



# FIRST PERSON PECULIAR



Stories by

# Mike Resnick

Hugo and Nebula Award Winning Author

**FIRST  
PERSON  
PECULIAR**

**Mike Resnick**



**WordFire Press**  
Colorado Springs, Colorado

**FIRST PERSON PECULIAR**

Entire contents copyright (c) 2014 Kirinyaga, Inc.

Additional copyright information on page 259

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the express written permission of the copyright holder, except where permitted by law. This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination, or, if real, used fictitiously.

ISBN: 978-1-61475-152-6

Book Design by RuneWright, LLC  
[www.RuneWright.com](http://www.RuneWright.com)

Published by  
WordFire Press, an imprint of  
WordFire, Inc.  
PO Box 1840  
Monument, CO 80132

Kevin J. Anderson & Rebecca Moesta, Publishers

WordFire Press Trade Paperback Edition March, 2014  
Printed in the USA  
[www.wordfire.com](http://www.wordfire.com)

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
The Wizard of West 34 <sup>th</sup> Street	5
The Gifilte Fish Girl	27
The Revealed Truth	37
Me and My Shadow	45
The Adventure of the Pearly Gates	63
A Little Night Music	71
Down Memory Lane	81
Will the Last Person to Leave the Planet Please Shut Off the Sun?	95
The Kemosabe	99
Old MacDonald Had A Farm	105
Mrs. Hood Unloads	123
Blue	127
Catastrophe Baker and a Canticle for Leibowitz	131
How I Wrote the New Testament, Ushered in the Renaissance, and Birdied the 17 <sup>th</sup> Hole at Pebble Beach	147
The Sacred Tree	155
The Evening Line	163
Cobbling Together a Solution	187
Beachcomber	205

<b>The Enhancement</b>	<b>211</b>
<b>Society's Goy</b>	<b>217</b>
<b>Me</b>	<b>229</b>
<b>Here's Looking at You Kid</b>	<b>237</b>
<b>A Princess of Earth</b>	<b>243</b>

# DEDICATION

To Carol, as always

And to fellow members of the Old White Guys Club:

Robert Silverberg  
Gregory Benford  
Jack McDevitt  
Barry N. Malzberg  
David Brin  
Eric Flint  
Kevin J. Anderson  
Larry Niven  
Jerry Pournelle  
Gene Wolfe  
Norman Spinrad  
Jack Dann



# INTRODUCTION

by Gregory Benford

**F**irst person seems the natural way to tell a story, but it has traps for the unwary. This collection shows how to avoid the snares and still use the assets of the big *I*.

First person has its advantages, all on display in these trademark Resnick stories. For example, the literary term for a dominant character is “first person major,” the character who tells the tale and is the principal actor. Think about Philip Marlowe in Raymond Chandler’s great noir novels. (Resnick echoes this very well, somewhat tongue in cheek.)

Since the narrator is within the story, he or she may not have knowledge of all the events. Since the piece is spoken directly in the character’s voice, it is automatically strong, allowing the reader to decide whether they can relate to the protagonist’s position or not. The style limits the ability for description, though.

A “first person minor” point of view stands at a distance from events, but is not the primary actor. The point of view voice gives us perspective, though limited to just his or hers. Try *The Great Gatsby*, an American classic narrated by a friend of Gatsby. A good rule: If you’re going to kill the lead character,

best not make him the point of view. The story ends when he does, unless you're taking the reader into the afterlife. (But you can do that, in fantasy. To show you how that works, see "The Adventure of the Pearly Gates" with its remarkable opening, "It was most disconcerting. One moment I was tumbling over the falls at Reichenbach, my arms locked around Professor Moriarty, and the next moment I seemed to be standing by myself in a bleak, gray, featureless landscape." Now *that's* an opening.)

Most of the time, the first person guarantees that at least the narrating *I* is telling us the truth as he/she sees it. But sometimes, not so.

Real people are unreliable narrators all the time, even if they try to be trustworthy. To my taste, though, that *I* should not lie to me; I get enough of that in real life, thank you.

Of course, that *I* could be a *we* instead—the first-person-plural point of view. This occurs rarely, but can be used effectively, sometimes as a means to increase the concentration on the character or characters the story is about. Example: Fred Pohl's *Man Plus*. One well-known and convoluted example of a multi-level narrative structure, using various first person voices, is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Even within this nested story, we learn that another character, Kurtz, told Marlow a lengthy story. We don't directly get told anything about its content. So we have an "I" narrator introducing a storyteller as "he" (Marlow), who talks about himself as "I" and introduces another storyteller as "he" (Kurtz), who in turn presumably told his story from the perspective of "I". It has a double framework: an unidentified "I" (first person singular) narrator relates a boating trip during which another character, Marlow, tells in the first person the story that comprises the majority of the work. Confusing, if you stop to think about it. The genius of Conrad is that you don't. The story sweeps you along.

Mike Resnick knows all this theory. This collection shows it. For fast dialog that must be in first person, look at "The Gefilte Fish Girl." For sheer audacity, consult "How I Wrote The New

Testament, Ushered In The Renaissance, And Birdied The 17th Hole At Pebble Beach”:

*So how was I to know that after all the false Messiahs the Romans nailed up, he would turn out to be the real one?*

Or dip into the simply titled “Me”:

*In the beginning I created the heavens and the Earth.*

*Well, not really.*

He leaves you with a deft comedy that wrenches your head around, though agreeably, in “Here’s Looking At You, Kid”:

*“I came to Casablanca for the waters.”*

I defy you to not read on, after that. Resnick knows what he’s doing. You don’t need to look into the gearbox, though. Just sit back and enjoy the ride.



*I wrote this because I heard a couple of kids talking about how great it would be to be the Wizard of Oz, and thinking that no job, no matter how interesting or powerful, is ever quite what it's cracked up to be. Go ask George W. Bush or Barack Obama—or the Wizard of West 34<sup>th</sup> Street.*

## THE WIZARD OF WEST 34<sup>TH</sup> STREET

**I**'m sitting at my desk, pretty much minding my own business and wondering how the Knicks will do when they go up against the Celtics in a few hours, when Milt Kaplan starts muttering into his phone about fifteen feet away from me. I try not to pay attention, but he gets louder and louder, and there is a desperate tone in his voice, and it becomes clear that he is being harassed for rent money or a credit card bill or a phone bill or (knowing Milt) probably a combination of all three.

Finally he slams the phone down and stares at the wall. For almost three minutes, which is a long time to stare at anything except a pretty girl. I am afraid he might be getting suicidal, so I figure a funny remark will bring him back to Earth, and I tell him that he can only stare at his half of the wall, if I see his eyes darting to the right I'm going to charge him the standard fee for staring at my half.

He doesn't crack a smile, but when he speaks his voice is soft and strained.

"I think I'm gonna have to see the Wiz," he says.

"Of Oz?" I ask with a smile.

He shakes his head and doesn't return the smile. "Not unless Oz has moved to the West Thirties."

So now I figure he *has* gone off the deep end, he's just being quiet about it.

He checks his watch. It's a quarter to noon.

"What the hell," he says. "They're not gonna fire me for taking an early lunch. If he's in the usual spot, I'll be back by one. If not, cover for me."

I don't want to let him go walking through noontime traffic in this state of mind, so I get to my feet.

"Want a little company?" I ask.

"Sure," he says. "It's chilly out, and if there's a line waiting to see him, it'll be nice to have someone to talk with."

We put our coats on, take the elevator down from the 27<sup>th</sup> floor, walk through the lobby, and out the main entrance.

"I hope the import/export business doesn't grind to a halt because we left a little early," I say,

"I was arranging for two gross of Bermuda shorts for what we call extra-large women," he replies. "I think the country can survive an extra hour and a quarter without them."

We walk south a few blocks, then turn right when we come to 34<sup>th</sup> Street.

"Six or seven cross-city blocks and we're there," he announces, heading off.

"We're *where*?" I ask.

"Where we're going," he says.

"Is it a building, or a restaurant, or what?"

"That all depends."

Now I know he's crazy, because locations don't change from one thing to another on a whim. It's getting chilly, so I figure if I can get him to admit we're on a wild goose chase, maybe we can stop at a coffee shop, warm up, and go back to

work at a quarter to one, before anyone gets too mad at us. So I ask: “*What* does it all depend on?”

“Where he’s at, of course,” says Milt.

“Where *who’s* at?” I ask in exasperation.

“The Wiz,” he explains as if to a child. “Where the hell did you think we were going?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” I say, because there is a story circulating around that whenever Milt Kaplan gets lost he can usually be found in Passaic with a blonde named Bernice. He doesn’t seem inclined to expand upon his answer, so finally I ask where we *are* going.

“West 34<sup>th</sup>, of course,” he answers. “Where else *would* we be going?”

“Beats the hell out of me,” I say. I’d shrug, but it’s too damned cold out.

“I mean,” Milt continues, “he *is* the Wizard of West 34<sup>th</sup> Street. Why would I look for him anywhere else?”

“The Wizard of West 34<sup>th</sup> Street?” I repeat. “I never heard of him.”

“He doesn’t advertise.”

“An understatement,” I say.

“My wife hates it when I go to him. She always thinks he’s going to want to be paid with my soul instead of with money.” He snorts. “As if anyone could find the damned thing.” He shakes his head. “I’ve got no choice. We could lose the apartment—and trying to get a place after you’ve been living a dozen years with rent control ...” He lets his voice tail off.

“Tell me about this Wizard,” I say. “Does he wear a pointed hat and a robe with all the signs of the Zodiac?”

Milt shakes his head. “He dresses just like anyone else.” He pauses thoughtfully. “Maybe a little worse.” Another pause. “And he usually needs a shave.”

“Goes with having a long white beard,” I suggest.

“Nah,” says Milt. “Usually it’s just stubble. Kind of the way Clint Eastwood used to look in those spaghetti Westerns, only gray.”

“And this is a guy you think is a wizard?”

“I don’t think it, I *know* it,” replies Milt. “We *all* know it.”

“Who all knows it?” I ask.

“All the guys who use him.”

“Sound like he’s got a hell of a sweet racket going,” I say.

“I’m surprised the cops haven’t busted him.”

“Why should they?” he shoots back. “There’s never been a complaint against him. Hell, sometimes the cops use him too.”

“I’ve got to see this wonder worker,” I say.

“You will,” he promises as we cross Sixth Avenue. “He’s usually somewhere between Eighth and Tenth.”

“He must be freezing his ass off.”

Milt chuckles. “We’ll find him in a bar, or perhaps a sandwich shop, either on 34<sup>th</sup> itself or maybe two or three buildings north or south on one of the cross streets. He doesn’t like being outside except in the summer.”

So we walk, and I try to guess which brownstone Rex Stout pretended that Nero Wolfe lived in, and we peek into the windows of a couple of bars, but Milt shakes his head after a moment and we keep on, and finally come to a deli.

“Yeah, there he is,” says Milt without much enthusiasm. “Damn, I hate this!”

“So let’s turn around and go back to the office,” I say.

“I can’t,” he responds unhappily. “I need the money.”

“What is he really?” I ask. “Some kind of loan shark?”

He shakes his head again. “You coming in with me?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” I say, falling into step behind him as he enters the place. We make a beeline for a table where this middle-aged guy is sitting. His clothes clearly came off the bargain rack to begin with, and have all seen better days and better years, and the shoes have probably seen better decades. He’s got a bowtie beneath his unbuttoned collar, but it’s just hanging down, and I get the feeling that the next time he ties it into a bow will be the first time. There’s a patch on his jacket’s elbow, and he could use a haircut or, failing that, at least a comb.

“Ah, Milton!” he says, looking up from his meal, which seems to consist entirely of chopped liver and rye bread, plus a couple of cheese blintzes. “How nice to see you again! Sit down. Have a knosh.”

“Have a knosh?” I repeat. “What kind of language is that for a wizard?”

He stares at me. “How many wizards do you talk to on a daily basis?” he asks at last.

“This is my friend Jacob,” says Milt hastily. “Can he join us?”

“Got no room at this table for Jacobs,” says the Wizard. He turns to me. “You want to sit at an informal table like this, you got to be Jake.”

“Okay, I’m Jake,” I say, sitting down.

“You look like you are,” he says. I frown, trying to figure out what the hell he’s talking about. “Forget it,” he adds. “It’s an old expression I found lying on the floor.”

“Have *you* got a name?” I ask.

“You couldn’t pronounce it,” he replies. “Just call me Wiz.”

The waiter comes up and hands the Wiz a folded note. He opens it, reads it, and shakes his head. “It’s gonna rain Tuesday morning, and this horse can’t stand up in the mud, let alone run six furlongs on it. Tell him No.”

“I heard the forecast just before I left the house this morning,” I say. “It calls for clear weather all week.”

“Amazing how these guys can stay in business when they’re wrong so often,” comments the Wiz, pouring some cinnamon sugar on his blintzes. “So, my friend Milton, what can I do for you today?”

“I’ve got a bit of a cash flow problem,” says Milt.

The Wiz closes his eyes for a few seconds, and he frowns like he’s concentrating on something. “You don’t have to sugar-coat it, Milton, not with *me*. You’re in deep shit.”

Milt nods uncomfortably.

“Could be worse,” says the Wiz. “You could live in some town where you needed a car, because if you did they’d sure as hell have repossessed it if you’d waited this long to see me.”

"I kept waiting for the market to turn," answers Milt miserably. "My broker kept saying it would happen any day."

The Wiz makes a face. "*Brokers!*" he snorts contemptuously. "They're almost as bad as weathermen." He pauses and stares at Milt. "How much do you need?"

"Don't you know?" asks Milt, surprised.

"My mistake," amends the Wiz. "How much do you *want*? We both know how much you need."

"Twelve, thirteen grand?" says Milt, though it comes out more as a question.

"How soon?"

"By Friday."

"Too bad," says the Wiz. "There's a really nice filly who'll be running for a big price on Saturday." I must have made a face, because he turns to me. "You don't think she'll win?"

"I don't even know who the hell she is," I say. "But somehow I thought a wizard was more than a racetrack tout."

"I'm not a racetrack tout," he replies. "I haven't been to Belmont or Aqueduct in years."

"You know what I mean," I say.

"Yes, and I want you to remember that I didn't take offense at it." He turns to Milt. "Give me a pen." Milt supplies one, and he begins scribbling on a paper napkin. "You still have a little over seventeen hundred dollars in your bank account. Take it out—"

"All of it?" interrupts Milt, his voice shaking a little.

"Take it out," repeats the Wiz firmly. "Give it to your broker, and tell him to go to the commodities market and invest it all on what I just wrote down." He looks up at Milt. "Now, this is important, Milton, so pay attention. He has to buy between noon and 1:00 PM on Wednesday, and he has to sell it between 10:00 and 11:00 AM on Friday morning. If one or the other of you fucks up either end of it, don't come running to me."

"And that'll give me thirteen grand?" asks Milt.

"After my fee," says the Wiz.

“Oh, of course,” agrees Milt promptly. “Thank you, Wiz.”

The Wiz shrugs. “It’s my job.”

“Your job?” I say. “Who do you work for?”

“I’m a freelancer.”

“Are there any other wizards in Manhattan?” I ask.

“Not to my knowledge.” A brief pause. “I sure as hell hope not.”

“Don’t want any competition, eh?” I say with a smile.

He stares at me with suddenly sad eyes that have seen too many things. “If you say so, Jake,” he says at last.

Milt gets to his feet. “I owe you big time, Wiz,” he says.

“I’ll collect, never fear,” the Wiz assures him. He sighs, suddenly deflated. “I always collect.” It sounds like anything but a brag.

“You won’t be offended if I leave?” continues Milt. “I want to get by the bank before I go back to the office.”

“Not a problem,” says the Wiz. He nods toward a woman who is wearing a dress that just doesn’t belong in a cheap deli, along with furs and diamonds that would be ostentatious even fifty blocks north of where we are. “I have someone else waiting to see me.”

“Nice meeting you,” I say, getting up and trying not to sound too insincere.

“May I offer you a suggestion, Jake?” he says, and then adds: “Freely given.”

“Sure, why not?” I say in bored tones, waiting for him to tell me what horse or boxer to put some money on.

“I have a feeling that you were planning on having dinner at Rosario’s tonight.”

“Now, how the hell did you know that?” I ask, surprised.

“Just a guess.”

“Damned good guess,” I admit. I turn to follow Milt to the door.

“My suggestion?” he says, and I stop and turn back to him.

“Yeah?”

“Don’t eat there this evening,” says the Wiz.

Before I can answer, he signals the bejeweled lady to come to the table, and I join Milt in the street.

I don't go to Rosario's Ristorante that night. I don't know why. Maybe I just have a taste for Greek food instead. I really don't think what the Wiz said has anything to do with it.

But the next morning, as I am getting dressed, I hear on the news that Rosario's has burned down to the ground, and that six diners have died in the blaze.

\* \* \*

I am back at the deli at noon, but he's not there. I walk up and down 34<sup>th</sup> Street, peeking in windows, and I finally see him in a bar that looks even grubbier than the deli. He is sitting in a booth, smoking a bent cigarette and talking to someone who looks like a male version of the lady in the furs and diamonds. I don't want to interrupt him, but I am damned if I'm going to just turn around and go back to the office, so I enter the place and sit down on a bar stool in the corner, right below photos of Mickey Mantle, Joe Namath, Willis Reed, Secretariat, and Tuffy Bresheen, a lady Roller Derby star from before I was born.

I nurse a beer for about ten minutes. Then the well-dressed guy gets up and leaves, but before I can even climb off my stool a tiny man—in the dim lighting I can't tell if he's a dwarf or a midget—climbs onto the booth opposite the Wiz, asks a single question, looks damned pleased with the answer, and walks right back out.

"Ah, it's the Real Jake," says the Wiz. "I appreciate your patience. Come join me. Bring your beer."

I walk over and sit down, placing my beer on the stained tabletop.

"What can I do for you, Jake?" he asks.

"How the hell did you know Rosario's would burn down?" I demand.

"What difference does it make?" he responds. "I was right, wasn't I?"

“You know you were,” I say. I stare long and hard at him. “Did you set the fire?”

“Of course I didn’t,” he says. “We’re not going to be friends if you say things like that, Jake.”

“*Are* we going to be friends?” I ask rather pugnaciously.

“Absolutely,” he replies. “I don’t do favors for just anyone, you know.”

“No,” I say. “They have to pay you.”

He almost winces. “Did I charge you a penny?” he asks in hurt tones.

“Why me?” I say.

“Because there’s enough pain in the world,” he answers. He stares at me. “I do you a service, I save you from second-degree burns, and I don’t charge you a thing. Why should that bother you?”

“Second-degree burns?” I repeat.

He nods his head.

“Not first-degree or third-degree?” I say.

“No,” he answers mildly but with absolute certainty. “Second-degree.”

“You’re sure?”

“I never lie,” he says.

“So you saved my life ...” I begin.

“Not your life,” he answers. “But a considerable portion of your skin.”

“And you didn’t charge me a thing,” I continue. “But you charge people for giving them winners at the track, or telling them what stock to play.”

“Oh, I do more than that,” he says. “I tell actors which plays to try out for and which ones won’t run a week. I tell fishermen where they’re biting and where they’re not.” A sudden smile. “I even tell Tootsie La Belle when to tone down her strip routine because a couple of cops are waiting to arrest her if she goes too far.” He takes another sip of his beer. “It’s much more than stocks and horses, Jake. I’m not a tout or a prognosticator. I’m the Wiz.”

“What else can you do?” I ask.

“What else do you want?”

“Hell, I don’t know,” I admit. “I should be thanking you for saving my life—”

“Your skin.”

“Okay, my skin. But instead, I’m getting more and more frustrated because I don’t understand you.”

“What’s to understand?” he says. “I’m the Wiz. I see suffering, now or in the future, and I do what I can to cure it, or at least alleviate it. People come to me with their problems, just like they go to a doctor or a dentist.”

“Or a priest,” I say.

He smiles. “Well, in this neighborhood, it’s more likely to be a rabbi.” He stares at me. “So what is it that troubles you?”

“You can pick winners. You can pick stocks. You can pick hits and flops. You can probably pick political races. So why aren’t you worth billions?”

“What would I do with billions?”

“You could start by getting a shave and haircut, and maybe taking a bath. You could dress a little better, and live a lot better,” I say. “Hell, you could buy the Empire State Building.”

“Probably,” he agrees. “But what would I do with it?”

“Didn’t you ever want to be something else?” I ask, and the second the words are out of my mouth I realize what a damnfool stupid question it is. After all, he’s the Wiz.

And suddenly there’s a very wistful smile on his face. “More than you can possibly imagine.”

“Well?” I say.

He utters a deep sigh. “It’s not as easy as you think or I wish.”

“Why not?”

“There’s your friend Milton, and a thousand other Miltons,” he answers. “Where would they go if there wasn’t a Wiz?”

“That shouldn’t be your concern,” I respond.

“Oh?” he says curiously. “Whose concern is it?”

“Theirs, of course,” I say.

He shakes his head sadly. "They're not up to it, Jake," he replies. "That's why they come to me."

"So the noble Wiz saves them all," I say.

"No, Jake. I can hardly save any of them," he says. "Look out the front window." People are walking past, and he starts pointing at them. "Heart attack. Cancer. Cancer. Mugged in the subway. Alzheimer's. Aneurism. Cancer." He turns back to me. "I can't save, or even help, more than one of them, and only if he asks me."

"There are rules to being a saint?" I ask sarcastically.

"I've no idea," he answers. "But there are rules to the Wizard game."

"So am I going to read about those seven people tomorrow?"

He shakes his head. "Some of them will live another twenty or thirty years. The man in the blue coat won't make it past the end of the week."

"You're sure of all that?" I say.

"I'm sure." He lights another cigarette. "I'm sure of something else, too."

"What?" I ask.

"No matter how it appears to you, it's not a blessing."

I check my watch. "I've got to get back to the office."

"Stop by again, Jake. We could become friends. I'd like that."

"There's probably a thousand men and women who *want* to be your friend," I say. "Why me?"

"Because you don't want anything from me."

"No, I don't," I say, getting up from the booth. "Keep your millions. I won't even envy you until I'm back at the office."

"Never envy me, Jake," he says seriously.

"Okay, as soon as I'm at my desk I'll go back to envying LeBron James, or maybe Tom Cruise."

"What floor is your office on?" he asks.

"The 27<sup>th</sup>. Why?"

"Can I make a suggestion?" he says.

I just stare at him.

“Take the freight elevator.”

“Why?” I demand.

“Just a hunch.”

“Bullshit,” I say. “Whatever’s going to happen, you know exactly what it is.”

“I don’t want to rush you, Jake, but the lady who just came in is worried about her son, who’s seeing some action in the Middle East. She’s very distraught, and I don’t want to keep her waiting.”

So I go back to the office, and I take the freight elevator, and an hour later Milt enters and sits down at his desk.

“Long lunch?” I ask, though I knew it wasn’t.

“Circuit on the fucking elevators blew,” he mutters. “We were stuck in the damned thing for over an hour.”

\* \* \*

On Thursday I find him sitting on an ancient wooden bench that’s been set up outside a small grocery store on Tenth Avenue, just around the corner from 34<sup>th</sup> Street. It’s forty degrees and windy, and he hasn’t got an overcoat, but he doesn’t seem uncomfortable. He’s smoking a cigarette, and I sit down next to him.

“Those things’ll kill you,” I say, indicating the cigarette.

“No such luck,” he answers.

“Thanks for saving me from a couple of hours of being stuck in an elevator.”

He shakes his head. “An hour and ten minutes. Hour and a quarter, tops. Depends on which elevator.”

“Milt was stuck in one of them.”

“Poor guy,” says the Wiz, not without compassion.

“If you’re half as good as I think you are, you knew when he visited you in the deli that it would happen,” I say.

He shrugs. “Anything’s possible.”

“Then why didn’t you warn him?”

“He’s going to use up all his extra money just thanking me for putting him in the right commodities at the right time.” answers the Wiz. “And where would I be if I worked for free?”

“But you told *me* for free!” I yell.

“Keep your voice down, Jake. If we disturb enough people, Homer the cop will chase me back inside”—he indicates a grubby coffee shop three doors down—“and it’s too damned stuffy in there.”

“Then answer me!” I insist.

“It was an act of friendship,” says the Wiz.

“Why me?” I say, and realize I asked that the day before too. “What have I got that Milt and a thousand other supplicants haven’t got?”

He smiles. “For one thing, you’re not a supplicant.”

“That’s no answer.”

“Funny,” he says. “I could have sworn it was.”

“So all someone has to do to be your friend and get free use of your services is to not ask for them?” I say.

“No, Jake,” he says. Suddenly he stares intently at me. “I helped you because I have a feeling that we’re kindred souls.” His cigarette goes out and he pulls a semi-crushed pack from his pocket. “I take it you don’t want one?”

I shake my head. “I had a father and an aunt die from cancer.”

“You won’t die from cancer, Jake.”

“You can see *that* far ahead?” I ask.

“Just take my word for it.”

“What *will* I die of?” I continue.

“Most people don’t want to know.”

“I just want to know *what*, not *when*.”

“Let it go, Jake,” says the Wiz, and suddenly he looks very old and very tired. “I don’t like talking about the end of things.” He taps his temple with a forefinger. “I see enough of them in here.”

I stare at him for a minute. “I never thought of that,” I say at last. “I guess the Wiz business isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“You see?” he says with a sad smile. “I *knew* you were a kindred spirit.”

A guy who’s dressed even worse than the Wiz approaches us.

“Go away,” says the Wiz.

“Goddamn it!” whines the man. “You help everyone else! I really need it, Wiz!”

“If you’re still here when I count to five, I’m calling Homer over and telling him you’re harassing me.”

The guy mutters an obscenity and wanders off.

“He looked pretty desperate,” I say.

“He is,” agrees the Wiz. “He’s panhandled enough money for a ten dollar bet at his bookie’s. He’s looking for a longshot, and if it comes in, he’ll just spend it on crack.” He grimaces. “Let him learn how to read a *Racing Form*, or maybe even work for it.”

“So it wasn’t that you *couldn’t* help him . . .” I say.

“I have an unwanted gift,” he explains. “I didn’t ask for it, and I don’t want it—but as long as I’ve got it, I’ll use it the best way I can. And that doesn’t include helping a guy cheat on his wife, or a druggie score with his pusher.”

“Did you just wake up one day and suddenly you were the Wiz?” I asked.

He smiles a wistfully sad smile, closes his eyes, and slowly shakes his head. “I asked a foolish question.”

“What question?”

“Better you should remain ignorant,” he says.

The wind starts blowing harder.

“You hungry?” he asks suddenly.

I think about it for a moment. “I could eat.”

We enter the coffee shop and sit down at a table.

“Where are the menus?” I ask, looking around for one.

“Have a burger,” he says. “That’s all they make until evening.”

“Then why don’t we go to a joint with a better selection?”

“This one suits me fine,” he says.

I see we're not going to leave, so I order a cheeseburger with grilled onions and a beer. He doesn't even order; the waitress just says she's bringing him the usual and he smiles and nods at her.

"So how's the world treating you, Jake?" he says.

"I'd tell you, but you already know," I answer.

He smiles. "Just making conversation."

"It makes more sense for me to ask *you* the questions," I say.

"That's what I'm here for."

"And none of these non-answers that don't tell me a thing," I add.

"I'll answer as best as I can," he tells me. "And I never lie."

"How long have you been the Wiz?" I ask. "Surely you weren't born this way, or everyone would know about you."

"A long time," he says with a bittersweet smile.

"Ten years?" I persist. "Twenty?"

"Seventeen years, six months, and eleven days," he says, and then adds: "But who's counting?"

"How did you become the Wiz?" I ask. "Is there some wizard's school you went to?"

"It just happened one day," he says.

I snap my fingers. "Just like that?"

"Almost."

"Why aren't you working for the government?" I ask. "I'll bet the Defense Department would pay a pretty penny for your skills."

"I've already got more pretty pennies than I need," he answers. "And I help *people*, not *things*."

"Does it make you happy—helping people?"

"It did once."

"Not any more?"

He sighs. "Nothing ever changes. No matter how many people I help, there are always more—and even with the ones I help, like Milton, the fixes are almost always temporary, not permanent."

Our sandwiches and beers arrive. I take a bite of my cheeseburger. It's not bad at all.

"So who do you like in tonight's game?" I ask, changing the subject.

"Like's got nothing to do with it," he replies. "The Bulls are gonna make the Knicks look bad."

I stare at him. "You know," I say, "it occurs to me that knowing everything isn't exactly the blessing it seems to be. When was the last time something surprised you?"

"A long, *long* time ago," he says.

"And it's not just knowing the races and the market, is it?" I continue. "If some woman agrees to go to bed with you, you knew she would before you asked her. Maybe you didn't have to ask at all." I look across the table at him. "You never feel surprised or lucky, do you?"

"Or loved," he adds. "Just ... *inevitable*."

"I'm sorry for you, Wiz," I say sincerely.

"There are compensations," he says. "I get to help people."

"A lot of them would get through the day without your help," I point out. "Maybe most of them."

He grimaces and his shoulders seem to sag. "Probably," he agrees.

"Is *everything* predetermined?" I ask.

"Hardly anything is," he says.

"But—"

"You have free will, Jake," he says. "I could warn you about Rosario's and the elevator, but it was up to you whether or not to take my advice. When you get right down to it, what's the difference between that and choosing to stop at a corner when there's heavy traffic and you see a red light?"

"There are two differences," I answer. "One is that you *knew* I'd take your advice. You could look ahead and see it. And the other is that the red light's always there for everybody, and you aren't."

"Now you're going to make me feel guilty," he says, though he manages a smile.

“I don’t mean to,” I say.

“I know.”

“I’m just starting to realize what your life must be like,” I continue. “I wouldn’t have it on a bet.”

“You don’t bet once you’re the Wiz,” he says gently. “In fact, you *can’t* bet, because betting involves the element of chance.”

“You should never have volunteered to be a wizard.”

“I didn’t volunteer.” He stares at me. “You have qualities, Jake,” he says. “You ask a few questions, and in five minutes you’ve figured out that the wizard business isn’t quite exactly what it appears to be from the outside. I’m curious to know what you’ll ask next.”

“How about ‘What’s for dessert?’” I say.

He laughs, and suddenly his melancholy vanishes.

We order vanilla ice cream—it’s the only sweet they serve until dinnertime—and then we walk out into the street.

“You didn’t pay,” I note.

“I did them a favor last week,” he replies. “The meal’s a *quid pro quo*.”

I check my watch. “I’ve got to get back to the office,” I say.

“Thanks for eating with me,” he says, shaking my hand. “And for being my friend.”

“One of thousands,” I suggest.

He shakes his head. “The rest are supplicants.”

“Surely you have some friends, too,” I say.

“Real friends?” A wistful expression crosses his face. “I had one about eighteen years ago.” A pause. “Maybe a little less.”

“Just about the time you became the Wiz,” I say. “What happened to him?”

“I’ve no idea,” he answers.

“Didn’t work out, huh?”

“I guess you could say that.”

I think about the Wiz and his one friend all the way back to the office and most of the afternoon.

\* \* \*

We meet for lunch a couple of times a week for the next month. He lets a few supplicants interrupt us, and he also refuses to talk to some others, and I can never tell by looking at them what the determining factors are. He talks to some bums and sends others on their way ... but he also talks to some guys who have their chauffeurs drive them up and sends some of *them* packing too.

“How do you decide who to talk to?” I ask him.

“I thought I told you,” says the Wiz.

“There’s got to be some gray areas,” I say. “The good ones can’t all be trying to save their families from ruin, and the bad ones can’t all be junkies.”

“Mostly it’s instinct and intuition. Usually I can see what they’re going to do with the help I give them, but even that can be misleading.”

“So you *can* make mistakes?”

He nods his head. “Yes, from time to time.” He smiles. “After all, I’m only human.”

I stare at him. “*Are* you human?”

“I’m as human as you are, Jake,” he says earnestly.

“I don’t know about that,” I say.

“Oh?” he replies, arching an eyebrow.

“It’s human to take care of yourself. But you dress like a bum, and you eat all your meals in delis and dives, and if you’ve squirreled away any money you sure as hell don’t use it. Where do you live?”

“Nearby.”

“Why don’t I think you live in one of these brownstones?” I say.

“Because you’re a reasonable man, Jake,” he answers. “All I need is a place to sleep.”

“When’s the last time you showered?”

“Seriously?” he says. A guilty smile crosses his face. “The last time it rained after midnight.”

“How can you live like that?” I say in exasperation.

“I used to live in a penthouse,” he replies. “Brooks Brothers

wasn't upscale enough for my wardrobe. I had a maid *and* a butler, as well as a valet."

"Why did you change?"

"The people who need me the most couldn't find me there," he says.

I shrug and turn my palms up. "How can I answer that?"

He smiles. "You'd feel damned foolish trying, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah."

"That's one of the reasons I like you," he says. "Not everyone is that perceptive." He pauses thoughtfully. "In fact, hardly anyone is. I just had a feeling you could be my friend."

"Your feelings have a way of coming true," I acknowledge. "But you know something interesting?"

"What?"

"You've never asked me if you could be *my* friend."

"That's not as important," he says.

I just stare at him. "Why not?" I say at last.

"You have lots of friends already."

Somehow I get the feeling that that's as close as he's come to a bullshit answer since I've met him,

\* \* \*

We keep meeting, and we keep talking, and he *seems* open and friendly, but I can't get over the feeling that he's got some agenda I know nothing about. I still don't know why a reasonably pleasant guy like the Wiz hasn't had a friend in seventeen years, or why he's chosen me out all the millions who live on this damned island.

We don't do anything but meet and talk, occasionally in delis and coffee shops, now and then in bars, once in a while when the weather's nice just out on a bench where anyone who's looking for him can find him (though everyone who needs him seems to have no trouble finding him wherever we are).

We never go to the Garden for basketball or hockey, we

never see a movie or a play, in truth we never get much more than half a block off 34<sup>th</sup> Street. He just wants to visit, to talk about almost anything, and he's always straightforward—or at least I think he is—when we talk about what he calls the Wiz Biz.

“What do you do if someone won't pay you after you've given them a winner, or told them how to avoid a mad dog gunman, or whatever?” I ask him one day as we're walking down 34<sup>th</sup> Street.

“I'm the Wiz,” he says. “I know before I help them if they're deadbeats.”

“That's a pretty useful thing to know,” I say. “Man's a deadbeat, you send him away.”

“Not always.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“Maybe his wife or kid is growing a tumor, and he's not insured and hasn't got enough to pay for a doctor. It becomes an ethical question: should *they* suffer because he's a loser?”

“I see,” I say. “It's not as simple as it seems at first.”

“Nothing ever is,” he says.

“Why don't you quit?” I say. “Just walk away from it all?”

“Who'd be here to help them?”

“You've seen enough suffering,” I continue. “You've done your share. It's *their* problem.”

“Just let them all suffer in pain and poverty when I can prevent it?” he says. “Is that what you'd do?”

I think about it for a long moment. “No,” I admit. “That's not what I'd do. It's just what I'd *want* to do.”

“I know,” he says, and I get the feeling he *does* know.

“When we first met,” I say, “I kind of envied you. I really did. I thought you had the greatest gift in the world. But the more we talk about it, the more I hate the choices you have to make day in and day out.”

“You learn to live with it,” he says.

“I don't know how,” I say. “There's so much pain, so much misery in the world. Most people just see a tiny part of it, but

you—you see it all.” I shake my head. “What must it be like?”

He comes to a stop and grabs my shoulder.

“Say that again!” he says, and there’s a hint of excitement in his voice as his fingers dig in.

I stare curiously at him. “What’s it like to see the future?”

“And you really want to know?”

“I asked, didn’t I?”

“Thank you, my friend,” he says with such an air of relief you’d swear he’s just run a marathon. “I have been waiting seventeen years for someone to ask me that.”

And suddenly his fingers feel like they’re dissolving on my shoulder. He seems to grow, not thinner exactly, but somehow less substantial, then translucent, and finally transparent, until there’s nothing left of him but a pile of grubby clothes on the ground and the butt of his still-burning cigarette,

All this happens seven years ago. Sometimes it feels like seven centuries.

\* \* \*

I am the Wizard of West 34<sup>th</sup> Street. If you’ve got a problem, or a need, or just a question, come by and tell me about it. There is no situation too dire or too hopeless, nothing so complex that it’s beyond my ability to solve. There will be a fee, of course, but you’ll be happy to pay it, and I will never ask for it before you are pleased with the results.

I’m always around. If you don’t see me on the street, just ask one of the locals, or peek into a restaurant or a bar. There aren’t that many of them, and I’ll be in one. Don’t let my appearance fool you. I’ve got a Master’s degree, I have enough money that I’m not going to con you out of yours, and I guarantee that you won’t catch any diseases from me. How I look just isn’t important to me any more.

I’m here to answer your questions, so ask me anything you like.

Anything at all.

*Please.*



*Back in 1996, Kris Rusch, who was editing F&SF, brought back an old custom, that of writing a cover story around a painting. But in this case, the painting was a cartoonish one of a deep-sea diver and a mermaid, and Kris assigned it to three of us*

—horror by Nina Kiriki Hoffman, fantasy by  
Esther Friesner, and science fiction by me.

## THE GIFILTE FISH GIRL

**S**o I walk up to her and say, “Ma, we gotta talk.”  
And she never looks up from the TV, and she says, “Not during *Homemakers’ Jamboree*, Marvin.”

And I say, “Ma, I’m Milton. Marvin is your goniff brother who is serving 6 to 10 for passing bogus bills.” (Which he is. He’s a great artist, even the judge admitted that, but he just doesn’t do his homework, and printing a bunch of twenties with Andrew Johnson’s picture on them is probably not the brightest move he ever made.)

Anyway, she says “Marvin, Milton, what’s the difference, and did you know that Liz Taylor is getting married again? What is it for her now—the 34th time?”

