

Sketch was a very unusual person, even for a native of Procyon IV, who believed that life and beauty, among other things, depended on your point of view. Just ask Miss Brown ...

BEAUTY and the BEAST

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AS SHIP'S secretary, Miss Brown could not accompany the expedition on its daily exploration flights in the dingey, so every afternoon she brought her collapsible typing desk outside and set it up in the shadow of the ship. Her graceful fingers would dance alphabetic rigadoons in the summer wind and sometimes, when the day was particularly warm and the sky was unusually blue, even for Procyon 31 IV, her eyes would steal away from the monotonous reports and the staid official forms and go AWOL over the lifeless lazy hills that rose beyond the plain.

They were lovely afternoons, and yet they were lonely too, in a way. But Miss Brown was acquainted with Loneliness. She had met Loneliness at her Senior Prom. She had been sitting by the wall and Loneliness had come over and sat beside her. Loneliness couldn't dance of course, and so the two of them sat there all evening, listening to the music and analyzing the quality of happiness. Happiness in an analytical form turned out to be as elusive as happiness in any other kind of form, and when the last dance was almost over Miss Brown got up unobtrusively and left by way of the French doors. Loneliness followed her all the way to the dormitory, but she didn't look back. Not once. It was a June night, and there was a moon, and the scent of summer flowers ...

The wind had a way of swirling around the ship when she least expected it to, and Miss Brown spent part of each afternoon chasing absconding reports and runaway official forms. She always promised herself that the next afternoon she would bring the heaviest paperweight she could find, but she never did. There was something about running in the wind, turning and twisting and bending, and the best part of it was, there was a practical reason behind it; and if the ship's cook happened to wake from his siesta and look down from the open lock, he wouldn't think she was crazy. Not if she was chasing papers. He would never dream that she was really dancing.

But Sketch caught on right away. He appeared, one afternoon, beside her desk, regarding her with his odd circular eyes. "Sketch" was the only name she ever found for him, and it was appropriate enough. He was like the rough outline of a man sketched on transparent paper, only he had been sketched—quite impossibly—on thin air. His head was a simple, somewhat asymmetrical oval. An elongated "S" started out as an eyebrow over his left eye and curved down to form the suggestion of a nose; below the extremity of the "S" there was an oblique dash representing a mouth, and below that a horizontal "C" implied a chin. His torso was a rough square, with a pair of long thin rectangles appended to it for legs, and a pair of shorter ones for arms.

"You dance very well," he said, though Miss Brown knew that he didn't really say it. She had just bent down to retrieve the last official form and happened to glance up and see him. There was no movement of his mouth, no slightest vacillation in the expression of his comic face.

She straightened abruptly. "This planet is uninhabited!" she said absurdly.

"In a way it is," Sketch said. "It depends on how you look at it."

Then, for a moment, she was frightened. That was odd, because she should have been frightened first

and then made the paradoxical remark about the planet. But she had been so startled, so ashamed—

"Dancing is nothing to be ashamed of," Sketch said. "Especially beautiful dancing like yours."

"But I wasn't dancing," she said. "I was picking up papers."

"It's all a matter of viewpoint . . . I must go now. Will you be dancing again tomorrow?"

"I'll probably be picking up papers, if that's what you mean," Miss Brown said.

"I'll come again tomorrow, then." He began to disappear: first the outline of his head, then his arms and his square torso; finally his rectangular legs. It was as though someone had erased him. That was the way it seemed to Miss Brown, anyway.

Mechanically she carried the papers back to her desk and sat down. "I must be losing my mind," she said aloud. The words sounded out of place in the stillness, and the wind carried them quickly away.

There simply couldn't be any life on the planet. She had typed all the expedition's reports herself; the long exhaustive reports that covered everything from geological strata several hundred million years old to the omnipresent traces of the last glacier retreat; and in all the pedantic melange of words there had not been one single sentence that even faintly suggested animal life of any kind.

The planet was a paradox. It had an hydrologic cycle equivalent to Earth's, and the continent they had chosen for exploration had a climate and terrain reminiscent of Illinois. There should have been life

But there wasn't. Unless you could call an anthropomorphic sketch drawn on thin air, life.

She tried to continue typing, but it was no use. Her eyes wouldn't stay on the paper. They kept wandering away, across the plain and over the distant hills. She kept hearing the wind. "You dance very well," the wind sang. "Very well, very well, very well . . ."

