

Pilgrimage to Earth

Robert Sheckley.

Alfred Simon was born on Kazanga IV, a small agricultural planet near Arcturus, and there he drove a combine through the wheat fields, and in the long, hushed evenings listened to the recorded love songs of Earth.

Life was pleasant enough on Kazanga, and the girls were buxom, jolly, frank and acquiescent, good companions for a hike through the hills or a swim in the brook, staunch mates for life. But romantic—never! There was good fun to be had on Kazanga, in a cheerful open manner. But there was no more than fun.

Simon felt that something was missing in this bland existence. One day, he discovered what it was.

A vendor came to Kazanga in a battered spaceship loaded with books. He was gaunt, white-haired, and a little mad. A celebration was held for him, for novelty was appreciated on the outer worlds.

The vendor told them all the latest gossip, of the price war between Detroit II and III, and how fishing fared on Alana, and what the president's wife on Moracia wore, and how oddly the men of Doran V talked. And at last someone said, "Tell us of Earth."

"Ah!" said the vendor, raising his eyebrows. "You want to hear of the old mother planet? Well, friends, there's no place like old Earth, no place at all.

On Earth, friends, everything is possible, and nothing is denied."

"Nothing?" Simon asked.

"They've got a law against denial," the vendor explained, grinning. "No one has ever been know to break it. Earth is different, friends. You folks specialize in farming? Well Earth specializes in impracticalities such as madness, beauty, war, intoxication, purity, horror, and the like, and people come from light-years away to sample these wares."

"And love?" a woman asked.

"Why girl," the vendor said gently, "Earth is the only place in the galaxy that still has love! Detroit II and II tried it and found it too expensive, you know, and Alana decided it was too unsettling, and there was no time to import it on Moracia or Doran V. But as I said, Earth specializes in the impractical, and makes it pay."

"Pay?" a bulky farmer asked.

"Of course! Earth is old, her minerals are gone and her fields are barren.

Her colonies are independent now, and filled with sober folk such as yourselves, who want value for

their goods. So what else can old Earth deal in, except the non-essentials that make life worth living?"

"Were you in love on Earth?" Simon asked.

"That I was," the vendor answered, with a certain grimness. "I was in love, and now I travel. Friends, these books..." For an exorbitant price, Simon bought an ancient poetry book, and reading, dreamed of passion beneath the lunatic moon, of dawn glimmering whitely upon lovers' parched lips, of locked bodies on a dark sea-beach, desperate with love and deafened by the booming surf.

And only on Earth was this possible! For, as the vendor told, Earth's scattered children were too hard at work wrestling a living from alien soil. The wheat and corn grew on Kazanga, and the factories increased on Detroit II and III. The fisheries of Alana were the talk of the Southern start belt, and there were dangerous beasts on Moraica, and a whole wilderness to be won on Doran V.

And this was well, and exactly as it should be.

But the new worlds were austere, carefully planned, sterile in their perfections. Something had been lost in the dead reaches of space, and only Earth knew love.

Therefore, Simon worked and saved and dreamed. And in his twenty-ninth year he sold his farm, packed all his clean shirts into a serviceable handbag, put on his best suit and a pair of stout walking shoes, and boarded the Kazanga—Metropole flyer.

At last he came to Earth, where dreams must come true, for there is a law against their failure.

He passed quickly through Customs at Spaceport New York, and was shuttled underground to Times Square. There he emerged blinking into daylight, tightly clutching his handbag, for he had been warned about pickpockets, cutpurses and other denizens of the city.

Breathless with wonder, he looked around.

The first thing that struck him was the endless array of theaters, with attractions in two dimensions, three or four, depending upon your preference.

And what attractions!

To the right of him a beetling marquee proclaimed: LUST ON VENUS! A DOCUMENTARY ACCOUNT OF SEX PRACTICES AMONG THE INHABITANTS OF THE GREEN HELL!

SHOCKING! REVEALING!

