

the house
at
the end
of
the street

by . . . Robert F. Young

The woman you'll never find is the woman you'll love eternally—if you're one of the lonely men on the barren slopes of Earth.

When we first read Robert F. Young's MISS KATY THREE all of the visions of beauty which had haunted us from boyhood seemed to tremble again in evanescent splendor before our eyes. It tuns a little like dipping into Keats for the first time and reading of "magic casements opening on the foam of perilous seas in faery land, forlorn." We hoped right then and there that Robert Young's muse would flame again in the same unexpected and lyrically breathtaking fashion. It has, and in this brand-new yarn.

THERE IS A search which has endured through generations out of mind. It is a search in which you have participated if you are a man, and the extent to which you have participated is commensurate with the degree of your idealism.

It is a search for a being who is at once the incarnation of our memories and the embodiment of our expectations; of a being who is flesh and blood and yet not at all; who is simultaneously earthly and ethereal.

It is a search, for all we know, for a non-existent being. To my knowledge she has never yet been found. But the brief moments when we think we have found her are certainly the best moments that we know, and if our goddesses invariably turn out to have feet of clay, it is not to their discredit so much as it is to ours, for we, not they, have predicated their goddess-hood.

Most men accept the non-existence of that which they cannot find and settle for baser metal. Some-where in their late twenties or early thirties they cease to believe in goddesses and marry the daughter of the butcher, the baker or the candle-stick maker.

They, I suspect, are the complacent gray men we see about us every day, in crowded streets and crowded bars, in offices and commuter-copt-ers. Yes, and in 'suburban living-rooms reading their eternal papers, or staring, like pallid ghosts, through the tinselly windows of their 3-D screens into the public lives of goddess-pretenders and pitchmen. In their way, I suppose, they are contented. Contentment is not a bad substitute for happiness any more than the daughter of the candlestick maker is a bad substitute for a goddess.

But there are a few of us who never stop looking. We staunchly continue to believe that some day we shall turn a springtime corner, and see our goddess approaching us down the street, the wind in her hair and golden flecks of the sun in her eyes.

And though the years slip slyly by and we never do quite find her, the hope never diminishes, and some of us assuage our need by reading romantic novels, and others of us just wander about parks on summer nights, or along beaches in moonlight, the need never assuaged at all, but always there, waiting ...

That which follows is the story of a goddess—and an apology. If at first it seems to be a dissertation on loneliness, be patient, for goddesses and apologies and loneliness, as you will see, sometimes go hand in hand. And if it is not the kind of story you expected the first Plutonian to write, I can only say that that is because you have lived all your life in the third house from the corner and have never visited the house at the end of the street. Unlike temperature, loneliness cannot be computed in degrees; but if there were a device to gauge its intensity it would hit its absolute low on the ice plains of Pluto.

The ice plains of Pluto are blue; not the blue with which you are acquainted; but a glinting malevolent blue, a hard uncompromising blue, an endless, hating blue. And on their horizon the sun is a little naked eye, pale and cold, hardly larger than the disdainful stars that surround it.

They go on and on, glinting and hating, unrelieved by the slightest shadow of a ridge, unsoftened by the faintest contour of a hill. Around them stretch the abysmal deeps of space—not the ordinary space that encompasses the inner planets, but the demoralizing darkness that confronts you when you reach the end of the street and turn your back on the pitiful radiance of the distant streetlight on the corner.

I got to know the ice plains very well. Eventually I came to accept them. But that was long after the second ship had come; long after the thirty-six hours I spent alone in the house at the end of the street.

The *Stardream I* landed itself. Such a *modus operandi* is probably frustrating to romantics who remember the early days of space travel when pilots had to know how to operate their own ships. But romantics are invariably afflicted with temporal nostalgia. The old way, to them, is always the best way. I suspect that their ancestral counterparts were around a century ago, deprecating the advent of the first thoroughly automatic ford.

I constituted the ship's complement of one: Captain Stephen Carver—Point of Departure: Triton; Destination Pluto. A passenger rather than a pilot, though a very carefully selected passenger. But *not* selected because of any technological aptitude. The problems that arise in space and on unexplored planets are of a psychological, not a technological, nature, and the men who ultimately reach the stars will differ diametrically from the gim-mick-minded swashbucklers who overran the moon and Mars.

After planetfall the first thing I did was to activate the locator beam. The *Stardream II* showed like a tiny blur on the detector screen, still some two million miles out. In a day and a half, if nothing went wrong, it would, follow the beam in and come down to rest by the *Stardream I*. And if something did go wrong, Captain Speller, passenger on the *Stardream II*, could return with me to Triton in the *Stardream I*, provided, of course, that he survived planetfall. The two ship system is based on the noble proposition that ships are more dispensable than men.