SHE WANTED to tell the others, but somehow she couldn't. They returned just before sunset and she joined them in the ship's lounge: Captain Fortesque, Dr. Langley, Mr. Smithers, Miss Staunton and Miss Pomeroy. Miss Staunton was a brunette ecologist and Miss Pomeroy was a blonde cartographer. Either of them could have passed for a 3-D love goddess and both of them knew it.

There was a plethora of talk about the typical distribution of land masses and the characteristic formation of mountain chains. Most of it circled harmlessly about Miss Brown's head. Dr. Langley, who was the expedition's geologist, delivered an impromptu lecture on the law of probabilities as applied to the present situation: there had to be, somewhere, an Earth parallel planet that had not spawned animal life, and overobviously they had found it. After several sequences of martinis all of them went in to dinner.

She should have told the captain. It was her duty, in a way. But seeing him there at the head of the table, big and burly and insensitive, his face like a foreboding glacier, his attention monopolized by his split pea soup, she could not bring herself to utter a word. She knew he would only laugh anyway, in his loud rumbling voice, and make some snide remark about her daydreaming when she should have been classifying expedition data.

She could have told Mr. Smithers, and she almost did. He was the expedition's archeologist, and quite young—about Miss Brown's age. He had a detached way of looking at her, as though he were seeing her and yet not seeing her; it had disconcerted her at first, till she discovered that he looked at everyone that way—even Miss Staunton and Miss Pomeroy. His assigned place at the table happened to be next to hers and during the long voyage a camaraderie of sorts had developed between them; it stemmed, of course, from the exigencies of the moment, and consisted entirely of such practicalities as "Please pass the salt, Miss Brown. Thank you," and "The bread, please, Mr. Smithers. Thank you." It fell abysmally short of being an intimate relationship, but it was all she had.

"I had a silly thing happen to me today," she began, right after the main course had been brought in.

"I'm not surprised, Miss Brown. This is a silly planet ... Please pass the potatoes."

Miss Brown passed the potatoes. "Yes, I guess it is," she said. "Well, this afternoon I—"

"The salt please, Miss Brown."

Miss Brown passed the salt. She watched while Mr. Smithers cut his roast beef into precise squares; waited till she was sure he wasn't the least bit interested in whatever she might have to say; then she cut

an indifferent square from her own roast beef and made believe she was hungry.

The next afternoon she forgot the paperweight as usual. The wind waited till her eyes went AWOL, then swirled quickly round the ship: There was a sudden squall of official forms and expedition data, and then she was running in the wind again, leaping and turning and pirouetting.

Sketch was waiting by the desk when she returned. Waiting with his soft, reassuring words: "How lovely. How lovely in the wind ..."

He came every afternoon after that. He never stayed very long; usually only long enough to say something nice about the way she danced. Sometimes he looked a little different, as though whoever had drawn him couldn't quite remember the way he had drawn him the day before. But the general characteristics were always the same: the Little Orphan Annie eyes, the ridiculous "S" of eyebrow and nose, the hyphen of a mouth, the horizontal "C" of a chin; the elongated rectangles of limbs.

"I wish I could draw better," he said one day.

"Is that the way you really look?" Miss Brown asked.

"Not exactly. But it's as closely as I can approximate myself and still stay within the range of your reality band."

"My *reality* band!"

"In the same way that your perception of color is limited by the narrowness of your visible spectrum, your perception of reality is limited by the narrowness of your experience. Since the life forms on this planet have no reference to your previous experience, the transcendental phase of your reasoning process rejects them. That is why your expedition is unable to find life on a world that teems with life."

"But there isn't any life on this world!"

"Of course there isn't—with reference to your limited experience. Your reality band, though narrower, is as absolute as mine is . . . But how do you account for me, Miss Brown?"

"I can't."

"But you believe I am real?"

"Yes. In a way."

"Then I *am* real. Even though you cannot visualize me as anything more than a crude sketch . . . Will you be dancing again tomorrow, Miss Brown?"

"I'll probably be picking up papers," Miss Brown said.

THE WARM summer days drifted slowly by. Each morning the members of the expedition arose early and set out determinedly in the dingey, and each evening they returned late, tired and thwarted and ill-tempered. Nasty little flurries of words sprang up in the wardroom; a state of cold war was tacitly declared between the Misses Staunton and Pomeroy; the captain's glacier of a face kept constant watch for unwary ships at sea.

But in Miss Brown's world the sky was blue and cloudless. Sometimes she caught herself singing in the shower. The minutes spent before her portable vanity lengthened subtly into hours. At dinner, when Mr. Smithers asked for the salt or the butter, she always had something sparkling to say, though naturally Mr. Smithers never noticed.