He wanted to go in. But across the street was a war film. The billboard shouted, THE SUN BUSTERS! DEDICATED TO THE DAREDEVILS OF THE SPACE MARINES! And further down was a picture called TARZAN BATTLES THE SATURNIAN GHOULS!

Tarzan, he recalled from his reading, was an ancient ethnic hero of Earth.

It was all wonderful, but there was so much more! He saw little open shops where one could buy food of all worlds, and especially such native Terran dishes as pizza, hotdogs, spaghetti and knishes. And there were stores which sold surplus clothing from the Terran spacefleets, and other stores which sold nothing but beverages.

Simon didn't know what to do first. Then he heard a staccato burst of gunfire behind him, and whirled.

It was only a shooting gallery, a long, narrow, brightly painted place with a waist-high counter. The manager, a swarthy fat man with a mole on his chin sat on a high stool and smiled at Simon.

“Try your luck?” Simon walked over and saw that, instead of the usual targets, there were four scantily dressed women at the end of the gallery, seated upon bullet-scored chairs. They had tiny bull-eyes painted on their foreheads and above each breast.

“But do you fire real bullets?” Simon asked.

“Of course!” the manager said. “There is a law against false advertising on Earth. Real bullets and real gals! Step up and knock one off!” One of the women called out, “Come on, sport! Bet you miss me!” Another screamed, “He couldn't hit the broad side of a spaceship!”

“Sure he can!” another shouted. “Come on, sport!” Simon rubbed his forehead and tried not to act surprised. After all, this was Earth, where anything was allowed as long as it was commercially feasible.

He asked, “Are there galleries where you shoot men, too?”

“Of course,” the manager said. “But you ain't no pervert, are you?”

“Certainly not!”

“You an outworlder?”

“Yes. How did you know?”

“The suit. Always tell by the suit.” The fat man closed his eyes and chanted, “Step up, step up and kill a woman! Get rid of a load of repressions! Squeeze the trigger and feel the old anger ooze out of you! Better than a massage!

Better than getting drunk! Step up, step up and kill a woman!” Simon asked one of the girls, “Do you stay dead when they kill you?”

“Don't be stupid,” the girl said.

“But the shock...” She shrugged her shoulders. “I could do worse.” Simon was about to ask how she could do worse, when the manager leaned over the counter, speaking confidentially.

“Look, buddy. Look what I got here.” Simon glanced over the counter, and saw a compact sub-machine gun.

“For a ridiculously low price,” the manager said, “I'll let you use the tommy. You can spray the whole place, shoot down the fixtures, rip up the walls.

This drives a 45slug, buddy, and it kicks like a mule. You really know you're firing when you fire the tommy.”

“I am not interested,” Simon said sternly.

“I've got a grenade or two,” the manager said. “Fragmentation, of course. You could really...”

“No!”

“For a price,” the manager said, “you can shoot me, too, if that's how your tastes run, although I wouldn't have guessed it. What do you say?”

“No! Never! This is horrible!” The manager looked at him blankly. “Not in the mood now? OK. I'm open twenty four hours a day. See you later, sport.”

“Never!” Simon said, walking away.

“Be expecting you, lover!” one of the women called after him.

Simon went to the refreshment stand and ordered a small glass of coca-cola.

He found that his hands were shaking. With an effort he steadied them, and sipped his drink. He reminded himself that he must not judge Earth by his own standards. If people on Earth enjoyed killing people, and the victims didn't mind being killed, why should anyone object?

Or should they?

He was pondering this when a voice at his elbow said, “Hey, bub.” Simon turned and saw a wizened, furtive-faced little man in an oversize raincoat standing beside him.

“Out-of-towner?” the little man asked.

“I am,” Simon said. “How did you know?”

“The shoes. I always look at the shoes. How do you like our little planet?”

“It's confusing,” Simon said carefully. “I mean I didn't expect... well...”

“Of course”, the little man said. “You're an idealist. One look at your honest face tells me that, my friend. You've come to Earth for a definite purpose. Am I right?” Simon nodded. The little man said, “I know your purpose, my friend. You're looking for a war that will make the world safe from something, and you've come to the right place. We have six major wars running at all times, and there's never any waiting for an important position in any of them.”

