

# SAINT JULIE AND THE VISGI

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*The woodsman couldn't spare Julie's beloved old tree. Down it had to come. But the religious tenets of an alien race, such as the Visgi, didn't bother little Julie . . . So she planted another tree in Visgi soil!*

**T**HE VISGI were conquerors, but they possessed none of the characteristics usually associated with conquerors. They were not cruel; they were not vindictive; they were not avaricious. They did not plunder; they did not pillage; they did not exploit. The word "rape" was not even in their vocabulary. They were conquerors because conquest was their religious *raison d'etre*.

The Visgi conquered Earth during the last years of the twentieth century, and the occupational administrators moved into office immediately. The first thing they did was to issue the traditional Visgi proclamation—a proclamation which stated in effect, that the moment a planet came under Visgi dominion the inhabitants of said planet must institute a re-landscaping project for the purpose of altering all surface features intrinsically different from the surface features of the planet Visge. For according to the Visgi credo, Visge was the Model, the First-To-Be-Created, and it was the Prime Motivator's wish that all other planets in the cosmos be patterned after the Model. That was why He had created the Visgi, and that was why Visgi technology went hand in hand with Visgi religion.

Fortunately, Visge was not radically different from Earth. It had seas and continents. It had rivers and plains and lakes and mountains and hills. It had a north and south polar cap and an International Date Line. On one of its northern continents there was a peninsula that could have passed for Florida. Actually there was only one intrinsic difference between Visge and Earth.

On Visge there were no trees.

**J**ULIE woke to the metallic song of saws and the shouts of men. Looking out of her bedroom window she saw the movement of denim clad bodies in the green foliage of the big maple, and sawdust drifting down like yellow snow. She dressed quickly and ran downstairs. Mother was standing on the back porch, her eyes very strange.

In the village below the hill on which Julie and her mother lived, maples and oaks and elms were dying like fine brave soldiers, their limbs dropping one by one in the summer morning sunlight. But Julie had eyes for her soldier only.

Her swing still hung from one of the lower branches. High above her head was the special bough whose foliated fingertips brushed her window reassuringly on windy nights when she could not sleep, and just below it was the branch reserved for robins when they came north each spring.

"Mother," she asked, "what are they doing to my tree?"

Mother took her hand. "You must be a brave girl, Julie."

"But Mother, they hurt my tree!"

"Hush, dear. They're only doing what they have to do."

The first limb fell with a swishing sound. Sawdust flurried in the morning wind. Julie cried out and wrenched her hand from Mother's. There was a big man in breeches and high-top shoes standing in the yard, looking up at the men and shouting at them to hurry. Julie ran toward him, screaming. "You leave my tree alone!" she cried. "You leave it alone!" She pounded his belt with her small clenched hands.

He grasped her wrists and pushed her away. His face was gray and there were dark smudges beneath his bleak blue eyes. "Damn it!" he shouted over Julie's head, "isn't this job tough enough as it is? Get her out of here. Get her out of here!"

Julie felt Mother's soft hands on her shoulders. "I'm sorry," Mother said. "But she doesn't mean any harm. You see, she doesn't understand."

"Why doesn't she?" the big man shouted. "She had it in school, didn't she? The Visgi held deforestation classes in every school in the world. Kids are supposed to *hate* trees now."

"But she doesn't go to school. You see, she's— She's not quite—"

Mother paused. The big man looked at Julie closely. Something very odd happened to his eyes. They had been like winter, and now, suddenly, they were like summer—soft and deep and misted. He looked back at Mother. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know."

"Of course you didn't," Mother said. "It's all right."

"I hate to take the tree down. You know that, don't you?"

"I know," Mother said. Her hand tightened on Julie's. "Come, Julie, we'll go back to the house."

The big man fumbled in the pockets of his breeches. He handed Julie a quarter. "Here," he said. "You be a brave girl now, won't you?"

Julie ignored the quarter. She looked up into the man's eyes. "Please don't hurt my tree," she said.

The big man stood there helplessly. "Come, Julie," Mother said again. "We have to get out of the way so the men can work."

Julie accompanied her reluctantly. "We'll go in and have breakfast," Mother said. "We'll have scrambled eggs, just the way you like them."

"No!"

"Yes, Julie."

Julie cried, but Mother made her go in the house and sit at the kitchen table. The swishing sounds and the thuds of falling limbs kept coming through the open window, and the singing of saws. Mother scrambled eggs and made toast. She poured Julie a glass of milk. Julie listened to the saws. There was another saw now, a saw that sang in a loud rasping voice. Suddenly someone shouted "Timber!" and right after that there was a heavy sickening thud. Julie tried to run to the window, but Mother caught her in her arms and held her very close. "It's all right, darling," she said over and over. "It's all right. Don't cry, baby, don't cry."