And I say, “You know, Ma, it’s funny you should bring that up.”

And she says, “Funny? Okay, Mister Big Shot, tell me what’s so funny. Are you the one she’s marrying? Go ahead, make my day.”

And I say, “Lots of people get married, Ma. Some of them even get married to women who aren’t Liz Taylor, hard as that may be for you to believe.”

And she says, “Lots of *mature* people, Melvin.”

And I say, “Melvin is my cousin who ran off with the gay lion tamer from the circus. I’m Milton, and speaking of mature, I’m 34 years old.”

And she says, “You’d think someone who’s 34 years old would know to change his socks without being told.” Suddenly she curses and says, “See? You made me miss today’s health tip. Here I sit, waiting to go to the hospital for a nerve transplant from all the *tsouris* you cause me, and I can’t even watch my television in peace.”

So I say, “You’re in great shape, Ma. Every artery’s as hard as a rock.”

“*Feb!*” she says. “God has reserved a special place in hell for ungrateful sons.”

“I know,” I say. “It’s probably right next to where He puts all the henpecked husbands.”

“Don’t you go making fun of my dear departed Erwin,” she says.

“I wasn’t,” I say. “And besides, all we know is that he departed in one hell of a hurry. We don’t know for sure that he’s dead.”

“If he isn’t, he should be, that *momser!*” she says.

Well, I can see the thought that he may be alive and God forbid enjoying himself is about to drive her wild, so I try to mollify her.

“Okay, okay,” I say, hoping the Lord is otherwise occupied and does not hear what I am about to say. “May God Himself strike me dead if he’s not your late husband.”

“Well, he was late for most things,” she agrees, leaning back in her chair. “Except in the bedroom. *There* he was always early.”

I try to change the subject again.

“We were talking about marriage,” I say.

“Someday, when you’re old enough, ” she says, “you’ll get married and ruin some poor Jewish girl’s happiness, just the way your dear departed father ruined mine, and the only good thing that will come of it will be a grandson who, knock wood, won’t take after his father and his grandfather but will show me a little respect and compassion.”

I begin to see that this is going to be even more difficult than I thought, and I try to come up with a subtle way to break the news to her. So I think, and I think, and I think some more, and finally I say, as subtly as I can, “Ma, I’m engaged.”

And she looks away from the television set and takes her feet off the hassock and plants them on the floor, and stares at me for maybe 30 seconds, and finally she says, “Engaged to do what?”

“To get married,” I say.

She digs into her sewing kit, which is on the floor next to her, and pulls out a scissors.

“Here,” she says, handing it to me. “Why waste all afternoon rushing me to the hospital’s cardiac unit? Just stab me now and be done with it.”

“Jugular or varicose?” I ask.

“*Schmendrick!*” she says. “How can the fruit of my looms talk to me like this?”

“I’m the fruit of your loins, Ma,” I tell her. “Fruit of the Loom is what I’m wearing beneath my pants.”

“All right,” she says. “Just stand there and watch me breathe my last.”

“Your last what?” I ask.

She glares at me and finally says, “Before I die, at least tell me the name of this female person you’re engaged to do whatever with.”

“Melora of the Purple Mist,” I say.

“Melora of the Purple Mist?” she repeats. “How can I fit all that on a wedding invitation?”

“Just use Melora,” I say.

“And what bowling alley or topless club do you meet Miss What’s-her-name of the Purple Mist at?” she asks.

“I met her at work, kind of,” I answer.

“I *knew* it!” she says, poking a pudgy forefinger into the air. “I knew I should never let you take that job with the sewage company!”

“It’s a salvage company,” I say.

“Sewage, salvage, what’s the difference?” she demands. “It’s that Gypsy who walks around half-naked with her deathless beauty sagging down to her *pupik*, right? I *told* you she had her sights set on you!”

“She’s not a Gypsy, and it’s not her. She’s just another diver.”

“So you’re marrying some other girl who lies around on deck with her *tuchus* soaking up the sun,” she says. “I should feel better about that?”

“She doesn’t lie around on deck,” I say uneasily.

“On deck, below deck, big difference,” she snaps.

“Bigger than you think,” I say. “The truth of it is, she spends most of her time about 50 feet below deck.”

“So she’s a diver,” she says.

“Not exactly,” I answer.

“What, then?”

“Try not to get real excited, Ma,” I say.

“I’m not excited, I have convulsions all the time,” she says. “Just tell me.”

“She’s a mermaid,” I say.

“As long as she’s not that Gypsy girl,” she says, fanning herself with the *TV Guide*. “Or that lady bartender from last summer. Or the bug woman.”

“The entomologist,” I correct her.

“Whatever,” she says. “So tell me about this Purple Mist person.”

“Like I said, she’s a mermaid.”

“Like what has a tail and spends her whole life in the water?” she asks.

“That’s right,” I say.

“Does she wear a bra?” she says suddenly.

“Ma!” I say, outraged.

“You heard me—does she wear a bra?”

“No,” I finally answer.

“Figures,” she says.

“What a thing to ask!” I say.

“What do you want me to ask?” she says. “My son comes home and tells me he’s marrying someone who’s covered with scales and spends all her time swimming in salt water, despite what it must do to her complexion. So can she at least get us a price on fresh fish?”

“It’s not something I’m real concerned with,” I say.

“Of course not,” she says. “You’re as impractical as your late father.” She sighs. “All right, so where did this female person go to school?”

“I don’t think she did,” I say.

“Ah!” she says with a knowing nod. “Rich family with a private tutor. What temple do they belong to?”

“Who?”

“Her family,” she says. “Try to pay attention, Martin.”

“Martin is your nephew who went broke manufacturing the folding waterbed,” I say. “I’m Milton, remember?”

“Don’t change the subject,” she says. “What temple do they go to?”

“They don’t,” I say.

“They’re Reformed?” she asks.

I take a deep breath and say, “They’re not Jewish at all,” and then I wait for the explosion.

It takes about three millionths of a second—a new record.

“You’re marrying a *shiksa*?” she bellows.

“I’m marrying a mermaid,” I say.

“Who cares about *that*?” she screams. “Call my doctor! I’m having a coronary!”

“Ma, try to understand—there *aren’t* any Jewish mermaids,” I say.

“It’s *my* fault?” she demands. “It’s bad enough that you want to give me grandsons with fins—and how in the world will the rabbi perform the *bris*?—but now you tell me that their mother’s a *goy*?”

“I knew I was gonna have trouble with you,” I say unhappily.

“Trouble?” she shrieks. “Why should there be trouble? Your Uncle Nate will come by with a knife and a cracker and say, ‘Is this a jar of Baluga caviar?’ and I’ll say ‘No, it’s 40,000 of my grandchildren.’”

“Will you at least meet her?” I ask.

“Some conversation we’ll have,” she replies. “She’ll say ‘Glub!’ I’ll say ‘Gurgle!’ and she’ll say ‘Glub!’ and I’ll say ‘I’m getting the folds’, and she’ll say—”

“That’s the bends, not the folds,” I explain.

“Bends, folds, what’s the difference?” she says. “I plan to be dead of a heart attack in two more minutes.”

“She speaks English,” I say, getting back to the subject.

“She does?”

“With a beautiful lilting accent.”

“I knew it!” she says. “You’re too young to remember, but they drove our people out of Lilting before the last war ...”

“Lilting isn’t a place, Ma,” I say.

“It isn’t?” she says suspiciously. “Are you sure of that?”

“I’m sure,” I say. “She really wants to meet you.”

“I’ll just bet she does,” she says. “She probably wants to feed me to her pet lobster.”

“I don’t think lobsters eat people,” I say.

“Aha!” she says. “But you don’t *know*!”

“We’re getting off the subject,” I say.

“Right,” she agrees. “The subject was my imminent death.”

“The subject was Melora.”

“What does this fish person who doesn’t wear a bra want with you anyway?” she demands. “Why doesn’t she go clope with some nice halibut?”

“I met her while I was hunting for treasure,” I say. “It was love at first sight.”

“So what you’re saying is that you went down there looking for gold and what you came up with was a topless person of the Purple Mist?”

“You’re making this very difficult, Ma.”

“You bring home a cod for dinner, and instead of cooking it I have to give it my son, and *I’m* making this difficult?” she says, just a bit hysterically.

I figure it’s time to play my ace in the hole, so I say, “She’s willing to convert, Ma.”

“Into what—a woman with two or more legs?”

“To Judaism,” I say. “I told her how important it was to you.”

“How can she convert?” she says. “Do we know any rabbis who can hold services 50 feet under the water?”

“She can come to the surface,” I say. “How else would we talk?”

“When did you ever *talk* to a girl?” she says. “You’re just like your departed father.”

“We talk all the time,” I say.

She considers this and finally nods her head. “I suppose there’s not a lot else you can do.”

“Don’t get personal, Ma,” I say.

She raises her eyes to the heavens—which are just beyond the light bulb in the middle of the ceiling—and has another of her hourly chats with God. “He wants me to welcome a lady fish into my family and he tells me not to get personal.”

“A lady Jewish fish,” I point out.

“So okay, she won’t be just a fish girl, she’ll be a gefilte fish girl, big deal. What do I feed her? If I give her lox, will she accuse me of cooking her relatives?”

“She eats fish all the time, Ma.”

“And when we leave the table to go watch Oprah, do I carry her or does she slither on her belly?”

“Actually, she doesn’t watch Oprah,” I say.

“She doesn’t watch Oprah?” she says, and I can tell this shocks her more than the fact that Melora is a mermaid.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“She’s never seen a television,” I say. “They don’t have them in her kingdom.”

“What are they, some kind of Communists?” she demands.

“They don’t have any electricity,” I explain.

“You mean she doesn’t even have a food processor?”

“That’s right,” I say.

“That poor girl!” she says. “And no disposal unit in her sink?”

“None,” I say, and I can see that suddenly she’s working up a head of sympathy.

“How can anybody live like that?” she says.

“She manages just fine.”

“Nonsense!” she says. “Nobody can live without a trash masher. My son’s wife may be a fish, but she isn’t going to slave 30 hours a day just because *I* had to!”

“That’s very thoughtful, Ma,” I say. “But—”

“Don’t interrupt!” she snaps. “You bring her by this afternoon. I’ll have some knishes ready, and some blintzes, and maybe a little chopped liver, and we’ll watch Oprah and I’ll show her my kitchen and ...” Suddenly she stops and re-thinks her schedule. “Bring her earlier and we can watch Dr. Phil, too. And tonight they’re re-running that old series with Lloyd Bridges. It should make her feel right at home.”

“You’ll like her, Ma,” I promise.

“Like, *shmike*,” she says. “If I have to go through life without ever being able to point to my son the doctor, at least I can point to my almost-daughter the gefilte fish girl. Mrs. Noodleman down the block will be so jealous!” She pauses. “We’ll have to put a little meat on her bones.”

“You haven’t even seen her,” I say.

“That’s all right,” she says. “I know your taste in women. Cheap and skinny.”

“Ma, you think any woman under 200 pounds is skinny?”

“And you think any woman who doesn’t ask for ice cubes and a straw with her wine is sophisticated.” She gets up, and I

can see she's getting set for a couple of hours of serious puttering. "Now, you go get her and bring her back, while I prepare something for the poor undernourished thing to eat. And I think I'll invite Rabbi Bernstein, since we need someone to work with her, and he's always fishing when he should be at Temple, and ..."

As I leave, she is trying to remember which company sells the pens that write under water so she can send out wedding invitations to the bride's family.



*I actually wrote a version of this story, under a female pseudonym, back in the mid-1960s for the only issue of an “all-women’s tabloid.” I never kept a copy, so this isn’t an exact duplicate, and I’d like to think I’m half a century better, so when an anthology where the theme fit opened up, I took another shot at it.*

## THE REVEALED TRUTH

**H**er first name was Helen. No one knew her last name. She wasn’t a local resident, that much was certain, since everyone in town knew everyone else. She had been passing through, on her way from somewhere to somewhere, probably driving a little too fast, especially on the fatal turn, and a tire had blown out while she was heading south on River Road. Her car plunged right into the river.

It was only eight or nine feet deep, but her door was locked and her window open. She banged her head pretty hard on the dashboard, and before a pair of startled fisherman could drag her out of the car she’d drowned. They carted her off to the hospital, dead on—well, *before*—arrival.

Her purse had the name “Helen” embroidered on it. It didn’t seem likely that her wallet and registration had floated away, but they weren’t in her purse or her car, and a whole troop of Boy Scouts volunteered to look for them, or some other ID, in the water and along the shore.

Turned out they only spent about four hours searching. No, they didn't find it, but word reached them that she'd been miraculously revived, and they concluded that she could probably tell the authorities her name.

I heard about it while I was working on my next Sunday sermon, something about gluttony being a worse sin than most people thought, and I was hunting up government figures on our increased national obesity problem when word of the miracle came through.

You know how people are always asking "Where were you when ...?" When JFK died, when Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. Well, to tell you the truth, I was two years old when Oswald killed Kennedy, and I was still in single digits when Armstrong walked on the moon, but I will always remember sitting at my desk in the alcove just to the left of the main altar when news of the Miracle at Miller's Landing came to me. Initially I was thrilled, as we all were, and I praised God for His power and His compassion.

Oh, I suppose we'd all read and heard about such things happening, but never in or even near our Miller's Landing. Helen had been officially dead for two hours and seventeen minutes. Usually, when someone's revived after that long, their brain is gone because it's been starved of oxygen, but every now and then they come back just fine, more often from freezing or drowning than any other kind of fatal (or should I say temporarily fatal?) accident.

Since no one knew anything about Helen, we didn't know what religion she belonged to, but everyone seemed sure she'd want to thank God for reviving her, and maybe get some counseling from a member of her church, so the word went out to me—I'm the local Baptist minister—as well as to Father Patrick McNamara and Rabbi Milt Weiss, my friendly rivals for our citizens' souls. I couldn't find any record of her, not only in Miller's Landing, but any nearby communities. I wondered if Patrick or Milt were having any better luck.

I remember that I was having lunch over at Irma's, like I always do on Tuesdays, when she serves up that wonderful tomato soup, and in came Patrick McNamara. He spotted me and walked over.

"Hi, Pete," he said. "Mind if I sit down?"

"It's a free country. Until Irma brings the check, anyway."

He chuckled at that. "We missed you on the links yesterday morning."

"Wedding arrangements. Billy Forrest and Lois O'Grady."

"Hey," he said with a smile. "That's half mine."

"You're too late," I said, returning his smile. "She's converting."

"Okay, you win this one," he said. "But I'll get mine back." And I knew he meant next month's Cain-Connors wedding. "By the way, have you heard about this drowned woman, this Helen someone-or-other?"

"Yeah," I said. "I thought I'd stop by after lunch and see if I could do anything for her."

"Oh. She's a Baptist?"

I shrugged. "I have no idea what she is, but I thought at least I'd make myself available to her."

"I was thinking the same thing. And just in case she *is* a Catholic, I'll make arrangements to take her confession right there."

"It's got to be more meaningful when you're mostly dead than when you're mostly not."

He chuckled. "Precisely."

I looked out the window. "I wonder where Milt is?"

"Are you supposed to be having lunch with him?"

"No, we usually meet over at Herbie's fish place on Thursdays," I answered. "But he's got a smaller congregation than you or me, so I figured he'd be Johnny-on-the-Spot to pick up another member."

Patrick laughed. "He won't find one *here*. If Lois O'Grady changes her mind, she's *mine*."

“No,” I agreed. “I meant that if he’s off to see Helen Somebody, he’s got to walk right past Irma’s front window to get to the hospital.”

I finished my pie and coffee, treated Patrick to a coffee as well, and after I had paid Irma we got up, walked out into the sunlight, and strolled the two blocks to the hospital.

“Well, son of a gun!” said Patrick. “Look who’s here. What a surprise!”

“I love you, too, Patrick,” laughed Milt Weiss, who stood at the registration desk. “Hi, Pete.”

“I didn’t see you walk past Irma’s,” I said.

“I drove. And since I have a direct line to God, let me state, rather than guess, that you’re here to see the remarkable, resurrected Helen.”

“Of course,” I said.

“She’s in Room 314,” announced Milt. “Shall we proceed? No sense doing this in relays.”

We joined him and entered the elevator, which let us out a few seconds later. We walked down the white, antiseptic corridor to 314 and went into the room.

“Good afternoon,” said the nurse. “I’ll go check on some of the other patients while you’re here.”

“How is she?” I asked. “Will she live?”

The nurse nodded.

“Must be in serious condition,” said Patrick.

“Not really, not for what she’s been through.”

“But you look so grim.”

The nurse shuffled uneasily. “She’s not what you expect.”

“What do you mean?” asked Milt.

“You’ll see,” the nurse said, and then she was gone.

We walked over to the bed, Milt on the right side of it, Patrick on the left, me at the foot, and stared down at the women. She seemed fiftyish, but her horrible experience and her weakened condition could have aged her ten or twelve years. Her hair was a dirty gray, her skin wrinkled, and though

the blanket covered her loosely, she looked to be about fifteen or twenty pounds overweight.

She opened her eyes.

“Good afternoon, Helen,” said Patrick, taking her hand and holding it gently.

She stared at each of us in turn. I looked for softness, or perhaps gratitude, if not for our presence, then for the simple fact of being alive, but all I saw ... well, I couldn't be sure if it was annoyance or contempt.

“How are you feeling, Helen?” asked Milt.

“I just died. How do you *think* I feel?”

“Grateful, perhaps?” I suggested. “A merciful God has allowed you to live again.”

“What do you know about God?” she said.

The question took me by surprise.

“I am a minister,” I said. “If there's any way I can help ...”

“And I am a rabbi,” said Milt, “and this gentleman across from me is a priest. No one knows your religion, so we came together to see if any or all of us could bring you spiritual comfort.”

“I don't need it as much as two of you do,” she said and gave a nasty smile.

I frowned. “I'm afraid I don't quite follow you, Helen.”

“I remember everything that happened *while* I was dead, everything I saw and heard, and everything I learned.”

“I'm sure you did,” said Milt soothingly.

“I'm not lying and I'm not crazy! I was *there!* I saw, and I remembered. Only one religion is true, and when I'm a little stronger, I'm going on television, to tell the people what I experienced. They deserve to know the truth, to know which religion is true and which ones are as phony as a three-dollar bill.” She set her jaw. “And no one is going to stop me.”

“Delusional,” said Patrick sadly.

Milt nodded his head. “Absolutely delusional.”

I sighed deeply. “I agree.”

“What you think doesn’t matter any more. I *know*. And I’m going to let everyone else know.”

“Get some sleep,” said Milt, backing away and walking to the door.

“We can call the nurse if you want,” added Patrick, also walking to the door.

“I don’t need a nurse. God sent me back with a purpose. I plan to fulfill it.”

“I’m glad to have met you, Helen,” I said, joining them at the door. “And I hope you regain your strength very soon.”

Then we were out in the corridor and walking to the elevator.

“What do you think?” asked Patrick with a worried expression on his face.

“Crazy as a loon,” said Milt.

“I don’t know,” I said. “She sounded pretty sure of herself.”

“Delusional people always do,” replied Milt.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t become a mass delusion,” said Patrick.

I turned to him. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t care what *she* thinks she knows. But what if she can convince others—like a television audience—that she’s right, that two of us have been living and teaching a lie?”

“More to the point,” I said, “what if she *is* right?”

I could tell both of them had been thinking the same thing.

“If she is,” said Milt as if trying to make himself believe it, “I expect to see you both in temple next week.”

“Church,” said Patrick. And then he added softly, “I hope.”

The elevator arrived, the doors slid open, but none of us got on. We just stood there, each lost in his own thoughts.

Finally Milt said, “You know, I think perhaps we should see her one more time before we leave.”

“I agree,” I said promptly.

“Me, too,” added Patrick.

We weren’t there long, maybe two or three minutes. Then we signaled for the nurse.

“What happened?” the nurse asked, as we stood back and let her approach Helen’s bed.

“She suddenly moaned and seemed to have trouble breathing,” said Patrick, as the nurse signaled a Code Blue, summoning what I like to call the Resurrection Squad. We stuck around, but it was obvious that this time her death was permanent.

Finally they covered her face, and the three of us walked slowly to the door.

“To come back from drowning, just to die again when she seemed on the road to health,” said Milt to the nurse. “Such a shame.”

“A tragedy,” added Patrick, as the three of us headed back to the elevator.

“A pity,” I agreed.



*I wrote this in 1984, for a chapbook collection titled *Unauthorized Autobiographies*. It was the first of my stories to be selected for a Best of the Year anthology (by Jerry Pournelle, if you need someone to blame).*

## ME AND MY SHADOW

**I**t all began when—  
No. Strike that.

I don't know when it all began. Probably I never will.

But it began the second time when a truck backfired and I hit the sidewalk with the speed and grace of an athlete, which surprised the hell out of me since I've been a very *unathletic* businessman ever since the day I was born—or born again, depending on your point of view.

I got up, brushed myself off, and looked around. About a dozen pedestrians (though it felt like a hundred) were staring at me, and I could tell what each of them was thinking: Is this guy just some kind of nut, or has he maybe been Erased? And if he's been Erased, have I ever met him before? Do I *owe* him?

Of course, even if we *had* met before, they couldn't recognize me now. I know. I've spent almost three years trying to find out who I was before I got Erased—but along with what they did to my brain, they gave me a new face and wiped my fingerprints clean. I'm a brand new man: two years, eleven months, and seventeen days old. I am (fanfare and trumpets,

please!) \*\*\*William Jordan\*\*\*. Not a real catchy name, I'll admit, but it's the only one I've got these days.

I had another name once. They told me not to worry about it, that all my memories had been expunged and that I couldn't dredge up a single fact no matter how hard I tried, not even if I took a little Sodium-P from a hypnotist, and after a few weeks I had to agree with them—which didn't mean that I stopped trying.

Erasures *never* stop trying.

Maybe the doctors and technicians at the Institute are right. Maybe I'm better off not knowing. Maybe the knowledge of what I did would drive the New Improved Me to suicide. But let me tell you: whatever I did, whatever *any* of us did (oh, yes, I speak to other Erasures; we spent a lot of time hanging around the newdisk morgues and Missing Persons Bureaus and aren't all that hard to spot), it would be easier to live with the details than the uncertainty.

Example:

“Good day to you, Madam. Lovely weather we're having. Please excuse a delicate inquiry, but did I rape your infant daughter four years ago? Sodomize your sons? Slit your husband open from crotch to chin? Oh, no reason in particular; I was just curious.”

Do you begin to see the problem?

Of course, they tell us that we're special, that we're not simply run-of-the-mill criminals and fiends; the jails are full of *them*.

Ah, fun and games at the Institute! It's quite an experience.

*We cherish your individuality*, they say as they painfully extract all my memories. (Funny: the pain lingers long after the memories are gone.)

*Society needs men with your drive and ambition*, they smile as they shoot about eighteen zillion volts of electricity through my spasmodically-jerking body.

*You had the guts to buck the system*, they point out as they shred my face and give me a new one.

*With drive like yours there's no telling how far you can go now that we've imprinted a new personality and a new set of ethics onto that*

*magnificent libido*, they agree as they try to decide whether to school me as a kennel attendant or perhaps turn me into an encyclopedia salesman. (They compromise and metamorphose me into an accountant.)

*You lucky man, you've got a new name and face and memories and five hundred dollars in your pocket and you've still got your drive and ambition*, they say as they excruciatingly insert a final memory block.

*Now go out and knock 'em dead*, they tell me.

*Figuratively speaking*, they add hastily.

*Oh, one last thing*, they say as they shove me out the door of the Institute. *We're pretty busy here, William Jordan, so don't come back unless it's an emergency. A bona fide emergency.*

"But where am I to go?" I asked. "What am I to do?"

*You'll think of something*, they assure me. *After all, you had the brains and guts to buck our social system. Boy, do we wish we were like you! Now beat it; we've got work to do—or do you maybe think you're the only anti-social misanthrope with delusions of grandeur who ever got Erased?*

And the wild part is that they were right: most Erasures make out just fine. Strange as it sounds, we really *do* have more drive than the average man, the guy who just wants to hold off his creditors until he retires and his pension comes through. We'll take more risks, make quicker decisions, fight established trends more vigorously. We're a pretty gritty little group, all right—except that none of us knows why he was Erased.

In fact, I didn't have my first hint until the truck backfired. (See? I'll bet you thought I had forgotten all about it. Not a chance, friend. Erasures don't forget things—at least, not once they've left the Institute. What most Erasures do is spend vast portions of their new lives trying to *remember* things. Futilely.)

Well, my memory may have been wiped clean, but my instincts were still in working order, and what they told me was that I was a little more used to being shot at than the average man on the street. Not much to go on, to be sure, but at least it implied that the nature of my sin leaned more toward physical violence than, say, Wall Street tycoonery with an eye toward sophisticated fraud.

So I went to the main branch of the Public Library, rented a quarter of an hour on the Master Computer, and started popping in the questions.

LIST ALL CRIMINALS STANDING SIX FEET TWO INCHES WHO WERE APPREHENDED AND CONVICTED IN NEW YORK CITY BETWEEN 2008 A.D. AND 2010 A.D.

\*\*\*CLASSIFIED.

That wasn't surprising. It had been classified the last fifty times I had asked. But, undaunted (Erasures are rarely daunted), I continued.

LIST ALL MURDERS COMMITTED BY PISTOL IN NEW YORK CITY BETWEEN 2008 A.D. AND 2010 A.D.

The list appeared on the screen, sixty names per second.  
STOP.

The computer stopped, while I tried to come up with a more limiting question.

WITHOUT REVEALING THEIR IDENTITIES, TELL ME HOW MANY CRIMINALS WERE CONVICTED OF MULTIPLE PISTOL MURDERS IN NEW YORK CITY BETWEEN 2008 A.D. AND 2010 A.D.

\*\*\*CLASSIFIED. Then it burped and added: NICE TRY, THOUGH.

THANK YOU. HAS ANY ERASURE EVER DISCOVERED EITHER HIS ORIGINAL IDENTITY OR THE REASON HE WAS ERASED?

NOT YET.

DOES THAT IMPLY IT IS POSSIBLE?

NEGATIVE.

THEN IT IS IMPOSSIBLE?

NEGATIVE.

THEN WHAT THE HELL DID YOU MEAN?

ONLY THAT NO IMPLICATION WAS INTENDED.

I checked my wristwatch. Five minutes left.

I AM AN ERASURE, I began.

I WOULD NEVER HAVE GUESSED.

Just what I needed—sarcasm from a computer. They're making them too damned smart these days.

RECENTLY I REACTED INSTINCTIVELY TO A SOUND VERY SIMILAR TO THAT MADE BY A PISTOL BEING FIRED, ALTHOUGH I HAD NO CONSCIOUS REASON TO DO SO. WOULD THAT IMPLY THAT GUNFIRE PLAYED AN IMPORTANT PART IN MY LIFE PRIOR TO THE TIME I WAS ERASED?

\*\*\*CLASSIFIED.

CLASSIFIED, NOT NEGATIVE?

THAT IS CORRECT.

I got up with three minutes left on my time.

My next stop was at Doubleday's, on Fifth Avenue. The sign in the window boasted half a million microdots per cubic yard, which meant that they had one hell of a collection of literature crammed into their single ten-by-fifty-foot aisle.

I went straight to the True Crime section, but gave up almost immediately when I saw the sheer volume of True Crime that occurred each and every day in Manhattan.

I called in sick, then hunted up a shooting gallery in the vidphone directory. I made an appointment, rode the Midtown slidewalk up to the front door, rented a pistol, and went downstairs to the soundproofed target range in the basement.

It took me a couple of minutes to figure out how to insert the ammunition clip, an inauspicious beginning. Then I hefted the gun, first in one hand and then the other, hoping that something I did would feel familiar. No luck. I felt awkward and foolish, and the next couple of minutes didn't make me feel any better. I took dead aim at the target hanging some fifty feet away and missed it completely. I held the pistol with both hands and missed it again. I missed it right-handed and left-handed. I missed it with my right eye closed, I missed it with my left eye closed, I missed it with both eyes open.

Well, if the only thing I had going for me was my instinct, I decided to give that instinct a chance. I threw myself to the

floor, rolled over twice, and fired off a quick round—and shot out the overhead light.

So much, I told myself, for instinct. Obviously the man I used to be was more at home ducking bullets than aiming them.

I left the gallery, hunted up a couple of Erased friends, and asked them if they'd ever experienced anything like my little flash of *déjà vu*. One of them thought it was hilarious—they may have made him safe, but I have my doubts about whether they made him sane—and the other confessed to certain vague stirrings whenever she heard a John Philip Sousa march, which wasn't exactly the answer I was looking for.

I stopped off for lunch at a local soya joint, spent another fruitless fifteen minutes in the library with my friend the computer, and went back to my brownstone condo to think things out. The whole time I was riding the sidewalk home I kept shadow-boxing and dancing away from imaginary enemies and reaching for a nonexistent revolver under my left arm, but nothing felt natural or even comfortable. After I got off the sidewalk and walked the final half block to my front door, I decided to see if I could pick the lock, but I gave up after about ten minutes, which was probably just as well since a passing cop was giving me the fish-eye.

I poured myself a stiff drink—Erasures' homes differ in locale and decor and many other respects, but you'll find liquor in all of them, as well as cheap memory courses and the Collected Who's Who in Organized Crime tapes—and tried, for the quadrillionth time, to dredge up some image from my past. The carnage of war, the screams and supplications of rape victims, the moans of old men and children lying sliced and bleeding in Central Park, all were grist for my mental mill—and all felt unfamiliar.

So I couldn't shoot and I couldn't pick locks and I couldn't remember. All that was one the one hand.

On the other hand was just one single solitary fact: I had ducked.

But somewhere deep down in my gut (certainly not in my brain) I knew, I *knew*, that the man I used to be had screamed wordlessly in my ear (or somewhere) to hit the deck before I got my/his/our damned fool head blown off.

This was contrary to everything they had told me at the Institute. I wasn't even supposed to be in communication with my former self. Even emergency conferences while bullets flew through the air were supposed to be impossible.

The more I thought about it, the more I decided that this definitely qualified as a bona fide Institute-visiting emergency. So I put on my jacket and left the condo and started off for the Institute. I didn't have any luck flagging down a cab—like frightened herbivores, New York cabbies all hide at the first hint of nightfall—so I started walking over to the East River sidewalk.

I had gone about two blocks when a grungy little man with watery eyes, a pockmarked face, and a very crooked nose jumped out at me from between two buildings, a wicked-looking knife in his hand.

Well, three years without being robbed in Manhattan is like flying 200 missions over Iraq or Paraguay or whoever we're mad at this month. You figure your number is up and you stoically take what's coming to you.

So I handed him my wallet, but there was only a single small bill in it, plus a bunch of credit cards geared to my voiceprint, and he suddenly threw the wallet on the ground and went berserk, ranting and raving about how I had cheated him.

I started backing away, which seemed to enrage him further, because he screamed something obscene and raced toward me with his knife raised above his head, obviously planning to plunge it into my neck or chest.

I remember thinking that of all the places to die, Second Avenue between 35<sup>th</sup> and 36<sup>th</sup> Streets was perhaps the very last one I'd have chosen. I remember wanting to yell for help but being too scared to force a sound out. I remember seeing the knife plunge down at me as if in slow motion.

And then, the next thing I knew, he was lying on his back, both his arms broken and his nose spouting blood like a fountain, and I was kneeling down next to him, just about to press the point of the knife into his throat.

I froze, trying to figure out what had happened, while deep inside me a voice—not angry, not bloodthirsty, but soft and seductive—crooned: *Do it, do it.*

“Don’t kill me!” moaned the man, writhing beneath my hands. “Please don’t kill me!”

*You’ll enjoy it, murmured the voice. You’ll see.*

I remained motionless for another moment, then dropped the knife and ran north, paying no attention to the traffic signals and not slowing down until I practically barreled into a bus that was blocking the intersection at 42<sup>nd</sup> Street.

*Fool!* whispered the voice. *Didn’t I save your life? Trust me.*

Or maybe it wasn’t the voice at all. Maybe I was just imagining what it would say if it were there.

At any rate, I decided not to go to the Institute at all. I had a feeling that if I walked in looking breathless and filthy and with the mugger’s blood all over me, they’d just Erase me again before I could tell them what had happened.

So I went back home, took a quick Dryshower, hunted up Dr. Brozgold’s number in the book, and called him.

“Yes?” he said after the phone had chimed twice. He looked just as I remembered him: tall and cadaverous, with a black mustache and bushy eyebrows, the kind of man who could put on a freshly-pressed suit and somehow managed to look rumpled.

“I’m an Erasure,” I said, coming right to the point. “You worked on me.”

“I’m afraid we have a faulty connection here,” he said, squinting at his monitor. “I’m not receiving a video transmission.”

“That’s because I put a towel over my camera,” I told him.

“I assume that this is an emergency?” he asked dryly, cocking one of those large, thick, disheveled eyebrows.

“It is,” I said.

“Well, Mr. X—I hope you don’t mind if I call you that—what seems to be the problem?”

“I almost killed a man tonight.”

“Really?” he said.

“Doesn’t that surprise you?”

“Not yet,” he replied, placing his hands before him and juxtaposing his fingers. “I’ll need some details first. Were you driving a car or robbing a bank or what?”

“I almost killed this man with my bare hands.”

“Well, whoever you are, Mr. X, and whoever you *were*,” he said, stroking his ragged mustache thoughtfully, “I think I can assure you that *almost* killing people probably wasn’t your specialty.”

“You don’t understand,” I said doggedly. “I used karate or kung fu or something like that, and I don’t *know* any karate or kung fu.”

“Who *is* this?” he demanded suddenly.

“Never mind,” I said. “What I want to know is: What the hell is happening to me?”

“Look, I really can’t help you without knowing your case history,” he said, trying to keep the concern out of his voice and not quite succeeding.

“I don’t have a history,” I said. “I’m a brand-new man, remember?”

“Then what have you got against telling me who you are?”

“I’m trying to find out who I am!” I said hotly. “A little voice has been telling me that killing people feels good.”

“If you’ll present yourself at the Institute first thing in the morning, I’ll do what I can,” he said nervously.

“I know what you can do,” I snapped. “You’ve already done it to me. I want to know if it’s being *undone*.”

“Absolutely not!” he said emphatically. “Whoever you are, your memory has been totally eradicated. No Erasure has ever developed even partial recall.”

“Then how did I mangle a professional mugger who was attacking me with a knife?”

“The human body is capable of many things when placed under extreme duress,” he replied in carefully measured tones.

“I’m not talking about jumping ten feet in the air or running fifty yards in four seconds when you’re being chased by a wild animal! I’m talking about crippling an armed opponent with three precision blows.”

“I really can’t answer you on the spur of the moment,” he said. “If you’ll just come down to the Institute and ask for me, I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” I demanded. “Erase a little smudge that you overlooked the first time?”

“If you won’t give me your name and you won’t come to the Institute,” he said, “just what is it that you want from me?”

“I want to know what’s happening.”

“So you said,” he commented dryly.

“And I want to know who I was.”

“You know we can’t tell you that,” he replied. Then he paused and smiled ingratiatingly into the camera. “Of course, we might make an exception in this case, given the nature of your problem. But we can’t do that unless we know who you are now.”

“What assurances have I that you won’t Erase me again?”

“You have my word,” he said with a fatherly smile.

“You probably gave me your word the last time, too,” I said.

“This conversation is becoming tedious, Mr. X. I can’t help you without knowing who you are. In all likelihood nothing at all out of the ordinary has happened or is happening to you. And if indeed you are developing a new criminal persona, I have no doubt that we’ll be meeting before too long anyway. So if you have nothing further to say, I really do have other things to do.” He paused, then looked sharply into the camera. “What’s *really* disturbing you? If you are actually experiencing some slight degree of recall, why should that distress you? Isn’t that what all you Erasures are always hoping for?”

“The voice,” I said.

“What about the voice?” he demanded.

“I don’t know whether to believe it or not.”

“The one that tells you to kill people?”

“It sounds like it *knows*,” I said softly. “It sounds convincing.”

“Oh, Lord!” he whispered, and hung up the phone.

“Are you still here?” I asked the voice.

There was no answer, but I really didn’t expect any. There was no one around to kill.

Suddenly I began to feel constricted, like the walls were closing in on me and the air was getting too thick to breathe, so I put my jacket back on and went out for a walk, keeping well clear of Second Avenue.

I stayed away from the busier streets and stuck to the residential areas—as residential as you can get in Manhattan, anyway—and spent a couple of hours just wandering aimlessly while trying to analyze what was happening to me.

Two trucks backfired, but I didn’t duck either time. A huge black man with a knife handle clearly visible above his belt walked by and gave me a long hard look, but I didn’t disarm him. A police car cruised by, but I felt no urge to run.

In fact, I had just about convinced myself that Dr. Brozgold wasn’t humoring me after all but was absolutely right about my having an overactive imagination, when a cheaply dressed blonde hooker stepped out of a doorway and gave me the eye.

*This one*, whispered the voice.

I stopped dead in my tracks, terribly confused.

*Trust me*, it crooned.

The hooker smiled at me and, as if in a trance, I returned the smile and let her lead me upstairs to her sparsely furnished room.

*Patience*, cautioned the voice. *Not too fast. Enjoy.*

She locked the door behind us.

What if she screams, I asked myself. We’re on the fourth floor. How will I get away?

*Relax*, said the voice, all smooth and mellow. *First things first. You’ll get away, never fear. I’ll take care of you.*

The hooker was naked now. She smiled at me again, murmured something unintelligible, then came over and started unbuttoning my shirt.

I smashed a thumb into her left eye, heard bones cracking as I drove a fist into her rib cage, listened to her scream as I brought the edge of my hand down on the back of her neck.

Then there was silence.