“Sorry, but...”

“Right at this moment,” the little man said impressively, “the downtrodden workers of Peru are engaged in a desperate struggle against a corrupt and decadent monarchy. One more man could swing the contest! You, my friend, could be that man! You could guarantee the socialist victory!” Observing the expression on Simon's face, the little man said quickly, “But there's a lot to be said for an enlightened aristocracy. The wise old king of Peru (a philosopher-king in the deepest Platonic sense of the word) sorely needs your help. His tiny corps of scientists, humanitarians, Swiss guards, knights of the realm and royal peasants is sorely pressed by the foreign-inspired. A single man, you know —“ “I'm not interested,” Simon said.

“InChina , the Anarchists...”

“No.”

“Perhaps you'd prefer Communists inWales ?Or the Capitalists inJapan ? Or if youraffinities lies with a splinter group such as the Feminists, Prohibitionists, Free Silverists or the like, we could probably arrange...”

“I don't want a war,” Simon said.

“Who could blame you?” the little man said, nodding rapidly. “War is hell. In that case, you've come to Earth for love.”

“How did you know?” Simon asked.

The little man smiled modestly. “Love and war,” he said, “are Earth's two staple commodities. We've been turning them both out in bumper crops since the beginning of time.”

“Is love very difficult to find,” Simon asked.

“Walk uptown two blocks,” the little man said briskly. “Can't miss it. Tell'em Joe sent you.”

“But that's impossible! You can't just walk out and...”

“What do you know about love?” Joe asked.

“Nothing.”

“Well, we're experts on it.”

“I know what the books say,” Simon said. “Passion beneath the lunatic moon.”

“Sure, and bodies on a dark sea-beach desperate with love and deafened by the booming surf.”

“You've read that book?”

“It's the standard advertising brochure. I must be going. Two blocks uptown. Can't miss it.” And with a pleasant nod, Joe moved into the crowd. Simon finished his coca-cola and walked slowly upBroadway, his brow knotted in thought, but determined not to form any premature judgements.

When he reached44th Street he saw a tremendous neon sign flashing brightly.

It said LOVE, INC.

Smaller neon letters read, Open 24 Hours a Day!

Beneath that it read, Up One Flight.

Simon frowned, for a terrible suspicion had just crossed his mind. Still, he climbed the stairs and entered a small, tastefully furnished reception room.

From there he was sent down a long corridor to a numbered room.

Within the room was a handsome gray-haired man who rose from behind an impressive desk and shook his hand, saying, "Well! How are things on Kazanga?"

"How did you know I was from Kazanga?"

"That shirt. I always look at the shirt. I'm Mr. Tate, and I'm here to serve you to the best of my ability. You are..."

"Simon, Alfred Simon."

"Please be seated, Mr. Simon. Cigarette? Drink? You won't regret coming to us, sir. We're the oldest love-dispensing firm in the business, and much larger than our closest competitor, Passion Unlimited. Moreover, our fees are far more reasonable, and bring you an improved product. Might I ask how you heard of us?"

Did you see our full page ad in the Times? Or..."

"Joe sent me," Simon said.

"Ah, he's an active one," Mr. Tate said, shaking his head playfully. "Well, sir, there's no reason to delay. You've come a long way for love, and love you shall have." He reached for a button on his desk, but Simon stopped him.

Simon said, "I don't mean to be rude or anything, but..."

"Yes?" Mr. Tate said, with an encouraging smile.

"I don't understand this," Simon blurted out, flushing deeply, beads of perspiration standing out on his forehead. "I think I'm in the wrong place. I didn't come all the way to Earth just for ...I mean, you can't really sell love, can you? Not love! I mean, then it isn't really love, is it?"

"But of course!" Mr. Tate said, half rising from his chair in astonishment.

"That's the whole point! Anyone can buy sex. Good lord, it's the cheapest thing in the universe, next to human life. But love is rare, love is special, love is found only on Earth. Have you read our brochure?"

"Bodies on a dark sea-beach?" Simon asked.