But Julie cried and cried.

That night she dreamed of the tree. She dreamed of it the way it had been in winter, dark and forlorn, its branches charcoal tracings on somber metallic skies. She dreamed of it the way it had been in spring, with new buds filming its branches with pale green mist. But most of all she dreamed of it the way it had been in summer, a green cloud above her head as she sat in her swing, a lovely cloud with the wind sighing through it, with the sky a robin's egg blue all around it.

A little girl and a cloud of a tree adrift on the top of a hill.

The next day the landscape men came. Julie woke to the huffing and puffing of a giant crane. Looking out her window she saw the big claw of the crane sinking into the stump of the tree and the steel cables tightening. There was a thick ripping sound when the stump pulled loose, and a shower of dark earth. The stump came out of the ground like a grisly tooth, its roots trailing wildly below it. The crane swung the stump around and dropped it into a waiting dump truck and the truck thundered down the hill into the valley. Another dump truck backed up to the dark deep wound where the stump had been and disgorged its load of reddish Visge soil; then a bulldozer began to chug-chug, creeping back and forth across the yard like a mechanized triceratops.

Julie dressed slowly. Mother was in the kitchen, sitting at the white table looking at her hands. She looked up when Julie came in. "Good morning, darling," she said. "Did you have a nice sleep?"

"Will they plant a new tree?" Julie asked.

"No, Julie. They'll plant grass. The kind of grass that grows on Visge."

"But why, Mother?"

Mother looked down at her hands again. "Because they must, dear. Because that's the way they are. . . Shall I scramble you some eggs?"

"I'm not hungry," Julie said.

The bulldozer labored all morning. By noon the ground where the tree had stood was level, and after they ate their lunch the landscape men got long rakes from their pickup truck and began raking the Visge soil. (Visge soil was restricted to hilltops where the danger of erosion was greatest.) They raked the soil till it was broken up into fine particles, then they planted Visge grass. They planted it the way the Visgi had instructed them, thickly so that the long roots would become entangled and lock the soil against the onslaughts of the rain and the wind. It was late afternoon when they finished, and they got into their truck and drove down the hill to the village.

That evening Julie sat on the porch steps, staring at the naked yard. She concentrated on the spot where the tree had stood, memorizing it with her eyes. She sat there long after the sun had set, watching the shadows creep up the hill. Mother sat behind her on the rocker. Around them in the coalescing darkness crickets began their chant, and from the marshes at the end of the valley came the dissonant singing of frogs. Fireflies began to flicker in the dark blurs of bushes on the borders of the yard.

Finally Mother said: "It's time for bed, Julie."

"All right, Mother."

"Would you like a glass of milk?" "No, Mother."

"You must be very hungry. You hardly touched your supper."

"No, Mother. I'm not hungry at all. . . ."

The house was very still, and damp with night. Julie lay very quietly in her bed, pretending sleep. She lay there for a long while, till Mother's breathing became even and deep, then she got up and tiptoed down the stairs. She opened the door carefully and walked softly across the porch and down the steps. The moon was full and the naked yard was silver now.

Julie didn't think they could have noticed the little tree. She was sure that she was the only one in the world who knew about it. She got her diminutive shovel out of her sand pail and went around to the side of the house. The tree was still there, growing very close to the foundation, hugging the concrete blocks as though it was afraid. It was as big around as Julie's little finger, it was a foot high, and it had one leaf.

She dug it up tenderly, then she carried it around the house to the place where the big tree had been. She planted it carefully, patting the soil around its tendril of a trunk till it stood up straight in the moonlight. "There," she said when she had finished, "the yard looks much better now."

She tiptoed back to bed.

**T**HE LOCAL administrator trudged up the hill early the next morning. Julie was already up and she was watering the new tree with her red sprinkling can. Mother was still in bed.

The Visgi didn't trust Terrans. They didn't trust anybody. It was each Visgi administrator's responsibility to see to it that the inhabitants of the zone which he governed lived up to the letter of the Visgi edict, and the zones were small enough so that each administrator could personally check the work of his Terran landscape crew.

The local administrator was typical of his race, both mentally and physically. His face was flat and he had flat gray eyes. His ears grew flatly against the sides of his head. He was wearing a flat-topped kepi. When he saw the little tree he stopped dead on his flat feet.

He hated trees. He hated any plant that did not grow on Visge. It was a religious conditioned reflex. In the beginning the Prime Motivator had created Visge; then He had created the rest of the cosmos. He had intended that all of the planets should be like Visge, but during the hectic days of the Creation He had become careless and made them any old way. So as soon as the cosmos was completed He had created the Visgi and given them the Word to go forth in ships and set the other planets right.