And then one evening the captain said, "I've had enough. If we don't find any evidence of life by tomorrow night, we're spacing!"

Miss Brown couldn't sleep that night. She turned and tossed in the darkness; she flicked on the light and sat on the edge of her berth, smoking chains of cigarettes. Towards morning she drifted into a fitful doze, but the early rising members of the expedition party awoke her when they came down the companionway.

She heard the muffled metallic sound of their footsteps first and then, when they were opposite her compartment, she heard Dr. Langley's voice through the ventilator: "Say, what's come over the beast lately?"

"I can't understand it," Miss Pomeroy's voice said. "She actually *smiles* sometimes. If I didn't know

better I'd say she was in love."

Dr. Langley's laughter. Miss Staunton's laughter. Someone else's laughter. Everybody's laughter. Dr. Langley's words: "*Her? In love?*" More laughter. The dwindling of footsteps.

Silence ...

She lay very quietly in the narrow berth. She lay with her hands clasped behind her head, looking up at the small white square of the ceiling. From the middle of the ceiling the raw fluorescent tube grinned hideously down on her unloveliness.

She lay there not moving for a long time, her eyes dry. After awhile she got up and began to dress. She dressed carefully, as usual, .but why? It was so useless.

When she brought out her desk that afternoon she made it a point to bring a paperweight too—the heaviest she could find—and she placed it carefully in the middle of the topmost sheet of paper. Very determinedly, she began to type.

She did Mr. Smither's notes first, then Dr. Langley's. It wasn't until she was in the middle of Miss Pomeroy's disconnected jottings that her eyes began to wander, the plain, then over the beckoning hills.

Beyond the farthest hill a village nestled in a green valley. A lovely village with pink houses and alabaster streets; with tall crystalline church spires. The kind of a village you could walk into without fear. The kind of village where, no matter who you were, or what you looked like, no one would ever reject you, no one would ever laugh at you.

Angrily, she jerked herself back to Miss Pomeroy's incoherent notes. She didn't notice at first that the paperweight was gone. When she did notice, it was too late. She grabbed for the papers, but the wind had been waiting and it swooped triumphantly around the ship. And suddenly she was dancing, her body free in the wind, her soft hair blowing about her face.

Sketch had been drawn in his usual place by the desk when she returned with the papers. The paperweight had been replaced. "I had to see you dance once more," he said.

She put the papers on the desk and set the paperweight on top of them. Then she looked into the circular eyes. "I hate you," she said. "I never want to see you again!"

The circular eyes looked back at her enigmatically. The absurd man-shape seemed to flutter in the wind.

"I don't know why you had to bother me in the first place," Miss Brown went on. "You've only made everything worse than it was before. Why did you do it? Why?"

"Because I wanted to see you dance."

"But you could have seen me dance—pick up papers—anyway. You didn't have to draw a silly picture of yourself. You didn't have to talk!"

"I wanted to tell you how beautifully you dance."

She stood there helplessly. "I can't dance at all," she said finally. "I know I can't. No one ever wanted to see me dance before. No one ever wanted to dance with me. No one would ever even ask me."

"I also wanted to tell you how beautiful you *are*."

And suddenly she was crying. She left her body standing in the summer wind and she went back and reattended the Prom with Loneliness. Then she went back to the April evening of her first date and sat on the park bench in the April rain, waiting and waiting and waiting, the chill rain seeping into her Easter coat, the cold fear seeping into her heart. Finally she went back and lay in her berth and listened to Dr. Langley's voice: "The beast," Dr. Langley's voice said over and over; "what's come over the beast?"

"I neglected to tell you," Sketch said, "that in my society I am a connoisseur." There was a quality about his voice—if it really was a voice—that had never been there before.

When she did not answer, he continued: "I am a connoisseur of beauty. It is my function in my society, just as it is your function in your society to transform the minute symbols of your machine into intelligible sequences on paper."

Her eyes were dry now, but her cheeks still glistened with the remnants of her tears. She felt sick and ashamed and she wanted to run back to the ship, back to her compartment; she wanted to lock the door of her compartment and—

"Don't go," Sketch said. "Please don't go yet. I would like to explain about beauty."

"All right," she said.

"Beauty is the result of the perception of symmetry. The result varies in proportion to the totality of the perception. Obviously, in order for the result to be completely true, its perception must be total.

"Immature races fail to recognize the subtle difference which exists between the symmetry of objects and the symmetry of intelligent beings. Objects possess tridimensional symmetry; intelligent beings possess quadri-dimensional symmetry.