*It was fabulous!* moaned the voice. *Just fabulous!* Suddenly it became solicitous. *Was it good for you, too?*

I waited a moment for my breathing to return to normal, for the flush of excitement to pass, or at least fade a little.

“Yes,” I said aloud. “Yes, I enjoyed it.”

*I told you,* said the voice. *They may have changed your memories, but they can't change your soul. You and I have always enjoyed it.*

“Do we just kill women?” I asked, curious.

*I don't remember,* admitted the voice.

“Then how did you know we had to kill this one?”

*I know them when I see them,* the voice assured me.

I mulled that over while I went around tidying up the room, rubbing the doorknob with my handkerchief, trying to remember if I had touched anything else.

*They took away your fingerprints,* said the voice. *Why bother?*

“So they don't know they're looking for an Erasure,” I said, giving the room a final examination and then walking out the door.

I went home, put the towel back over the vidphone camera, and called Dr. Brozgold.

“You again?” he said when he saw that he wasn't receiving a picture.

“Yes,” I answered. “I've thought about what you said, and I'll come in tomorrow morning.”

“At the Institute?” he asked, looking tremendously relieved.

“Right. Nine o'clock sharp,” I replied. “If you're not there when I arrive, I'm leaving.”

“I'll be there,” he promised.

I hung up the vidphone, checked out his address in the directory, and walked out the door.

*Smart*, said the voice admiringly as I walked the twenty-two blocks to Brozgold's apartment. *I would never have thought of this.*

"That's probably why they caught you," I whispered into the cold night air.

It took me just under an hour to reach Brozgold's place. (They turn the slidewalks off at eight o'clock to save money.) Somehow I had known that he'd be in one of the century-old four-floor apartment buildings; any guy who dressed like he did and forgot to comb his hair wasn't about to waste money on a high-rise to impress his friends. I found his apartment number, then walked around to the back, clambered up the rickety wooden stairs to the third floor, checked out a number of windows, and knew I had the right place when I came to a kitchen with about fifty books piled on the floor and four days' worth of dirty dishes in the sink. I couldn't jimmy this lock any better than my own, but the door was one of the old wooden types and I finally threw a shoulder against it and broke it.

"Who's there?" demanded Brozgold, walking out of the bedroom in his pajamas and looking even more unkempt than usual.

"Hi," I said with a cheerful smile, shoving him back into the bedroom. "Remember me?"

I closed the door behind us, just to be on the safe side. The room smelled of stale tobacco, or maybe it was just the stale clothing in his closet. His furniture—a dresser, a writing desk, a double bed, a couple of nightstands, and a chair—had cost him a bundle, but they hadn't seen a coat of polish, or even a dust rag, since the day they'd been delivered.

He was staring at me, eyes wide, a dawning look of recognition on his face. "You're ... ah ... Jurgins? Johnson? I can't remember the name on the spur of the moment. You're the one who's been calling me?"

"I am," I said, pushing him onto the chair. "And it's William Jordan."

“Jordan. Right.” He looked flustered, like he wasn’t fully awake yet. “What are you doing here, Jordan? I thought we were meeting at the Institute tomorrow morning.”

“I know you did,” I answered him. “I wanted to make sure that all your security was down there so we could have a private little chat right here and now.”

He stood up. “Now you listen to me, Jordan—”

I pushed him back down, hard.

“That’s what I came here for,” I said. “And the first thing I want to listen to is the reason I was Erased.”

“You were a criminal,” he said coldly. “You know that.”

“What crime did I commit?”

“You know I can’t tell you that!” he yelled, trying to hide his mounting fear beneath a blustering exterior. “Now get the hell out of here and—”

“How many people did I kill with my bare hands?” I asked pleasantly.

“What?”

“I just killed a woman,” I said. “I enjoyed it. I mean, I *really* enjoyed it. Right at this moment I’m trying to decide how much I’d like killing a doctor.”

“You’re crazy!” he snapped.

“As a matter of fact,” I replied, “I have a certificate stating that the State of New York considers me to be absolutely sane.” I grinned. “Guess who signed it?”

“Go away!”

“As soon as you tell me what I want to know.”

“I can’t!”

“Are you still with me?” I whispered under my breath.

*Right here,* said the voice.

“Take over at the proper moment or I’m going to break my hand,” I told it.

*Ready when you are,* it replied.

“Perhaps you need a demonstration of my skill and my sincerity,” I said to Brozgold as I walked over to the dresser.

I lifted my hand high above my head and started bringing it down toward the dull wooden surface. I winced just before impact, but it didn't hurt a bit—and an instant later the top of the dresser and the first two drawers were split in half.

"Thanks," I whispered.

*Any time.*

"That could just as easily have been *you*," I said, turning back to Brozgold. "In fact, if you don't tell me what I want to know, it *will* be you."

"You'll kill me anyway," he said, shaking with fear but blindly determined to stick to his guns.

"I'll kill you if you *don't* tell me," I said. "If you do, I promise I won't harm you."

"What's the promise of a killer worth?" he said bitterly.

"You're the one who gave me my sense of honor," I pointed out. "Do you go around manufacturing liars?"

"No. But I don't go around manufacturing killers, either."

"I just want to know who I was and what I did," I repeated patiently. "I don't want to do it again. I just need some facts to fight off this damned voice."

*Well, I like that,* said the voice.

"I can't," repeated Brozgold.

"Sure you can," I said, taking a couple of steps toward him.

"It won't do you any good," he said, on the verge of tears now. "Everything about you, every last detail, has been classified. You won't be able to follow up on anything I know."

"Maybe we won't have to," I said. "How many people did I kill?"

"I can't."

I reached over to the little writing desk and brought my hand down. It split in two.

"How many?" I repeated, glaring at him.

"Seventeen!" he screamed, tears running down his face.

"Seventeen?" I repeated wonderingly.

"That we know about."

Even I was surprised that I had managed to amass so many. “Who were they? Men? Women?” He didn’t answer, so I took another step toward him and added menacingly, “Doctors?”

“No!” he said quickly. “Not doctors. Never doctors!”

“Then who?”

“Whoever they paid you to kill!” he finally blurted out.

“I was a hit man?”

He nodded.

“I must really have enjoyed my work to kill seventeen people,” I said thoughtfully. “How did they finally catch me?”

“Your girlfriend turned state’s evidence. She knew you had been hired to kill Carlo Castinerra—”

“The politician?”

“Yes. So the police staked him out and nailed you. You blundered right into their trap.”

I shook my head sadly. “That’s what I get for trusting people. And *this*,” I added, bringing the edge of my hand down on his neck and producing a snapping noise, “is what *you* get.”

*That was unethical, said my little voice. You promised not to hurt him if he told you what you wanted to know.*

“We trusted someone once, and look where it got us,” I replied, going around and wiping various surfaces. “What about that hooker? Had someone put out a contract on her?”

*I don’t remember, said the voice. It just felt right.*

“And how did killing Dr. Brozgold feel?” I asked.

*Good, said the voice after some consideration. It felt good. I enjoyed it.*

“So did I,” I admitted.

*Then are we going back in business?*

“No,” I said. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned as an accountant, it’s that everything has a pattern to it. Fall into the same old pattern and we’ll wind up right back at the Institute.”

*Then what will we do?* asked the voice.

“Oh, we’ll go right on killing people,” I assured it. “I must confess that it’s addictive. But I make more than enough money

to take care of my needs, and I don't suppose *you* have any use for money."

*None*, said the voice.

"So now we'll just kill whoever we want in any way that pleases us," I said. "They've made William Jordan a stickler for details, so I think we'll be a lot harder to catch when I was you." I busied myself wiping the dresser as best I could.

"Of course," I added, crossing over to the desk and going to work on it, "I suppose we could start with Carlo Castinerra, just for old time's sake."

*I'd like that*, said the voice, trying to control its excitement.

"I thought you might," I said dryly. "And it will tidy up the last loose end from our previous life. I hate loose ends. I suppose it's my accountant's mind."

So that's where things stand now.

I've spent the last two days in the office, catching up on my work. At nights I've cased Castinerra's house. I know where all the doors and windows are, how to get to the slidewalk from the kitchen entrance, what time the servants leave, what time the lights go out.

So this Friday, at 5:00 PM on the dot, I'm going to leave the office and go out to dinner at a posh French restaurant that guarantees there are no soya products anywhere on the premises. After that I'll slide over to what's left of the theater district and catch the old Sondheim classic they've unearthed after all these years. Then it's off to an elegant nearby bar for a cocktail or two.

And then, with a little help from my shadow, I'll pay a long-overdue call on the estimable Mr. Castinerra.

Only this time, I'll do it right.

Erasures are, by and large, pretty lonely people. I can't tell you how nice it is to finally have a hobby that I can share with a friend.



*When I was editing Sherlock Holmes in Orbit I decided to write a Holmes story myself. I chose to do an unreported case set in a time slot that Dr. Watson conveniently left open, and it also gives the true answer to what happened after Holmes and Moriarty went over the Falls at Reichenbach.*

## THE ADVENTURE OF THE PEARLY GATES

*“... An examination by experts leaves little doubt that a personal contest between the two men ended, as it could hardly fail to end in such a situation, in their reeling over, locked in each other’s arms. Any attempt at recovering the bodies was absolutely hopeless, and there, deep down in that dreadful cauldron of swirling water and seething foam, will lie for all time the most dangerous criminal and the foremost champion of the law of their generation ...”*

—The Final Problem

\* \* \*

**I**t was most disconcerting. One moment I was tumbling over the falls at Reichenbach, my arms locked around Professor Moriarty, and the next moment I seemed to be standing by myself in a bleak, gray, featureless landscape.

I was completely dry, which seemed not at all surprising, though there was no reason why it should not have been. Also, I had felt my leg shatter against the rocks as we began our plunge, and yet I felt no pain whatsoever.

Suddenly I remembered Moriarty. I looked around for him, but he was nowhere to be seen. There was an incredibly bright light up ahead, and I found myself drawn to it. What happened next I can remember but hazily; the gist of it is that I found myself in, of all places, Heaven. (No one told me that I was in Heaven, but when one eliminates the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth ... and Professor Moriarty's absence was quite enough to convince me that I was not in Hell.)

How long I remained there I do not know, for there is no means by which one can measure duration there. I only know that I felt I might as well have been in the Other Place, so bored was I with the eternal peace and perfection of my surroundings. It is an admission that would certainly offend all churchmen, but if there is one place in all the cosmos for which I am uniquely unsuited, it is Heaven.

In fact, I soon began to suspect that I was indeed in Hell, for if each of us makes his own Heaven and his own Hell, then my Hell must surely be a place where all my training and all my powers are of no use whatsoever. A place where the game is never afoot, indeed where there is no game at all, cannot possibly qualify as a Paradise for a man such as myself.

When I was bored beyond endurance back on Earth, I had discovered a method of relief, but this was denied me in my current circumstances. Still, it was a craving for cerebral stimulation, not for a seven percent solution of cocaine, that consumed me.

And then, when I was sure that I was facing an eternity of boredom, and was regretting all the chances I had forsaken to commit such sins as might have placed me in a situation where at least I would have had the challenge of escaping, I found myself confronted by a glowing entity that soon manifested

itself in the outward form of a man with pale blue eyes and a massive white beard. He wore a robe of white, and above his head floated a golden halo.

Suddenly I, too, took on human shape, and I was amazed to discover that I had not until this very moment realized that I had no longer possessed a body.

“Hello, Mr. Holmes,” said my visitor.

“Welcome, Saint Peter,” I replied with my newfound voice.

“You know who I am?” he said, surprised. “Your indoctrination period is supposed to be instantly forgotten.”

“I remember nothing of my indoctrination period,” I assured him.

“Then how could you possibly know who I am?”

“Observation, analysis and deduction,” I explained. “You have obviously sought me out, for you addressed me by my name, and since I have evidently been a discorporate being, one of many billions, I assume you have the ability to distinguish between us all. That implies a certain authority. You have taken the body you used when you were alive, and I perceive that the slight indentations on the fingers of your right hand were made by a crude fishing line. You possess a halo while I do not, which therefore implies that you are a saint. Now, who among the many saints was a fisherman and would have some authority in Heaven?”

Saint Peter smiled. “You are quite amazing, Mr. Holmes.”

“I am quite bored, Saint Peter.”

“I know,” he said, “and for this I am sorry. You are unique among all the souls in Heaven in your discontent.”

“That is no longer true,” I said, “for do I not perceive a certain lack of content upon your own features?”

“That is correct, Mr. Holmes,” he agreed. “We have a problem here—a problem of my own making—and I have elected to solicit your aid in solving it. It seems the very least I can do to make your stay here more tolerable to you.” He paused awkwardly. “Also, it may well be that you are the one soul in my domain who is capable of solving it.”

“Cannot God instantly solve any problem that arises?” I asked.

“He can, and eventually He will. But since I have created this problem, I requested that I be allowed to solve it—or attempt to solve it—first.”

“How much time has He given you?”

“Time has no meaning here, Mr. Holmes. If He determines that I will fail, He will correct the problem Himself.” He paused again. “I hope you will be able to assist me to redeem myself in His eyes.”

“I shall certainly do my best,” I assured him. “Please state the nature of the problem.”

“It is most humiliating, Mr. Holmes,” he began. “For time beyond memory I have been the Keeper of the Pearly Gates. No one can enter Heaven without my approval, and until recently I had never made a mistake.”

“And now you have?”

He nodded his head wearily. “Now I have. A *huge* mistake.”

“Can’t you simply seek out the soul, as you have sought me out, and cast it out?”

“I wish it were that simple, Mr. Holmes,” he replied. “A Caligula, a Tamerlaine, an Attila I could find with no difficulty. But this soul, though it is blackened beyond belief, has thus far managed to elude me.”

“I see,” I said. “I am surprised that five such hideous murders do not make it instantly discernable.”

“Then you know?” he exclaimed.

“That you seek Jack the Ripper?” I replied. “Elementary. All of the others you mentioned were identified with their crimes, but the Ripper’s identity was never discovered. Further, since the man was mentally unbalanced, it seems possible to me, based on my admittedly limited knowledge of Heaven, that if he feels no guilt, his soul displays no guilt.”

“You are everything I had hoped you would be, Mr. Holmes,” said Saint Peter.

“Not quite everything,” I said. “For I do not understand your concern. If the Ripper’s soul displays no taint, why bother seeking him out? After all, the man was obviously insane and not responsible for his actions. On Earth, yes, I would not hesitate to lock him away where he could do no further damage—but here in Heaven, what possible harm can he do?”

“Things are not as simple as you believe them to be, Mr. Holmes,” replied Saint Peter. “Here we exist on a spiritual plane, but the same is not true of Purgatory or Hell. Recently, an unseen soul has been attempting to open the Pearly Gates from *this* side.” He frowned. “They were made to withstand efforts from without, but not within. Another attempt or two, and the soul may actually succeed. Once possessed of ectoplasmic attributes, there is no limit to the damage he could do in Purgatory.”

“Then why not simply let him out?”

“If I leave the gates open for him, we could be overwhelmed by even more unfit souls attempting to enter.”

“I see,” I said. “What leads you to believe that it *is* the Ripper?”

“Just as there is no duration in Heaven, neither is there location. The Pearly Gates, though quite small themselves, exist in *all* locations.”

“Ah!” I said, finally comprehending the nature of the problem. “Would I be correct in assuming that the attempt to break out was made in the vicinity of the souls of Elizabeth Stride, Annie Chapman, Catherine Eddowes, Mary Kelly and Mary Ann Nicholls?”

“His five victims,” said Saint Peter, nodding. “Actually, two of them are beyond even *his* reach, but Stride, Chapman and Kelly are in Purgatory.”

“Can you bring those three to Heaven?” I asked.

“As bait?” asked Saint Peter. “I am afraid not. No one may enter Heaven before his or her time. Besides,” he added, “there is nothing he can do to them in spiritual form. As you yourself

know, one cannot even communicate with other souls here. One spends all eternity reveling in the glory of God.”

“So *that* is what one does here,” I said wryly.

“Please, Mr. Holmes!” he said severely.

“I apologize,” I said. “Well, it seems we must set a trap for the Ripper on his next escape attempt.”

“Can we be sure he will continue his attempts to escape?”

“He is perhaps the one soul less suited to Heaven than I myself,” I assured him.

“It seems an impossible undertaking,” said Saint Peter morosely. “He could try to leave at any point.”

“He will attempt to leave in the vicinity of his victims,” I answered.

“How can you be certain of that?” asked Saint Peter.

“Because those slayings were without motive.”

“I do not understand.”

“Where there is no motive,” I explained, “there is no reason to stop. You may rest assured that he will attempt to reach them again.”

“Even so, how am I to apprehend him—or even identify him?” asked Saint Peter.

“Is location *necessarily* meaningless in Heaven?” I asked.

He stared at me uncomprehendingly.

“Let me restate that,” I said. “Can you direct the Pearly Gates to remain in the vicinity of the souls in question?”

He shook his head. “You do not comprehend, Mr. Holmes. They exist in all times and places at once.”

“I see,” I said, wishing I had my pipe to draw upon now that I was in human form. “Can you create a second gate?”

“It would not be the same,” said Saint Peter.

“It needn’t be the same, as long as it similar to the perception of a soul.”

“He would know instantly.”

I shook my head. “He is quite insane. His thought processes, such as they are, are aberrant. If you do as I suggest, and place a false gate near the souls of his victims, my guess is

that he will not pause to notice the difference. He is somehow drawn to them, and this will be a barrier to his desires. He will be more interested in attacking it than in analyzing it, even if he were capable of the latter, which I am inclined to doubt.”

“You’re quite sure?” asked Saint Peter doubtfully.

“He is compelled to perform his carnage upon prostitutes. For whatever reason, these seem to be the only souls he can identify as prostitutes. Therefore, it is these that he wishes to attack.” I paused again. “Create the false gates. The soul that goes through them will be the one you seek.”

“I hope you are correct, Mr. Holmes,” he said. “Pride is a sin, but even *I* have a modicum of it, and I should hate to be shamed before my Lord.”

And with that, he was gone.

\* \* \*

He returned after an indeterminate length of time, a triumphant smile upon his face.

“I assume that our little ruse worked?” I said.

“Exactly as you said it would!” replied Saint Peter. “Jack the Ripper is now where he belongs, and shall never desecrate Heaven with his presence again.” He stared at me. “You should be thrilled, Mr. Holmes, and yet you look unhappy.”

“I envy him in a way,” I said. “For at least he now has a challenge.”

“Do not envy him,” said Saint Peter. “Far from having a challenge, he can look forward to nothing but eternal suffering.”

“I have that in common with him,” I replied bitterly.

“Perhaps not,” said Saint Peter.

I was instantly alert. “Oh?”

“You have saved me from shame and embarrassment,” he said. “The very least I can do is reward you.”

“How?”

“I rather thought *you* might have a suggestion.”

“This may be Heaven to you,” I said, “but it is Hell to me. If you truly wish to reward me, send me to where I can put my abilities to use. There is evil abroad in the world; I am uniquely qualified to combat it.”

“You would really turn your back on Heaven to continue your pursuit of injustice, to put yourself at risk on almost a daily basis?” asked Saint Peter.

“I would.”

“Even knowing that, should you fall from the path of righteousness—and it is a trickier path than your churches would have you believe—this might not be your ultimate destination?”

“Even so.” And privately I thought: *especially* so.

“Then I see no reason why I should not grant your request,” said Saint Peter.

“Thank God!” I muttered.

Saint Peter smiled again. “Thank Him yourself—when you think of it. He *does* listen, you know.”

Suddenly I found myself back in that infinite gray landscape I had encountered after going over the falls at Reichenbach, only this time, instead of a shining light, I thought I could see a city in the distance ...

\* \* \*

*“Holmes!” I cried. “Is it really you? Can it indeed be that you are alive? Is it possible that you succeeded in climbing out of that awful abyss?”*

— The Adventure of the Empty House

*This one was an assignment for a vampire anthology. I have never been able to take the icons of the horror story—vampires, werewolves, witches, etc.—seriously, but that doesn't mean I can't offer my less-than-serious take on them.*

## A LITTLE NIGHT MUSIC

**T**he Beatles?

Yeah, I remember 'em. Especially the little one—what was his name?—oh, yeah: Ringo.

The Stones? Sure I booked 'em. That Mick what's-his-name was a strange one, let me tell you.

Kiss, Led Zepplin, the Who, Eddie and the Cruisers, I've booked 'em all at one time or another.

After awhile, they all kind of fade together in your memory. In fact, there's just one group that stands out. Strange, too, since they never made any kind of a splash.

Ever hear of Vlad and the Impalers?

I didn't think so. Hell, there's no reason why you should have. I never heard of 'em either, until Benny—he's not exactly my partner, but we kind of cooperate together from time to time—calls me up one day and says he's picked up a group and do I have any holes in the schedule? So I look at the calendar, and I see a couple of gigs that are open, and I say yeah, what the hell, send their agent over and maybe we can do a little

business. Benny says they don't have an agent, that this guy Vlad handles all the details himself. Now, if you've ever had to deal with one of these jokers, you know why I wasn't exactly thrilled, but the lead guitarist from this futuristic Buckets of Gor band has been hauled in for possession and I don't see anyone racing to make his bail, so I tell Benny I've got half an hour open at three in the afternoon.

"No good, Murray," he says. "The guy's a late sleeper."

"Most guys in this business are," I say, "but three in the afternoon is almost tomorrow."

"How's about you two have dinner together, maybe around seven or so?" says Benny.

"Out of the question, baby," I answer. "I got a hot date, and I just bought a new set of gold chains that figure to impress her right into the sack."

"This Vlad guy don't like to be kept waiting," says Benny.

"Well, if he wants a booking, he can damn well *learn* to wait."

"Okay, okay, let me check his schedule," says Benny. He pauses for a minute. "So how's three o'clock?"

"I thought you just said he couldn't make it at three."

"I mean three o'clock in the morning."

"What is this guy, an insomniac?" I ask. But then I remember that powder-blue Mercedes 560 SL with the sun roof that I saw the other day, and I figure what the hell, maybe this guy's group can earn my down payment for me, so I say that three in the A.M. is okay—and as it turns out, I could have met him at seven after all, because this broad throws a bowl of soup at me and walks out of the restaurant just because I try to play a little bit of Itsy-Bitsy-Spider on her thigh under the table.

So I go back to the office and lay down on the couch and take a nap, and when I wake up there's this skinny guy dressed all in black, sitting down on a chair and staring at me. I figure he's strung out on something, because his eyes have got like wall-to-wall pupils, and his skin is white as a sheet, and I try to

remember how much cash I have lying around the place, but then he bows his head and speaks.

“Good evening, Mr. Barron,” he says. “I believe you were expecting me?”

“I was?” I say, sitting up and trying to focus my eyes.

“Your associate said that I was to meet you here,” he continues. “I am Vlad.”

“Oh, right,” I say, as my head starts to clear.

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Barron,” he says, extending his hand.

“Call me Murray,” I answer, taking his hand, which is cold as a dead fish and much the same texture. “Well, Vlad,” I say, dropping his hand as soon as I can and leaning back on the couch, “tell me a little something about you and your group. Where have you played?”

“Mostly overseas,” he says, and I realize that he’s got an accent, though I can’t quite place it.

“Well, nothing wrong with that,” I say. “Some of our best groups started in Liverpool. One of ‘em, anyway,” I add with a chuckle.

He just stares at me without smiling, which kind of puts me off, since if there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s a guy with no sense of humor. “You will book my group, then?” he says.

“That’s what I’m here for, Vlad bubby,” I say, starting to relax as I get used to those eyes and that skin. “Matter of fact, there’s an opening on a cruise ship going down to Acapulco. Six days and out. Five bills a night and all the waitresses you can grab.” I smile again, so he’ll know he’s dealing with a man of the world and not just some little schmuck who doesn’t understand what’s going on.

He shakes his head. “Nothing on water.”

“You get seasick?” I ask.

“Something like that.”

“Well,” I say, scratching my head and then making sure my hairpiece is still in place, “there’s a wedding party that’s looking for some entertainment at the reception.”

“What is their religion?” he asks.

“It makes a difference?” I say. “I mean, they’re looking for a rock group. Nobody’s asking you to play *Have Nagila*.”

“No churches,” he says.

“For a guy who’s looking for work, bubbly, you got a lot of conditions,” I say. “You want to work with me, you got to meet me halfway.”

“We will work in any venue that is not a church or a boat,” he says. “We work only at night, and we require total privacy during the day.”

Well, at this point I figure I’m wasting my time, and I’m about to show him the door, and then he says the magic words: “If you will do as I ask, we will pay you 50% of our fee, rather than your usual commission.”

“Vlad, sweetheart,” I say, “I have the feeling that this is the beginning of a long and beautiful relationship!” I walk to the wet bar behind my desk and pull out a bottle of bubbly. “Shall we make it official?” I ask, reaching for a couple of glasses.

“I don’t drink ... champagne,” he says.

I shrug. “Okay, name your poison, bubbly.”

“I don’t drink poison, either.”

“Okay, I’m game,” I say. “How about a Bloody Mary?”

He licks his lips and his eyes seem to glow. “What goes into it?”

“You’re kidding, right?” I say.

“I never kid.”

“Vodka and tomato juice.”

“I don’t drink vodka and I don’t drink tomato juice.”

Well, I figure we could spend all night playing *Guess What The Fruitcake Drinks*, so instead I pull out a contract out of my center drawer and ask tell him to Hancock it.

“Vlad Dracule,” I read as he scrawls his name. “Dracule. Dracule. That’s got a familiar ring to it.”

He looked sharply at me. “It does?”

“Yeah,” I say.

"I'm sure you are mistaken," he says, and I can see he's suddenly kind of tense.

"Didn't the Pirates have a third baseman named Dracule back in the 60s?" I ask.

"I really couldn't say," he answers. "When and where will we be performing?"

"I'll get back to you on that," I say. "Where can I reach you?"

"I think it is better that *I* contact *you*," he says.

"Fine," I say. "Give me a call tomorrow morning."

"I am not available in the mornings."

"Okay, then, tomorrow afternoon." I look into those strange dark eyes, and finally I shrug. "All right. Here's my card." I scribble my home number on it. "Call me tomorrow night."

He picks up my card, turns on his heel, and walks out the door. Suddenly I remember that I don't know how big his group is, and I race into the hall to ask him, but when I get there he's already gone. I look high and low for him, but all I see is some black bird that seems to have flown into the building by mistake, and finally I go back and spend the rest of the night on my couch, thinking about dinner and wondering if my timing is just a little bit off.

Well, Pride and Prejudice, the black-and-white girls' band that ends every concert with a fist fight, gets picked up for pederasty, and suddenly I've got a hole to fill at the Palace, so I figure what the hell, 50% is 50%, and I book Vlad and the Impalers there for Friday night.

I stop by their dressing room about an hour before show time, and there's skinny old Vlad, surrounded by three chicks in white nightgowns, and he's giving each of them hickeys on their necks, and I decide that if this is the kinkiest he gets, he's a lot better than most of the rockers I deal with.

"How's it going, sweetheart?" I say, and the chicks back away real fast. "You ready to knock 'em dead?"

“They’re no use to me if they’re dead,” he answers without cracking a smile.

So I decide he’s got a sense of humor after all, though a kind of dull, deadpan one.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Barron?” he goes on.

“Call me Murray,” I correct him. “The PR guy wants to know where you played most recently.”

“Chicago, Kansas City, and Denver.”

I give him my most sophisticated chuckle. “You mean there are *people* between L.A. and the Big Apple?”

“Not as many as there were,” he says, which I figure is his way of telling me that the band wasn’t exactly doing S.R.O.

“Well, not to worry, bubby,” I said. “You’re gonna do just fine tonight.” Someone knocks on the door, and I open it, and in comes a delivery boy carrying a long, flat box.

“What is that?” asks Vlad, as I tip the kid and send him on his way.

“I figured you might need a little energy food before you get up on stage,” I answer, “so I ordered you a pizza.”

“Pizza?” he says, with a frown. “I have never had one before.”

“You’re kidding, right?” I say.

“I told you once before: I never jest.” He stares at the box. “What is in it?”

“Just the usual,” I say.

“What is the usual?” he asks suspiciously.

“Sausage, cheese, mushrooms, olive, onions, anchovies . . .”

“That was very thoughtful of you, Murray, but we don’t—”

I sniff the pizza. “And garlic,” I add.

He screams and covers his face with his hands. “Take it away!” he shouts.

Well, I figure maybe he’s allergic to garlic, which is a goddamned shame, because what’s a pizza without a little garlic, but I call the boy back and tell him to take the pizza back and see if he can get me a refund, and once it’s out of the room Vlad starts recovering his composure.

Then a guy comes by and announces that they're due on stage in 45 minutes, and I ask if he'd like me to leave so they can get into their costumes.

"Costumes?" he asks blankly.

"Unless you plan to wear what you got on," I say.

"In point of fact, that is precisely what we intend to do," answers Vlad.

"Vlad, bubby, sweetie," I say, "you're not just singers—you're *entertainers*. You got to give 'em their money's worth ... and that means giving 'em something to look at as well as something to listen to."

"No one has ever objected to our clothing before," he says.

"Well, maybe not in Chicago or K.C.—but this is L.A., baby."

"They didn't object in Saigon, or Beirut, or Chernobyl, or Kampala," he says with a frown.

"Well, you know these little Midwestern cow towns, bubby," I say with a contemptuous shrug. "You're in the major leagues now."

"We will wear what we are wearing," he says, and something about his expression tells me I should just take my money and not make a Federal case out of it, so I go back to my office and call Denise, the chick who dumped the soup on me, and tell her I forgive her and see if she's busy later that night, but she has a headache, and I can hear the headache moaning and whispering sweet nothings in her ear, so I tell her what I really think of no-talent broads who just want to get close to major theatrical booking agents, and then I walk into the control booth and wait for my new act to appear onstage.

And after about ten minutes, out comes Vlad, still dressed in black, though he's added a cloak to his suit, and the three Impalers are in their white nightgowns, and even from where I'm sitting I can see that they've used too much lipstick and powder, because their lips are a bright red and their faces are as white as their gowns. Vlad waits until the audience quiets down, and then he starts singing, and I practically go crazy, because

what he's doing is a rap song, and worse still, he's doing it in some foreign language so no one can understand the words, but just about the time I think the audience will tear the place apart I realize that they're sitting absolutely still, and I decide that they're either getting into it after all, or else they're so bored that they haven't got the energy to riot.

And then the strangest thing happens. From somewhere outside the building a dog starts howling, and then another, and a third, and a cat screeches, and pretty soon it sounds like a barnyard symphony, and it keeps on like that for maybe half an hour, every animal within ten miles or so baying the moon, and then Vlad stops and bows, and suddenly the kids jump to their feet and begin screaming and whistling and applauding, and I start thinking that maybe it's Liverpool all over again.

I go backstage to congratulate him, and when I get there he's busy giving hickeys to a couple of girls who snuck past the security forces, which isn't as bad as sharing a snort with them, I suppose, and then he turns to me.

"We will expect our money before we leave," he says.

"Out of the question, snookie," I say. "We won't have a count until the morning."

He frowns. "All right," he says at last. "I will send an associate of mine to your office to collect our share."

"Whatever you say, Vlad bubby," I tell him.

"His name is Renfield," says Vlad. "Don't let his appearance startle you."

As if appearances could startle me after twenty years of booking rock acts.

"Fine," I say. "I'll expect him at, say, ten o'clock?"

"That is acceptable," says Vlad. "Oh, one more thing."

"Yes?" I say.

"That scarab ring you wear on the small finger of your left hand ..."

I hold it up. "Yeah, it's a beaut, isn't it?"

"I strongly advise you to take it off and hide it in your desk before Mr. Renfield makes his appearance."

“A klepto, huh?” I say.

“Something like that,” answers Vlad.

“Well, thanks for the tip, sweetheart,” I say.

Then a Western Union girl enters the room and unloads a bushel of telegrams on Vlad.

“What is this?” he asks.

“It means you’re a hit, baby,” I said.

“Oh?”

“Open ‘em up and read ‘em,” I encourage him.

He opens the first of them, scans it, and drops it like it’s a hot potato. Then he backs into a corner, hissing like he’s a tire losing air.

“What’s the problem?” I say, picking up the telegram and reading it: I LOVE YOU AND WANT TO HAVE YOUR BABY. LOVE AND XXX, KATHY.

“Crosses!” he whispers.

“Crosses?” I repeat, trying to figure out what’s bugging him.

“At the bottom,” he says, pointing to the telegram with a trembling finger.

“Those are X’s,” I say. “They stand for kisses.”

“You’re sure?” he asks, still huddled in the corner. “They look like crosses to me.”

“No,” I say, pulling out a pen and scribbling on the telegram. “A cross looks like *this*.”

He shrieks and curls into a fetal ball, and I decide that maybe he snorts a little nose candy after all, or that he just doesn’t know how to handle success, so I kiss each of the girls goodbye—their cheeks are as cold as his hand, and I make a note to complain about the heating system—and then I go home, counting all the millions we’re going to make in the next couple of years.

Well, Renfield shows up the next morning, right on schedule, and I wonder what Vlad was so concerned about, because compared to most of the heavy metal types I deal with, he’s actually a mild, unprepossessing little fellow. We get to talking, and I find out that his hobby is entomology, and I can

see that he's really into his subject because his homely little face lights up like a Christmas tree whenever he discusses bugs, and finally he takes the money and leaves.

Right about then I am figuring that a Mercedes is really too small and I am seriously considering getting a Rolls Royce Silver Spirit instead, but the fact of the matter is that I never see Vlad and the Impalers again. *Pride and Prejudice* makes bail, and Buckets of Gor beats their rap on a technicality, and suddenly the only thing I've got for my new superstar is a gig sponsored by a local church group, and he turns it down, and I call his hotel to explain, and he's checked out with no forwarding address.

I check *Variety* and *Billboard* for the next year, and I see that he's shown up in some minor league towns like Soweto and Lusaka, and the last I hear of him he's heading off to Kuwait City, and I think of what a waste it is and how much money we could have made for each other, but I never did understand rock stars, and this guy was a little harder to understand than most of them.

Well, you'll have to excuse me, but I gotta be off now. I'm auditioning a new group—Igor and the Graverobbers—and I don't want to be late. The word I get is that they're talented but kind of lifeless. But, what the hell, you never know where lightning will strike next.

*This is one of my favorites among my own stories, and (I think) a legitimate use of “Flowers for Algernon’s” methodology for a totally different but valid purpose. It was a Hugo nominee, and as I write these words it’s being made into a movie in China.*

## DOWN MEMORY LANE

**G**wendolyn sticks a finger into her cake, pulls it out, and licks it with a happy smile on her face. “I *like* birthdays!” she says, giggling with delight.

I lean over and wipe some frosting off her chin. “Try to be a little neater,” I say. “You wouldn’t want to have to take a bath before you open your present.”

“Present?” she repeats excitedly, her gaze falling on the box with the colorful wrapping paper and the big satin bow. “Is it time for my present now? Is it?”

“Yes, it is,” I answer. I pick up the box and hand it to her. “Happy birthday, Gwendolyn.”

She tears off the paper, shoves the card aside, and opens the box. An instant later she emits a happy squeal and pulls out the rag doll. “This is my very favorite day of my whole life!” she announces.

I sigh and try to hold back my tears.

Gwendolyn is 82 years old. She has been my wife for the last 60 of them.

I don't know where I was when Kennedy was shot. I don't know what I was doing when the World Trade Center collapsed under the onslaught of two jetliners. But I remember every single detail, every minute, every second, of the day we got the bad news.

"It may not be Alzheimer's," said Dr. Castleman. "Alzheimer's is becoming a catchword for a variety of senile dementias. Eventually we'll find out exactly which dementia it is, but there's no question that Gwendolyn is suffering from one of them."

It wasn't a surprise—after all, we knew something was wrong; that's why she was being examined—but it was still a shock.

"Is there any chance of curing it?" I asked, trying to keep my composure.

He shook his head sadly. "Right now we're barely able to slow it down."

"How long have I got?" said Gwendolyn, her face grim, her jaw set.

"Physically you're in fine shape," said Castleman. "You could live another ten to twenty years."

"How long before I don't know who anyone is?" she persisted.

He shrugged helplessly. "It proceeds at different rates with different people. At first you won't notice any diminution, but before long it will become noticeable, perhaps not to you, but to those around you. And it doesn't progress in a straight line. One day you'll find you've lost the ability to read, and then, perhaps two months later, you'll see a newspaper headline, or perhaps a menu in a restaurant, and you'll read it as easily as you do today. Paul here will be elated and think you're regaining your capacity, and he'll call me and tell me about it, but it won't last. In another day, another hour, another week, the ability will be gone again."

"Will I know what's happening to me?"

“That’s almost the only good part of it,” replied Castleman. “You know now what lies ahead of you, but as it progresses you will be less and less aware of any loss of your cognitive abilities. You’ll be understandably bitter at the start, and we’ll put you on anti-depressants, but the day will come when you no longer need them because you no longer remember that you ever had a greater mental capacity than you possess at that moment.”

She turned to me. “I’m sorry, Paul.”

“It’s not your fault,” I said.

“I’m sorry that you’ll have to watch this happen to me.”

“There must be something we can do, some way we can fight it ...” I muttered.

“I’m afraid there isn’t,” said Castleman. “They say there are stages you go through when you know you’re going to die: disbelief, then anger, then self-pity, and finally acceptance. No one’s ever come up with a similar list for the dementias, but in the end what you’re going to have to do is accept it and learn to live with it.”

“How long before I have to go to ... to wherever I have to go when Paul can’t care for me alone?”

Castleman took a deep breath, let it out, and pursed his lips. “It varies. It could be five or six months, it could be two years, it could be longer. A lot depends on you.”

“On me?” said Gwendolyn.