"Yes, that one. I wrote it. Gives something of the feeling, doesn't it? You can't get that feeling from just anyone, Mr. Simon. You can get that feeling only from someone who loves you." Simon said dubiously, "It's not genuine love, though is it?"

"Of course it is! If we were selling simulated love, we'd label it as such. The advertising laws on Earth are strict, I can assure you. Anything can be sold, but it must be labelled properly, That's ethics, Mr. Simon!" Tate caught his breath, and continued in a calmer tone. "No, sir, make no mistake, our product is not a substitute. It is the exact self-same feeling that poets and writers have raved about for thousands of years. Through the wonders of modern science we can bring this feeling to you at your convenience, attractively packaged, completely disposable, and for a ridiculously low price."

Simon said, "I pictured something more... spontaneous."

"Spontaneity has its charm," Mr. Tate agreed. "Our research labs are working on it. Believe me, there's nothing science can't produce, as long as there's a market for it."

"I don't like any of this," Simon said, getting to his feet. "I think I'll just go see a movie."

"Wait!" Mr. Tate cried. "You think we're trying to put something over on you. You think we'll introduce you to a girl who will act as though she loved you, but who in reality will not. Is that it?"

"I guess so," Simon said.

"But it just isn't so! It would be too costly for one thing. For another, the wear and tear on the girl would be tremendous. And it would be psychologically unsound for her to attempt living a lie of such depth and scope."

"Then how do you do it?"

"By utilizing our understanding of science and the human mind." To Simon, this sounded like double-talk. He moved towards the door.

"Tell me something," Mr. Tate said. "You're a bright-looking fellow. Don't you think you could tell real love from a counterfeit item. "

"Certainly."

"There's your safeguard! You must be satisfied, or don't pay us a cent."

"I'll think about it," Simon said.

"Why delay? Leading psychologists say that real love is a fortifier and a restorer of sanity, a balm for damaged egos, a restorer of hormone balance, and an improver of the complexion. The love we supply you has everything: deep and abiding affection, unrestrained passion, complete faithfulness, an almost mystic affection for your defects as well as your virtues, a pitiful desire to please, and, as a plus that only Love, Inc. can supply: that uncontrollable first spark, that blinding moment of love at first sight!" Mr. Tate pressed a button. Simon frowned undecidedly. The door opened, a girl stepped in, and Simon stopped thinking.

She was tall and slender, and her hair was brown with a sheen of red. Simon could have told you nothing about her face, except that it brought tears to his eyes. And if you asked him about her figure, he might have killed you.

"Miss Penny Bright", said Tate, "meet Mr. Alfred Simon." The girl tried to speak but no words came, and Simon was equally dumbstruck. He looked at her and knew. Nothing else mattered. To the depths of his heart he knew that he was truly and completely loved.

They left at once, hand in hand, and were taken by jet to a small cottage in a pine grove, overlooking the sea, and there they talked and laughed and loved, and later Simon saw his beloved wrapped in the sunset flame like a goddess of fire. And in blue twilight she looked at him with eyes enormous and dark, her known body mysterious again. The moon came up, bright and lunatic, changing flesh to shadow, and she wept and beat his chest with her small fists and Simon wept too, although he did not know why. And at

last dawn came, faint and disturbed, glimmering upon their parched lips and locked lips, and nearby the booming surf deafened, inflamed, and maddened them.

Atnoon they were back in the offices of Love, Inc. Penny clutched his hand for a moment, then disappeared through an inner door.

“Was it real love?” Mr. Tate asked.

“Yes!”

“And was everything satisfactory?”

“Yes! It was love, it was the real thing! But why did she insist on returning?”

“Post-hypnotic command,” Mr. Tate said.

“What?”

“What did you expect? Everyone wants love, but few wish to pay for it. Here's your bill, sir.” Simon paid, fuming. “This wasn't necessary,” he said. “Of course I would pay you for bringing us together. Where is she now? What have you done with her?”

“Please,” Mr. Tate said soothingly. “Try to calm yourself.”

