1. *Asimov's* rejected four of these stories—almost half. *F&SF* and *Strange Horizons* each rejected three. *One Story* and *Weird Tales* each rejected two of them.

- No prior rejections: 2 stories
- 1 prior rejection: 2 stories
- 2 prior rejections: 1 story
- 4 prior rejections: 2 stories
- 7 prior rejections: 1 stories
- 9 prior rejections: 1 story

Is there something wrong with these markets that they passed up on these gems? Absolutely not. We got fifteen other stories of similar quality, stories with (one assumes) similar backstories of rejection, and we rejected *them*. There's too much bad stuff in the slush pile, but there's also too much good stuff.

Every story needs an editor to champion it. One thing we conclude from this experiment is that there aren't enough editors. We were able to temporarily become editors and scoop a lot of great stories out of the slush pile.

It's not like we were these stories' only hope. At least one of the stories we rejected was published in a different market before this anthology came out, and at least one has been bought by another market. These stories were in someone else's top five percent. But a lot of the stories we're publishing had been rejected by the markets I read regularly. Even if they were published, I probably never would have read them.

It's well known that there's an oversupply of stories relative to readers. That's why rates are so low. Our experiment shows that there's an oversupply of stories relative to editors. By picking up this anthology you've done what you can to change the balance of readers

to stories. I wrote this appendix to show that you've also got the power to change the balance of editors to stories.

Appendix B: Sample Contract

*We had trouble finding a good sample contract for this task, so we thought we'd share the one we used. **We are not lawyers**, but we used this contract with no problems. We originally got this contract from Chris East at Futurismic, and made slight modifications.*

[Publication title]

Publishing Agreement

This contract is made between *[Your name]* (hereafter known as “The Publisher”) and *[Author’s name]* (hereafter known as “The Author”).

In consideration of mutual promises and forbearances, the parties agree as follows:

Author’s Publishing Grant

1. The Author grants the Publisher First Online Rights to the publication of his or her short story entitled “*[Story Title]*” an original work of approximately *[x,xxx]* words, hereinafter referred to as “the Work,” on *[Publication title]*, the Publisher’s website.
2. The Author further grants that the Work will remain published on *[Publication title]* indefinitely.
3. The Author further grants to the Publisher nonexclusive electronic rights to distribute the Work under a Creative Commons “Attribution-NonCommercial-Sharealike 2.5” license.¹
4. Under the terms of the Creative Commons license, the Publisher may publish a noncommercial print-on-demand volume incorporating the Work.

Other Rights

5. It is understood and agreed that all rights not expressly granted herein reside exclusively with the Author.

Payment

6. For the rights granted to the Publisher above, the Author will receive a payment in the sum of *[amount]*, which will be paid within thirty (30) days of the Publisher's receipt of this signed agreement.

Author's Warranties and Indemnities

7. The Author warrants and represents that he or she is the sole author of the Work, that the Work is original, that no one has reserved the rights granted in this agreement, and that he or she has full power to enter into this agreement. The Author also represents, to the best of his or her knowledge, that the Work does not contain any libelous material, is not in violation of any rights of privacy or any other rights of third persons, and does not violate any existing common law or statutory copyrights. The Author agrees to hold the Publisher harmless against any judgment finally sustained that the Work contains libel, plagiarism and/or invasion of privacy, or that the rights granted in this contract have been previously reserved.

Changes in Text or Title

8. The Publisher will make no major alterations to the Work's text or title without the Author's written approval. The Publisher reserves the right to make corrections to spelling or grammar.

Reversion of Rights and Withdrawal of Offer to Publish

9. In the event that the work is not published within one (1) year of the signing of this agreement, all rights revert to the Author. The Author shall keep any payments made by the Publisher to him or her.

10. In the event that a copy of the counter-signed agreement is not returned to the Author within sixty (60) days of signing by the Author, or that payment is not made as specified, the Publisher's offer to purchase the work shall be considered withdrawn.

Author's Credit

11. The Author will be credited in the published material and in any descriptive or promotional materials as *[Author's Byline]*.

Venue

12. This agreement shall be deemed executed under the laws of the state of New York. New York state law shall be the applicable law of this agreement. The parties acknowledge that each part has read and understood this contract before execution.

In witness whereof the parties have executed this contract on this *[xxxx]* day of *[xxxxx]*, 20*[xx]*.

(Author)

[Author's address]

(Publisher)

[Publisher's address]

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