“As you become more childlike, you will become more curious about things that you no longer know or recognize. Paul tells me you’ve always had a probing mind. Will you be content to sit in front of the television while he’s sleeping or otherwise occupied, or will you feel a need to walk outside and then forget how to get back home? Will you be curious about all the buttons and switches on the kitchen appliances? Two-year-olds can’t open doors or reach kitchen counters, but *you* will be able to. So, as I say, it depends on you, and that is something no one can predict.” He paused. “And there may be rages.”

“Rages?” I repeated.

“In more than half the cases,” he replied. “She won’t know why she’s so enraged. You will, of course—but you won’t be able to do anything about it. If it happens, we have medications that will help.”

I was so depressed I was thinking of suicide pacts, but Gwendolyn turned to me and said, “Well, Paul, it looks like we have a lot of living to cram into the next few months. I’ve always wanted to take a Caribbean cruise. We’ll stop at the travel agency on the way home.”

That was her reaction to the most horrific news a human being can receive.

I thanked God that I’d had 60 years with her, and I cursed Him for taking away everything that made her the woman I loved before we’d said and done all the things we had wanted to say and do.

\* \* \*

She’d been beautiful once. She still was. Physical beauty fades, but inner beauty never does. For 60 years we had lived together, loved together, worked together, played together. We got to where we could finish each other’s sentences, where we knew each other’s tastes better than we knew our own. We had fights—who doesn’t?—but we never once went to bed mad at each other.

We raised three children, two sons and a daughter. One son was killed in Vietnam; the other son and the daughter kept in touch as best they could, but they had their own lives to lead, and they lived many states away.

Gradually our outside social contacts became fewer and fewer; we were all each other needed. And now I was going to watch the only thing I’d ever truly loved become a little less each day, until there was nothing left but an empty shell.

\* \* \*

The cruise went well. We even took the train all the way to the rum factory at the center of Jamaica, and we spent a few days in Miami before flying home. She seemed so normal, so absolutely herself, that I began thinking that maybe Dr. Castleman's diagnosis had been mistaken.

But then it began. There was no single incident that couldn't have occurred 50 years ago, nothing that you couldn't find a reasonable excuse for—but things kept happening. One afternoon she put a roast in the oven, and at dinnertime we found that she'd forgotten to turn the oven on. Two days later we were watching *The Maltese Falcon* for the umpteenth time, and suddenly she couldn't remember who killed Humphrey Bogart's partner. She "discovered" Raymond Chandler, an author she'd loved for years. There were no rages, but there was everything else Dr. Castleman had predicted.

I began counting her pills. She was on five different medications, three of them twice a day. She never skipped them all, but somehow the numbers never came out quite right.

I'd mention a person, a place, an incident, something we'd shared together, and one time out of three she couldn't recall it—and she'd get annoyed when I'd explain that she had forgotten it. In a month it became two out of three times. Then she lost interest in reading. She blamed it on her glasses, but when I took her to get a new prescription, the optometrist tested her and told us that her vision hadn't changed since her last visit two years earlier.

She kept fighting it, trying to stimulate her brain with crossword puzzles, math problems, anything that would cause her to think. But each month the puzzles and problems got a little simpler, and each month she solved a few less than she had the month before. She still loved music, and she still loved leaving seeds out for the birds and watching them come by to feed—but she could no longer hum along with the melodies or identify the birds.

She had never allowed me to keep a gun in the house. It was better, she said, to let thieves steal everything than to get killed

in a shootout—they were just possessions; we were all that counted—and I honored her wishes for 60 years. But now I went out and bought a small handgun and a box of bullets, and kept them locked in my desk against the day that she was so far gone she no longer knew who I was. I told myself that when that day occurred, I would put a bullet into her head and another into my own ... but I knew that I couldn't. Myself, yes; the woman who'd been my life, never.

\* \* \*

I met her in college. She was an honor student. I was a not-very-successful jock—3rd-string defensive end in football, back-up power forward in basketball, big, strong, and dumb—but she saw something in me. I'd noticed her around the campus—she was too good-looking not to notice—but she hung out with the brains, and our paths almost never crossed. The only reason I asked her out the first time was because one of my frat brothers bet me ten dollars she wouldn't give me the time of day. But for some reason I'll never know she said yes, and for the next 60 years I was never willingly out of her presence. When we had money we spent it, and when we didn't have money we were every bit as happy; we just didn't live as well or travel as much. We raised our kids, sent them out into the world, watched one die and two move away to begin their own lives, and wound up the way we'd started—just the two of us.

And now one of us was vanishing, day by day, minute by minute.

\* \* \*

One morning she locked the bathroom door and couldn't remember how to unlock it. She was so panicky that she couldn't hear me giving her instructions from the other side. I was on the phone, calling the fire department, when she appeared at my side to ask why I was talking to them and what was burning.

“She had no memory of locking herself in,” I explained to Dr. Castleman the next day. “One moment she couldn’t cope with a lock any three-year-old could manipulate, and the next moment she opened the door and didn’t remember having any problem with it.”

“That’s the way these things progress,” he said.

“How long before she doesn’t know me any more?”

Castleman sighed. “I really don’t know, Paul. You’ve been the most important thing in her life, the most constant thing, so it stands to reason that you’ll be the last thing she forgets.” He sighed again. “It could be a few months, or a few years—or it could be tomorrow.”

“It’s not fair,” I muttered.

“Nobody ever said it was,” he replied. “I had her checked over while she was here, and for what it’s worth she’s in excellent physical health for a woman of her age. Heart and lungs are fine, blood pressure’s normal.”

Of course her blood pressure was normal, I thought bitterly. She didn’t spend most of her waking hours wondering what it would be like when the person she had spent her life with no longer recognized her.

Then I realized that she didn’t spend most of her waking hours thinking of *anything*, and I felt guilty for pitying myself when she was the one whose mind and memories were racing away at an ever-faster rate.

\* \* \*

Two weeks later we went shopping for groceries. She wandered off to get something—ice cream, I think—and when I’d picked up what I needed and went over to the frozen food section she wasn’t there. I looked around, checked out the next few aisles. No luck.

I asked one of the stock girls to check the women’s rest room. It was empty.

I started getting a panicky feeling in the pit of my stomach. I was just about to go out into the parking lot to look for her

when a cop brought her into the store, leading her very gently by the arm.

“She was wandering around looking for her car,” he explained. “A 1961 Nash Rambler.”

“We haven’t owned that car in 40 years or more,” I said. I turned to Gwendolyn. “Are you all right?”

Her face was streaked by tears. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I couldn’t remember where we parked the car.”

“It’s all right,” I said.

She kept crying and telling me how sorry she was. Pretty soon everyone was staring, and the store manager asked if I’d like to take her to his office and let her sit down. I thanked him, and the cop, but decided she’d be better off at home, so I led her out to the Ford we’d owned for the past five years and drove her home.

As we pulled into the garage and got out of the car, she stood back and looked at it.

“What a pretty car,” she said. “Whose is it?”

\* \* \*

“They’re not sure of anything,” said Dr. Castleman. “But they think it’s got something to do with the amyloid beta protein. An abundance of it can usually be found in people suffering from Alzheimer’s or Down Syndrome.”

“Can’t you take it out, or do something to neutralize it?” I asked.

Gwendolyn sat in a chair, staring at the wall. We could have been ten thousand miles away as far as she was concerned.

“If it was that simple, they’d have done it.”

“So it’s a protein,” I said. “Does it come in some kind of food? Is there something she shouldn’t be eating?”

He shook his head. “There are all kinds of proteins. This is one you’re born with.”

“Is it in the brain?”

“Initially it’s in the spinal fluid.”

“Well, can’t you drain it out?” I persisted.

He sighed. “By the time we know it’s a problem in a particular individual, it’s too late. It forms plaques on the brain, and once that happens, the disease is irreversible.” He paused wearily. “At least it’s irreversible today. Someday they’ll cure it. They should be able to slow it down before too long. I wouldn’t be surprised to see it eradicated within a quarter of a century. There may even come a day when they can test embryos for an amyloid beta imbalance and correct it *in utero*. They’re making progress.”

“But not in time to help Gwendolyn.”

“No, not in time to help Gwendolyn.”

\* \* \*

Gradually, over the next few months, she became totally unaware that she even had Alzheimer’s. She no longer read, but she watched the television incessantly. She especially liked children’s shows and cartoons. I would come into the room and hear the 82-year-old woman I loved singing along with the Mickey Mouse Club. I had a feeling that if they still ran test patterns she could watch one for hours on end.

And then came the morning I had known would come: I was fixing her breakfast—some cereal she’d seen advertised on television—and she looked up at me, and I could tell that she no longer knew who I was. Oh, she wasn’t afraid of me, or even curious, but there was absolutely no spark of recognition.

The next day I moved her into a home that specialized in the senile dementias.

\* \* \*

“I’m sorry, Paul,” said Dr. Castleman. “But it really is for the best. She needs professional care. You’ve lost weight, you’re not getting any sleep, and to be blunt, it no longer makes any difference to her who feeds and cleans and medicates her.”

“Well, it makes a difference to *me*,” I said angrily. “They treat her like an infant!”

“That’s what she’s become.”

“She’s been there two weeks, and I haven’t seen them try—really *try*—to communicate with her.”

“She has nothing to say, Paul.”

“It’s there,” I said. “It’s somewhere inside her brain.”

“Her brain isn’t what it once was,” said Castleman. “You have to face up to that.”

“I took her there too soon,” I said. “There *must* be a way to connect with her.”

“You’re an adult, and despite her appearance, she’s a four-year-old child,” said Castleman gently. “You no longer have anything in common.”

“We have a lifetime in common!” I snapped.

I couldn’t listen to any more, so I got up and stalked out of his office.

\* \* \*

I decided that depending on Dr. Castleman was a dead end, and I began visiting other specialists. They all told me pretty much the same thing. One of them even showed me his lab, where they were doing all kinds of chemical experiments on the amyloid beta protein and a number of other things. It was encouraging, but nothing was going to happen fast enough to cure Gwendolyn.

Two or three times each day I picked up that pistol I’d bought and toyed with ending it, but I kept thinking: what if there’s a miracle—medical, religious, whatever kind? What if she becomes Gwendolyn again? She’ll be all alone with a bunch of senile old men and women, and I’ll have deserted her.

So I couldn’t kill myself, and I couldn’t help her, and I couldn’t just stand by and watch her. Somehow, somewhere, there had to be a way to connect with her, to communicate on the same level again. We’d faced some pretty terrible problems together—losing a son, suffering a miscarriage, watching each of our parents die in turn—and as long as we were together we were

able to overcome them. This was just one more problem—and every problem is capable of solution.

I found the solution, too. It wasn't where I expected, and it certainly wasn't *what* I expected, but she was 82 years old and sinking fast, and I didn't hesitate.

That's where things stand this evening. Earlier today I bought this notebook, and this marks the end of my first entry.

\* \* \*

Friday, June 22. I'd heard about the clinic while I was learning everything I could about the disease. The government outlawed it and shut it down, so they moved it lock, stock and barrel to Guatemala. It wasn't much to look at, but then, I wasn't expecting much. Just a miracle of a different sort.

They make no bones about what they anticipate if the experiment goes as planned. That's why they only accept terminal patients—and because they have so few and are so desperate for volunteers, that's also why they didn't challenge me when I told them I had a slow-acting cancer. I signed a release that probably wouldn't hold up in any court of law outside Guatemala; they now have my permission to do just about anything they want to me.

\* \* \*

Saturday, June 23. So it begins. I thought they'd inject it into my spine, but instead they went through the carotid artery in my neck. Makes sense; it's the conduit between the spine and the brain. If anything's going to get the protein where it can do its work, that's the ticket. I thought it would hurt like hell, but it's just a little sore. Except for that, I don't feel any different.

\* \* \*

Wednesday, June 27. Fourth day in a row of tedious lectures explaining how some of us will die but a few may be saved and

all humanity will benefit, or something like that. Now I have an inkling of how lab rats and guinea pigs feel. They're not aware that they're dying; and I guess before too long, we won't be either.

\* \* \*

Wednesday, July 3. After a week of having me play with the most idiotic puzzles, they tell me that I've lost six percent of my cognitive functions and that the condition is accelerating. It seems to please them no end. I'm not convinced; I think if they'd give me a little more time I'd do better on these damned tests. I mean, it's been a long time since I was in school. I'm out of practice.

\* \* \*

Sunday, July 7. You know, I think it's working. I was reading down in the lounge, and for the longest time I couldn't remember where my room was. Good. The faster it works, the better. I've got a lot of catching up to do.

\* \* \*

Tuesday, July 16. Today we got another talking-to. They say the shots are stronger and the symptoms are appearing even faster than they'd hoped, and it's almost time to try the anecdote. Anecdote. Is that the right word?

\* \* \*

Friday, July 26. Boy am I lucky. At the last minute I remembered why I went there in the first place. I waited until it was dark and snuck out. When I got to the airport I didn't have any money, but they asked to see my wallet and took out this plastic card and did something with it and said it was OK and gave me a ticket.

\* \* \*

Saturday, July 27. I wrote down my address so I wouldn't forget, and boy am I lucky I did, because when I got a cab at the airport I couldn't remember what to tell him. We drove and we drove and finally I remembered I had written it down, but when we got home I didn't have a key. I started pounding on the door, but no one was there to let me in, and finally they came with a loud siren and took me somewhere else. I can't stay long. I have to find Gwendolyn before it is too late, but I can't remember what it would be too late for.

\* \* \*

Mundy, August. He says his name is Doctor Kasleman and that I know him, and he kept saying, "Oh, Paul, why did you do this to yourself, and I told him I didn't remember but I know I had a reason and it had something to do with Gwendolyn. Do you remember her he said. Of course I do I said, she is my love and my life. I asked when can I see her & he said soon.

\* \* \*

Wednesday. They gave me my own room, but I don't want my own room I want to be with Gwendolyn. Finally they let me see her and she was as beautiful as ever and I wanted to hug her and kiss her but when I walked up to her she started crying and the nurse took her away.

\* \* \*

It has been 8 days since I wrote here. Or maybe 9. I keep forgetting to. Today I saw a pretty little girl in the hall, with pretty white hair. She reminds me of someone but I don't know who. Tomorrow if I remember I will bring her a present.

\* \* \*

i saw the pretti gurl again today. i took a flower from a pot and gave it to her and she smiled and said thank you and we talkt alot and she said i am so glad we met & i am finaly happy. i said so am i. i think we are going to be great friends becauz we like each other and have so mucch in commmon. i askt her name and she couldnt remember, so i will call her gwendolyn. i think i nu someone called gwendolyn once a long time ago and it is a very pretti name for a very pretti new frend.

*When I delivered a collection to Beth Meacham, my editor at Tor, she didn't like any of the story titles as a title for the book, so I came up with this one. She replied that she liked it and that she'd use it, but that of course I now had to write a story with that title for inclusion in the book. So I did.*

## WILL THE LAST PERSON TO LEAVE THE PLANET PLEASE SHUT OFF THE SUN?

**I**t started with the Jews.

One day they announced that they were emigrating to the world of New Jerusalem. Just like that. Not even so much as a by-your-leave.

“We are tired of being under-appreciated and over-persecuted,” said their statement. “We gave you the Old Testament and the Ten Commandments, relativity and quantum mechanics, the polio vaccine and interstellar travel, Hollywood and Miami Beach and Sandy Koufax, the 6-Day War of 1967 and the 23-Minute War of 2041, and frankly, we’ve had it with you guys. Live long and prosper and don’t call us, we’ll call you.”

And the next day they were gone, every last one of them.

It was June 21, 2063. I still remember my friend Burt passing out *Earth: Love It Or Leave It* t-shirts to all the guys at work, and saying that we were well rid of them and that *now* things were going to get better in a hell of a hurry.

Then, three months later, Odingo Nkomo announced that the Kikuyu were leaving for Beta Piscium IV, and then Joshua Galawanda took the Zulus to Isandhwana II, and almost before you could turn around, Africa was empty except for a few Arabs in the north and a handful of Indians who quickly booked passage back to Bombay.

Well, this didn't bother anyone very much, because nobody really cared about Africa anyway, and suddenly there were two billion less mouths to feed and some of the game parks started showing signs of life. But then Moses Smith demanded that the U.S. government supply transportation to all American blacks who wanted to leave, and Earl Mingus ("the Pride of Mississippi"), who had just succeeded to the presidency, agreed on the spot, and suddenly we had an all-white nation.

Well, *almost* all-white. Actually, it took another year for Harvey Running Horse to convince all his fellow Amerinds to accompany him to Alphard III, which he had renamed Little Big Horn.

"Now," said Burt, popping open a beer, "if we could just get rid of the Hispanics, and maybe the Catholics ..."

The Hispanics headed off for Madrid III two months later, and Burt threw a big party to celebrate. "I'm finally proud to be an Amurrican agin!" he announced, and hung a huge flag outside his front door.

Of course, it wasn't just the blacks and Jews and Hispanics who were emigrating, and it wasn't just America and Africa that were getting emptier. The Chinese left the next year, followed by the Turks, the Bulgarians, the Indians, the Australians, and the French Polynesians. It didn't even make headlines when the Cook County Democratic Machine went off to Daleyworld, which figured to be the only planet that was ever turned into a smoke-filled back room.

“Great!” proclaimed Burt. “We finally got room to breathe and stretch our legs.”

Things kind of settled down for a couple of years then, and life got pretty easy, and we hardly noticed that the Brits, the Germans, the Russians, the Albanians, the Sunis and the Shiites had all gone.

“Wonderful!” said Burt on the day the Greeks and the Pakistanis left. “So maybe we still wear gas masks because of the pollution, and the water still ain’t safe to drink, and we ain’t quite gotten over our little problem with Eight Mile Island”—that was the problem that turned it into thirty-two Quarter Mile Islands—“but, by God, what’s a little inconvenience compared to a world run by and for 100% pure Amurricans?”

I suppose we should have seen the handwriting on the wall when the NFL moved the Alaska Timberwolves and the Louisiana Gamblers, the last two franchises still on Earth, to the Quinellus Cluster. There were other little hints, too, like using downtown Boston to test out the new J-Bomb, or the day the Great Lakes finally turned solid with sludge.

That was when the *real* emigration started, right in our backyard, so to speak. Nevada, Michigan, and Florida were the first to go; then New Hampshire and Delaware, then Texas, and then it was Katie-bar-the-door. For the longest time I really thought California would stick around, but they finally located a world with a 9,000-mile beach and a native populace that specialized in making sandals and cheap gold jewelry, and suddenly the United States of America began at St. Louis and ended about 60 miles west of Council Bluffs.

“Let ‘em go,” counseled Burt. “We never needed ‘em anyway. And there’s just that much more for the rest of us, right?”

Except that things kept happening. The ice cap slipped south all the way to Minneapolis, Mount Kilimanjaro started pouring lava down onto the Serengeti Plains, the Mediterranean boiled away, the National Hockey League went bankrupt, and people kept leaving.

That was almost ten years ago.

There are only eight of us left now. Burt was pressed into duty as World President this week, because Arnie Jenkins hurt his wrist and can't sign any documents, and Sybil Miller, who was supposed to succeed Arnie, has her period and says she doesn't feel like it.

We haven't gotten any mail or supplies in close to a year now. They say that Earth is too polluted and dangerous to land on any more, so Burt figured it was his Presidential duty to take one of our two remaining ships to Mars Base and pick up the mail, and bring Arnie back his yearly supply of cigarettes.

I stopped by his office this morning to return a socket wrench I had borrowed, and I saw a letter addressed to me sitting on his desk, so I opened it and read it.

*I been mulling it over, and I decided that I was all wrong about this after all. I mean, being World President is all well and good, but not when your only duties are taking out the garbage and picking up the mail. A World President needs a army and navy to keep the peace, and lots of people paying taxes, and stuff like that. I hate to leave now that we're finally down to nothing but 100% pure and loyal Americans, but the fact of the matter is that there ain't no point to being President every eighth week without no perks and no fringes, so I'm off to the big wide galaxy to see if anyone out there wants a guy with Presidential experience. I'll be happy to take over the reins of any government what wants me, so long as it's white and Christian and mostly American and has a football team. In fact, I don't even have to be President; I got no serious objections to hiring on as King*

*Do me a favor and post this one last official message for me.*

And there was a printed sign saying, WILL THE LAST PERSON TO LEAVE THE PLANET PLEASE SHUT OFF THE SUN?

I can't tell you how relieved the rest of us are. Burt was okay for a Baptist, but you know what they say about Baptists.

Now if we can just find a way to get rid of Myrtle Bremmer and that Presbyterian claptrap she's always spouting, we'll finally have an America that *I'm* proud to be a part of.

*So I got an assignment to write a story for Piers Anthony's anthology about American Indians, and I was sure everyone would be using Sitting Bull and Geronimo ... and then I remembered that charming scene in Cat Ballou where Cat's father is convinced that Indians are one of the twelve lost tribes of Israel, and suddenly I had a story to tell.*

## THE KEMOSABE

**S**o me and the Masked Man, we decide to hook up and bring evildoers to justice, which is a pretty full-time occupation considering just how many of these *momzers* there are wandering the West. Of course, I don't work on Saturdays, but this is never a problem, since he's usually sleeping off Friday night's binge and isn't ready to get back in the saddle until about half past Monday.

We get along pretty well, though we don't talk much to each other—my English is a little rusty, and his Yiddish is non-existent—but we share our food when times are tough, and we're always saving each other's life, just like it says in the dime novels.

Now, you'd think two guys who spend a whole year riding together wouldn't have any secrets from each other, but actually that's not the case. We respect each other's privacy, and it is almost twelve months to the day after we form a team that we find ourselves answering a call of Nature at the very same time,

and I look over at him, and I am so surprised I could just *plotz*, you know what I mean?

It's then that I start calling him Kemosabe, and finally one day he asks me what it means, and I tell him that it means "uncircumcised goy," and he kind of frowns and tells me that he doesn't know what *either* word means, so I sit him down and explain that Indians are one of the lost Hebrew tribes, only we aren't as lost as we're supposed to be, because Custer and the rest of those *meshugginah* soldiers keep finding us and blowing us to smithereens. And the Kemosabe, he asks if Hebrew is a suburb of Hebron, and right away I see we've got an enormous cultural gap to overcome.

But what the hell, we're pardners, and we're doing a pretty fair job of ridding the West of horse thieves and stage robbers and other varmints, so I say, "Look, Kemosabe, you're a *mensch* and I'm proud to ride with you, and if you wanna get drunk and *shtup* a bunch of *shiksas* whenever we go into town, that's your business and who am I to tell you what to do? But Butch Cavendish and his gang are giving me enough *tsouris* this month, so if we stop off at any Indian villages, let's let this be our little secret, okay?"

And the Kemosabe, who is frankly a lot quicker with his guns than his brain, just kind of frowns and looks hazy and finally nods his head, though I'm sure he doesn't know what he's nodding about.

Well, we ride on for another day or two, and finally reach his secret silver mine, and he melts some of it down and shoves it into his shells, and like always I ride off and hunt up Reb Running Bear and have him say Kaddish over the bullets, and when I hunt up the Masked Man again I find he has had the *chutzpah* to take on the whole Cavendish gang single-handed, and since they know he never shoots to kill and they ain't got any such compunctions, they leave him lying there for dead with a couple of new *pupiks* in his belly.

So I make a sled and hook it to the back of his horse, which he calls Silver but which he really ought to call White, or at least

White With The Ugly Brown Blotch On His Belly, and I hop up my pony, and pretty soon we're in front of Reb Running Bear's tent, and he comes out and looks at the Masked Man lying there with his ten-gallon Stetson for a long moment, and then he turns to me and says, "You know, that has got to be the ugliest *yarmulke* I've ever seen."

"This is my pardner," I say. "Some goniffs drygulched him. You got to make him well."

Reb Running Bear frowns. "He doesn't look like one of the Chosen People to me. Where was he *bar mitzvahed*?"

"He wasn't," I say. "But he's one of the Good Guys. He and I are cleaning up the West."

"Six years in Hebrew school and you settle for being a janitor?" he says.

"Don't give me a hard time," I said. "We got bad guys to shoot and wrongs to right. Just save the Kemosabe's life."

"The Kemosabe?" he repeats. "Would I be very far off the track if I surmised that he doesn't keep kosher?"

"Look," I say, deciding that it's time to play hardball, "I hadn't wanted to bring this up, but I know what you and Mrs. Screaming Hawk were doing last time I visited this place."

"Keep your voice down or that *yenta* I married will make my life hell!" he whispers, glancing back toward his teepee. Then he grimaces. "Mrs. Screaming Hawk. Serves me right for taking her to Echo Canyon. *Feb!*"

I stare at him. "So *nu*?"

"All right, all right, Jehovah and I will nurse the Kemosabe back to health."

"Good," I say.

He glares at me. "But just this one time. Then I pass the word to all the other Rabbis: we don't cure no more *goys*. What have they ever done for us?"

Well, I am all prepared to argue the point, because I'm a pretty open-minded kind of guy, but just then the Kemosabe starts moaning and I realize that if I argue for more than a couple of minutes we could all be sitting *shivah* for him before

dinnertime, so I wander off and pay a visit to Mrs. Rutting Elk to console her on the sudden passing of her husband and see if there is anything I can do to cheer her up, and Reb Running Bear gets to work, and lo and behold, in less than a week the Masked Man is up and around and getting impatient to go out after desperados, so we thank Reb Running Bear for his services, and he loads my pardner down with a few canteens of chicken soup, and we say a fond *shalom* to the village.

I am hoping we have a few weeks for the Kemosabe to regain his strength, of which I think he is still missing an awful lot, but as Fate would have it, we are riding for less than two hours when we come across the Cavendish gang's trail.

"Aha!" he says, studying the hoofprints. "All thirty of them! This is our chance for revenge!"

My first thought is to say something like, "What do you mean *we*, mackerel eater?"—but then I remember that Good Guys never back down from a challenge, so I simply say "Ugh!", which is my opinion of taking on thirty guys at once, but which he insists on interpreting as an affirmative.

We follow the trail all day, and when it's too dark to follow it any longer, we make camp on a small hill.

"We should catch up with them just after sunrise," says the Masked Man, and I can see that his trigger finger is getting itchy.

"Ugh," I say.

"We'll meet them on the open plain, where nobody can hide."

"Double ugh with cherries on it," I say.

"You look very grim, old friend," he says.

"Funny you should mention it," I say, but before I can suggest that we just forget the whole thing, he speaks again.

"You can have the other twenty-nine, but Cavendish is mine."

"You're all heart, Kemosabe," I say.

He stands up, stretches, and walks over to his bedroll. "Well, we've got a hard day's bloodletting ahead of us. We'd best get some sleep."

He lays down, and ten seconds later he's snoring like all get-out, and I sit there staring at him, and I just know he's not gonna come through this unscathed, and I remember Reb Running Bear's promise that no medicine man would ever again treat a goy.

And the more I think about it, the more I think that it's up to me, the loyal sidekick, to do something about it. And finally it occurs to me just what I have to do, because if I can't save him from the Cavendish gang, the least I can do is save him from himself.

So I go over to my bedroll, and pull out a bottle of Mogen David, and pour a little on my hunting knife, and try to remember the exact words the medicine man recites during the *bris*, and I know that someday, when he calms down, he'll thank me for this.

In the meantime, I'm gonna have to find a new nickname for my pardner.



*One day we're driving along, and Carol is humming the first couple of lines of an old nursery rhyme repeatedly, and finally I ask her to hum something else. She asks what, and since nursery rhymes seem to be the order of the day I suggest the only other one I can think of, "Old MacDonald Had a Farm"—and the second I say it, I start thinking about what kind of farm Old MacDonald will have in a century or two, which resulted in this Hugo nominee.*

## OLD MACDONALD HAD A FARM

**I** came to praise Caesar, not to bury him.

Hell, we all did.

The farm spread out before us, green and rolling, dotted with paddocks and water troughs. It looked like the kind of place you wish your parents had taken you when you were a kid and the world was still full of wonders.

Well, the world may not have been full of wonders any longer, but the farm was. Problem was, they weren't exactly the kind you used to dream of—unless you were coming down from a *really* bad acid trip.

The farm was the brainchild of Caesar Claudius MacDonald. He'd finally knuckled under to public pressure and agreed to show the place off to the press. That's where I came in.

My name's McNair. I used to have a first name, but I dumped it when I decided a one-word byline was more memorable. I work

for the *SunTrib*, the biggest newstape in the Chicago area. I'd just broken the story that put Billy Cheever away after the cops had been after him for years. What I wanted for my efforts was my own syndicated column; what I got was a trip to the farm.

For a guy no one knew much about, one who almost never appeared in public, MacDonald had managed to make his name a household word in something less than two years. Even though one of his corporations owned our publishing company, we didn't have much on him in our files, just what all the other news bureaus had: he'd earned a couple of Ph.D.s, he was a widower who by all accounts had been faithful to his wife, he'd inherited a bundle and then made a lot more on his own.

MacDonald was a Colorado native who emigrated to New Zealand's South Island, bought a 40,000-hectare farm, and hired a lot of technicians over the years. If anyone wondered why a huge South Island farm didn't have any sheep, they probably just figured he had worked out some kind of tax dodge.

Hell, that's what I thought too. I mean, why else would someone with his money bury himself on the underside of the globe for half a lifetime?

Then, a week after his 66th birthday, MacDonald made The Announcement. That's the year they had food riots in Calcutta and Rio and Manila, when the world was finding out that it was easier to produce eleven billion living human beings than to feed them.

Some people say he created a new life form. Some say he produced a hybrid (though not a single geneticist agrees with that.) Some—I used to snicker at them—say that he had delved into mysteries that Man Was Not Meant To Know.

According to the glowing little computer cube they handed out, MacDonald and his crew spent close to three decades manipulating DNA molecules in ways no one had ever thought of before. He did a lot of trial and error work with embryos, until he finally came up with the prototype he sought. Then he spent a few more years making certain that it would breed true. And finally he announced his triumph to the world.

Caesar MacDonald's masterpiece was the Butterball, a meat animal that matured at six months of age and could reproduce at eight months, with a four-week gestation period. It weighed 400 pounds at maturity, and every portion of its body could be consumed by Earth's starving masses, even the bones.

That in itself was a work of scientific brilliance—but to me the true stroke of genius was the astonishing efficiency of the Butterballs' digestive systems. An elephant, back when elephants still existed, would eat about 600 pounds of vegetation per day, but could only use about forty percent of it, and passed the rest as dung. Cattle and pigs, the most common meat animals prior to the Butterballs, were somewhat more efficient, but they, too, wasted a lot of expensive feed.

The Butterballs, on the other hand, utilized one hundred percent of what they were fed. Every pellet of food they ingested went right into building meat that was meticulously bio-engineered to please almost every palate. Anyway, that's what the endless series of P.R. releases said.

MacDonald had finally consented to allow a handful of pool reporters to come see for themselves.

We were hoping for a look at MacDonald too, maybe even an interview with the Great Man. But when we got there, we learned that he had been in seclusion for months. Turned out he was suffering from depression, which I would have thought would be the last thing to affect humanity's latest savior, but who knows what depresses a genius? Maybe, like Alexander, he wanted more worlds to conquer, or maybe he was sorry that Butterballs didn't weigh 800 pounds. Hell, maybe he had just worked too hard for too long, or maybe he realized that he was a lot closer to the end of life than the beginning and didn't like it much. Most likely, he just didn't consider us important enough to bother with.

Whatever the reason, we were greeted not by MacDonald himself, but by a flack named Judson Cotter. I figured he had to work in P.R.; his hair was a little too perfect, his suit too up-to-

the-minute, his hands too soft for him to have been anything else but a pitchman.

After he apologized for MacDonald's absence, he launched into a worshipful biography of his boss, not deviating one iota from the holobio they'd shown us on the plane trip.

"But I suspect you're here to see the farm," he concluded after paraphrasing the bio for five minutes.

"No," muttered Julie Balch from *NyVid*, "we came all this way to stand in this cold wet breeze and admire your clothes."

A few of us laughed, and Cotter looked just a bit annoyed. I made a mental note to buy her a drink when the tour was done.

"Now let me see a show of hands," said Cotter. "Has anyone here ever seen a live Butterball?"

*Where did they find you? I thought. If we'd seen one, do you really think we'd have flown all the way to hell and gone just to see another?*

I looked around. No one had raised a hand. Which figured. To the best of my knowledge, nobody who didn't work for MacDonald had ever seen a Butterball in the flesh, and only a handful of photos and holos had made it out to the general public. There was even a rumor that all of MacDonald's employees had to sign a secrecy oath.

"There's a reason, of course," continued Cotter smoothly. "Until the international courts verified Mr. MacDonald's patent, there was always a chance that some unscrupulous individual or even a rogue nation would try to duplicate the Butterball. For that reason, while we have shipped and sold its meat all over the world, always with the inspection and approval of the local food and health authorities, we have not allowed anyone to see or examine the animals themselves. But now that the courts have ruled in our favor, we have opened our doors to the press." *Screaming bloody murder every step of the way*, I thought.

"You represent the first group of journalists to tour the farm, but there will be many more, and we will even allow Sir Richard Perigrine to make one of his holographic documentaries here at the farm." He paused. "We plan to open it to public tours in the next two or three years."

Suddenly a bunch of bullshit alarms began going off inside my head.

“Why not sooner, now that you’ve won your case?” asked Julie, who looked like she was hearing the same alarms.

“We’d rather that *you* bring the initial stories and holos of the Butterballs to the public,” answered Cotter.

“That’s very generous of you,” she persisted. “But you still haven’t told us why.”

“We have our reasons,” he said. “They will be made apparent to you before the tour is over.”

My old friend Jake Monfried of the *SeattleDisk* sidled over to me. “I hope I can stay awake that long,” he said sardonically. “It’s all rubbish anyway.”

“I know,” I said. “Their rivals don’t even need the damned holos. Any high school kid could take a hunk of Butterball steak and come up with a clone.”

“So why haven’t they?” asked Julie.

“Because MacDonald’s got fifty lawyers on his payroll for every scientist,” answered Jake. He paused, his expression troubled. “Still, this guy’s lying to us—and it’s a stupid lie, and he doesn’t look *that* stupid. I wonder what the hell he’s hiding?”

We were going to have to wait to find out, because Cotter began leading us across a rolling green plain toward a barn. We circled a couple of ponds, where a few dozen birds were wading and drinking. The whole setting looked like something out of a Norman Rockwell or a Grandma Moses painting, it was so wholesome and innocent—and yet every instinct I had screamed at me that something was wrong here, that nothing could be as peaceful and tranquil as it appeared.

“To appreciate what Mr. MacDonald has done here,” said Cotter as we walked toward a large barn on a hillside, “you have to understand the challenge he faced. More than five billion men, women and children have serious protein deficiencies. Three billion of them are quite literally starving to death. And of course the price of meat—*any* meat—had skyrocketed to the point where only the very wealthy can afford it. So what he had

to do was not only create an animal as totally, completely nutritious as the Butterball, he had to also create one that could mature and breed fast enough to meet mankind's needs now and in the future."

He stopped until a couple of laggards caught up with the group. "His initial work took the form of computer simulations. Then he hired a bevy of scientists and technicians who, guided by his genius, actually manipulated DNA to the point where the Butterballs existed not just on the screen and in Mr. MacDonald's mind, but in the flesh.

"It took a few generations for them to breed true, but fortunately a Butterball generation is considerably less than a year. Mr. MacDonald then had his staff spend some years mass-producing Butterballs. They were designed to have multiple births, not single offspring, and average ten to twelve per litter—and all of our specimens were bred and bred again so that when we finally introduced the Butterball to the world two years ago, we felt confident that we could keep up with the demand without running out of Butterballs."

"How many Butterballs have you got here?" asked the guy from *Eurocom International*, looking out across the rolling pastures and empty fields.

"We have more than two million at this facility," came the answer. "Mr. MacDonald owns some twenty-seven farms here and in Australia, each as large or larger than this one, and each devoted to the breeding of Butterballs. Every farm has its own processing plant. We're proud to note that while we have supplied food for billions, we've also created jobs for more than 80,000 men and women." He paused to make sure we had recorded that number or were jotting it down.

"That many?" mused Julie.

"I know it seems like we sneaked up on the world," said Cotter with a smile. "But for legal reasons we were compelled to keep the very existence of the Butterballs secret until we were ready to market them—and once we *did* go public, we were processing, shipping and selling hundreds of tons from each

farm every month right from the start. We had to have all our people in place to do that.”

“If they give him the Nobel, he can afford to turn the money down,” Jake said wryly.

“I believe Mr. MacDonald is prepared to donate the money to charity should that happy event come to pass,” responded Cotter. He turned and began walking toward the barn, then stopped about eighty feet from of it.

“I must prepare you for what you’re going to—”

“We’ve already seen the holos,” interrupted the French reporter.

Cotter stared at him for a moment, then began again. “As I was saying, I must prepare you for what you’re going to *bear*.”

“Hear?” I repeated, puzzled.

“It was a fluke,” he explained, trying to look unconcerned and not quite pulling it off. “An accident. An anomaly. But the fact of the matter is that the Butterballs can articulate a few words, just as a parrot can. We could have eliminated that ability, of course, but that would have taken more experimentation and more time, and the world’s hungry masses couldn’t wait.”

“So what do they say?” asked Julie.

Cotter smiled what I’m sure he thought was a comforting smile. “They simply repeat what they hear. There’s no intelligence behind it. None of them has a vocabulary of more than a dozen words. Mostly they articulate their most basic needs.”

He turned to the barn and nodded to a man who stood by the door. The man pushed a button, and the door slid back.