The next thing I did was to don my suit, pass through the airlocks and descend the little Jacob's ladder to the surface. I needn't have done so. My orders did not include any extra-ship reconnoitering prior to Speller's arrival, and I already had seen the Plutonian landscape through the viewports during planetfall.

But man is a tradition-bound creature, and there is a deep-bedded symbolical significance in the minds of all of us concerning the contact of our feet with alien soil, especially when our particular feet are the first to make the contact. As the first Plutonian I simply had to stand, however briefly, on Plutonian soil.

Or rather, Plutonian ice.

So I stood there at the base of the ship, in the relative center of that Brobdingnagian plain, awaiting the exaltation that was my rightful reward for being the first man ever to set foot on the doorstep of Number 9 Solar Drive.

But it wasn't exaltation that I experienced.

Standing there I gradually became aware of a quality that the excitement of planetfall had crowded out of my initial receptivity. Standing there I really *saw*, for the first time, the immensity all around me. I saw the ice flats glinting blue-ly away to the inward horizon above which the travesty of the sun hovered; and away and away and away to the dark dull outward horizon that wasn't an horizon at all but an awesome place where the changeless terrain left off and the outer darkness began—the darkness that separates the house at the end of the street from the first house of the next town, four miles, or four light years away.

I had visited the other houses and I knew what aloneness, in its ordinary sense, was like. I was even cognizant, in a vague way, that the farther down the street you progressed, the more acute the alone-ness became. But I was totally un-prepared for the aloneness that crept in from those abysmal outer deeps and touched my marrow.

There is nothing I can compare it to; there is nothing in my experience that even approximates it. Try to visualize a vast silent plain compounded of ice and shattered starlight, then try to project yourself into the middle of it. Now imagine a bleak cold star above one horizon and let the information that that star is Sol sink into your mind; the same Sol that turns Earth skies blue, that creates the seasons, that is behind all sweet dawns and is an integral part of every sublime twilight. The Sol that is the sole progenitor of Day, that is responsible for every single blade of grass and every single patterned leaf—That little star on the horizon, that shoddy twinkle of lifeless light, that futile pentagram on the Cimmerian face of space; that remote street-light on the corner that so warmly illumines the first three houses—That star is Sol.

Imagine it if you can, and then try to imagine the emptiness that begins on the opposite horizon, an emptiness so illimitable, so prodigious, that it overextends its bounds between systems and creeps inexorably in over the Plutonian plains, a great dark mesmeric entity that suffuses you, that inundates you, that overwhelms you. . . .

When I got back into the ship I headed straight for the medicinal locker. There was whiskey there—a generous allotment. There was no reason why there shouldn't have been. Men do not set foot into space ships until they have been pronounced psychologically sound, and psychologically sound men do not abuse alcohol allotments. But it is possible to be psychologically sound amid a predictable set of circumstances and psychologically un-sound amid an unpredictable set of circumstances.

I got thoroughly drunk. . . .

When I came out of it I was lying on the small lounge in the passenger compartment (it would be both romantic and inaccurate to call it a navigation room). My mouth was parched and there was an insistent throbbing going on in my brain. I got up miserably and stumbled in the general direction of the medicinal locker.

I would have been all right if it hadn't been for one thing. I would have washed down an anti-al tablet and, in a matter of minutes my hangover would have been little more than an unpleasant memory, then I would have returned to the cozy compartment and taken my seat before the transmitter and the moment the *Stardream II* picked up the locator beam I would have established radio contact with Speller. I would have talked to him unremittingly about anything under the sun until the *Stardream* came down to rest beside the *Stardream I* and there were two men on Pluto instead of only one.

I would have done all that and this story would not differ radically from the stories most spacemen tell, despite its portentous beginning—

If I had remembered to close the viewports.

As it was I got as far as the first one, and without thinking at all, with that same absence of conscious volition typical of all men when they pass windows of any kind, I looked out at the Plutonian plain.

There was a village lying there, where nothing had been before; the loveliest, the sweetest, the warmest village that I had ever seen. There were white houses and green lawns, and immaculate streets lined with elms and maples. In the center there was a park so green it hurt your eyes to look at it.

I stood frozen before the view-port. I did not believe in what I saw, yet I could not take my eyes away. Gradually I began to make out details. All of the houses had rose-trellised verandahs, in each front yard there was a French lilac tree in bloom, and in every back yard there was an apple tree in blossom.

The streets were deserted. So, apparently, were the houses.

Presently my eyes touched the outskirts. Impossibly, the green lawns and the immaculate streets left off and the ice flats began. The bright sunlight ceased to be, and in its stead the ice glinted, malevolently, hatefully, endlessly.