Certainly if He had intended planets to have trees He would have put some on Visge too.

The local administrator strode indignantly across the newly seeded soil and towered ominously over the little tree. He reached down with one large self-righteous hand. His fingertips had almost touched the thin trunk before the Thought—as it was later designated in Visgi scripture—struck him. Then something

else struck him. Julie's sprinkling can bounced off his shoulder, showering his face with water. "You leave my tree alone!" she said.

The local administrator hardly noticed the can or the water. He was down on his hands and knees, his face close to the ground, his eyes scrutinizing the soil. But his eyes only confirmed what his mind had known in the first place: a quantity of Visgi soil was always distributed whenever sizeable trees were removed from hilltops.

He got slowly to his feet. His flat gray eyes had acquired a third dimension. He looked down at the little girl. "You planted this?" he asked, pointing to the tree.

"Yes," Julie said, "and don't you dare cut it down!"

The local administrator stared at her, the Thought sinking its fingers deeper and deeper into his Visgi brain. Abruptly he turned and began to run down the hill to the village. Julie had never seen a Visgi run before and she watched, enthralled. She was still watching when Mother called from the upstairs window and asked what was the matter. The local administrator had reached the bottom of the hill by then and was hurrying up the village street toward his headquarters.

It was not a matter for a mere local administrator to handle, so the first thing he did when he reached his headquarters was to call the Visgi resident governor and explain the nature of his insight. The governor regarded him skeptically at first, his precipitate cliff of a face dark and foreboding on the telescreen; but finally he agreed to investigate the matter immediately and directed the local administrator to have everything in readiness for his official appearance.

The local administrator notified the officer of the guard without delay, and the officer of the guard assembled a ceremonial detail in dress scarlet. Shortly before noon the detail marched militarily up the hill, the local administrator in the lead. He was beginning to have misgivings by then, and the governor's awesome face haunted him. Perhaps he had acted too hastily. Perhaps he had divined a religious motif where none existed at all. Certainly the Prime Motivator's ways were complex, but did not their very complexity make them all the more difficult of interpretation? And did local administrators have any business trying to interpret them at all?

By the time they reached the top of the hill the local administrator was perspiring, but not from the exertion of the climb. However, he surveyed the scene with outward calm while the officer of the guard aligned the detail in two parallel scarlet rows along the edge of the seeded area.

Julie and her mother were standing together on the porch steps. The little tree was standing all alone in the middle of the yard, its single leaf fluttering valiantly in the summer wind. Suddenly a shadow drifted across the hill, and the local administrator looked up. The swallow-shape of the governor's ship showed brightly in the blue sky and even as he watched it began to descend. "Quickly!" he shouted to the officer of the guard. "Obtain the Terran child and stand her by the tree so that the governor can see them both together!"

At first Julie was frightened, and Mother seemed frightened too. But after the officer of the guard had explained what was about to take place, Mother said it would be all right for Julie to go with him. Mother's eyes were very bright, Julie thought; they had not been that bright for a long time—not since Father had gone away in the silver ship and never returned. Julie liked to see Mother's eyes that way and she skipped happily along beside the big officer of the guard.

She stood by the little tree while the big swallow-ship came down, and she watched while the Visgi with the awesome cliff of a face descended the spiral landing stairs. His entourage followed. There were so many of them that Julie thought they would never stop emerging from the ship, but finally they did. They formed in a group behind the governor, talking and waving their arms. They seemed terribly excited over something.

The governor talked for awhile with the local administrator. Then he bent down and scooped up a handful of reddish soil and examined it minutely. He looked over at Julie and the tree, his face still like a cliff, but a cliff with the first rays of the morning sun just beginning to illuminate it. He walked across the yard to the tree. The local administrator walked beside him and the governor's entourage followed.

"See how sturdy it is," the local administrator said. "How green its foliage."

"As green as the hills of Visge," the governor said.

"Only on Visge soil could a tree grow like that."

"Truly the ways of the Prime Motivator are inscrutable!"

For Visge soil was Visge soil, no matter where it happened to be, and whatever grew on Visge soil automatically became native to Visge. The Prime Motivator's ways were devious, but they were beyond questioning by mortals, even Visgi mortals. If He had chosen such an indirect method of bringing trees to the Model, there was undoubtedly a sound motivation behind his reasoning. Henceforth, trees would be planted on Visge and be permitted to grow throughout the remainder of the cosmos.

The governor's entourage could contain themselves no longer. They edged around the governor and the local administrator, jostling each other in their eagerness to see the first Visge maple. But the governor did not reprimand them. The governor was staring at Julie. His face was no longer awesome—it was filled with awe instead. For it had occurred to him that he was standing face to face with the first Visge saint.