The first big surprise was the total silence that greeted us from within the barn. Then, as they heard us approaching—we weren’t speaking, but coins jingle and feet scuff the ground—a voice, then a hundred, then a thousand, began calling out:

*“Feed me!”*

It was a cacophony of sound, not quite human, the words repeated again and again and again: *“Feed me!”*

We entered the barn, and finally got our first glimpse of the Butterballs. Just as in their holos, they were huge and roly-poly, almost laughably cute, looking more like oversized bright pink balloons than anything else. They had four tiny feet, good for balance but barely capable of locomotion. There were no necks to speak of, just a small pink balloon that swiveled atop the larger one. They had large round eyes with wide pupils, ears the size of small coins, two slits for nostrils, and generous mouths without any visible teeth.

“The eyes are the only part of the Butterball that aren’t marketable,” said Cotter, “and that is really for esthetic reasons. I’m told they are quite edible.”

The nearest one walked to the edge of its stall.

“*Pet me!*” it squeaked.

Cotter reached in and rubbed its forehead, and it squealed in delight.

“I’ll give you a few minutes to wander around the barn, and then I’ll meet you outside, where I’ll answer your questions.”

He had a point. With a couple of thousand Butterballs screaming “*Feed me!*” more and more frantically, it was almost impossible to think in there. We went up and down the rows of small stalls, captured the place on film and tape and disk and cube, then went back outside.

“That was impressive,” I admitted when we’d all gathered around Cotter again. “But I didn’t see any two million Butterballs in there. Where are the rest of them?”

“There are more than three hundred barns and other enclosures on the farm,” answered Cotter. “Furthermore, close to half a million are outside in pastures.”

“I don’t see anything but empty fields,” remarked Jake, waving a hand toward the pristine enclosures.

“We’re a huge farm, and we prefer to keep the Butterballs away from prying eyes. In fact, this barn was built only a month ago, when we finally decided to allow visitors on the premises. It is the only building that’s as close as a mile to any of our boundary lines.”

“You said that some of them were in pastures,” said Julie. “What do they eat?”

“Not grass,” answered Cotter. “They’re only outside because they’re multiplying so fast that we’re actually short of barns at the moment.” He paused. “If you looked carefully at them, you noticed that grazing is quite beyond their capabilities.” He held up a small golden pellet for us to see. “This is what they eat. It is totally artificial, created entirely from chemicals. Mr. MacDonald was adamant that no Butterball should ever eat any product that might nourish a human being. Their digestive systems were engineered to utilize this particular feed, which can provide nourishment to no other species on Earth.”

“As long as you tinkered with their digestive systems, why didn’t you make them shit-eaters?” asked Jake, only half-jokingly. “They could have served two purposes at once.”

“I assume that was meant in jest,” said Cotter, “but in point of fact, Mr. MacDonald considered it at one time. After all, some nourishment *does* remain in excrement—but alas, not enough. He wanted an animal that could utilize one hundred percent of what we fed it.”

“How smart are they?” asked one of the Brits. “When I was a child, I had a dog that always wanted me to feed it or pet it, but it never told me so.”

“Yes it did,” said Cotter. “It just didn’t use words.”

“Point taken,” said the Brit. “But I’d still like to know ...”

“These are dumb farm animals,” said Cotter. “They do not think, they do not dream, they have no hopes or aspirations, they do not wish to become Archbishop. They just happen to be able to articulate a few words, not unlike many birds. Surely you don’t think Mr. MacDonald would create a sentient meat animal.”

“No, of course not,” interjected Julie. “But hearing them speak is still a bit of a shock.”

“I know,” said Cotter. “And that’s the *real* reason we’ve invited you here, why we’re inviting so many other press pools—to prepare the public.”

“That’s going to take a lot of preparation,” I said dubiously.

“We have to start somewhere,” said Cotter. “We have to let the people know about this particular anomaly. Men love to anthropomorphize, and a talking animal makes doing so that much easier. The consumers must be made to understand, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that these are unintelligent meat animals, that they do not know what their words mean, that they have no names and aren’t pets, that they do not mourn the loss of their neighbors any more than a cow or a goat does. They are humanity’s last chance—note that I did not even say humanity’s last *best* chance—and we cannot let the protestors and picketers we know will demonstrate against us go unanswered. No one will believe *our* answers, but they should believe the answers of the unbiased world press.”

“Yeah,” I said under my breath to Jake. “And if kids didn’t want to eat Bambi, or Henry the Turkey, or Penelope Pig, how is anyone going to make them dig into Talky the Butterball, who actually exists?”

“I heard that,” said Cotter sharply, “and I must point out that the children who will survive because of the Butterballs will almost certainly never have been exposed to Bambi or Henry or any of the others.”

“Maybe not for a year or two,” I replied, unimpressed. “But before long you’ll be selling Butterburgers on every street corner in the States.”

“Not until we’ve fulfilled our mission among the less fortunate peoples of the world—and by that time the people you refer to should be prepared to accept the Butterballs.”

“Well, you can hope,” I said.

“If it never comes to that, it doesn’t really matter,” said Cotter with an elaborate shrug. “Our mission is to feed Earth’s undernourished billions.”

We both knew it would come to that, and sooner than anyone planned, but if he didn’t want to argue it, that was fine with me. I was just here to collect a story.

“Before I show you the processing plant, are there any further questions?” asked Cotter.

“You mean the slaughterhouse, right?” said Jake.

“I mean the processing plant,” said Cotter severely. “Certain words are not in our lexicon.”

“You’re actually going to show us Butterballs being ... *processed?*” asked Julie distastefully.

“Certainly not,” answered Cotter. “I’m just going to show you the plant. The process is painless and efficient, but I see no value in your being able to report that you watched our animals being prepared for market.”

“Good!” said Julie with obvious relief.

Cotter gestured to an open bus that was parked a few hundred meters away, and it soon pulled up. After everybody was seated, he climbed on and stood next to the driver, facing us.

“The plant is about five miles away, at almost the exact center of the farm, insulated from curious eyes and ears.”

“*Ears?*” Julie jumped on the word. “Do they scream?”

Cotter smiled. “No, that was just an expression. We are quite humane, far more so than any meat packing plant that existed before us.”

The bus hit a couple of bumps that almost sent him flying, but he hung on like a trooper and continued bombarding us with information, about three-quarters of it too technical or too self-serving to be of any use.

“Here we are,” he announced as the bus came to a stop in front of the processing plant, which dwarfed the barn we had just left. “Everyone out, please.”

We got off the bus. I sniffed the air for the odor of fresh blood, not that I knew what it smelled like, but of course I couldn’t detect any. No blood, no rotting flesh, nothing but clean, fresh air. I was almost disappointed.

There were a number of small pens nearby, each holding perhaps a dozen Butterballs.

“You have perhaps noticed that we have no vehicles capable of moving the hundreds and thousands of units we

have to process each day?” asked Cotter, though it came out more as a statement than a question.

“I assume they are elsewhere,” said the lady from India.

“They were inefficient,” replied Cotter. “We got rid of them.”

“Then how do you move the Butterballs?”

Cotter smiled. “Why clutter all our roads with vehicles when they aren’t necessary?” he said, tapping out a design on his pocket computer. The main door to the processing plant slid open, and I noticed that the Butterballs were literally jumping up and down with excitement.

Cotter walked over to the nearest pen. “Who wants to go to heaven?” he asked.

“*Go to heaven!*” squeaked a Butterball.

“*Go to heaven!*” rasped another.

Soon all twelve were repeating it almost as if it were a chant, and I suddenly felt like I was trapped inside some strange surrealistic play.

Finally Cotter unlocked their pen and they hopped—I hadn’t seen any locomote at the other barn—up to the door and into the plant.

“It’s as simple as that,” said Cotter. “The money we save on vehicles, fuel and maintenance allows us to—”

“There’s nothing simple about it!” snapped Julie. “This is somewhere between blasphemy and obscenity! And while we’re at it,” she added suspiciously, “how can a dumb animal possibly know what heaven is?”

“I repeat, they are not sentient,” said Cotter. “Just as you have code words for your pet dog or cat, we have them for the Butterballs. Ask your dog if he wants a treat, and he’ll bark or sit up or do whatever you have conditioned him to do. We have conditioned the Butterballs in precisely the same way. They don’t know the meaning of the word ‘heaven’ any more than your pet knows the meaning of the word ‘treat,’ but we’ve conditioned them to associate the word with good feelings and with entry into the processing plant. They will happily march miles through a driving rain to ‘go to heaven.’”

“But heaven is such a ... a *philosophical* concept,” persisted the Indian woman. “Even to use it seems—”

“Your dog knows when he’s been good,” interrupted Cotter, “because you tell him so, and he believes you implicitly. And he knows when he’s been bad, because you show him what he’s done to displease you and you call him a bad dog. But do you think he understands the abstract philosophical concepts of good and bad?”

“All right,” said Julie. “You’ve made your point. But if you don’t mind, I’d rather not see the inside of the slaughterhouse.”

“The processing plant,” he corrected her. “And of course you don’t have to enter it if it will make you uncomfortable.”

“I’ll stay out here too,” I said. “I’ve seen enough killing down in Paraguay and Uruguay.”

“We’re not killing anything,” explained Cotter irritably. “I am simply showing you—”

“I’ll stay here anyway,” I cut him off.

He shrugged. “As you wish.”

“If you have no vehicles to bring them to the plant,” asked the Brit, approaching the entrance, “how do you move the ... uh, the finished product out?”

“Through a very efficient system of underground conveyers,” said Cotter. “The meat is stored in subterranean freezers near the perimeter of the property until it is shipped. And now ...” He opened a second pen, offered them heaven, and got pretty much the same response.

*Poor bastards*, I thought as I watched them hop and waddle to the door of the plant. *In times gone by, sheep would be enticed into the slaughterhouse by a trained ram that they blindly followed. But leave it to us to come up with an even better reward for happily walking up to the butcher block: heaven itself.*

The Butterballs followed the first dozen into the belly of the building, and the rest of the pool followed Cotter in much the same way. There was a parallel to be drawn there, but I wasn’t interested enough to draw it.

I saw Julie walking toward one of the pens. She looked like she didn't want any company, so I headed off for a pen in the opposite direction. When I got there, four or five of the Butterballs pressed up against the fence next to me.

"Feed me!"

"Feed me!"

"Pet me!"

"Feed me!"

Since I didn't have any food, I settled for petting the one who was more interested in being petted than being fed.

"Feel good?" I asked idly.

"Feel good!" it said.

I almost did a double take at that.

"You're a hell of a mimic, you know that?" I said.

No reply.

"Can you say what I say?" I asked.

Silence.

"Then how the hell did you learn to say it feels good, if you didn't learn it just now from me?"

"Pet me!"

"Okay, okay," I said, scratching it behind a tiny ear.

"Very good!"

I pulled my hand back as if I'd had an electric shock. "I never said the word 'very.' Where did you learn it?" *And more to the point, how did you learn to partner it with 'good'?*

Silence.

For the next ten minutes I tried to get it to say something different. I wasn't sure what I was reaching for, but the best I got was a "Pet me!" and a pair of "Goods".

"All right," I said at last. "I give up. Go play with your friends, and don't go to heaven too soon."

"Go to heaven!" it said, hopping up and down. "Go to heaven!"

"Don't get so excited," I said. "It's not what it's cracked up to be."

"See Mama!" it squealed.

"What?"

“*See God! See Mama!*”

Suddenly I knew why MacDonald was being treated for depression. I didn’t blame him at all.

I hurried back to the slaughterhouse, and when Cotter emerged alone a moment later I walked up to him.

“We have to talk,” I said, grabbing him by the arm.

“Your colleagues are all inside inspecting the premises,” he said, trying to pull himself loose from my grip. “Are you sure you wouldn’t care to join them?”

“Shut up and listen to me!” I said. “I just had a talk with one of your Butterballs.”

“He told you to feed him?”

“He told me that he would see God when he went to heaven.”

Cotter swallowed hard. “Oh, shit—another one!”

“Another one of *what?*” I demanded. “Another sentient one?”

“No, of course not,” said Cotter. “But as often as we impress the need for absolute silence among our staff, they continue to speak to each other in front of the Butterballs, or even to the Butterballs themselves. Obviously this one heard someone saying that God lives in heaven. It has no concept of God, of course; it probably thinks God is something good to eat.”

“He thinks he’s going to see his mother, too,” I said.

“He’s a *mimic!*” said Cotter severely. “Surely you don’t think he can have any memory of his mother? For Christ’s sake, he was weaned at five weeks!”

“I’m just telling you what he said,” I replied. “Like it or not, you’ve got a hell of a P.R. problem: Just how many people do you want him saying it to?”

“Point him out to me,” said Cotter, looking panicky. “We’ll process him at once.”

“You think he’s the only one with a vocabulary?” I asked.

“One of the very few, I’m sure,” said Cotter.

“Don’t be *that* sure,” said Julie, who had joined us while I was talking to Cotter. She had an odd expression on her face,

like someone who's just undergone a religious experience and wishes she hadn't. "Mine looked at me with those soft brown eyes and asked me, very gently and very shyly, not to eat it."

I thought Cotter would shit in his expensive suit. "That's impossible!"

"The hell it is," she shot back.

"They are *not* sentient," he said stubbornly. "They are *mimics*. They do not think. They do not know what they are saying." He stared at her. "Are you sure he didn't say '*feed*'? It sounds a lot like '*eat*.' You've got to be mistaken."

It made sense. I hoped he was right.

"Don't feed me?" repeated Julie. "The only un-hungry Butterball on the farm?"

"Some of them speak better than others. He could have been clearing his throat, or trying to say something that came out wrong. I've even come across one that stutters." It occurred to me that Cotter was trying as hard to convince himself as he was to convince her. "We've tested them a hundred different ways. They're not sentient. They're *not!*"

"But—"

"Consider the facts," said Cotter. "I've explained that the words sounds alike. I've explained that the Butterballs are not all equally skilled at articulation. I've explained that after endless lab experiments the top animal behavioral scientists in the world have concluded that they are not sentient. All that is on one side. On the other is that you *think* you may have heard something that is so impossible that any other explanation makes more sense."

"I don't know," she hedged. "It sounded exactly like ..."

"I'm sure it did," said Cotter soothingly. "You were simply mistaken."

"No one else has ever heard anything like that?" she asked.

"No one. But if you'd like to point out which of them said it ..."

She turned toward the pen. "They all look alike."

I tagged along as the two of them walked over to the Butterballs. We spent about five minutes there, but none of them said anything but “*Feed me!*” and “*Pet me!*” and finally Julie sighed in resignation.

“All right,” she said wearily. “Maybe I was wrong.”

“What do you think, Mr. McNair?” asked Cotter.

My first thought was: what the hell are you asking *me* for? Then I looked into his eyes, which were almost laying out the terms of our agreement, and I knew.

“Now that I’ve had a few minutes to think about it, I guess we were mistaken,” I said. “Your scientists know a lot more about it than we do.”

I turned to see Julie’s reaction.

“Yeah,” she said at last. “I suppose so.” She looked at the Butterballs. “Besides, MacDonald may be a zillionaire and a recluse, but I don’t think he’s a monster, and only a monster could do something like ... well ... yes, I must have been mistaken.”

And that’s the story. We were not only the first pool of journalists to visit the farm. We were also the last.

The others didn’t know what had happened, and of course Cotter wasn’t about to tell them. They reported what they saw, told the world that its prayers were answered, and only three of them even mentioned the Butterballs’ special talent.

I thought about the Butterballs all during the long flight home. Every expert said they weren’t sentient, that they were just mimics. And I suppose my Butterball could very well have heard someone say that God lived in heaven, just as he could have heard someone use the word “very.” It was a stretch, but I could buy it if I had to.

But where did Julie Balch’s Butterball ever hear a man begging not to be eaten? I’ve been trying to come up with an answer to that since I left the farm. I haven’t got one yet—but I *do* have a syndicated column, courtesy of the conglomerate that owns the publishing company.

So am I going use it to tell the world?

That's my other problem: Tell it *what*? That three billion kids can go back to starving to death? Because whether Cotter was telling the truth or lying through his teeth, if it comes down to a choice between Butterballs and humans, I know which side I have to come down on.

There are things I can control and things I can't, things I know and things I am trying my damndest not to know. I'm just one man, and I'm not responsible for saving the world.

But I *am* responsible for me—and from the day I left the farm, I've been a vegetarian. It's a small step, but you've got to start somewhere.

*Marty Greenberg was doing an anthology of Robin Hood stories, and invited me to write one. I don't write derring-do, but I knew Marty had a soft spot for Jewish shtick stories, so I came up with Mrs. Hood's tsouris.*

## MRS. HOOD UNLOADS

**Y**es, Mrs. Grobnik, it's a new set of tiles. My son the Most Wanted Felon gave them to me. Probably they used to belong to the rabbi's wife.

He just gave them to me last week. He'd been keeping them for me for three months. Two nights a week he can sneak into the castle and annoy the King, but can he come by for dinner with his mother more than once in three months?

You think you've got *tsouris*? Well, God may ignore you from time to time, but He *hates* me.

I don't mean to complain ... but what did I ever do to deserve such a *schmendrik* for a son? I think they must have switched babies at the hospital, I really do. 26 hours I spent in labor, and for what? You work and you slave, you try to give your son a sense of values, and then even when he stops by he gulps his food and can never stay for dessert because the army is after him.

So at least you can write and tell me how you're doing, Mr. Big Shot, I tell him. And do you know what he says to that? He

says he can't write because he's illiterate. Me, I say he's just using that as an excuse.

You break the wall, Mrs. Noodleman. Can I bring anyone some tea?

Well, of course he robs from the rich, Mrs. Grobnik. I mean, what's the sense of robbing from the poor? But why does he have to rob at all? Why couldn't he have been a doctor? But he says no, he's got this calling, that God told him he has to rob from the rich and give to the poor. When I was fourteen, God told me that I was a fairy princess, but you didn't see me going out and kissing any frogs. Anyway, I tell him that maybe he's misinterpreting, that maybe God is telling him to be a banker or a real estate broker, but he says no, his holy mission is to rob the rich and give to the poor. So I ask him why he can't at least charge the poor a ten percent handling fee, and he gives me that look, the same one I used to smack his *tuchis* for when he was a boy.

*Pong!* Very good, Mrs. Katz.

No, we're happy to have you here, Mrs. Katz. I just couldn't take any more of that Mrs. Nottingham. She's so hoity-toity and walks around with her nose in the air, and acts like her boy is a lawyer instead of just a policeman. My son the criminal gives away more in a week than her son makes in a year.

You heard *what*, Mrs. Noodleman? You heard him say that he moved to Sherwood Forest because he went off to the Crusades and came back to find out he wasn't the Lord of the Manor? Well, of course he wasn't the Lord of the Manor! Was my late husband, Mr. Hood, God rest his soul, the Lord of the Manor? Are my brothers Nate and Jake the Lords of the Manor? Probably ten thousand boys came home and found they weren't Lords of the Manor—but did *they* go live in the forest and rob their mother's friends?

He was an apprentice blacksmith, that's what he was. He probably made up all this Lord of the Manor stuff to impress that *shiksa* Marian.

And while I'm thinking of it, what's all this *Maid* Marian talk? She doesn't look like a maid to *me*.

Not so fast, Mrs. Noodleman. I have a flower, so I get an extra tile.

Anyway, you work and you slave, and what does it get you? Your son runs off to the forest and starts wearing a *yarmulka* with a feather in it, that's what.

And look who he runs around with—a bunch of merry men! I don't know if I can bear the shame! Just wish I knew what I ever did to make God hate me so much.

Thank you for your kind words, Mrs. Grobnik, but you just can't imagine what it's like. I try to raise him with proper values, and look how it all turns out—he's dating this Marian person, and his closest friend is a priest, Friar someone-or-other.

Oh, it's not? Now his best friend is Little John? Well, I don't want to be the one to gossip, but the stable girl told me what's so little about *him*.

*Chow*, Mrs. Noodleman. I lost track—whose turn is it now?

So he comes by last Thursday, and he gives me these tiles, and he says he can only stay for five minutes because the Sheriff's men are after him, and he gulps his *gefille* fish down, and I notice he's looking thin, so I ask him if he's getting his greens, and he gives me that look, and he says Ma, of course I'm getting my greens, I live in a forest. So sue me, I say, better I should just sit here in the dark and never even mention that you're too skinny because you never come by for dinner unless the Sheriff's men are watching your hide-in.

Hide-out, hide-in, what's the difference, Mrs. Katz? At least *your* son comes by for dinner every Sunday. The only time I know I'll see *my* son is when I go to the post office, and there's his picture hanging on the wall.

*Oy!* You're showing four white dragons, Mrs. Noodleman! You see? I *knew* God hated me!

And he says the next time he comes by—if I haven't died of old age and neglect by then—he's going to bring his gang with him. And I say not without a week's notice, and that I'm not letting this Marian person in the house, no matter what, and even if I do, she isn't allowed to use the bathroom. And he just

laughs that Mr. Big Shot laugh, ho-ho-ho, like he thinks he can wrap me around his little finger. Well, I'll Mr. Big Shot him right across the mouth if he doesn't learn a little respect for his mother.

Mah Jong!

All right, so God doesn't hate me full-time, once in a while He blinks long enough for me to win a game.

By the way, what do you cook for seventy merry *gays*, anyway?

*I had just won the American Dog Writers Association Award for Best Short Fiction of 1977 with "The Last Dog." I wrote "Blue" a couple of months later, submitted it to the same market—Hunting Dog Magazine—and won again. The secretary of the organization, who had expressed some distaste for science fiction or fantasy stories, asked me if I planned to do any more. I replied that I'd probably do one a year as long as they were handing out the award. They cancelled the award one week later.*

## BLUE

**I** had a dog, his name was Blue.  
Bet you five dollars he's a good one too.  
Come on, Blue!

*I'm a-coming too.*

They sing that song about him, Burl Ives and Win Stracke and the rest, but they wouldn't have been too happy to be locked in the same room with old Blue. He'd as soon take your hand off as look at you.

He wandered out to my shack one day when he was a pup and just plumped himself down and stayed. I always figured he stuck around because I was the only thing he'd ever seen that was even meaner and uglier than he was.

As for betting five dollars on Blue or anything else, forget it. It's been so long since I've seen five dollars that I don't even

remember whose picture is on the bill. Jefferson, I think, or maybe Roosevelt. Money just never mattered much to me, and as long as Blue was warm and dry and had a full belly, nothing much mattered to him.

Each winter we'd shaggy up, me on my face and him just about everywhere, and each summer we'd naked down. Didn't see a lot of people any time of year. When we did, it'd be a contest to see who could run them off the territory first, me or Blue. He'd win more often than not. He never came back looking for praise, or like he'd done a bright thing; it was more like he'd done a *necessary* thing. Those woods and that river was ours, his and mine, and we didn't see any reason to put up with a batch of intruders, neither city-slickers nor down-home boys either.

It was a pretty good life. Neither of us got fat, but we didn't go hungry very often either. And it was kind of good to sit by a fire together, me smoking and him snorting. I don't think he liked my pipe tobacco, but we had this kind of pact not to bother each other, and he stuck by it a lot better than a couple of women I outlived.

And, Mister, that dog was hell on a cold scent.

*Blue chased a possum up a cinnamon tree.*

*Blue looked at the possum, possum looked at me.*

*Come on, Blue.*

*I'm a-coming, too.*

Except that it wasn't a cinnamon tree at all. I don't ever recollect seeing one. It was just a plain old tree, and I still can't figure out how the possum got up there all in one piece.

It must have been twenty below zero, and neither of us had eaten in a couple of days. Suddenly Blue put his nose to the ground and started baying just like a bloodhound. Thought he was on the trail of an escaped killer the way he carried on, but it was just an old possum, looking every bit as cold and hungry as we did. The way Blue ran him I thought his heart would burst, but somehow he made it a few feet up the tree trunk. Slashed Blue on the nose a couple of times, just for good measure, but

if he thought that would make old Blue run off with his tail between his legs, he had another think coming. Blue just stood there, kind of smiling up at him, and saying, Possum, let's see you come on down and try that again.

It was a mighty toothy smile.

*Baked that possum good and brown.*

*Laid sweet potatoes all around.*

*Come on, Blue,*

*You can have some too.*

Never did like possum meat. Even when you bake a possum it tastes just awful. The sweet potatoes were just to kill the flavor. Folksingers and poets live on steak and praise; let 'em try living on possum for a few days and I bet that verse would come out different.

Anyway, I did offer some to Blue, just like the song says. He looked at it, picked it up, and kind of played with it like a pup dog does when you give him a piece of fruit. At first I thought it was just good taste on Blue's part, but then his nose started to swell where the possum had nailed him. Usually I'd slap a little mud on a wound like that, but mud's not the easiest thing to come by when it's below zero, so I rubbed some snow on instead.

First time in his life Blue ever snarled at me.

*When old Blue died he died so hard,*

*He jarred the ground in my back yard.*

*Go on, Blue.*

*I'll get there too.*

Guess the possum had rabies or something, because Blue just got worse and worse. His face swelled up like a balloon, and some of the fire went out of his eyes.

We stayed in the shack, me tending to him except when I had to go out and shoot us something to eat, and him just getting thinner and thinner. I kept trying to make him rest easier, and I could see him fighting with himself, trying not to bite me when I touched him where it hurt.

Then one day he started foaming at the mouth, and howling something awful. And suddenly he turned toward me and got up on his feet, kind of shaky-like, and I could tell he didn't know who I was any more. He went for me, but fell over on his side before he got halfway across the floor.

I only had a handful of bullets left to last out the winter, but I figured I'd rather eat fish for a month than let him lie there like that. I walked over to him and put my finger on the trigger, and suddenly he stopped tossing around and held stock-still. Maybe he knew what I was going to do, or more likely it was just that he always held still when I raised my rifle. I don't know the reason, but I know we each made things a little easier for the other in that last couple of seconds before I squeezed the trigger.

*When I get to Heaven, first thing I'll do*

*Is grab my horn and call for Blue.*

*Hello, Blue.*

*Finally got here too.*

That's the way the song ends. It's a right pretty sentiment, so I suppose they had to sing it that way, but Heaven ain't where I'm bound. Wouldn't like it anyhow; white robes and harp-strumming and minding my manners every second. Besides, winter has always chilled me to the bone; I *like* heat.

But when I get to where I'm going, I'll look up and call for him, and Blue will come running just like he always did. He'll have a long way to go before he finds me, but that never stopped old Blue. He'll just put his nose to the ground, and pretty soon we'll be together again, and he'll know why I did what I did to him.

And we'll sit down before the biggest fire of all, me smoking my pipe and him twitching and snorting like always. And maybe I'll pet him, but probably I won't, and maybe he'll lick me, but probably he won't. We'll just sit there together, and we'll know everything's okay again.

Hello, Blue. I finally got here too.

*Catastrophe Baker first saw the light of day in my novel, The Outpost, where he had half a dozen tall-tale adventures, each of which parodied a famous science fiction theme or story. I thought he was retired after the book came out, but several anthology editors thought otherwise and had me keep bringing him back. Among his targets have been Anne McCaffrey's "The Ship Who Sang", Murray Leinster's "First Contact," Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations," and here he takes on Walter Miller Jr.'s "A Canticle for Leibowitz."*

## CATASTROPHE BAKER AND A CANTICLE FOR LEIBOWITZ

**I** was standing at the bar in the Outpost, which is the only good watering hole in the Plantagenet system, lifting a few with my old friend Hurricane Smith, another practitioner of the hero trade. Somehow or other the conversation got around women, like it always does sooner or later (usually sooner), and he asked me what was the most memorable name I'd ever found attached to a woman.

Now, man and boy I've met thirteen authentic Pirate Queens, and eleven of them were called Zenobia, so that figures to be a mighty memorable name, and the Siren of Silverstrike was pretty original (at least in my experience), but when it came down to choosing just the single most memorable name, I

allowed that there was one that won hands down, and that was Voluptua von Climax.

“You’re kidding!” said Smith.

“I wish I was,” I told him. “Because a deeply tragic story goes with that name.”

“You want to tell me about it?” he said.

I shook my head. “It brings back too many painful memories of what might have been between her and me.”

“Aw, come on, Catastrophe,” he said.

“Some other time.”

“I’m buying for as long as you’re telling it to me,” Smith offered.

And this is the story I told him that night, out at the most distant edge of the Inner Frontier.

\* \* \*

It all began when I touched down on the pleasure planet of Calliope, which abounded in circuses and thrill shows and opera and ballet and theatre and no end of fascinating rides like the null-gravity Ferris wheel, and course there were hundreds of casinos and nightclubs. I mosied around for a few hours, taking in all the sights, and then I saw *her*, and I knew I’d fallen hopelessly and eternally in love again.

Trust me when I tell you that there ain’t never been a woman like her. Her face was exotic and beautiful, she had long black hair down almost to her waist, beautifully rounded hips, a tiny waist, and I’ll swear she had an extra pair or two of lungs.

She was accompanied by a little guy who seemed to be annoying her, because she kept walking away, which kind of reminded me of jelly on springs, and he kept following her, talking a blue streak.

I knew I had to meet her, so I walked over to her and introduced myself.

“Howdy, ma’am,” I said. “My name is Catastrophe Baker, and you are the most beautiful thing I’ve seen during my long travels throughout the galaxy. Is this little twerp bothering you?”

“Go away and leave us alone!” snapped the little twerp.

Well, that ain’t no way to speak to a well-meaning stranger, so I knocked out eight of his teeth and busted three of his ribs and dislocated his left shoulder and kicked him in the groin as a mild reproof, and then turned my attention back to the beautiful if beleaguered lady.

“He won’t bother us no more, ma’am,” I assured her, and it seemed likely since he was just lying there on the ground, all curled up in kind of a ball and moaning softly. “How else can I be of service to you?”

“Catastrophe Baker,” she repeated in the most beautiful voice. “I’ve heard about you.” She kind of looked up and down all six feet nine inches of me. “You’re even bigger than they say.”

“Handsome, too,” I said, in case she needed a hint.

“You know,” she said thoughtfully, “you might be just what the doctor ordered.”

“If I was the doctor, I’d be more concerned with helping your friend here,” I said, giving him a friendly nudge with my toe to show there wasn’t no hard feelings. I really and truly didn’t mean to break his nose with it.

“You misunderstand me,” she said. “I heard you were kind of a law officer.”

“No, ma’am,” I told her. “You’ve been the victim of false doctrine. I ain’t never worn a badge in my life.”

“But didn’t you bring in the notorious McNulty Brothers?” she asked.

“No-Neck and No-Nose,” I confirmed. “Yeah, I brought ‘em in, ma’am, but only after they tried to cheat me at whist.”

“Whist?” she repeated. “I find it difficult to picture *you* playing whist.”

“We play a mighty fast and aggressive game of it out on the Frontier, ma’am,” I answered. Which was true. At one point in the second hand No-Nose played a dagger, and I topped him with a laser pistol, and then No-Neck tried to trump me with a blaster, but I finessed him by bringing the barrel of my pistol down on his hand and snapping all his fingers.

“Well, if you’re not a lawman, what *are* you?”

“A fulltime freelance hero at your service, ma’am,” I said. “You got any heroing needs doing, I’m your man.”

She stared at me through half-lowered eyelids. “I think you might be the very man I’ve been looking for, Catastrophe Baker.”

“Well, I *know* you’re what I been looking for all my life,” I told her. “Or at least since my back molars came in. You got a name, ma’am?”

“Voluptua,” she replied. “Voluptua von Climax.”

“Well, Miss Voluptua, ma’am,” I said, “how’s about you and me stepping out for some high-class grub? Or would you rather just rent a bridal suite first?”

“All that can wait,” she said. “I think I have a job for you.”

“Is anyone else bothering you?” I asked. “Laying out men who prey on women—especially women with figures like yours—is one of the very best things I do.”

“No, it’s much more serious than that. Come with me, Catastrophe Baker, and I’ll introduce you to the man I work for, and whom I hope you will soon be working for as well.”

So I fell into step alongside her, and soon we were in the Theater District, which is this three-block area with a whole bunch of theaters, and then we saw a sign directing us to *Saul Leibowitz’s Messiah*, which was the first indication I had that there was more than one of them.

Anyway, we entered the theater, and she led me backstage to a plush office, and she opened the door without knocking, and we walked in and found ourselves facing a very upset man with thinning gray hair and the biggest smokeless cigar you ever saw. She walked right up to him and gave him a peck on the cheek, but he was too upset to notice.

Finally she spoke up and said, “Solly, this is Catastrophe Baker, the famous hero, here to help us in our time of need.”

*That* woke him up, and he stared at me for a minute. “You’re really Catastrophe Baker?” he said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“The same one who got kicked off Nimbus IV for—”

“They told me they were in their twenties,” I said in my own defense.

“All eleven of them?” he said. “I suppose they must have added their ages together. What did the judge say?”

“The judge complained,” I said. “The press complained. The constabulary complained. But no one ever heard the girls complain.” I turned to Voluptua. “I hope you’ll file that fact away for future reference, ma’am.”

“That’s neither here nor there,” said the guy. “My name is Saul Leibowitz, and I am in desperate need of a hero.”

“Then this is your lucky day,” I said, “because you just found one. Just set me the challenge, name the price, and let’s get this show on the road.”

“Price?” he repeated. “But I thought you were a hero.”

“Heroes got to eat too, you know,” I told him. “And when you’re as big as me, that comes to serious money.”

“All right,” he said. “You name any reasonable price and I’ll pay it.”

“Let me hear the job and I’ll decide what’s reasonable,” I answered.

“I’m producing a new musical,” he began.

“I know,” I said. “I saw the sign for something called *The Messiah* on my way in.”

“Actually,” he sniffed, “the proper title is *Saul Leibowitz’s Messiah*.”

“And what’s the problem?”

“I’ll be honest with you,” said Leibowitz. “The play was in serious danger of folding. Then I hired the famous show doctor, Boris Gijinsky, to fix it. Yesterday he added the most beautiful canticle in the second scene, the cast and director were sure everyone would love it, and we were set for our official opening next week—and then, last night, our only copy of the canticle was stolen. I need it back, Mr. Baker. Without it I’m probably destitute by next week.”

“I don’t want to cause you no consternation,” I said, “but I ain’t never seen a canticle before.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Voluptua. “I know what it looks like, and I’m coming along.”

“Are you sure?” asked Leibowitz. “It could be dangerous.”

“That’s no problem,” I said. “I’ll be there to protect her from danger.”

“Who’ll be there to protect her from *you*?” he said.

“I’ll be fine,” Voluptua assured him.

He turned to face me. “She’s twenty-six. Just remember that you like ‘em young.”

What I mostly like ‘em is female, but I didn’t see no sense arguing the point, so I did some quick mental math, and told him I’d do the job for ten percent of the first month’s gross.

“Five percent,” he countered.

“Split the difference,” I said. “Nine percent, and I’m off to find the bad guys.”

He seemed about to argue, then just kind of collapsed back on his chair and sighed deeply. “Deal,” he said.

“Okay,” I said to Voluptua. “Let’s get going.” I accompanied her to my ship, then came to a stop.

“I don’t want to put a damper on your enthusiasm,” I said, “but I ain’t got the slightest idea where to go next.”

“That’s all right,” she said. “I have a pretty good idea who took it.”

“Why didn’t you tell Mr. Leibowitz?” I asked.

“All he’d do is go out and hire a hero,” she explained. “And he already has.”

“So where are we heading?” I said, as I ordered the hatch to open and the ramp to descend.

“Stratford-on-Avon II,” she said, as we entered the ship. I relayed our destination to the navigational computer, and a minute later we’d shot up through the stratosphere. Then she turned to me. “Change course,” she said.

“I beg your pardon, ma’am? Ain’t we going to Stratford-on-Avon?”

“That’s what we want them to think,” she said with a triumphant smile. “And that’s why I said it: in case we were

being overheard. But I'm more than just a pretty face."

She took a deep breath, and I was happy to agree that she was more than just a pretty face.

"Take us to Back Alley IV."

I passed the order on to the computer.

"We will traverse the MacDonald Wormhole and will reach our destination in seven hours and three minutes," announced the computer in its gentle feminine voice.

"Well, Catastrophe Baker, it looks like we've got some time to kill," she said, starting to slip out of her clothes. "Have you got any ideas on how to make it pass more quickly?"

I allowed that she was giving me more ideas than I could handle, and then she was in my arms, and I got to say that she felt even better than she looked. A minute later I carried her to my bunk, and we spent a vigorous few hours killing time, and I can testify that she was mighty well-named, and I feel sorry for those who think a climax just has something to do with the end of a video. For the longest time I thought the ship had developed a new vibration, and then I finally figured out that what was vibrating was *her*. She was a mighty good kisser too, and every now and then she'd get carried away and give me a bunch of little love bites, and a couple of them even drew blood, which probably wasn't that surprising considering how white her teeth looked when she smiled.

"Approaching Back Alley IV," announced the computer in what seemed like no time at all.

A minute later it said, "I'm not kidding. We're entering the atmosphere."

Another minute and then it said, "Will you get your hand out of there and put your pants on before we land? I've never been so humiliated in my life!"

"All right, all right!" I muttered, swinging my feet over to the deck. "Keep your shirt on."

"Tell that hussy to keep *hers* on!" said the computer.

We finished getting dressed just as the ship touched down, then opened the hatch and walked out onto the planet's surface.

As far as I could tell, Back Alley wasn't much of a world: no trees, no flowers, no animals, nothing much but a Tradertown that had sprung up maybe half a century ago judging from the shape of the buildings. It was night out, and four little bitty moons were racing across the sky, casting their light down onto the bleak surface of the planet.

"I don't mean to be overly critical, ma'am," I said, "but what makes you think the canticle is here? It's a mighty big galaxy, and there can't be five hundred people, tops, in this little town—and as far as I can tell, there ain't no other towns on the planet."

"You're right," she said. "There's just this one town."

"So what makes you think it's here?"

"Because I know who stole it," she answered.

"Then why didn't you say so back in Leibowitz's office?" I asked her.

She shrugged, which is a mighty eye-catching thing to do when you're built like Voluptua von Climax. "He'd want to know how I knew, and it would just lead to an awkward scene."