I brought my eyes back quickly and locked them on the charming houses, the exquisite yards; the hedges and the picket fences; the rambling, shaded streets. And suddenly such a poignant sense of *need* swept over me that I could not endure the lonely ship for another second, and I ran wildly from the compartment, down the companionway to the locks. At the threshold of the inner door I paused.

There was a remnant of reason still remaining in my mind. *My suit*, I thought. *My suit!* I got into it feverishly. I forced myself to check the oxygen intake dial, the pressure indicator and the thermometer, not because there was any likelihood that any of the built-in units were malfunctioning, but to reassure myself of my sanity.

I remembered that I had been drinking, and while it was improbable that a single bout with a bottle would bring about an hallucination of the proportions of the one I had just witnessed, it was equally improbable that the village could be real. But real or not, I had to investigate it.

I stepped into the closet-sized chamber and sealed the inner door. I depressed the stud that controlled the ponderous outer door.

There was a hiss, then a whoosh! of air, and there before me on the -350 degrees Fahrenheit plain was the summer village. If anything, it was more vivid and more real than it had been when I had seen it through the viewport.

The nearest street began perhaps a hundred yards from the ship, and I stumbled toward it. The moment I stepped upon its flagstone side-walk, dazzling sunlight was all about me. Startled, I glanced up at the sky, and the sky was blue! A summer blue, a June blue, a morning blue . . . and a sweet haze-softened sun was rising above the red rooftops.

I stared at the nearest house. There was something strikingly familiar about it, its Martian Colonial lines, its nostalgic rose-trellised verandah— Suddenly I recognized it, and I was stunned.

For it was my boyhood home, the house I had been born in the house I had lived in before I went away to school; and it was just exactly the way it had been when I was a small boy stalking Martians in the back yard and treeing Venerian *sphugi* in the apple trees. And next door to it was its identical twin, and across the street, its identical triplet.

I realized then that every house on the street was the same, every house in the entire village.

As I stood there, gawking like a schoolboy, a tall handsome man came down the walk, opened the gate of the picket fence and started down the street toward the center of the village. He was wearing a light pastel business suit and he was carrying a brief case. He looked right at me when he opened the gate but he did not see me.

But I saw *him*. His wide apart gray eyes, his slender nose and firm mouth; the unforgettable cleft on his chin. And I recognized him instantly.

Why shouldn't I have? He was my father.

I don't know how long I stood there—it is doubtful anyway if time could have been computed by orthodox standards in so unorthodox a situation—but presently I started moving down the street, clumsily, grotesquely, like some blundering deep sea diver in the midst of a delicate Atlantis. I received my second shock when I reached the gate. My mother came out of the house, descended the verandah steps and began to cut a bouquet of lilacs from the tree in the front yard.

The scene was so starkly vivid, so intensely distinct that it transcended reality. There was the blue summer sky showing above the red shingles of the roof; the white clapboard siding, the shutter-embellished windows, the open verandah (so popular then after its century of ostracism), the deep greenness of the lawn, my mother's scissors twinkling in the sun as she snipped the mauve blooms; my beautiful dark-haired mother herself—

Just as I remembered her.

Just as she had been all those absconded years ago. . . .

Presently she glanced up, but though she looked right at me she did not see me. There were particles of the sun in her blue eyes, but nothing else, and after awhile she returned them to her work. She snipped another lilac, added it to her bouquet, then went back into the house.

The oxygen intake dial, inset at eye level in my helmet, registered "Normal." But my chest was tight and I could hardly get my breath.

After a long while I moved on. When I reached the second house, a tall handsome man came down the walk, opened the gate and started down the street. He was wearing a light pastel business suit and he was carrying a briefcase. He had wide apart gray eyes, a slender nose and a firm mouth, and there was an unforgettable cleft on his chin. . . .

When I came opposite the gate, a lovely dark-haired woman came out of the house, descended the verandah steps and began to cut a bouquet of lilacs from the tree in the front yard. Her scissors twin-kled in the sunlight.

And the next house. And the next, and so on down the street. An entire village of my boyhood homes, peopled by facsimiles of my mother and my father just as they had looked when I was ten years old.

Regression? What else? How else does the mind react when con-fronted with a situation it cannot possibly cope with? Even in normal crises it is prone to return to a pleasanter situation, a situation that affords protection, that reassures. In an extreme crisis—absolute loneli-ness for instance—might it not multiply that happier milieu? Might it not only multiply it, but subjectively create it?

But regression is merely one phase of the mind's protective mechanism. There are many others, among them romantic invention.

The dream girl device. . . .