"An object possesses height, breadth and thickness; an intelligent being possesses height, breadth, thickness *and* character. It is as impossible to perceive the total symmetry of an intelligent being in three dimensions as it is to perceive the total symmetry of an object in two dimensions.

"Do you understand, Miss Brown?"

"I think so," she said. "I can rationalize it too."

"There is no need for rationalization . . . I am a connoisseur of beauty. I neglected to tell you that I am also a creator of beauty. But I create it subjectively by giving others the ability to see it. The concept of beauty is an advanced stage in the growing up process of every race, and every race, in its infancy, makes the same tragic blunder: it blames the result for the incompleteness of the perception.

"I am a creator of beauty, yet I cannot make you beautiful. But I can make the members of your race realize that you, and countless others like you, *are* beautiful."

It was quiet in the shadow of the ship. Even the wind was quiet, flowing evenly down from the distant hills and across the summer plain. Miss Brown was quiet too. She stood very still before the absurd drawing, trying to see beyond the vacant circular eyes.

"I wish," Sketch said. Then he paused. "I wish," he tried again, "that there were a sort of intermediate reality between your reality and mine. A reality in which you could see me as I really am. I am a very poor artist. I am a cartoonist really—"

"No you're not!" Miss Brown said quickly. "I think you draw very well."

"Thank you," Sketch said. "I must go now."

"We're leaving tonight. You may never see me—dance again."

"I know. I shall miss you very much, Miss Brown." He began to erase himself.

"Wait! Don't go!"

"I must. I have to correct a dimensional defect in the perceptive response of an entire civilization. It is a large order, even for me. Goodbye, Miss Brown."

He saved his eyes till last, and just before he erased them he sketched a teardrop in the corner of each one.

DINNER was served just before blast-off. The captain had trouble concentrating on his soup. Every time he raised his spoon Miss Brown kept getting in his eyes.

Dr. Langley was bewildered. He kept looking at Miss Pomeroy and Miss Staunton, and then at Miss Brown. After awhile he confined himself to Miss Brown.

Mr. Smithers was still preoccupied with his soup when the main course was served. He relinquished it finally and transferred his attention to the braised beef. The mashed potatoes came around on schedule and he served himself with a moderate helping. For some annoying reason the gravy was delayed. His eyes explored the table and discovered it just beyond Miss Brown's plate. "Please pass the gravy, Miss Brown," he said.

She handed it to him gracefully. She was smiling.

She was beautiful!

Mr. Smithers almost dropped the gravy. He managed to save it at the last moment, but he couldn't save himself.

"You look lovely tonight, Miss Brown," he said.

Nancy had to pass the corner every morning on her way to school, and every morning the other kids were standing there waiting with their cruel words and their shrill laughter. "Crazy

eyes, crazy eyes, where you going, crazy eyes?"

They were standing there this morning, too. She walked by them numbly, not looking at them, holding herself tight the way she always did. She waited helplessly for the words; she waited miserably for the laughter.

Suddenly a little boy ran up beside her. His freshly scrubbed face was shining; his eyes were warm and friendly. "Carry your books, Nance?"

Miss Briggs managed to make the airbus, but as usual all the seats were taken. But she was used to standing and she no longer minded the vertigo that accompanied her every morning on the flight to work. It was a part of her personal status quo, and she accepted it just as she accepted her apartment niche, the March wind, and the inescapable fact that she was not beautiful. No one had ever sacrificed his seat for her and it was unlikely that anyone ever would.

"You look tired," the young man said, getting up. "Please sit down, won't you?"

Shadows, even when they are three dimensional, are still shadows, and the illusion of physical depth is not enough to turn melodrama into drama. Miss Merritt was sick of 3-D's. She was sick to death of them.

On the way home she stopped in the drugstore for a coke and a cigarette. The handsome young man in the gray gabardine suit was there again, looking through the paperbacks. She sipped her coke nonchalantly and took a delicate drag on her cigarette; then, for the hundredth time, she pretended that the young man picked up one of the less lurid jobs, leafed through it puzzledly for awhile, finally came over to the counter and said, "Pardon me. This one kind of bewilders me. I wonder if you could help me." Usually the book turned out to be a Steinbeck or a Faulkner, or sometimes even a Hemingway, but whatever it was she was always able to explain it to him brilliantly. Sitting there tonight she became aware of a gabardine arm almost touching her elbow. "Excuse me," the young man said. "This book here. I just don't get it. I wonder—" The book had a flamboyant cover and it was a long way from Steinbeck and Faulkner, and it was a million miles from Hemingway. But it was good enough.

THE END