"Now that we're here and he's a few light years away," I said, "how *did* you know?"

"Because he stole it for *me*," she said. "He's madly in love with me, and he thought if he stole it Solly would go broke and then he'd have a clear path to my affections."

Now personally I hadn't noticed her putting up any blockades to her affections, but even so it made sense that he'd want to get rid of the competition, at least the part he knew about, and it had the added advantage that sometime in the future he and Voluptua could resurrect the show with the missing canticle, whatever that was, and make a fortune.

"What can you tell me about him?" I asked.

"He's mean through and through," she told me. "I think you should sneak up behind him and subdue him before he knows you're there."

"That's against the heroing codes of ethics and sportsmanship, ma'am," I said.

“But they say he’s the dirtiest fighter on the whole Inner Frontier!”

“Good,” I said. “I hate it when a fight ends too soon.”

She stared at me. “How long do your fights usually last?”

“Oh, maybe six or seven seconds,” I answered.

She blinked very rapidly. “Really?”

“Heroes don’t never lie, ma’am.”

“I find that very exciting,” she said, throwing her arms around me and nibbling a little on my lower lip.

I kissed her back, then disengaged myself. “We got time for this later,” I said, “but right now I think I should be confronting this villain and getting back what was stolen. Where’s he likely to be?”

“Probably in one of the bars,” she said, “carousing with drunken friends and cheap women.”

“He got a name, ma’am?”

She wrinkled her nose and frowned. “Cutthroat Hawke,” she replied.

“He any relation to Cutthroat McGraw?” I asked. She just stared at me. “I guess not,” I said. “Well, let’s go find him and retrieve Mr. Leibowitz’s goods.”

She led the way past two well-lit taverns to a little hole in the wall with bad lighting and a worse smell. I stood in the doorway and looked around. There were a bunch of aliens, most of ‘em kind of animal, at least one vegetable, and a couple I’ll swear wasn’t even mineral, and none of ‘em looked all that happy to see me.

Then I spotted the one human, sitting alone in the farthest corner, and I knew he had to be Cutthroat Hawke. He was wearing a leather tunic, and metallic pants, and well-worn boots, and it was clear that shaving wasn’t his favorite sport. He was nursing a glass of something blue with a bunch of smoke coming out of it, and he didn’t pay me any attention at all when I took a step or two into the room.

“Cutthroat Hawke!” I bellowed. “Your destiny has found you out! Are you going to turn over what you stole and come

along peaceably, or am I going to enjoy the hell out of the next half minute?”

“Who the hell are you?” he demanded.

“I’m Catastrophe Baker, freelance hero by trade, and I’m here to right the terrible wrong you done to Saul Leibowitz and Voluptua von Climax.”

“Voluptua?” he repeated, looking around. “Is she here?”

“Never you mind,” I said. “You got your hands full with *me*.”

“*She* put you up to this, didn’t she?” he snarled.

“I won’t have you defaming the woman I momentarily love,” I told him harshly. “Now, are you coming peaceably or are you coming otherwise? There ain’t no third choice.”

And no sooner had the words left my lips (which were still a little sore from all those love bites) than half a dozen aliens got up and blocked my way.

“Leave him alone,” said one of them ominously.

“I can’t do that,” I said. “He’s a thief and a villain.”

“He robbed a human,” replied the alien. “We approve.”

“I don’t want no trouble,” I said, “but you’re standing between me and the object of my noble quest.”

He reached for a weapon, and suddenly he wasn’t standing between us no more. And I’m sure he’ll walk again someday, once he gets out of whatever hospital they took him to after I got a little hot under the collar and flung him into a wall forty feet away. Then a snake-like alien started coiling himself around me and squeezing for all he was worth, so I grabbed him by his neck (which was about twenty feet long, but I latched onto the part right behind his head) and did a little squeezing of my own, and I don’t doubt for a second that they can fix all them vertebrae I shook loose if he ever stops twitching long enough for them to go to work on him.

The other aliens suddenly decided they had urgent business elsewhere, and suddenly I found myself face to face with Cutthroat Hawke. Well, let me be more precise: suddenly I found myself looking down the barrel of Cutthroat Hawke’s blaster.

I was too far away to grab it out of his hand, so I decided to try a heroic ruse.

“Hey, Cutthroat,” I said, “your shoelace is untied.”

“I wear boots,” he replied.

“And your fly is unzipped.”

“I use magnetic closures.”

“And there’s something with about fifteen legs crawling up your sleeve.”

“Boy,” he said, “if you’re the best and the brightest, the hero business has fallen on hard times.”

He’d have said something more, but just then the fifteen-legged spider bit him on the shoulder, right through his sleeve, and he turned to slap it away, and whilst he was doing so I kicked the blaster out of his hand and picked him up by the neck and held him a few feet above the ground.

“Now ain’t you sorry you put me to all this trouble?” I said.

He tried to answer, but he was turning blue from lack of air, and finally he just nodded his head.

“And if I put you down, you ain’t going to try to escape or go for a weapon, right?” I said.

And I’m sure he’d have said “Right” if he’d still been awake, but he’d passed out from lack of air while I was asking the question, so I just released my grip and he fell to the floor in a heap.

I examined his pockets, but there wasn’t anything there except a few credits, just enough to pay for his drinks, so I walked to the middle of the bar, stuck a couple of fingers in my mouth, and whistled to get all the aliens’ attention.

“I need to know where Cutthroat Hawke stored his worldly possessions,” I announced.

They all just stared at me, sullen and silent.

“I’d really appreciate your help,” I said.

No answer.

“Okay,” I said, busting a chair apart and holding a leg up. “I guess one of you is going to have to volunteer to help me look for it.”

Suddenly every alien in the joint was telling me that he kept his goods in a box under his bed in room 17 of the boarding house next door. I walked out, met Voluptua, told her to keep an eye on Cutthroat Hawke (not that he was going anywhere), and then I went up to Hawke's room.

Sure enough there was a small box under the bed. In it was a diamond ring and a matching bracelet, wrapped up on some old wrinkled paper. I looked around for something that might be a canticle and couldn't find it, and finally figured, well, at least Mr. Leibowitz could pawn the diamonds to keep the play running an extra week or two, so I stuffed the whole package in my pocket.

I gathered Voluptua and Hawke up, carried him over a shoulder to my ship, bound his hands and feet with negatronic manacles for safe keeping, stuck him in a corner where we couldn't trip over him, and a minute later we'd reached light speeds and were headed back to Calliope.

Once again Voluptua decided it was too warm for clothes, and she doffed hers and came over and started helping me out of mine. Finally I felt a certain familiar sense of urgency and carried her over to the bed.

"But you're still wearing your pants," she protested.

"But unlike Hawke's," I said, "mine got a zipper."

And I demonstrated it to her, and then she demonstrated some things to me, and then it felt like the ship was vibrating again, and then she was covering me with painful (but loving) little bites, and finally she plumb wore me out and I fell asleep.

I woke up when I felt a hand in my pocket that almost certainly wasn't mine, and sure enough it belonged to Voluptua.

"What's going on?" I said.

"I was just smoothing out your pants pocket, my love," she said.

"From the inside?" I asked.

Before she could answer I got the distinct impression that something was missing. I sat up and looked around, and it turns out that what was missing was Cutthroat Hawke.

Well, let me amend that. *Most* of him was missing. What was left were his clothes and a few bones.

I walked over to make sure, though in my experience mighty few people walk off and leave their bones behind.

“What the hell happened here?” I demanded.

She gave me an innocent smile. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“I’m talking about losing an entire prisoner while we’re cruising along at light speeds,” I said.

She gave me an unconcerned shrug. “These things happen.”

“Not on my ship, they don’t!” I said.

She gave me a very unladylike burp.

I looked from the bones to her to the bones and back to her again.

“You *ate* an entire prisoner?” I said.

“I’d have saved some for you, my love,” she said, “but they don’t keep well.”

“You ate him!” I repeated.

“What are you getting so upset about?” she said. “I didn’t use your galley, and I cleaned up after myself.”

“If you were hungry, why didn’t you just say so?” I said. “I’d have been happy to stop off at a restaurant.”

“I was going to have to kill him anyway,” she said. “He betrayed me.”

“How?”

“He was my partner. We stole the canticle together, but then he decided not to share the proceeds with me.” She made a face. “He was a terrible man! I’m glad I ate him!”

“Do you do this a lot?” I asked.

“Steal canticles?” she replied. “This was my first.”

“I meant, eat your partners,” I said.

“My partners? Not very often.”

“Well, I ain’t no policeman,” I said, “so I ain’t turning you in. We’ll let Mr. Leibowitz decide what to do with you.”

“You don’t have to tell him,” she said, putting her arms around me. “I love you, Catastrophe Baker.”

"I know," I said. "And I got the love bites to prove it."

"You know you loved them."

"It was an interesting experience," I admitted. "I ain't ever been an appetizer before."

She laughed, and while she did I took a quick look to see if her teeth were filed.

We talked about this and that and just about everything except our favorite foods, and finally the ship touched down, and a couple of minutes later the two of us walked into Leibowitz's office.

"That was fast!" said Leibowitz, obviously impressed. "I didn't expect you back for two or three more days."

"Us heroes don't waste no time," I said. "I'm pleased to announce that the culprit that robbed you is no longer among the living."

"You killed him?" asked Leibowitz.

"No, your lady friend put him out of his misery."

He looked surprised. "Really?"

"Ask her yourself," I said.

He turned to Voluptua. "How did you do it? With a blaster? A knife? Poison?"

"You got seventeen more guesses," I said, "and my bet is that you're going to need 'em all."

He got up, walked around his desk until he was standing right in front of her, and hugged her. "As long as you're safe, that's all that matters," he said.

He kissed her, she kissed him, he flinched, and I could see he was missing a little bit of lip when they parted.

"Always enthusiastic, that's my Voluptua," he said, turning to me. "And did you bring me back my canticle?"

"I'm afraid not," I said, pulling the package out of my pocket. "All he had were these diamonds."

I started unwrapping them when he grabbed the wrapping paper out of my hand, unfolded it, and held it up to the light.

"My canticle!" he cried happily after he'd read it over.

"I always thought a canticle was some kind of a fruit, like a honeydew melon," I said.

He laughed as if I had made a joke, then summoned his staff to tell them that he'd got his canticle back, and since everyone was busy admiring the canticle and praising Voluptua for her bravery, I decided no one would notice or mind if I kept the diamonds for myself, since they didn't rightly belong to anyone, or at least anyone that wasn't thoroughly digested by now.

And that's the way I left them: Leibowitz, Voluptua, and the canticle.

\* \* \*

Hurricane Smith downed his drink.

"So how much was your nine percent of the play worth?" he asked.

"Nothing," I said. "The damned thing closed on opening night. The critics said it was the worst hymn anyone ever heard."

Hurricane chuckled. "That's critics for you. They're never happy unless they're convincing you that what you like just isn't any good." He poured himself another one. "Still, it was an interesting story. They still together, the producer and the lady?"

"Far as I know," I answered. "I guess it *was* pretty interesting at that. Maybe I'll write it up for one of them true adventure holodisks."

"Why not?" he agreed. "You got a title?"

"I thought I'd call it *A Canticle for Leibowitz*."

He shook his head. "You may get top marks as a space hero, but you ain't ever going to make it as a writer if you think something called *A Canticle for Leibowitz* is going to sell more than ten copies."

"It does lack a little punch," I admitted. "What would *you* call it?"

"That's easy enough," said Hurricane. "I'd call it *A Cannibal for Leibowitz*."

It made perfect sense to me, and if I ever write this heroic epic up, that's exactly what I'm going to call it, unless some effete namby-pamby editor changes it to something else.

*I was browsing the Aboriginal SF table in the dealer's room of a Worldcon, and the editor, who was also hawking the magazine, asked me for a story. And off the top of my head I suggested the following title. He bought it on the spot, told me he wouldn't allow a title change, and then I had to go home and think of a story that fit it. And, crazily enough, it won France's Prix Ozone a few years later.*

## HOW I WROTE THE NEW TESTAMENT, USHERED IN THE RENAISSANCE, AND BIRDIED THE 17<sup>TH</sup> HOLE AT PEBBLE BEACH

**S**o how was I to know that after all the false Messiahs the Romans nailed up, *he* would turn out to be the real one? I mean, it's not every day that the Messiah lets himself be nailed to a cross, you know? We all thought he was supposed to come with the sword and throw the Romans out and raze Jerusalem to the ground—and if he couldn't quite pull that off, I figured the least he could do was take on a couple of the bigger Romans, *mano a mano*, and whip them in straight falls.

It's not as if I'm an unbeliever. (How could I be, at this late date?) But you talk about the Anointed One, you figure you're talking about a guy with a little flash, a little style, a guy whose muscles have muscles, a Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger-type of guy, you know what I mean?

So sure, when I see them walking this skinny little wimp up to Golgotha, I join in the fun. So I drink a little too much wine, and I tell too many jokes (but all of them funny, if I say so myself), and maybe I even hold the vinegar for one of the guards (though I truly don't remember doing that)—but is that any reason for him to single me out?

Anyway, there we are, the whole crowd from the pub, and he looks directly at me from his cross, and he says, "One of you shall tarry here until I return."

"You can't be talking to me!" I answer, giving a big wink to my friends. "I do all my tarrying at the House of Young Maidens over on the next street!"

Everybody else laughs at this, even the Romans, but he just stares reproachfully at me, and a few minutes later he's telling God to forgive us, as if *we're* the ones who broke the rules of the Temple, and then he dies, and that's that.

Except that from that day forth, I don't age so much as a minute, and when Hannah, my wife, sticks a knife between my ribs just because I forgot her birthday and didn't come home for a week and then asked for a little spending money when I walked in the door, I find to my surprise that the second she removes the knife I am instantly healed with not even a scar.

Well, this puts a whole new light on things, because suddenly I realize that this little wimp on the cross really *was* the Messiah, and that I have been cursed to wander the Earth (though in perfect health) until he returns, which does not figure to be any time soon as the Romans are already talking about throwing us out of Jerusalem and property values are skyrocketing.

Well, at first this seems more like a blessing than a curse, because at least it means I will outlive the *yenta* I married and

maybe get a more understanding wife. But then all my friends start growing old and dying, which they would do anyway but which always seems to happen a little faster in Judea, and Hannah adds a quick eighty pounds to a figure that could never be called *svelte* in the first place, and suddenly it looks like she's going to live as long as me, and I decide that maybe this is the very worst kind of curse after all.

Now, at about the time that Hannah celebrates her 90th birthday—thank God we didn't have cakes and candles back in those days or we might have burnt down the whole city—I start to hear that Jerusalem is being overrun by a veritable plague of Christians. This in itself is enough to make my good Jewish blood boil, but when I find out exactly what a Christian is, I am fit to be tied. Here is this guy who curses me for all eternity or until he returns, whichever comes first (and it's starting to look like it's going to be a very near thing), and suddenly—even though nothing he promised has come to pass *except* for cursing a poor itinerant businessman who never did anyone any harm—everybody I know is worshipping him.

There is no question in my mind that the time has come to leave Judea, and I wait just long enough for Hannah to choke on an unripe fig which someone has thoughtlessly served her while she laid in bed complaining about her nerves, and then I catch the next caravan north and book passage across the Mediterranean Sea to Athens, but as Fate would have it, I arrive about five centuries too late for the Golden Age.

This is naturally an enormous disappointment, but I spend a couple of decades soaking up the sun and dallying with assorted Greek maidens, and when this begins to pall I finally journey to Rome to see what all the excitement is about.

And what is going on there is Christianity, which makes absolutely no sense whatsoever, since to the best of my knowledge no one else he ever cursed or blessed is around to give testimony to it, and I have long since decided that being known as the guy who taunted him on the cross would not be

in the best interests of my social life and so I have kept my lips sealed on the subject.

But be that as it may, they are continually having these gala festivals—kind of like the Super Bowl, but without the two-week press buildup—in which Christians are thrown to the lions, and they have become overwhelmingly popular with the masses, though they are really more of a pageant than a sporting event, since the Christians almost never win and the local bookmakers won't even list a morning line on the various events.

I stay in Rome for almost two centuries, mostly because I have become spoiled by indoor plumbing and paved roads, but then I can see the handwriting on the wall and I realize that I am going to outlive the Roman Empire, and it seems like a good idea to get established elsewhere before the Huns overrun the place and I have to learn to speak German.

So I become a wanderer, and I find that I really *like* to travel, even though we do not have any amenities such as Pullman cars or even Holiday Inns. I see all the various wonders of the ancient world—although it is not so ancient then as it has become—and I journey to China (where I help them invent gunpowder, but leave before anyone considers inventing the fuse), and I do a little tiger-hunting in India, and I even consider climbing Mount Everest (but I finally decide against it since it didn't have a name back then, and bragging to people that I climbed this big nameless mountain in Nepal will somehow lack a little something in the retelling.)

After I have completed my tour, and founded and outlived a handful of families, and hobnobbed with the rich and powerful, I return to Europe, only to find out that the whole continent is in the midst of the Dark Ages. Not that the daylight isn't as bright as ever, but when I start speaking to people it is like the entire populace has lost an aggregate of 40 points off its collective I.Q.

Talk about dull! Nobody can read except the monks, and I find to my dismay that they still haven't invented air-

conditioning or even frozen food, and once you finish talking about the king and the weather and what kind of fertilizer you should use on your fields, the conversation just kind of lays there like a dead fish, if you know what I mean.

Still, I realize that I now have my chance for revenge, so I take the vows and join an order of monks and live a totally cloistered life for the next twenty years (except for an occasional Saturday night in town, since I am physically as vigorous and virile as ever), and finally I get my opportunity to translate the Bible, and I start inserting little things, little hints that should show the people what he was really like, like the bit with the Gadarene swine, where he puts devils into the pigs and makes them rush down the hill to the sea. So okay, that's nothing to write home about today, but you've got to remember that back then I was translating this for a bunch of pig farmers, who have a totally different view of this kind of behavior.

Or what about the fig tree? Only a crazy man would curse a fig tree for being barren when it's out of season, right? But for some reason, everyone who reads it decides it is an example of his power rather than his stupidity, and after a while I just pack it in and leave the holy order forever.

Besides, it is time to move on, and the realization finally dawns on me that no matter how long I stay in one spot, eventually my feet get itchy and I have to give in to my wanderlust. It is the curse, of course, but while wandering from Greece to Rome during the heyday of the Empire was pleasant enough, I find that wandering from one place to another in the Dark Ages is something else again, since nobody can understand two-syllable words and soap is not exactly a staple commodity.

So after touring all the capitals of Europe and feeling like I am back in ancient Judea, I decide that it is time to put an end to the Dark Ages. I reach this decision when I am in Italy, and I mention it to Michelangelo and Leonardo while we are sitting around drinking wine and playing cards, and they decide that I am right and it is probably time for the Renaissance to start.

Creating the Renaissance is pretty heady stuff, though, and they both go a little haywire. Michelangelo spends the next few years lying on his back getting paint in his face, and Leonardo starts designing organic airplanes. However, once they get their feet wet they do a pretty good job of bringing civilization back to Italy, though my dancing partner Lucretia Borgia is busily poisoning it as quick as Mike and Leo are enlightening it, and just about the time things get really interesting I find my feet getting itchy again, and I spend the next century or so wandering through Africa, where I discover the Wandering Jew Falls and put up a signpost to the effect, but evidently somebody uses it for firewood, because the next I hear of the place it has been renamed the Victoria Falls.

Anyway, I keep wandering around the world, which becomes an increasingly interesting place to wander around once the Industrial Revolution hits, but I can't help feeling guilty, not because of that moment of frivolity eons ago, but because except for having Leonardo do a portrait of my girlfriend Lisa, I really don't seem to have any great accomplishments, and eighteen centuries of aimlessness can begin to pall on you.

And then I stop by a little place in England called Saint Andrews, where they have just invented a new game, and I play the very first eighteen holes of golf in the history of the world, and suddenly I find that I have a purpose after all, and that purpose is to get my handicap down to scratch and play every course in the world, which so far comes to a grand total of one but soon will run into the thousands.

So I invest my money, and I buy a summer home in California and a winter home in Florida, and while the world is waiting for the sport to come to them, I build my own putting greens and sand traps, and for those of you who are into historical facts, it is me and no one else who invents the sand wedge, which I do on April 17, 1893. (I invent the slice into the rough three days later, which forces me to invent the two-iron. Over the next decade I also invent the three through nine irons,

and I have plans to invent irons all the way up to number twenty-six, but I stop at nine until such time as someone invents the golf cart, since twenty-six irons are very difficult to carry over a five-mile golf course, with or without a complete set of woods and a putter.)

By the 1980s I have played on all six continents, and I am currently awaiting the creation of a domed links on Antarctica. Probably it won't come to pass for another two hundred years, but if there is one thing I've got plenty of, it's time. And in the meantime, I'll just keep adding to my list of accomplishments. So far, I'd say my greatest efforts have been putting in that bit about the pigs, and maybe getting Leonardo to stop daydreaming about flying men and get back to work on his easel. And birdying the 17<sup>th</sup> hole at Pebble Beach has got to rank right up there, too; I mean, how many people can sink a 45-foot uphill putt in a cold drizzle?

So all in all, it's been a pretty good life. I'm still doomed to wander for all eternity, but there's nothing in the rulebook that says I can't wander in my personal jet plane, and Fifi and Fatima keep me company when I'm not on the links, and I'm up for a lifetime membership at Augusta, which is a lot more meaningful in my case than in most others.

In fact, I'm starting to feel that urge again. I'll probably stop off at the new course they've built near Lake Naivasha in Kenya, and then hit the links at Bombay, and then the Jaipur Country Club, and then . . .

I just hope the Second Coming holds off long enough for me to play a couple of rounds at the Chou En-Lai Memorial Course in Beijing. I hear it's got a water hole that you've got to see to believe.

You know, as curses go, this is one of the better ones.



*I was asked to write a Weird Western story, probably because of my Doc Holliday series of Weird Western novels from Pyr ... but I didn't want to just write a shorter version of the same kind of story, so I looked north and west and came up with this one.*

## THE SACRED TREE

**T**here was a time when the Yakima tribe lived in peace with its surroundings and its neighbors. We welcomed the changing of the seasons, the migration of the birds, the spawning of the fish. We harvested our crops, hunted for meat when we desired it, paid tribute to the sacred tree that protected our people. We had lived this way for many hundreds of years; we expected to live this way for many hundreds more.

Then the white man came.

We tried to be neighborly and accommodating at first, but whatever we offered he took, and whatever we did not offer he also took. It was when he began taking first our land and then our women, against our will and theirs, that we realized we had to do something.

Since it had been many years since we had gone to war, we had no war chief, and because I am the tribe's medicine man, it was not long before my people came to me for guidance.

"Tell us how to rid our land of the White Eyes," they begged me. "You are the wisest of us all, Uqualla. Your word is

our command, and you must tell us how to be free of the White Eyes once and for all.”

“I will sit by the sacred tree that guards our village and commune with the spirits of those medicine men who came before me,” I replied. “Then you will have your answer.”

“Tomorrow?” they asked.

“I do not know,” I answered. “One cannot rush the spirits.”

That night, as I was eating the evening meal, prior to consulting the spirits, there was a small commotion on the trail approaching the village. Many of our dogs began barking, and finally two of the White Eyes rode into the middle of the village on horseback. One was Combs, who claimed to be the Indian Agent, whatever *that* was, for clearly he was not one of the People and we had never met in council with his leaders. The other I had never seen before: he was tall, with a black patch over his left eye, and he wore a pistol on each hip, with another tucked in his boot. “Hello, Uqualla,” said Combs, not deigning to dismount.

I stared at him and made no answer.

“This is Mr. Sims,” he said, indicating his one-eyed companion. “He will be working with me.”

He stared at me for a long moment.

“Have you nothing to say?” he said at last.

“You have asked no questions,” I replied.

“I’m about to,” he said. “How many men live in this village?”

“Why?” I said.

“My government wishes to know.”

“Again, why?” I replied.

“We will be conscripting every fifth able-bodied man to join the army.”

“What does ‘conscripting’ mean?” I asked.

“We will be asking them to take the oath of allegiance and serve three years in the cavalry, probably as scouts.”

“They will say no,” I told him.

“They will not have a choice,” answered Combs.

“Ah,” I said. “Conscripting means forcing.”

“Try not to look at it that way.”

“You will be forcing our men to join your wars against our brothers, with whom we have lived in peace for many years,” I pointed out. “How would *you* look at it?”

“I am sorry you cannot see it our way,” said Combs. “Now, how many men are in the village?”

“I will not answer,” I said.

“Pete?” said Combs, turning to his companion.

The man named Sims pulled out his pistol and shot two of our men before anyone realized what was happening. Both of them fell to the ground, dead.

“We won’t count those two,” said Combs. “*Now* how many men have you?”

“Forty-three,” I said, for I knew if I did not answer he would kill more.

“Good,” he said. “I will return next week with Mr. Sims and a number of his friends, and I will expect nine men to be ready to join us. I hope you will not consider doing anything foolish.”

He turned his horse and trotted away, followed by Sims, who looked disappointed that he had only been allowed to kill two of us.

Once they were gone, most of the village gathered around me. Only two of them spoke English, and I explained to the rest what Combs had said.

“So we must wear their uniforms and kill the Kalispel and the Quileute and the Suquamish or they will come here and kill us?” demanded Gray Wolf.

“I will not join the White Eyes to kill my brothers!” swore Screaming Hawk.

“Nor I!” cried half a dozen others.

“I will kill,” said Tall Badger, and all eyes turned to him. “But I will kill whom *I* want to kill. And right now I want to kill Combs and the one-eyed man!”

“Can your magic protect us, Uqualla?” asked Thunder Bear.

“I do not know,” I said truthfully. “It can probably protect you against the two who came tonight, but if you kill them they will be followed by four, and then fifteen, and then one hundred. I must seek guidance.” I paused and looked at them. “I will sit by the sacred tree and speak all night with the spirits, and tomorrow morning I will know the answer.”

One by one they returned to their dwellings, and I did as I had said I would. I communed with the Great Spirit that lives within the sacred tree, and by morning I had the answer.

They approached me at sunrise, my people, and asked for my guidance.

“I will not tell you to attack the White Eyes,” I began. “They have guns that fire many times, and you have only arrows and knives, and once you have unleashed an arrow you cannot get it back.”

“Are you forbidding us to kill them, then?” demanded Screaming Hawk.

I shook my head. “I am only saying that I am not ordering you to do so.”

“But *if* we do . . .” said Thunder Bear.

“*If* you do, then I will protect you.”

“Will you grow us as tall as the sacred tree?” he asked. “Or will the White Eyes’ bullets bounce off us?”

I shook my head. “You will still be men, and you can still be killed.”

“Then what do you mean when you say that you protect us?” demanded Gray Wolf.

“Listen,” I said, “and I shall tell you.”

When I was finished, they all looked doubtful.

“Is it possible?” asked Tall Badger at last.

“It is possible,” I assured him. “But only if you return here. I cannot protect you in the land of the White Eyes, or even in the lands of the Quileute or the Kalispel.”

“We shall do as you say,” promised Gray Wolf.

The four of them mounted their ponies and rode away from the village of the People, and I did not see them again for three

days. Then I noticed clouds of dust on the horizon, and a moment later the four of them raced into the village and dismounted in front of me.

“We have ridden fast and far,” said Thunder Bear.

“Did you accomplish your purpose?” I asked.

“Combs and One-Eye are both dead,” said Thunder Bear, spitting on the ground.

“But more White Eyes will be here soon,” added Gray Wolf.

“Do they know which of the People they are looking for?” I asked.

“They saw Screaming Hawk, and they saw me,” said Gray Wolf. “They may have seen the others. I do not know.”

“You said to come to you when our mission was accomplished,” said Tall Badger. “We have done as you said. Are you still prepared to protect us?”

“Have I ever lied to the People?” I replied.

“Whatever it is you must do, you had better do it soon,” said Screaming Hawk, peering off into the distance. “Because here come our pursuers.”

“Gather around the sacred tree,” I said, “and I shall chant the spell that will protect you.”

And so I did.

The White Eyes arrived five minutes later, six of them, all armed with both pistols and rifles. They knew exactly who they were looking for. They walked past the sacred tree and entered the village, shoving men and women aside, walking into every dwelling, threatening to kill us if we did not reveal the location of their prey. But we pled ignorance, and invited them to remain as long as they wished.

“Damn it!” said their leader. “I know Gray Wolf is a member of your tribe, and so is Bright Hawk or Screaming Hawk or whatever the hell kind of hawk he thinks he is.”

“You may search again,” I said. “We will not stop you.”

“As if you could!” he snorted contemptuously.

“Stay as long as you wish.”

He made a face as if remaining was the most unpleasant thing he could imagine. They made one last brief search of the village, then mounted their horses.

“If I find out you *were* hiding them ...” began the leader. He drew his gun, aimed it at a dog, and pulled the trigger. The dog yelped and fell over, whining and twitching in agony. “I’ll do to you and five of your men exactly what I did to the dog.”

“But he’ll aim better,” said a second man, and all the White Eyes laughed.

Then they rode away, and one of the women took a spear and ended the dog’s suffering.

The next morning I was approached by Kamaikan.

“That was my dog they killed,” he said. “I will go into the kingdom of the White Eyes until I find the man who shot him, and then I will kill him.” He paused. “Will you protect me?”

“It is not I who protects the People, but the Great Spirit who speaks to me through the sacred tree.”

“Will the Spirit and the tree protect me? I will kill him regardless, but I do not wish to leave my two daughters without a father.”

“The tree will protect you, Great Eagle, as it protected the four men yesterday.”

“I am Kamaikan,” he corrected me.

I shook my head. “From this day forward, you are Great Eagle.”

“But I am named for the greatest chief in our history,” he protested.

“If you want my protection, and the protection of the sacred tree, you are Great Eagle,” I said. “What is your decision?”

He considered for a moment, then nodded his head. “I am Great Eagle.”

I laid a hand upon his shoulder. “Go and do what must be done.”

He thanked me, and a moment later he was riding south and east, into the morning sun.

The next four days were uneventful. Then Great Eagle returned, dismounted, and approached me.

“The deed is done,” he announced.

“You killed just the one?” I asked.

“Just the man who killed my dog.”

“Were you seen?”

“It was the middle of the night. I was seen, but I do not think I was identified.”

“Do not stray far from the village, Great Eagle,” I told him.

“I will go only to other villages of the People to find a dog for my daughters.”

I shook my head. “Not yet.”

“Then when?”

“I will tell you when.”

The White Eyes’ law officer—they called him a sheriff, but I do not know how he differed from the previous one, who was called a marshal—appeared the next day, accompanied by two other men who also wore metal stars on their shirts. They searched the village and questioned many of the men and women, but they could not find Great Eagle, and finally they returned to the city of the White Eyes.

A few hours later I told Great Eagle he could now leave to find a dog for his daughters.

Thus it went for the next year. The White Eyes would find some new way to threaten or harm the People, and Gray Wolf and the others would visit the city of the White Eyes under cover of night and take their revenge, then come back here where the power of the sacred tree would hide and protect them.

After a year things changed. I do not know if the White Eyes got new leadership, or if they merely tired of riding out to our village and never finding what they were looking for, but after that year there were no more abuses, at least not to the Yakima.

I could not be sure that this new condition would continue, and so I explained to my warriors that they owed a tribute to

the sacred tree, and that the tribute was their everlasting presence and vigilance. They all agreed, even Great Eagle, though it meant that he would rarely, if ever, hold his daughters again, and from that day forth they have been mute guards of the People, ready to come forth and avenge any wrongs done against us by the White Eyes.

And the White Eyes? They have ceased being enemies and have become something entirely new. The term is “tourists”, and when they visit the land of the People, armed not with pistols and rifles, but with cameras and dollars, the first thing they see, and the thing that most fascinates them, is the sacred tree.

Of course, we see different things when we look at it. I see my warriors, silently guarding the People as they pledged to do, ready to manifest themselves and come forth whenever it should prove necessary. The “tourists” see only a hawk, a bear, a wolf, a badger and an eagle.

They call it a totem pole, and now and then they remark that the eyes of the creatures seem to be following them, watching their every movement as they walk through the village that they once thought to conquer.

There is another tree at the far end of the village, not sacred but profane. It displays hideous creatures, their faces contorted by their death throes for all eternity. The “tourists” think them only monsters from legend, created by the wood-carver’s art, but when I look at them I can see the faces of Combs and Sims and others who did us harm, begging for a release that will never come.

*This one was a positive delight to write. Harry the Book is a continuing character, a bookie in a Damon Runyonesque fantasy New Year, and this is his twelfth story. (3 or 4 more and I'll have enough for a collection.) It was commissioned by Gardner Dozois for Rip-Off, the anthology's conceit being that each story must begin with a line from a public domain classic. I used the opening line of Carol's favorite book, Pride and Prejudice.*

## THE EVENING LINE

**I**t is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife," says Benny Fifth Street.

"I don't want to hear this," replies Plug Malone.

"I do not think that what you want enters into this," says Benny.

"What is this all about?" asks Joey Chicago, who is polishing glasses behind the bar. Well, not really polishing them, but at least flicking a semi-damp towel over them.

"I hit three longshots in a row when I was at Aqueduct this afternoon," explains Malone, "and no matter what Harry's stooge says, I plan to enjoy my winnings on my own."

"I am his flunky, not his stooge," replies Benny with dignity.

"Big difference," snorts Malone. "Either way, I am not in want of a wife."

I am sitting in my office, which happens to be the third booth at Joey Chicago's 3-Star Tavern, sipping an Old Peculiar and minding my own business, which at the moment consists of dopping out the odds for the fight card at the Garden that night, when Benny turns to me. "What do you think, Harry?"

"I think Kid Testosterone lasts about thirty seconds of the first round against Tidal Wave McTavish," I say. "Forty-five if he's lucky."

"No, I mean about all the women who will soon be pursuing Plug Malone with a single-minded intensity."

"How much did you win today?" I ask Malone.

He looks furtively around to make sure no one else is listening. "Fifty-three large," he answers.

"That is nothing," says Gently Gently Dawkins, munching on a candy bar as he enters the tavern. "I myself am a fifty-eight large."

"We are talking about money, not pants sizes," says Benny. "Our friend Plug Malone has had a remarkable run of luck at Aqueduct."

"Spend it fast," says Dawkins, "before some filly spends it for you."

"No one knows except you three, and Joey Chicago here," says Malone. "No one *will* know."

"That's like saying no one will notice an earthquake because it happens on the next block," says Dawkins.

"Then no one will care," says Malone. "I will share a confidence with you. My real name is Jeremiah Malone. I know you think Plug is for the chew of tobacco I usually have in my mouth except when I am in classy establishments like this one"—he glares at Joey Chicago—"where they do not even have the courtesy to furnish a spittoon, but in truth it is short for Plug Ugly, which is a nickname they gave back at P.S. 48 and which has stuck with me ever since. I am the ugliest, least attractive husband material in Manhattan, maybe in all of New York. You have never seen me with a woman. Women take one look at me and run in the opposite direction."

“Which direction is the opposite direction?” asks Dead End Dugan, who has been more than a little confused ever since he became a zombie, and is standing in the farthest, darkest corner of the tavern.

“Do not bother yourself with such trivialities,” I tell him. “Go back to staring peacefully at a wall and thinking dead thoughts.”

“You’re the boss, Harry,” replies Dugan, and suddenly he is as still and silent as a statue again. Benny and Gently Gently do most of my errands for me, but every now and then, when someone is reluctant to make good his marker, it is nice to have a six foot ten inch zombie on my team.

“So what are the odds of Malone’s looks frightening away potential brides?” asks Benny.

“Yesterday, three thousand to one no one will give him a second look,” I answer. “Since he won the fifty-three large, half a million to one that they will.”

“But nobody knows!” wails Malone.

“It goes out on the wind, like news of antelope drinking at a waterhole goes out to a hungry lioness,” I say. “They’ll start showing up any minute now.”

No sooner do the words leave my lips than Mimsy Borogrove walks in. She slithers right past my two flunkies and sidles up to Malone, who acts like he has never been sidled up to before.

“Got a light, Big Boy?” she half says and half breathes.

“A light *what?*” asks Malone.

“Come back to my place and we’ll talk about it,” she says, reaching out for him.

“Unhand that man!” says a voice from the doorway, and we all turn to see Almost Blonde Annie standing there.

“Unhand me?” repeats Malone, staring at his hands in horror and then trying to tuck them into his pockets. “But I *need* them!”

“Of course you do,” says Almost Blonde Annie. “After all, you have to sign the marriage license.”

"I beg your pardon," says Mimsy Borogrove, "but I got here first."

"And I got here last," says Snake-Hips Levine, entering the tavern and undulating right up to Malone. "Come on, Sweetie," she says. "We don't want to have anything to do with these other broads."

"Do I know you?" asks Malone.

"Wouldn't you like to?" says Snake-Hips. "Look at me," she continues, running her hands over her body just the way any healthy male of the species would like to. "Isn't this worth fifty-two thousand, two hundred and twelve dollars?"

"Fifty-three thousand," says Mimsy.

Snake-Hips shakes her head, and everything else she has just naturally shakes with it. "Fifty-two thousand, two hundred and twelve. The other seven hundred and eighty-eight dollars was the money he bet that was returned to him when he cashed in." She stares compassionately at Mimsy. "You'd better get a new source of information, Honey."

Gently Gently Dawkins leans over to me. "Perhaps we should do a little something to save him from this veritable plague of potential fiancés," he whispers.

"I am a bookie, not a marriage counselor," I say. "Plug Malone's pre-marital problems are his own."

"I think Mimsy may take a poke at Snake-Hips," says Dawkins. "What will we do then?"

"I will practice my trade and offer eight-to-five that Snake-Hips takes her out in straight falls," I answer.