Quite unsuspectingly I came to the village park. White walks wound in and out of the sunlight, arabesqued with shade when they passed beneath the trees. There were polychromatic parterres, and white benches ensconced in shrub-bery. Stately elms shouldered the summer sky.

But soft you now! The fair Ophelia!

Goddesses are many things to many men. Your goddess to me might seem too short, and mine, to you, too tall. Your goddess may have gray eyes, while mine has blue. Goddesses are strictly subjective phenomena.

I had started down one of the enchanting walks when I saw her. She was coming toward me out of sun and shadow. She was tall, and her hair was dark and short. She was wearing a mist-blue dress.

She was too far away at first for me to see her face, but I felt that I knew her, knew her from some-where. As she neared me, the de-tails around her subtly faded—trees, grass, shadows—and at the same time the sun seemed to in-crease its brightness, until finally there was utterly nothing in my perspective but this tall sun-burn-ished girl walking. It was like star-ing at a single object in a picture and having everything else in the picture become blurred and mean-ingless.

Presently, as the distance be-tween us shrank, I began to see her face. It was a wide face, flawlessly molded. There were light blue eyes flashing beneath thin dark bird wings of brows, a firm line of nose, a generous mouth, warm with the beginning of a radiant smile. It was a country girl's face and quite utterly beautiful, and though I had never seen it before I knew it very well.

How did I know it?

I knew it because I knew the memories and the associations that had shaped it.

I knew the tranquil evenings, and I knew the green hills that rise into the serene blueness of summer skies; I knew the quiet country roads. I knew the mists that accom-pany summer mornings and I knew the fields new-turned in spring. I knew meadow flowers and quiet laughter, and brooks bubbling in violet shade.

I knew the sweet smell of October vineyards and I knew the invigorating sharpness of November winds. I knew the creaking sound of snow on January nights, and I knew the first fresh breath of spring. .

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She was a composite, a montage, a blend of all the moments when I had known beauty. She was the image that had shone unseen, deep in my mind, whenever I had looked at a pretty girl and turned disappointedly away. She was my hitherto unknown criterion.

She was more than that.

She was my own personal goddess; my Muse. And I had had to journey all the way to the house at the end of the street to find her. For the house at the end of the street is loneliness itself, and goddesses and loneliness, as I have said, sometimes go hand in hand.

She had almost reached me when the *Stardream II* arrived. It was an incongruous falling star, shattering the blue illusion of the sky. It settled down on dwindling geysers of jets and proudly took its place in the sun beside the *Stardream I*.

And suddenly my goddess began to fade away. Her face blurred, that lovely face, that goddess-face

of memories and associations; and then her body, that tall goddess-body of Grecian symmetry and breasts in blossom—the whole exquisite creation of her shimmered, diffused, paled into transparency. . .

And where the park had been, where the nostalgic village had stood, the ice plain reasserted it-self, glinting malevolently away to the immensities, to the pale orb of the objective sun.

Confront the mind with abso-lute loneliness and it will create. It will create because it must create, because creation is its last resort against insanity, its ultimate defense mechanism.

But its creation is limited and it is conditioned. It is limited by the *a posteriori* factors of our individ-ual existences, and it is conditioned by the habitual devices we employ to meet the lesser forms of loneliness. Regression and romantic in-vention.

When I stood for the first time on the ice plains of Pluto I knew that here was a loneliness I was un-prepared to meet, that I could not endure. My conscious reaction was to drink myself into insensibility. My subconscious reaction was more complex.

Subconsciously, I came to a de-cision. Subconsciously, I decided that the next time I looked at those ice flats there was going to be a reassuring quality added to them through which their loneliness could not possibly penetrate. And when my transcendental logic proc-essed my next retinal image of them, that reassuring quality had to be there.

And what is more reassuring to any man than his boyhood home? Than his mother and father? Than his goddess. . . .

The only time the mind will create is when it has to, and the length of time it will sustain its creation is as long, and no longer, than it has to.

Two men on Pluto can never be as lonely as one man on Pluto. Neither of them can experience *absolute* loneliness.

When I saw the second ship come down I knew that I was no longer alone. And my creation turned to dust.

I have said that in addition to being the story of a goddess that this is also an apology.

It is an apology to potential god-desses. To almost-goddesses. To my real goddess, if or when I ever find her.

For it is one thing to search for a goddess and not know what she is going to look like, and it is quite another thing to search for one and know exactly what she is going to look like. In the first instance you look subconsciously; in the second you look subconsciously *and* con-sciously.

I look for my goddess every day. I stroll morning streets and after-noon avenues. I have a penchant for parks, and you may have seen me sitting by some quiet lake, or wandering down some maple arbored lane.

Searching.

Searching for my goddess—Have *you* seen her?