“I don't want to be calm!” Simon shouted. “I want Penny!”

“That will be impossible,” Mr. Tate said, with the barest hint of frost in his voice. “Kindly stop making a spectacle of yourself.”

“Are you trying to get more money out of me?” Simon shrieked. “All right, I'll pay. How much do I have to pay you to get her out of your clutches?” And Simon yanked out his wallet and slammed it on the desk.

Mr. Tate poked the wallet with a stiffened forefinger. “Put that back in your pocket,” he said. “We are an old and respectable firm. If you raise your voice again, I shall be forced to have you ejected.” Simon calmed himself with andeffort, put the wallet back in his pocket and sat down. He took a deep breath and said, very quietly, “I'm sorry.”

“That's better,” Mr. Tate said. “I will not be shouted at. However, if you are reasonable, I can be reasonable too. Now, what's the trouble?”

“The trouble?” Simon's voice started to lift. He controlled it and said, “She loves me.”

“Of course.”

“Then how can you separate us?”

“What has one thing got to do with another?” Mr. Tate asked. “Love is a delightful interlude, a relaxation, good for the intellect, for the ego, for the hormone balance, and for the skin tone. But one would hardly wish to continue loving, would one?”

“I would,” Simon said. “This love was special, unique. . .”

“They all are,” Mr. Tate said. “But as you know, they are all produced in the same way.”

“What?”

“Surely you know something about the mechanics of love production?”

“No,” Simon said. “I thought it was. . . natural.” Mr. Tate shook his head. “We gave up natural selection centuries ago, shortly after the Mechanical Revolution. It was too slow, and commercially unfeasible.

Why bother with it, when we can produce any feeling at will by conditioning and proper stimulation of certain brain centers? The result? Penny, completely in love with you! Your own bias, which we calculated, in favor of her particular somatype, made it complete. We always throw in the dark sea-beach, the lunatic moon, the pallid dawn. . .”

“Then she could have been made to love anyone,” Simon said slowly.

“Could have been brought to love anyone,” Mr. Tate corrected.

“Oh, lord, how did she get into this horrible work?” Simon asked.

“She came in and signed a contract in the usual way,” Tate said. “It pays very well. And at the termination of the lease, we return her original personality—untouched! But why do you call the work horrible? There's nothing reprehensible about love.”

“It wasn't love!” Simon cried.

“But it was! The genuine article! Unbiased scientific firms have made qualitative tests of it, in comparison with the natural thing. In every case, our love tested out to more depth, passion, fervor and scope.” Simon shut his eyes tightly, opened them and said, “Listen to me. I don't care about your scientific tests. I love her, she loves me, and that's all that counts. Let me speak to her! I want to marry her!” Mr. Tate wrinkled his nose in distaste. “Come, come, young man! You wouldn't want to marry a girl like that! But if it's marriage you're after, we deal in that, too. I can arrange an idyllic and nearly spontaneous love-match with a guaranteed, government-inspected virgin. . .”

“No! I love Penny! At least let me speak to her!”

“That will be quite impossible,” Mr. Tate said.

“Why?” Mr. Tate pushed a button on his desk. “Why do you think? We've wiped out the previous indoctrination. Penny is now in love with someone else.” And the Simon understood. He had realized that even now Penny was looking at another man with that passion he had known, feeling for another man that complete and bottomless love that unbiased scientific firms had shone to be so much greater than the old-fashioned, commercially unfeasible natural, and that upon the same dark sea-beach mentioned in the advertising brochure—He lunged for Tate's throat. Two attendants, who had entered the office a few moments earlier, caught him and led him to the door.

“Remember!” Tate called. “This in no way invalidates your own experience.” Hellishly enough, Simon knew that what Tate said was true.

And then he found himself on the street.

At first, all he desired was to escape from Earth, where the commercial impracticalities were more than a normal man could afford. He walked very quickly, and his Penny walked beside him, her face glorified with love for him, and him, and him, and you, and you.

And of course he came to the shooting gallery.

“Try your luck?” the manager asked.

“Set'em up,” said Alfred Simon.