As we are conversing, four more women have entered the tavern, and now it is Joey Chicago who approaches me.

"Harry," he says, "we have a problem. All these women are taking up space at the bar, and none of them are buying any drinks."

"I hope you are not suggesting that I should buy drinks for the house," I reply. "Along with everything else, I have long suspected that Almost Blonde Annie has a hollow leg."

“Can’t Milton cast a spell that either makes them buy drinks or go home?” he asks, “I will tear up your tab if he does.”

“All right,” I say, because my tab has reached almost six dollars, and I hate spending my own money. “I will talk to him.”

“Good. Where is he?”

“Where else?” I say. “In his office,” I head off to the men’s room, which is where Big-Hearted Milton, my personal mage, has set up shop for the past two years. I find him, as usual, sitting cross-legged inside a pentagram he has drawn on the floor just next to the row of sinks, and there is a black candle burning at each point of it.

“Milton,” I say, “I need you to cast a spell.”

He holds a finger up to his lips. “In a minute.”

He began chanting in a language that bears a striking resemblance to ancient Mesopotamian, or possibly French, and finally he snaps his fingers and all the candles immediately go out.

“Hah!” he says, getting to his feet. “*That* will show her!”

“Mitzi McSweeney again,” I say. I do not ask, because these days it is always Mitzi McSweeney.

“We are sitting at a table in Ming Toy Epstein’s Almost Kosher Chop Suey House, and she remarks that one of her garters is pinching her, so I reach under the table to adjust it, and she hits me in the face with a plate of sweet and sour pork.” He frowns. “Me, who hasn’t had pork since he was bar mitzvahed!”

“So what kind of terrible curse did you put on her this time?” I ask in bored tones, because somehow Milton’s curses never seem to wind up bothering anyone but Milton.

“Oh, it’s a good one,” he assures me with an evil smile. “Since it is her garter that causes this humiliation, I curse every garter she owns. Now none of them will work!”

“That is very brilliant, Milton,” I say. “Now whenever she is out in public ...”

“... her garters will unsnap ...” he laughs.

“Right,” I say. “And she will have to stop right there on the street and lift her skirt and try to re-snap them, and of course some handsome man will see this lovely lady with even lovelier legs in distress and will come to her aid, and try to help attach her stockings and doubtless introduce himself and tag along with her in case the garters give her further trouble, which of course they will.”

“Damn!” growls Milton. “Why didn’t *I* think of that?”

He relights the candles, stands in the middle of the pentagram, chants something in another unknown language, makes a mystical gesture, and then rejoins me by the door.

“All done,” he announces. “Now, what can I do for you?”

“Not for me,” I say. “It seems that Plug Malone made a big score and is being whelmed over by women.”

“What is wrong with that?” asks Milton.

“They are taking up space at the bar and not buying anything, and Joey Chicago wants them to spend money or go home.”

“Hell, have Plug Malone treat ’em all.”

“There is a school of thought that opines that Plug Malone has never so much as spoken to a woman, except perhaps for his mother,” I say.

Milton cracks open the door and takes a peek at the bar.

“Her?” he says. “And her too? And is that Sugar Lips Sally? And ...”

He studies each of the dozen women who have gathered so far, and shakes his head in wonderment. “I have not seen such an outstanding field since the 1997 Belmont Stakes,” he says at last.

“So can you do one or the other?” I say. “Send them home or get them to part with some money?”

“I will not send them home,” announces Milton. “There is always a chance Mitzi McSweeney will refuse to see me again, She complains that she is getting arthritis in her hand after the last forty times she bloodied my nose.”

“All right,” I say. “Then cast a spell that makes them spend their money.”

“Look at all those skin-tight dresses, Harry,” he says. “They cannot possibly be hiding three dollars between them. I will hex Malone into buying drinks for all of them.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I think Joey Chicago will go for that.”

So Milton mutters a spell, and suddenly Malone gets the strangest, most puzzled expression on his face, and announces that he is buying for everyone in the house.

“Everyone?” repeats Joey Chicago with a happy smile.

“Every man and woman in the place,” Malone assures him.

“What about zombies?” asks Gently Gently.

“Do zombies drink?” asks Almost Blonde Annie.

“I don’t know,” admits Malone. “Hey, Dugan!” he shouts. “Do zombies drink?”

Dead End Dugan blinks his eyes a couple of times, and frowns. “I don’t know,” he answers. “It’s been so long ...”

“Besides, even if he started, it would probably all pour out through those holes in his chest,” says Benny Fifth Street.

“Probably,” agrees Dugan unhappily. “Or maybe where I got my throat slit. That was ... let me think ... the fourth time.”

“How many times have you been killed?” asks Malone.

“Five that I can remember,” says Dugan.

“That’s horrible!” says Snake-Hips Levine with a shudder that attracts the attention of every man in the place.

“It hardly hurt at all after the third time,” Dugan assures her. He makes a face. “I really hated it when they dumped me overboard though. You think they’d have been more considerate, what with all the ice in the East River.”

While all this high-brow discussion of life and death is occurring—or to be totally accurate, death and more death—word seems to have gone out on the wind that Malone is paying, because suddenly almost a dozen men enter the tavern and ask for drinks.

Brontosaur Nelson, who is a midget wrestler, asks for a tall one, which cracks everyone up, and the laughter attracts Loose

Lips Louie, who is just walking by, and Impervious Irving, who is between bodyguard jobs, and Charlie Three-Eyes (who has a scar where he claims his third eye used to be, though word on the street is that it is simply where his ever-loving wife bites him when she finds he has been watching Bubbles La Tour's Dance of Sublime Surrender at the Rialto every night, and try as he will he cannot convince her that he goes for the music, which any ever-loving spouse will agree is like buying *Playboy* for the articles.).

Everyone keeps drinking and having a good time, and finally Loose Lips Louie says, "So who's the lucky lady, Plug?" and two seconds later you can hear a pin drop. And this is not a figure of speech; Gently Gently is loosening the pin that is holding his shirt together where he has popped a button after his fourth hot fudge sundae of the day, and so silent does the tavern become that I can hear it hit the floor fifteen feet away.

"I'm not the marrying type," says Malone.

"Are you the type who buys drinks for the house?" asks Loose Lips Louie,

"Certainly not," says Malone.

"Well, there you have it," says Loose Lips Louie. "Now, who's the lucky lady?"

Malone looks like a deer caught in the headlights, except no deer ever looks so frightened, even when surrounded by a pack of elephants or whatever it is that has a taste for freshly-killed deer, and suddenly he frowns and points a finger at Milton.

"This is your doing!" he yells. "I would never stand for drinks unless I was hexed, and you're the only mage here. *You're* the reason all these gorgeous man-hungry women are after me!"

"If I am the reason all these women are here," answers Milton calmly, "than I am also the reason you win fifty-three large at Aqueduct, and I would like my fee, please."

"Never, you foul fiend!" screams Malone.

"I thought *I* was the foul fiend," says Dead End Dugan, who looks puzzled for a moment and then goes back to thinking dead thoughts.

“It is not Milton,” I explain. “Not only does Milton not have a way with women, but he cannot go through a single day without Mitzi McSweeney bloodying his nose and threatening his life. It is the money that has attracted all these woman.”

Of course every woman in the place denies it, and Stella Houston, who claims to be Stella Dallas’s better-looking sister, slinks up to Malone and offers to hold his money before Milton or I can steal it.

“So tell us, Malone,” says Loose Lips Louie. “Who’s the lucky woman?”

“I keep telling you,” replies Malone, looking even more exasperated than terrified, “I am *not* getting married.”

“Of course you are,” says Brontosaur Nelson. “You don’t think these lovely frail flowers are going to let you leave the place un-engaged, do you?”

“Hell, even Impervious Irving couldn’t make it out the door if he was in your place,” says Loose Lips Louie. “So who’s your choice?”

*“I am not getting married!”* screams Malone. The nearest men jump back, startled, but the women merely look amused.

Benny Fifth Street walks over to me. “I smell a profitable enterprise here,” he says.

“That thought has not escaped my notice,” I say, turning to the room at large. “Let me make up a morning line, and then the book is open for business.”

“It is ten o’clock at night,” notes Gently Gently. “Unless you want them to stay here until daybreak, what we need is an evening line.”

“The man’s got a point,” agrees Benny Fifth Street.

“All right,” I say. “Bring me the blackboard on which Joey Chicago advertises the day’s special, and a piece of chalk.”

The place has fallen silent, as each of the men is studying the field and trying to decide where to put his money. It is not without incident. Almost Blonde Annie decks Charlie Three-Eyes when he tries to examine her teeth, and Mimsy Borogrove

kicks Brontosaur Nelson almost to the ceiling when he tries to examine things down at his eye level.

“How’s it coming, Harry?” asks Bet-a-Bunch Murphy after a few minutes.

“I’m working on it,” I tell him.

“Who’s the favorite?”

“That is the one thing that requires no work at all,” I answer. “I make Bubbles La Tour the top-heavy favorite, you should pardon the expression.”

Impervious Irving nods his head in agreement. “She is truly the Secretariat of women.”

“Better,” adds Short Odds MacDougal.

“Now just a minute, Buster ...” begins Stella Houston ominously.

“What are the odds on her, Harry?” asks Loose Lips Louie.

“I make it one-to-eight-thousand,” I answer.

“So if I bet eight thousand dollars on Bubbles La Tour and she wins what I think we shall call the Plug Malone Sweepstakes, all I win is a dollar?” continues Loose Lips Louie.

“That’s right,” I say.

“An underlay,” remarks Gently Gently Dawkins. “I make her one-to-ten-thousand, minimum.”

“If he proposes to Bubbles La Tour, there won’t be enough of him left to bury,” vows Mimsy Borogrove.

“We’ll kill him with such skill and dexterity that a jury will award us both ears and the tail,” chimes in Snake-Hips Levine.

“You know,” says Benny Fifth Street, “I never thought of it until just now, but I’ll bet all the other super-heroes who come equipped with just one or two super-powers apiece do not like Superman any more than these delicate feminine blossoms like Bubbles La Tour.”

“Shut up about her!” snaps Stella Houston.

“Right,” says Short Odds MacDougal. “Mentioning her in front of these lovely ladies is like mentioning Babe Ruth to a bunch of minor leaguers.”

Even Impervious Irving can't pull the women off Short Odds MacDougal as fast as they pile on, and I call Dead End Dugan over to help.

After about three or four minutes MacDougal is uncovered and helped to his feet. Both of his eyes are blackened, what's left of his nose is bleeding, and he spits out three teeth. Both knees and an elbow are exposed where his suit has been torn, and his face seems much larger than usual. Then Benny Fifth Street loosens his tie and suddenly he can breathe again and the size of his face goes back down to normal. He is about to say something, but then he looks into the unforgiving faces of the assembled ladies, sighs once, and trudges off to a corner.

In the meantime Gently Gently Dawkins has been whispering into his cell phone, and finally he puts it back into his pocket.

"Bubbles La Tour has scratched," he announces.

"Why?" asks Brontosaur Nelson.

"She must have thrown a shoe," muses Bet-a-Bunch Murphy.

"She says she remembers Malone, and would not marry him if he was the last man on Earth."

"This is unheard of," says Murphy. "When has a horse ever rejected his jockey?"

"Well, that makes it a more competitive field," says Loose Lips Louie. "What is the evening line now?"

"I will have to re-compute it," I say. "Losing Bubbles La Tour in the Plug Malone Sweepstakes, is like doping out the odds in a golf match where Ben Hogan, Arnold Palmer, Jack Nicklaus and Tiger Woods all fail to make the cut. It is clearly a wide-open race."

But in just a handful of minutes we are given to realize that it is not as wide-open as it had seemed, because who should walk into the tavern but Morris the Mage. He walks right up to Mimsy Borogrove and holds out his hand. She puts a couple of C-notes into it, he pockets it, nods, and shakes her hand.

“What is going on here?” demands Milton, who does not like having his territory encroached upon.

“I have been retained by this lovely spinster here,” announces Morris as Mimsy kind of growls deep in her throat at the word ‘spinster,’ “to help her nab—uh, to help her *wed*—the man of her choice.” He looks at Mimsy, smiles, makes a mystical sign in the air, and says “*Presto!*”—and suddenly instead of wearing what looks like an exceptionally wide black satin belt and not much else, Mimsy is decked out in an elaborate wedding gown.

“Lacks a little something,” muses Morris. “Ah! I have it! *Abra cadabra!*” And just like that, Mimsy is carrying a huge bouquet of flowers.

Almost Blonde Annie frowns. “Is that fair?”

“Don’t worry,” says Bet-a-Bunch Murphy. “She is still nowhere near as heavy a favorite as Bubbles La Tour was before she scratched.”

The other women aren’t paying much attention to Murphy or Mimsy. Each of them is speaking into their cell phones, and we know what is coming next, just not in what order.

Spellsinger Solly is the first to arrive. He pauses just long enough for Snake-Hips Levine to fork over some cash. Then he snaps his fingers, and Mimsy Borogrove’s gorgeous wedding gown has suddenly turned into some severely-tailored widow’s weeds.

“Get me outta these things!” she screams, tearing at the clothes, and Impervious Irving and Gently Gently Dawkins go over to help her, and suddenly she is standing there in nothing but her lacy underthings, and there’s not much of *them*, and she is glaring at Morris. “*Do something!*” she bellows.

Morris takes a good look at her, of which an awful lot is exposed for looking at, and applauds.

“Something *else*, damn it!” she snaps.

Morris mutters a spell, and she is back in the dress she entered with.

“That’s a relief,” says Benny Fifth Street.

“Is it?” asks Joey Chicago curiously.

Benny nods. “Another ten seconds and I’d have proposed to her myself.”

The other mages start showing up, each finds his client, and I am hoping that we are about to have a Mexican standoff, because as far as I can see the alternative is a Mexican shootout.

The mages each have a drink, and then I assume that they begin mentally bombarding Malone with marriage proposals, because he claps his hands over his ears, scrunches up his eyes, and screams “I *ain’t* getting married!”

“What are *you* doing?” demands Morris, as I work on the blackboard.

“I am adjusting the odds,” I reply.

“How?” asks Bet-a-Bunch Murphy.

“I had Mimsy Borogrove as the nine-to-five favorite,” I answer, “but now I put her at six-to-one.”

“Why?” demands Morris, who is clearly concerned for his client.

“She gets dressed,” I explain.

“Is *that* all?” he says, muttering a spell and pointing to her—but just as he points she turns to the bar to order another drink, and the spell hits Gently Gently Dawkins full force, and suddenly he is standing there in his colorful boxer shorts and his undershirt and not much else.

“Petunias!” giggles Loose Lips Louie, pointing to the flower design on Dawkins’s shorts. “Ain’t that sweet?”

“He may not be much,” I whisper to Milton, “but he’s one of ours. Do something.”

“Right,” Milton whispers back. He mumbles a spell and a bumblebee crawls out of one of the petunias, flies across the room, and stings Loose Lips Louie on the nose.

Louie bellows in pain, and Stella Houston, who is standing beside him, laughs.

“Lady,” says Louie, dabbing his wound with a napkin, “you might as well go home. You ain’t ever gonna get a husband with an attitude like yours.”

Well, there is one husband she is never going to get, and that is Loose Lips Louie, and she starts pummeling him with such intensity that it looks like no one else is ever going to get him either, unless they are heavily into necrophilia, but finally her mage, Willie the Wizard, pulls her back.

“Why are you stopping me?” she demands.

“You only give me three C-notes,” he says, “which is fine for a wedding, but nowhere near enough to get you out of stir after you have been arrested for murder. Let us concentrate on marrying you to this poor unassuming bozo who has no idea what misery is in store for him.”

It is entirely possible that he is going to say more, but suddenly Stella Houston starts pummeling *him* instead. He gets loose and runs out into the street with Stella in hot pursuit.

“Another scratch,” says Benny Fifth Street. “This field is getting smaller and smaller.”

“Right,” says Gently Gently, who actually looks more comfortable without his suit and shirt, which are about four sizes smaller than he is. “I figure we are down to maybe only a million eligible women.”

“Let us eliminate all those women who are not attracted to Malone because of the money he is carrying around with him.”

“Right,” says Dawkins. “Now we are down to nine hundred ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred and ninety-seven, give or take.”

“Let’s be reasonable,” suggests Bet-a-Bunch Murphy, which I personally think would make a pleasant change. “There are so many mages on the scene that there is no way, now that Bubbles La Tour has scratched, that any woman without a mage has a chance.”

“You know, he’s got a point,” says Brontosaur Nelson.

I find that I have to agree with him, and shortly thereafter I come up with the evening line, which reads as follows:

Snake-Hips Levine, 9-2

Bodacious Belinda, 5-1

Mimsy Borogrove, 6-1

Almost Blonde Annie, 6-1

Penelope Precious, 8-1

Lascivious Linda, 8-1

Bedroom Eyes Bernice, 10-1

And the rest go up in odds from there.

“Harry, you must be out of your mind,” whispers Benny Fifth Street. “You’ve got Lascivious Linda down there at eight-to-one. Why, she can take Snake-Hips Levine in straight falls.”

“They are all utterly charming morsels of femininity,” I say, “and I would never try to rank them in order of desirability, at least not without a set of body armor. But I am not ranking the ladies so much as I am ranking their mages.”

“Aha!” says Benny. “Now it makes sense.”

“You are forgetting something vitally important,” says Malone.

“Oh?” I say. “What is that?”

*“I ain’t marrying none of them!”* he bellows.

“Please do not interrupt us when we are having a serious discussion,” says Benny. And he goes on to tell me which mages he thinks I am ranking too high.

“Milton,” says Malone, with just a note of panic in his voice, “you’re the resident mage here. Make them all go away.”

“All the other mages?” asks Milton. “That will leave you at the mercy of the very people you wish to have nothing to do with.”

“Not the mages,” says Malone. “The *women*.”

“Probably their mages would object,” says Milton, “and looking around the tavern I see twelve . . . no, fourteen of them.”

“That is no problem,” says Malone. He takes my chalkboard away and lays on the far end of the bar. The mages all gather around it, studying the odds and arguing about whether their prices are too short or too long. “You see?” continues Malone. “They are only concerned with where Harry ranks them. Their interest in the women starts and stops with their fees.”

Milton takes a good hard look, and sure enough, none of the mages is paying any attention to the women.

“What the hell,” says Milton. “Give me ten large and I’ll vanish them all.”

“Forever?” asks Benny Fifth Street, who seems to have taken a liking to, or at least an interest in, Mimsy Borogrove.

Milton shakes his head. “Not for a lousy ten thousand dollars. But I’ll vanish them long enough for Malone to take what remains of his stash and head out into the wild, untamed wilderness of New Jersey.”

“It’s a deal,” says Malone, and he peels off the ten large and hands it to Milton, who stuffs it into a pocket.

“Now I’m only going to have time to cast this spell once before the other mages notice what is happening, so I need to gather all the women close together.”

Having said that, Milton starts leading each of the women over to the farthest part of the bar from where the mages are. He

has twelve of them standing together and is just leading Lascivious Linda over when we hear a female voice bellow from the doorway: “Since when did you become a collector?” and in walks Mitzi McSweeney with blood in her eye.

“You misunderstand, my dear,” says Milton nervously, backing away a few steps as she approaches him with her hands balled up into fists. “I am just doing a service for Plug Malone here, who has no desire to be near any of these women.”

“So you’re carting them all off as a favor to him?” she screams.

“Certainly not,” says Milton. “Women don’t interest me at all. I prefer you.”

“*WHAT?*” she bellows.

“I didn’t mean that,” says Milton, his hands stretched out defensively in front of him as he begins backing away toward his office.

“Just don’t let him vanish all your clothes,” says Mimsy Borogrove as Mitzi McSweeney walks by her in pursuit of Milton. “I didn’t realize how cold it was in here until—”

She does not get to finish the sentence.

“You vanished her clothes?” demands Mitzi.

“Never!” protests Milton, his back to the door of the men’s room. “That was Morris the Mage’s spell. I cannot vanish anyone’s clothes unless I say *barota nictu!*”

And as quick as the words leave his mouth, Mitzi McSweeney’s clothes disappear.

Milton’s eyes widen, more in terror than lust. He swallows hard and leans back against the door, which starts giving way. “You’re looking ...uh ...*well* today,” he says, then turns and races hell for leather into the interior of his office.

Mitzi is one step behind him as the door swings shut and they vanish from sight. There follows a great deal of noise, a few shrieks of pain and terror, a crash, and a lot of words I never knew existed, all screamed in a feminine voice.

“Now magic them back—or else!” yells the voice.

There is a brief pause, and then a fully-dressed Mitzi McSweeney emerges from Milton’s office. She pauses and turns to him just before the door swings shut.

“I’ll talk to you *later!*” she snaps and walks out of the tavern.

I head toward the men’s room, with Benny and Gently Gently falling into step behind me. Just before I get there I call Dead End Dugan over, in case the carnage is so great that only a zombie can endure it on an empty stomach, and then the four of us enter.

“Any sports fans see this and they will never talk about Mohammed Ali or Mike Tyson again,” says Benny.

“Who would have guessed that there was that much blood in a body?” asks Gently Gently.

“It’s not *in* him,” notes Benny. “It’s *on* him.”

“And there wasn’t a mark on her,” adds Gently Gently in awestruck tones.

“Thad’s because I ab a gendulmad,” says Milton, holding a blood-soaked handkerchief to his nose. “Helb ged me on my feed.”

We help him up. He sways a bit, but then Dugan steadies him.

“Thag you,” he says, blowing some more blood out of his nose. “Thad woman has a left you wouldn’t believe.”

“I think we’re missing a bet here,” says Gently Gently.

“Oh?” I say.

“Have Milton cast a spell to marry Mitzi McSweeney off to Malone. No one’s bet on her, so you’ll win all the money, and this way Milton will at least live til his next birthday.”

“No!” says Milton. “She is the love of my life, or at least the goal of it. I will give her time to cool off and then throw myself at her mercy.”

“Last time you throw yourself at her mercy you miss,” I remind him, “and she is somewhat less than pleased with what you hit.”

He winces in pain at the memory. “Maybe I had better just extend my hand in friendship.”

“And the last time you do that,” adds Benny, “she is bending over watering her flowers, and you know what happened.”

“I am the greatest mage in Manhattan,” groans Milton. “In all of New York City, even. How can this keep happening to me?”

“Luck,” suggests Dead End Dugan.

“Luck?” repeats Milton uncomprehendingly.

Dugan nods. “With a left like she has, you should have been as dead as me months ago.”

We escort Milton back to the bar, where all the other mages are still arguing over the evening line, and all the women are eyeing Malone not unlike the way a healthy cat eyes a crippled mouse.

“The women are still here!” snaps Malone, reaching into Milton’s pocket and taking back his ten large.

“I see you are having your usual fine luck with the opposite sex,” notes Morris the Mage.

Milton, whose nose has started bleeding again, mutters a curse. It comes out as “*Blmskeph!*”

“Let us be charitable here,” adds Spell singer Solly. “You have to admit that Mitzi McSweeney is about as opposite as sexes get to be.”

“You are speagig about the woman I love!” growls Milton. “Well, lust for, anyway,” he amends.

“Let us get back to the man we all lust for,” says Almost Blonde Annie. She turns to her mage, Sam Mephisto, who does most of his magicking in the Bronx. “I paid you good money for a husband. I want him.”

“I am working on it,” says Sam Mephisto. “These things take time.”

“Work faster!” she snaps.

“Not to worry,” he says. “If worst comes to absolute worst, I’ll marry you myself.”

That is when we learn that interacting with the female of the species is not a problem unique to Big-Hearted Milton, but may very well affect *all* mages. Dead End Dugan and Impervious Irving wait until she pauses for breath and lift him up to the bar, where Joey Chicago douses his face with water.

Sam Mephisto blinks a few times, then slowly sits up. “That was a most amazing experience,” he says. “For a minute there I dream I am back in Egypt, mounted on my camel and leading my men into battle against General Sherman.” Which is when we know he is not entirely recovered, unless General Sherman went further astray than most history books would have us believe.

He gets down off the bar, blinks his eyes a few more times, and finally speaks. “It has been a long, hard night,” he says. “I think I am going to take a little nap.” And with that he slides down to the floor and lies there, snoring up a storm.

“Some mage!” snaps Almost Blonde Annie, making the same kind of disgusted face I make whenever I see Gently Gently Dawkins pour Tabasco sauce on his oatmeal. She glares from one man to another, and finally says, “I am a woman alone, without representation. Isn’t *anyone* going to do something about it?”

I decide that she has a point, so I walk over to the blackboard when I have posted the evening line and raise her odds to forty-to-one.

She takes a glass of beer off the bar, throws it in Sam Mephisto's face, and stalks out into the night, leaving him licking his lips while still snoring.

"Well, that's one less to worry about," says Malone with a sigh of relief.

"Two," says Benny. "Stella Houston's probably still chasing Willie the Wizard all over Manhattan."

"Right," adds Gently Gently, surveying the tavern. "Fourteen more and you're out of the woods."

"Well, til tomorrow, anyway," agrees Benny.

"I hadn't even thought about tomorrow," says Malone.

"Well, you had better be prepared for it, because how long do you think you can keep something like fifty-three large a secret?" says Gently Gently. "Why, even now, I'll bet women are approaching from Connecticut and New Hampshire and New Jersey, maybe even from as far away as Delaware." He furrows his brow in thought. "It must be borne on the wind, like phera ... phero ... those things that perfume tries to copy."

Even as he speaks three more women enter the tavern, looking neither right nor left, but eyes trained straight ahead on Malone.

"Milton, *do* something!" says Malone, his voice shaking.

"I *ab* doing subthig!" snaps Milton, still holding his handkerchief to his face. "I *ab* bleeding!"

One of the three newcomers notices all the mages, and immediately pulls out her cell phone and speaks to it in low tones. The other two soon follow suit.

"Well, whatever the result," says Joey Chicago happily, "at least we are doing some business."

"Why don't they all want to marry *you* then?" asks Malone.

"Because I lose all my money betting with Harry on everything from horses to politics," answers Joey. "Why, just last night I bet on Horrible Herman to win a steel cage match at the Garden."

"And does he?" asks Malone.

Joey Chicago shakes his head. "The steel cage beats him without drawing a deep breath."

Two mages walk in the front door and a third materializes by the juke box, so I walk over to the chalkboard and adjust the evening line again.

Suddenly I am confronted by Morris the Mage.

"You really think my entry is no better than a six-to-one shot?" he says pugnaciously.

"It's a well-matched field," I say. "And unless it comes up mud, I still make Snake-Hips Levine the favorite."

"Maybe we should make her carry extra weight," suggests Gently Gently.

"Shut up!" snaps Morris. He turns back to me. "Six to one, that's your final odds?"

"Not necessarily," I reply. "The starting gate is far from full yet."

"But you don't expect her odds to go any lower?"

"Not unless Snake-Hips Levine or Bodacious Belinda scratch," I say.

"All right," says Morris, pulling out his wad and peeling off a dozen hundred-dollar bills. "I'm putting twelve C-notes on her to win the Plug Malone Sweepstakes."

This makes all the other mages look like they lack confidence, and soon they are all lined up, putting bets down on their entries, and when they are all done the purse is up over fifteen large, and one or two of the women are looking at me the way they look at Plug Malone, but then they remember I will have to pay most of it to the winner, and I am back to being a wallflower again.

"Well, Plug baby, where shall we go on our honeymoon?" asks Lascivious Linda.

"We don't need a maid coming along with us, Plug honey," says Bedroom Eyes Bernice. "Tell her we want to be alone."

"Tell them both," chimes in Bodacious Belinda. "It's me that you love."

"I don't love anyone!" yells Malone.

“It’s me he’d *better* love,” says Bodacious Belinda, glaring at her mage.

“Harry, this is becoming intolerable,” says Malone. “Hell, I’d almost marry the woman who tried to kill Milton if that would make the others go away.”

“You can’t!” says Milton, who has finally unclogged his nasal passages. “She’s mine!”

“She sure didn’t act like it,” says Malone.

“It was just a lovers’ spat.”

“If the Third Reich could spat like that we’d all be speaking German,” says Malone.

“Just keep away from her,” says Milton. “She’s *mine*.” Then he pauses and adds: “Potentially.”

“All right, all right,” says Malone. “It was a silly thought to begin with.”

“What’s so silly about sharing a bed with Mitzi McSweeney?” demands Milton pugnaciously.

“I get the feeling that the bed is a hospital bed,” answers Malone. “And that Mitzi McSweeney isn’t sharing it, but is signing the papers about not using extraordinary means, like giving me food and water, to keep me alive.”

Milton is about to object, but then he realizes that he agrees down the line with Malone, and just nods his head instead.

“It is getting near midnight, and the object of our affection still hasn’t made his choice,” announces Mimsy Borogrove. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I am getting tired of waiting.”

“Me, too,” says Lascivious Linda. “But what do you propose to do about it?”

“I say if he hasn’t chosen one of us by midnight, we draw straws for him,” says Mimsy.

“We could have a nude mud-rasslin’ tournament, with Malone going to the winner,” suggests Joey Chicago. “At least we’d get to charge admission.”

The mages all nod their heads in approval, but Bodacious Belinda points out that the wrong kind of mud could ruin their

complexions and did anyone really trust Joey Chicago to supply the right kind, and they spend the next five minutes arguing about what kind of contest to have, but there is no question that they plan to resolve the problem before morning comes and a whole new crowd of women shows up.

“Damn!” mutters Malone. “I wish I’d never won that money to begin with.”

Which is when I begin to get a truly profound inspiration.

“Do you really mean that?” I ask him.

“Yes,” he says. “Look at these women. Now I know how a seal feels when he finds himself in the middle of a flock of sharks.”

“I think it is a pride of sharks,” says Gently Gently.

“No, it is a school,” says Benny.

“Don’t be silly,” says Gently Gently. “Sharks don’t go to school.” Suddenly he frowns. “Well, not in this hemisphere, anyway. I can’t say anything about African sharks.”

“Shut up!” I snap at my flunkies. I turn back to Malone. “Well?” I say.

“Yes, I really mean it.”

“Bet me the fifty-three large that twelve plus twelve equals seventy-three,” I say.

“But it doesn’t,” replies Malone.

“I know,” I say.

Suddenly his face lights up. “That’s brilliant, Harry!” he exclaims. He raises his voice so it can be heard throughout the tavern. “Harry the Book, I will bet you fifty-three large that twelve plus twelve equals seventy-three.”

“No!” cries Snake-Hips Levine. “Do not make that wager!” Everyone turns to her. “Twelve plus twelve is sixty-seven.”

“I think it is forty-one,” says Mimsy Borogrove.

Even Spellsinger Solly gets into the action, opining that it is ninety-four.

“I am sticking by my guns,” says Malone. “Fifty-three large says that the answer is seventy-three.”

“The answer is twenty-four, and I will thank you for my money,” I say.

Everyone pulls out their pocket computers, and they finally admit that I am right, and suddenly I am surrounded by women.

“Good,” I announce in a loud voice. “This will just about pay off the money I owe Hot Horse Harvey for that Daily Double he hits this afternoon.”

“But Hot Horse Harvey is tapped out and hasn’t laid a bet since—*Om!*” says Gently Gently as I kick him in the shin while all the women and their mages are stampeding out the door.

Finally there is just Joey Chicago, Plug Malone, my flunkies and me, and then Malone walks up and shakes my hand.

“Thank you, Harry, for saving me from a fate worse than death.”

“You’ve really never spoken to a woman since you were a kid?” I ask.

“Well, except for Granola Gidwitz,” he says. “She seemed less intimidating, what with her cock eye and her triple chin and ...” His voice trails off and he stares wistfully off into space for a minute. “You know, it’s strange, but I miss her. I wonder if she still lives over on West 22nd Street?” He heads off toward the door. “I think maybe it’s time I paid her a visit.”

Then he is gone, and no sooner does he leave than Mitzi McSweeney re-enters the tavern.

“You came back!” says Milton excitedly.

“I have decided to forgive you this one time,” says Mitzi.

“And I will never give you cause to regret it,” says Milton, reaching his arms out to her and walking forward to embrace her. But he forgets that Sam Mephisto is still sprawled out on the floor, and he trips over him, and he reaches out his hands to grab hold of something, anything, to stop himself from falling, and as you can imagine Mitzi is somewhat less than thrilled with what he grabs hold of, and a moment later he has retreated to his office, she has followed him in, and the rest of us conclude that World War III will sound pretty much like the sound coming from Milton’s office, only less violent.

*Back during the 4<sup>th</sup> (or was it the 5<sup>th</sup>?) resurrection of *Amazing Stories*, I started writing a series of connected tales for them under the broad title of “The Miracle Brigade.” They got three issues out, I got three stories written, and then they folded yet again, and I was too busy to ever go back and revisit the Brigade. Here’s one of them, to give you the flavor.*

## COBBLING TOGETHER A SOLUTION

### A Miracle Brigade Story

**G**od save us from do-gooders. They mean well, there’s never any question of that. Humans are the most generous, compassionate race in the galaxy. We can’t stand to see another being suffer, or go without, or lack anything that would make its life better.

With all that as a given, you wouldn’t think anyone with such good intentions could fuck things up so badly. But we do, time and again. Sometimes it’s the Department of Alien Affairs. Sometimes it’s the Department of Agricultural Development.

Sometimes it's the HDB—the Department of Housing, Dwellings, and Burrows. Sometimes it's even the Department of Galactic Health.

They go out to those distant worlds, these well-meaning idealists, intent on improving the lot of every living thing, of ushering us all into a galactic Utopia—a galactic group hug, one of my associates calls it. They pour money and manpower and machinery into the problem. They supervise every aspect of it. They keep copious records. They learn from their mistakes. And finally, one day, their job is done and they leave with full hearts, convinced that they've contributed their bit toward that Utopia. They go home, knowing they've left some obscure little world a better place than when they found it.

That's when I go to work.

You don't read or hear about me and my group, because the Republic would rather pretend that we don't exist, that there's no need for us. That's okay. We're not in it for the publicity. We do our job because, when you really think about the galaxy, there are a hell of a lot of Them out there and not very many of Us, and it's in our best interest to put things right after the idealists are done.

That's us—The Miracle Brigade.

Oh, that's not our official name. In fact, we don't have an official name. Like I said, officially we don't even exist. Ask anyone in the government; every last one will swear that he's never heard of us, that indeed there's no call for our services. But we're all that stands between Man and a galaxy that might someday decide it can do very well without us.

What do we do?

A little of everything. Take MacArthur 4, for example.

It's populated by a mildly humanoid race—two hands, two feet, walk upright, don't look too much like your kid's worst nightmare. Not very advanced, not very warlike, not very creative. The planet's real name was Beta Prognani II—Beta for the binary it circled, Prognani because it was first mapped by Guiseppe Prognani, who modestly named it after himself. Once

it became known that the natives were not only humanoid but also sentient, we took a sudden interest in this obscure little world. Three hundred million natives, properly assimilated, meant three hundred million taxpayers, three hundred million customers for the Republic's goods, at least a few million conscripts for the Republic's navy, and maybe a source of cheap labor if we decided the planet had anything worth mining.

They hadn't developed space flight yet, so of course they'd never met a Man—or anyone else—before. In fact, they were still living in huts and caves. The most sophisticated dwelling on the whole planet looked like an enormous teepee, maybe sixty feet in diameter.

The first ones to land were the missionaries. They spent about ten years trying to Christianize a bunch of aliens who didn't think Christ died for their sins, or even that they had committed any. They had their own gods, and they resented a bunch of strangers coming to their world and saying that God was created in our image. (Yeah, I know, the official line is that we were created in God's image—but put yourself in the alien's position. Any way you cut it, we were trying to convince them that God looked like us rather than them.)

After ten years the Republic pulled all the evangelists out of there before they lost the planet for us forever. By this time Canphor VII had sent emissaries to Beta Prognani II, and since the Canphorites don't have any use for God or religion, they didn't try to impose their version of either on the locals, which certainly made them more popular than we were.

So the Republic took a good hard look at the situation and decided that we'd better do something in a hurry to win the populace back (not that they'd ever been with us in the first place.)

The first thing they did was to appoint a governor with a mandate to improve the inhabitants' standard of living. As near as anyone can tell, he turned about two square miles of lakeside property into a vacation spa for himself and his friends and never set foot outside his confines, never learned the local

language, never made a single recommendation for exploiting the planet's resources or bettering the locals' lives.

It only took the Republic eight years to replace him.

The next governor was named Philip MacArthur (in case you were wondering how the planet got its current name). MacArthur was a career diplomat—a career governor, actually; this was his fourth assignment, which is why it was MacArthur 4 rather than MacArthur 2—and he wasn't going to sit around just enjoying the sunshine and taking an occasional swim in the lake, no sir. He was going to make MacArthur 4 a better place, and the natives would be so grateful that they would literally beg to join the Republic and come under its economic and military sphere of influence.

After all, he'd left his last three worlds with the knowledge that he'd done his job and done it well. (I didn't know about MacArthurs 1 and 3, but I'd had to go to MacArthur 2 after he left and figure out what to do with the huge fishing industry he'd set up without realizing that the natives were vegetarians who had no idea what to do with three tons a day of fresh seafood.)

Well, the first thing Philip MacArthur did was come up with an informal name for the locals—Blue Demons, due to the bluish cast to their skins and the vestigial horns on their heads. That lasted for about five months, until a couple of Blue Demons who had learned Terran explained to their brethren that the humans had named them after evil, supernatural beings. Within a week they had burned down every human structure on MacArthur 4—and since the governor was in his mansion at the time, the Republic had to appoint a new governor.

This one's name was Vasily Petrovitch, and he'd had even more experience than his predecessor at governing worlds. His first official act was to petition to change the name of the world to Petrovitch 7 on all existing maps and charts. His second act was to sue the Department of Cartography for insisting that the world was and would remain Beta Prognani II. By the time he'd run through his appeals and actually traveled to MacArthur 4 to begin governing the place, almost two years had passed.

Petrovitch decided to make the rounds of the various villages, explaining to each community that we'd meant no disrespect and that while he personally thought "Blue Demons" was a rather cute, endearing sobriquet, we were happy to apologize and call them whatever they wanted. It was when he tried to hire an interpreter that he made two more discoveries: first, MacArthur 4 had a barter economy, and no interpreter was willing to work for money, and second, he needed close to 100 translators, because MacArthur 4's natives spoke 17 major languages and 86 minor dialects.

That was when Petrovitch decided that the way to win the Blue Demons over, other than calling them the all-but-unpronounceable name they preferred, was to unite them through a single language and a single government.

It didn't take him long to decide that Terran was the ideal language for the Blue Demons, despite the fact that the structure of their mouths and the shape of their tongues made it impossible for them to utter explosives. In addition, the few Blue Demons who actually managed to learn Terran tended to sound dead drunk whenever they spoke it.

Then he had to confront the problem of how to spread the word that the planet needed a single governing body and a new language. He couldn't do it by radio or video, because radio and video didn't exist on MacArthur 4. He couldn't do it with computers, because they'd never seen a computer. Besides, there was no electric or nuclear power on the planet, and he knew he could never convince the Republic to pay for the cost of wiring the whole world while they all lived in huts and teepees.

So he called in a team of experts, mostly alien anthropologists. Their conclusion: since two-thirds of the Blue Demons never visited even a neighboring village, the first order of business was to make them a mobile society. You can't minister to a single tribe without arousing the ire and jealousy of all the others, and you can't have a global community if they're not talking to each other.

But they *can't* talk to each other, noted Petrovitch. That's one of the problems we're trying to solve.

They're just like Men or any other race, said the experts with absolute conviction. Put them in a room together and sooner or later they'll find a way to communicate—and once a single language becomes dominant, it will be that much easier to convert them all to Terran, and *then* we can start doing great things for them, bring them God and medicine and space travel and all the other benefits of a galactic civilization.

So the trick, they concluded, is to make it easy for the Blue Demons' far-flung communities to make contact with each other.

How we do that, asked Petrovitch.

We cover the planet with a series of roads, said the experts. Super-highways, even.

But they don't have any vehicles, noted Petrovitch.

Trust us, said the experts. We'll build roads from one village to another, and the Blue Demons will follow them. Within a few years we can introduce automobiles, and then communications systems, and then ...

How much is this going to cost, asked Petrovitch.

We have no idea, said the experts with a collective shrug; that's not our concern.

It's *our* concern, agreed the economists, and it seems only reasonable to make the Blue Demons pay for the roads. After all, they're the ones who will benefit from them.

What do you propose they pay with, asked Petrovitch. They don't use money, you know.

We'll take payment in those alien cattle they breed and use for barter, said the economists. (They weren't really cattle, of course. In fact, they didn't look anything like cattle—but calling them cattle was easier than finding out what they actually were, and so cattle they became.)

What will we do with the cattle, asked Petrovitch.

Let nature take its course, explained the economists. They produce one calf a year. If the mother weighs 1,200 pounds and

the calf weighs 120 before his first birthday, that's a ten percent per annum return on our investment. Once we're a major economic player in the planetary economy, we'll be in a better position to introduce the Republic's currency and gently bring the Blue Demons into the system. Of course, they added, we'll never charge for medicine or any other form of humanitarian aid, because that's the kind of race we are.

Petrovitch had a feeling that there was a flaw in there somewhere, but they were the experts, not him. He considered everything he was told, approved a master plan, and left to pursue his court case. He died of a brain aneurism—or perhaps it was a broken heart—shortly after losing his final appeal to change the planet's name from MacArthur 4 to Petrovitch 7.

It was seven years later that the Republic took a plebiscite to see if MacArthur 4 would like to apply for membership.

Not a single Blue Demon voted.

Obviously they didn't understand what we're asking them to do, concluded the experts. So they went around with interpreters to explain the glories of being a cog in the vast and all-powerful Republic machine. This time 187 Blue Demons voted. 186 opposed joining. The remaining voter spent most of his time rubbing cattle dung all over his body and howling at the moon, and somehow didn't seem representative of his people, no matter how much the Republic tried to convince itself that it was the 186 who were out of step with the rest of the Blue Demons.

So they sent in more experts to study the situation—and in the fullness of time they paid a visit to the Miracle Brigade, as they always do.

The Republic's representative was a mousy little fellow named Duncan Smythe. He never used a simple word when he could latch onto a complex one, he never walked when he could mince, and he seemed very unhappy that he didn't have a longer nose so he could look down it at me.

"So that's the situation," he said after laying the problems out for me. "We've expended almost two billion credits creating

the most exhaustive system of roads and highways on this godforsaken little dirtball, and in four months of observation not a single Blue Demon ever availed himself of them. Furthermore, we've offered to inoculate them against diseases, and they have categorically refused to accept our magnanimous gesture." He paused uncomfortably, then continued: "And we almost had a riot when we tried to convert them to a monied economy."

"A riot," I repeated, unsurprised.

"A riot," he confirmed.

"Let me guess," I said. "You told them you were installing a hut tax, and the only way for them to pay it was to work for cash."

"How did you know?" he said, surprised.

"Because no bureaucrat ever met an old, discredited idea that he wasn't certain would work if only he was in charge of it," I replied. "Which did they do—burn their own huts or kill your tax collectors?"

"Neither," replied Smythe. "They slaughtered half our herd of cattle under cover of night, and offered to let the other half live only if we paid them a tribute exactly equal to the planetary total of hut taxes."

I smiled. "And here everyone was saying that they weren't creative."

"You say that almost admiringly," he accused me.

"I admire innovation," I said. "And since I'm not likely to find it in the Republic's bureaucracy, I tend to admire it wherever I encounter it."

"I've heard about your department and its attitude," he said. "Just whose side are you on?"

"We're pretty much on our own side."

"You're supposed to be loyal to the Republic," Smythe said severely.

"Our job is pulling the Republic's fat out of the fire after well-meaning assholes put a torch to it," I replied. "You wouldn't believe how thoroughly that erodes our respect for the

Republic and its well-meaning representatives. I just wish some of you idiots would learn from your mistakes. I suppose I might as well wish for a trillion credits while I'm at it."

"I don't have to sit here and listen to this."

"No, you don't," I agreed. "In fact, the sooner you stalk off in a petulant huff, the sooner I can analyze the situation and figure out how best to salvage it."

He glared at me. "They say that your group comes up with unique solutions, that you're problem-solvers of last resort." He drew himself up to his full five and a half feet, and tried to make his voice harsh; it just sounded laughable. "They'd better be right." He got up, frowned furiously, and minced out the door.

I resisted the urge to ask him what would happen if they were wrong.

\* \* \*

I knew better than to try to hire an interpreter. For one thing, the only remuneration he'd accept would be cattle, and I didn't have any. For another, the Republic had stockpiled so much hostility that I wasn't sure I could trust his translations. So I spent a month taking sleep-intensive language disks, and when I finally landed on MacArthur 4 I was moderately fluent in the three most common languages.

There was no one waiting to greet me at the tiny spaceport that the original governor had built. As far as I could ascertain, there were no Men on the world at all. There was nothing except a few hundred million Blue Demons, separated by distance and language and custom, and united only in their distrust of the human race.

Just the kind of situation we face every day.

I left the spaceport and figured I'd follow one of the highways to whatever village it led to. I knew that it was a warm arid planet, so I'd come prepared with cotton, sweat-absorbing clothes and a broad-brimmed hat to shade my eyes. Even so, as I walked down the concrete causeway I became uncomfortably warm and began sweating pretty heavily.

When I'd gone a little over a mile, with no villages or huts or teepees in sight, I paused to wipe the sweat from my eyes and inadvertently knocked my hat off my head. As I reached down to pick it up, I could feel the heat rising from the sun-baked pavement.

I walked a little farther and saw a herd of animals grazing off in the distance. They didn't look like the cattle that the Blue Demons used for currency, and since they were quickly aware of my presence and didn't run off, I concluded that they'd never been hunted as meat animals—at least not this herd.

I spent most of the day walking along the highway. From time to time I had the feeling that I was being watched, but I could never spot any Blue Demons. When twilight came I pulled a meal out of my pack, sat down with my back propped up against the trunk of a smooth alien tree, and had dinner. I took a couple of adrenaline pills and another that oxygenated my blood, which would keep me going until my body had totally adjusted to the planetary conditions. I spent the next couple of hours considering the problems the Republic had created and left behind, and felt I had pretty good notion of how to solve them as the night air finally began to cool things down.

When I woke up the next morning I was surrounded by half a dozen Blue Demons. A couple had war clubs and one held a crude spear, but no one was striking any threatening postures. They were just staring at me; rather the way you stare at a snake while trying to decide whether or not he's poisonous and whether he looks annoyed with you.

"Good morning, brothers," I greeted them.

"You speak our language," said the nearest, sounding mildly surprised.

"I have been banished to your world," I replied, "so I thought I had better learn to communicate with you."

"The Republic has banished you? What terrible crimes have you committed?"

I knew they lived in family units, so I gave them an answer that made sense to them. "I ran off with the king's woman. And

now I am here, probably forever, and I must make the best of it." I paused and looked from one to another. "I would not presume to live in your village, among your people. But may I live just beyond it until I am better acquainted with your world, for I am sure I will have many questions to ask."

I could see it in their faces: *The enemy of my enemy is my friend.* They put their heads together, spoke in low whispers, and finally turned back to me. "You may come with us."

"Thank you," I said, getting to my feet and grabbing my backpack.

They headed off across the uneven grasslands, paralleling the road, and I fell into step beside them.

"Excuse me, my brethren," I said innocently, "but why don't we walk on the highway? After all, it is level, and has no obstructions."

"Men made it, Men can use it," said one of the Blue Demons contemptuously.

"So you will use nothing Men have given you?"

"Nothing."

"I *knew* they were wrong," I said.

The Blue Demons all stopped and stared at me. "Wrong about what?" demanded the leader.

"About why you refuse to use the highways," I replied. "I knew you must have a reason, and that you weren't cowards."

"They call us cowards?"

I shrugged. "They say you are afraid to walk on the roads, but I was sure they must be wrong."

"They put the roads here to cripple and kill us!" said the leader.

"Watch," said another. He spat onto the sun-baked highway. Within a minute his saliva began bubbling and quickly evaporated. "Would *you* walk on that?"

"I walked on it all the way from the spaceport," I said.

"And it didn't burn your feet?"

"My feet never touched it."

“I had hoped you might be different,” he said wearily. “I was mistaken. All Men are liars.”

“Wait!” I said, trying to look surprised. I pointed to my shoes. “You think *these* are my feet?”

“Of course.”

I took off a shoe and held it up. “They are artifacts created to *protect* my feet. We call them shoes.”

Each Blue Demon in turn examined the shoe with various amazed mutterings.

“They protect my feet from heat, from cold, from rain, from snow, even from thorns and stones that I step on,” I explained.

The leader stood next to me and looked down at both our feet. “They would not protect me,” he said.

“That is because your feet are shaped differently,” I answered. “But if you made a shoe that fit around your foot, it would afford you the same protection my shoes afford me.”

He studied the shoe again, his fingers probing every inch of it.

“What is it made of?”

*Reprocessed petroleum products, but you don't need to know that yet.* “Cured animal skins,” I said.

“We do not kill our cattle,” he said, using his unpronounceable word for *cattle*. “Would you bind your feet with Man’s paper money, or affix his coins to the bottoms of your toes?”

I pointed to a distant herd of grazing herbivores. “Do you use *them* for currency?”

“No.”

“Then your problem is solved.”

“I only wanted to know how *you* managed to walk on the roads,” he said. “We have no desire to walk on Man’s highways.”

“You’re right, of course,” I said. “They’re Men’s highways. Why should you care that they think you’re a race of ignorant cowards?”

“Why indeed?” he agreed with just a hint of hesitation in his voice.

We walked another mile across the uneven vegetation, and then another Blue Demon fell into step beside me.

“What else do they say about us?”

“Nothing,” I replied.

“Nothing?”

“They feel a race that is too cowardly to walk on the roads and too ignorant to protect their feet isn’t worth talking about,” I said. “That’s why they’ve decided to deposit their lawbreakers on your planet. They don’t think it’s good for anything else.”

“I will wait by the spaceport and kill them!” bellowed the largest of the Blue Demons.

“Well, yes, you could do that,” I admitted. “But that would just convince them that you are ignorant killers rather than ignorant pastoralists.”

*Cowardly* hadn’t worked that well, but *ignorant* was doing its job. I clammed up, and we walked all the way to the village in silence.

They were pretty decent folk. They let me sleep in an empty teepee that night, and the next day about a dozen of them of both sexes showed up and helped me build a hut. It only took about two hours, and then they left me alone while I explored the village and surrounding area.

Three days later the leader showed up in the ugliest, smelliest, most ill-fitting pair of moccasins anyone ever saw.

“It doesn’t work,” he complained. “They keep falling apart, and stones and thorns pierce through them, and the odor attracts unwelcome flesh-eaters.” He stared at me reproachfully. “I should have known better than to listen to a Man.”

“Well, listen a little more and I’ll tell you what you did wrong,” I said. I spent the rest of the day showing him how to cure a hide, how to make a sturdy thread from the creature’s gut, and how to reinforce the soles so that nothing could puncture them.

It took him another three weeks (and another two dozen dead herbivores, each killed for about two percent of its hide) to make a mildly workable pair of moccasins, but he finally did it, then walked up and down the highway that ran beside the village with his contempt for the Republic written all over his face.

Within another month every member of the village could fashion a crude pair of shoes, and suddenly they had something to trade neighboring villages besides cattle.

Of course, no village wanted to deplete its stock of four-legged currency to buy shoes, so each village studied the items and began making their own. The “enlightened” villages realized they’d better make more shoes in a hurry, before the more distant villages learned to make their own, and I taught them how to use the wind to power some crude machines that could turn out shoes a little faster than before.

Once they understood the principle of mass production, they found more efficient means of powering their machines, and began specializing in the various aspects of shoe-making: this group designed the ever-more-sophisticated footwear, that group hunted the herbivores, this group tanned the hides, that group worked the machines, this group became the merchants that sold them to distant villages.

I was an honored consultant, but I kept pointing out that this was *their* industry; the products were theirs to do with as they pleased, and I was happy to simply serve as an occasional advisor.

I’d been told that they weren’t creative, and despite their reaction to the hut tax, that description was true—which made my job a lot easier. It never occurred to any of them to start using their skills to make leather clothing, or better coverings for their teepees, or anything else except more shoes. And then came the day I’d been waiting for, the day when they realized that every Blue Demon household had more shoes than the members could possibly wear in half a dozen lifetimes.

What were they to do with all these extra shoes, they wondered?

“That’s easy,” I told them when they sought me out. “You will trade them”—I was careful not to use the word *sell*—“to other worlds. After all, almost every race needs shoes.”

“But their feet will not be the same as ours.”

“Men live on thousands of planets,” I said. “They will be your best trading partners. You can make molds from my feet, and the feet of the men and women who pilot the ships that land here. Later you can send some of your artisans abroad in the galaxy to meet more races, make more molds, and arrange more trades.”

“But they have no cattle,” protested the Blue Demons. “What will they trade for the shoes?”

“That presents a problem,” I agreed, “but it’s far from insurmountable. You will have to trade the shoes for currency, and then trade the currency to other worlds for things that you want.”

“What kind of things?” they asked suspiciously.

“If you keep making shoes at this rate, you will kill the last of your herbivores in another year’s time,” I said. “So I suggest that you trade the currency for more hides and artificial materials, and with the shoes you will then be able to make, you will trade them for still more currency and then trade the currency for better machines to make still more and better shoes.”

*And before you know it, you’ll be “trading” cash for medicines and clothing, for vehicles to run on your unused roads, and for a million other things.*

“We will have to think about it,” they told me.

“You had better think quickly,” I warned them, “before you run out of animals.”

“This is a serious decision,” they said. “Money has no value. It cannot reproduce, or give sustenance. It is just pieces of paper and chips of metal. If Men want to introduce money into our daily lives, then it must be a bad thing.”

“You’re looking at it all wrong,” I said. “Of course money has no value ... but if the races you’re trading with are too

ignorant”—that word again—“to realize that, why not take advantage of it? Consider the alternative: what would you rather trade for things that you want—cattle or worthless paper?”

It was a persuasive argument, and they may have been uneducated but they weren't stupid. Within a month they were exporting shoes to Deluros VIII, Spica II, the Roosevelt system, and a dozen other worlds. In six months' time they had tripled the number of factories on the planet, and had traded some of their worthless paper to a team of cold fusion experts who showed them how to power those factories.

In less than two years hotels for businessmen had sprung up around the no-longer-tiny spaceport, and visitors were greeted by a banner proclaiming that they had just landed on Beta Prognani II—Cobbler to the Galaxy.

I'd left long before that, of course. We're too busy to linger once the job is done. It was a few years and a dozen assignments later that I chanced to run into Duncan Smythe in a bar out in the Binder system. For a moment he didn't recognize me. Then, from the way he began glaring with open hostility, I knew he had remembered who I was.

I walked over and offered him a greeting. “Hello, Mr. Smythe. I trust you're doing well.”

“No thanks to you,” he replied bitterly.

“Oh?”

“After you jury-rigged that little fiasco out on MacArthur 4 with your ridiculous solution, they wanted to transfer me to some desolate, underpopulated world on the Inner Frontier. I got a reprieve at the last minute.”

“I know you did,” I said.

He looked puzzled.

“*We* vouched for you.”

“You?” he repeated. “You mean the Miracle Brigade?”

“That's right.”

“But ... but I *loathe* you and your so-called methods. Why should you go out of your way to keep me at my post?”

“We enjoy our work, Mr. Smythe,” I said. “And if they fire or demote enough well-meaning people like you, we could someday find ourselves out of a job.”

I turned and left before he could take a swing at me or throw his drink in my face.

Then I walked across the street to our regional office to deal with the problem of Bluewater III, an aquatic world where the nine distinct species of sentient fish were displaying some seemingly-inexplicable resentment over the Republic’s good-hearted attempt to attract money and tourism by introducing sport fishing.



*I wrote this story for a Roy Torgeson anthology back in 1979. I thought it was a nice, powerful little story, but I had no idea how many reprint anthologists and foreign editors would agree with me. This is its thirteenth appearance, not bad for a sub-1,500-worder by an unknown.*

## BEACHCOMBER

**A**rlo didn't look much like a man. (Not all robots do, you know.) The problem was that he didn't act all that much like a robot.

The fact of the matter is that one day, right in the middle of work, he decided to pack it in. Just got up, walked out the door, and kept on going. *Somebody* must have seen him; it's pretty hard to hide nine hundred pounds of moving parts. But evidently nobody knew it was Arlo. After all, he hadn't left his desk since the day they'd activated him twelve years ago.

So the Company got in touch with me, which is a euphemistic way of saying that they woke me in the middle of the night, gave me three minutes to get dressed, and rushed me to the office. I can't really say that I blame them: when you need a scapegoat, the Chief of Security is a pretty handy guy to have around.

Anyway, it was panic time. It seems that no robot ever ran away before. And Arlo wasn't just any robot: he was a twelve million dollar item, with just about every feature a machine could

have short of white-walled tires. And I wasn't even so certain about the tires; he sure dropped out of sight fast enough.

So, after groveling a little and making all kinds of optimistic promises to the Board, I started doing a little checking up on Arlo. I went to his designer, and his department head, and even spoke to some of his co-workers, both human and robot.

And it turned out that what Arlo did was sell tickets. That didn't sound like twelve million dollars' worth of robot to me, but I was soon shown the error of my ways. Arlo was a travel agent supreme. He booked tours of the Solar System, got his people into and out of luxury hotels on Ganymede and Titan and the Moon, scheduled their weight and their time to the nearest gram and the nearest second.

It *still* didn't sound that impressive. Computers were doing stuff like that long before robots ever crawled out of the pages of pulp magazines and into our lives.

"True," said his department head. "But Arlo was a robot with a difference. He booked more tours and arranged more complicated logistical scheduling than any other ten robots put together."

"More complex thinking gear?" I asked.

"Well, that too," was the answer. "But we did a little something else with Arlo that had never been done before."

"And what was that?"

"We programmed him for enthusiasm."

"That's something special?" I asked.

"Absolutely. When Arlo spoke about the beauties of Callisto, or the fantastic light refraction images on Venus, he did so with a conviction that was so intense as to be almost tangible. Even his voice reflected his enthusiasm. He was one of those rare robots who was capable of modular inflection, rather than the dull, mechanistic monotone so many of them possess. He literally loved those desolate worlds, and his record will show that his attitude was infectious."

I thought about that for a minute. "So you're telling me that you've created a robot whose entire motivation had been to

send people out to sample all these worlds, and he's been crated up in an office twenty-four hours a day since the second you plugged him in?"

"That's correct."

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe he wanted to see some of these sights himself?"

"It's entirely possible that he did, but leaving his post would be contrary to his orders."

"Yeah," I said. "Well, sometimes a little enthusiasm can go a long way."

He denied it vigorously, and I spent just enough time in his office to mollify him. Then I left and got down to work. I checked every outgoing space flight, and had some of the Company's field reps hit the more luxurious vacation spas. He wasn't there.

So I tried a little closer to home: Monte Carlo, New Vegas, Alpine City. No luck. I even tried a couple of local theaters that specialized in Tri-Fi travelogs.

You know where I finally found him?

Stuck in the sand at Coney Island. I guess he'd been walking along the beach at night and the tide had come in and he just sank in, all nine hundred pounds of him. Some kids had painted some obscene graffiti on his back, and there he stood, surrounded by empty beer cans and broken glass and a few dead fish. I looked at him for a minute, then shook my head and walked over.

"I knew you'd find me sooner or later," he said, and even though I knew what to expect, I still did a double take at the sound of that horribly unhappy voice coming from this enormous mass of gears and gadgetry.

"Well, you've got to admit that it's not too hard to spot a robot on a condemned beach," I said.

"I suppose I have to go back now," said Arlo.

"That's right," I said.

"At least I've felt the sand beneath my feet," said Arlo.

“Arlo, you don’t have any feet,” I said. “And if you did, you couldn’t feel sand beneath them. Besides, it’s just silicon and crushed limestone and . . .”

“It’s sand and it’s beautiful!” snapped Arlo.

“All right, have it your way: it’s beautiful.” I knelt down next to him and began digging the sand away.

“Look at the sunrise,” he said in a wistful voice. “It’s glorious!”

I looked. A sunrise is a sunrise. Big deal.

“It’s enough to bring tears of joy to your eyes,” said Arlo.

“You don’t have eyes,” I said, working at the sand. “You’ve got prismatic photo cells that transmit an image to your central processing unit. And you can’t cry, either. If I were you, I’d be more worried about rusting.”

“A pastel wonderland,” he said, turning what passed for his head and looking up and down the deserted beach, past the rotted food stands and the broken piers. “Glorious!”

It kind of makes you wonder about robots, I’ll tell you. Anyway, I finally pried him loose and ordered him to follow me.

“Please,” he said in that damned voice of his. “Couldn’t I have one last minute before you lock me up in my office?”

I stared at him, trying to make up my mind.

“One last look. Please?”

I shrugged, gave him about thirty seconds, and then took him in tow.

“You know what’s going to happen to you, don’t you?” I said as we rode back to the office.

“Yes,” he said. “They’re going to put in a stronger duty directive, aren’t they?”

I nodded. “At the very least.”

“My memory banks!” he exclaimed, and once again I jumped at the sound of a human voice coming from an animated gearbox. “They won’t take this experience away from me, will they?”

“I don’t know, Arlo,” I said.

“They can’t!” he wailed. “To see such beauty, and then have it expunged—erased!”

“Well, they may want to make sure you don’t go AWOL again,” I said, wondering what kind of crazy junkheap could find anything beautiful on a garbage-laden strip of dirt.

“Can you intercede for me if I promise never to leave again?”

Any robot that can disobey one directive can disobey others, like not roughing up human beings, and Arlo was a pretty powerful piece of machinery, so I put on my most fatherly smile and said: “Sure I will, Arlo. You can count on it.”

So I returned him to the Company, and they upped his sense of duty and took away his enthusiasm and gave him a case of agoraphobia and wiped his memory banks clean, and now he sits in his office and speaks to customers without inflection, and sells a few less tickets than he used to.

And every couple of months or so I wander over to the beach and walk along it and try to see what it was that made Arlo sacrifice his personality and his security and damned near everything else, just to get a glimpse of all this.

And I see a sunset just like any other sunset, and a stretch of dirty sand with glass and tin cans and seaweed and rocks on it, and I breathe in polluted air, and sometimes I get rained on; and I think of that damned robot in that plush office with that cushy job and ever need catered to, and I decide that I’d trade places with him in two seconds flat.

I saw Arlo just the other day—I had some business on his floor—and it was almost kind of sad. He looked just like any other robot, spoke in a grating monotone, acted exactly like an animated computer. He wasn’t much before, but whatever he had been, he gave it all away just to look at the sky once or twice. Dumb trade.

Well, robots never did make much sense to me, anyway.



*I wrote this one less than a year ago. Tom Easton was editing an anthology called IMPOSSIBLE FUTURES. I agreed to write a story for it, totally forgot about it, and then was reminded when the deadline was about four hours away—and I beat it by an hour and a half.*

## THE ENHANCEMENT

**Y**ou want to know why the courts are more overcrowded than ever? I'll tell you why. It's all Arturo Rubichenko's fault, but he's too damned busy basking in the public's adoration to know or care about it.

I remember how the media was so thrilled with him and his breakthrough. They covered it daily for almost two years, and of course Rubichenko won the Nobel Prize and damned near every other prize and award a grateful world could devise. Word is that he actually pulled down almost two billion dollars in prize money.

I never understood exactly how it worked. I still don't. I probably have that in common with everyone in the world except six or seven scientists. All we knew was that somehow he injected something—I can't even spell the word, let alone pronounce it—into a Bonobo chimpanzee, and six months later, in a series of carefully regulated lab tests, it had an IQ of 93. We all thought it was truly remarkable.

Then he injected the same damned thing into a cat, and the cat's attendants—PhD's all—actually taught it how to read and to manipulate a specially-made computer keyboard, and she had an IQ of 104.

That was fine too, and the chimp and the cat actually toured the world, showing off their enhanced IQs, and people were saying that all he had to do now was find out how to make it work on people, and the human race would take a quantum step ahead.

The first seven humans he injected died, and that was the end of our march toward an intellectual Valhalla.

But something else happened, something that no one predicted or expected. The chimpanzee and the cat both had offspring. The chimp's firstborn had an IQ of 117 at four years of age, and the cat's six kittens ranged from 101 to 124.

It wasn't long before they started mass-producing the miracle. We were all in favor of having more brains in service of humanity. After all, we didn't care who came up with scientific and medical breakthroughs, as long as somebody or *something* did.

We're still waiting for the breakthroughs—after all, a 105 IQ isn't more likely to cure cancer or Alzheimer's just because it's between a cat's ears instead of a human's—but that doesn't mean the world hasn't changed.

Especially *my* world. I'm the Judge of the Circuit Court.

Take last Tuesday, for example. My first case was brought by the 600-pound gorilla who sat down next to his attorney and glared sullenly at me.

"Harvey Kerchak versus MGM Pictures," announced my bailiff.

"And who is representing Mr. Kerchak?" I asked, because while every animal you see these days can think, frequently better than the average man on the street, they still can't speak.

"Bradley T. Driscoll," said the well-dressed lawyer, getting to his feet.

"And the nature of his complaint?"

“My client wants all versions of all Tarzan movies immediately withdrawn from circulation,” answered Driscoll. “We would like them destroyed, but will settle for them being locked in a vault and never withdrawn without my client’s permission.”

“I assume you have a reason?” I said.

“The apes in the films are portrayed as cute, mindless chimpanzees, whereas in the novels they were much larger, quite intelligent, and totally verbal, able to articulate as well as you and I.”

“These films were made before what has become known as the Enhancement,” I noted.

“Nonetheless, the public showing of these motion pictures causes my client untold emotional pain.”

*If it’s untold*, I felt like asking, *then why the hell are you in court telling me about it?* Still, a conscientious judge always looks for a compromise that will satisfy both parties in a dispute.

“Would it cause untold pain if it were shown only in theatres, so that members of Mr. Kerchak’s species could easily avoid it and not encounter it accidentally on television?”

“You might ask if a film from the same era portraying members of the Negro race as slow-witted ‘darkies’, or a film showing women as nothing more than mindless and willing sex objects would be acceptable to blacks and females who do not set foot in the theatre but must deal with the subsequent behavior of those who *do* attend.”

“All right,” I said. “Let me just be sure about this. Your client has no objection to the source material?”

“He strongly approves of the books,” replied Driscoll. “And the comic strips and comic books as well.”

“There are comic books?” I asked.

“Certainly, Your Honor.”

“And Mr. Kerchak approves of them?” I continued with the vague feeling that parts of my literary education had been sadly lacking

“Yes, Your Honor. The apes in the comic books are, if anything, even more intelligent and articulate than the apes in the books.”

I turned to the opposing attorney. “Has MGM any rebuttal?”

“You have made it yourself, Your Honor,” she replied. “The films were created prior to the Enhancement.”

Both sides presented more arguments, while I tried to concentrate on what they were saying but found myself thinking about the weather, and my garden, and even the girl in the short skirt in the third row.

Finally they finished, and I told them I’d consider their arguments and would deliver a verdict in two days.

Then the bailiff declared a fifteen-minute break and I retired to my chambers. I sat down, lit a totally-illegal cigar, leaned back, and tried to remember why I went to law school and what kind of cases I hoped I’d be deciding when I became a judge. Finally I sighed and shook my head sadly. Who the hell ever thought that saying “Sit, goddamn it!” would become a serious First Amendment case? Or that a trio of Clydesdales could bring a suit claiming that the constitutional negation of the Dred Scott decision applied to them as well? Did I really become a judge to rule on the antiquated legality of “Once a plow horse, always a plow horse”?

After I finished the cigar I nodded to the bailiff, who went out ahead of me to tell everyone to rise when I entered and that court was back in session.

I sat down and looked out at the plaintiff’s table, where a collie sat perched on a cushion atop a stool.

“Fluffy versus Columbia Broadcasting System,” announced the bailiff.

“Has the plaintiff a surname?” I asked.

“No, Your Honor,” said the plaintiff’s lawyer.

“All right,” I said. “What is the nature of his complaint?”

“*Her* complaint, Your Honor,” the lawyer corrected me.

*Big deal*, I thought. “All right,” I amended. “*Her* complaint.”

“It seems that the popular television show, *Lassie*, is using a male collie in the title role. This is clearly a case of sex discrimination, and my client seeks redress.”

I rolled my eyes, cursed Arturo Rubichenko for the thousandth time, and began counting the minutes to my retirement.



*Superstar singer Janis Ian is my spiritual kid sister. Back in 2001, after collaborating on a story, we put together an anthology, STARS, which featured original stories by all her favorite writers, and each story was about, or based on, the lyrics of one of her songs. Her first huge hit (when she was 14, believe it or not) was “Society’s Child,” about a white girl who is forbidden to a black boy. Marty Greenberg would have loved my take on it.*

## SOCIETY’S GOY

*Now I could understand the tears and shame  
She called you boy instead of your name  
When she wouldn’t let you inside  
When she turned and said  
“But honey, he’s not our kind*

—*Society’s Child*, by Janis Ian

**October 47, 4227 G.E.**

**H**e’s GORGEOUS!  
I mean, it’s as if Morvich and Casabella and that old guy, Michael something, you know, the one who painted some big ceiling, as if they all got together and said, what’s the most beautiful thing we can paint, the most beautiful thing in all the galaxy?

I have to stop, Dear Diary. He's got me so ... so I don't know ... that I just can't dictate any more.

***October 49***

I saw him in the library today—so he's not just beautiful, he's bright, too! I brushed past him, but he didn't notice. Except for sneezing. It must be the cologne. Maybe three ounces was too much. Tomorrow I'll use less. And I'll change from "Ecstasy" to "Ravage Me."

I wonder what his name is.

***October 50***

He was at the library again today. Maybe he's a student. Whatever he is, he just stands out. I've *got* to find a way to meet him!

***October 51***

He wasn't there today. I came home and cried and counted 51 ways to kill myself, but then I cracked a nail and had to go to the beautician to get the acrylic fixed.

***October 52***

Rabighan! That's his name—or as near as I can come to spelling it. These foreign names are murder. I heard the lib-mech report to him that a disk he wanted had been damaged and he'd have to wait until tomorrow.

Rabighan. Rabighan. Rabighan.

It's gorgeous!

***October 53***

He noticed me!!!!

He dropped something—I'm not sure exactly what it was; kind of like a little flower he wears on his chest—and I picked it up, and he said "Thank you."

Plain as day. He just looked at me, and I think he smiled a bit, and he said “Thank you!”

What a beautiful voice he has!

### ***October 54***

I was walking past him today, and I just blurted “Hi, Rabighan,” and he said “Hi” right back at me.

Isn’t life wonderful!!!!!!

### ***Naugustus 1***

I saw him in the cafeteria today, and I sat right down next to him and said “Hi.”

“Are you sure you’re supposed to be here?” he said, like only grad students were allowed.

“I don’t mind if you don’t,” I said. Sometimes I can’t believe how *bold* I can be!

“You’re a very unusual young lady,” he said.

I was about to say he was very unusual too, but instead I blurted out that he was very beautiful. Well!!! I could have sunk right through the floor, except that he seemed flattered.

“We haven’t been introduced,” he said. “My name is Rabighan.”

I’d thought about this moment for days. “And mine is Valpariso,” I said.

“Valpariso?” he repeated. “Isn’t that a city back on old Earth?”

“Valencia!” I said quickly. “I meant Valencia!”

He stared at me for a minute. It was like he was seeing right through all my clothes. I liked it!!!

“I’m pleased to meet you, Valencia,” he said. “I’ve met very few young women since I came to Society III. Perhaps, when you have time, we could talk together. There’s so much I’d like to learn about your world.”

I screwed up my courage. “How about this afternoon?” I asked him. “I can tell you everything you ever wanted to know about Society.”

“This afternoon would be fine.”

And so we walked all over the campus, talking about this and that, and thank goodness he didn't ask me who was Governor because I never remember stuff like that. He told me he'd never met anyone who was majoring in aerobics before, and he seemed fascinated by it, so I invited him to come to the game tomorrow night and watch me cheerlead, and he agreed.

I think I'm in love!!!!!!!!!!

## ***Naugustus 2***

He came, and he watched, and he was so polite he never once mentioned how I fell into the crowd when I was doing my backflip or how I was so busy watching him watching me that I forgot to catch Darlene when she jumped down from the top of the Human Pyramid. (They say she'll be out of the hospital in less than a week.)

He waited while I showered and changed, and then we talked some more. I'm afraid to ask him how long he'll be staying on Society III.

## ***Naugustus 4***

Rabighan saw me crying today. I tried to hide it, but I couldn't.

“What's wrong, Valencia?” he asked.

“I'm in love with you and you're going to be leaving soon!” I sobbed.

“I have no intention of leaving Society for years,” he said. “I like it here.” He watched me for a moment, and then added: “You are still crying.”

“You've never once said you liked me,” I said.

“I like you.”

“Very much?” I asked, blowing my nose.

He shrugged. “Very much.”

“Then how come you never walk me home, or ask to meet my parents?”

“I grew up on a different world,” he said. “I am not aware of your social traditions. Is that what is expected of me—that I should meet your parents?”

I was still crying too hard to speak, so I just nodded.

“Then I shall.”

“They’re playing bingo tonight,” I said. “But you could come for dinner tomorrow.”

“If that is what you wish.”

I wonder if a grad student can afford a real starstone, or if my engagement ring will have to be something dull and ordinary, like a blue diamond?

### ***Naugustus 5***

All day I was too nervous to eat. I put on my half-inch eyelashes and the rouge and the phosphorescent purple lipstick so I’d look more mature, and then I waited in my room for Rabighan to come.

I must have fallen asleep, because the next thing I knew the Spy-Eye was saying that we had a visitor, and even though I ran as fast as I could, Mama beat me to the front door by a good five steps. She opened it, and there he was in all his splendor.

“Yes?” she said, staring at him.

“Rabighan,” he replied.

“You’ve made a mistake,” said Mama. “I think the Rabighans live over on the next block.”

“I *am* Rabighan.”

For a moment Mama looked confused. Then suddenly she nodded. “Ah, you must be here to fix the trash atomizer. It’s around the back.”

“I am here at Valencia’s request,” he said.

“We don’t have any Valencia here.”

It was his turn to look confused. “Valpariso, perhaps?”

“No,” said Mama, getting annoyed.

“Do you have a daughter?”

“Yes.”

“And her name is not Valencia or Valpariso?”

“Her name is Gertrude.”

I wanted to shrink down to insect size, but I knew if I did Mama would slam the door in his face before I could explain, so I walked up and stood where she couldn’t shut it without smashing my head.

“Why, Rabighan!” I said. “What a surprise!”

“You know this Rabighan?” said Mama.

“He’s an old friend.”

“You don’t *have* any old friends,” she said. “We just moved here from New Brooklyn two months ago.”

“Well, we’re so close that he *feels* like an old friend,” I said.

“*How* close?” demanded Mama, cocking an eyebrow and giving me The Look.

“What a thing to ask!” I said, trying to look offended.

I’m not half as good at looking offended as Mama is. She turned toward the living room and called for Daddy.

“Milton!” she hollered. “Come quick!”

Daddy plodded in a minute later, looking like she’d just woke him up.

“What is it and why is the door open and who is standing in it?” he said.

“This is Rabighan,” I said.

Daddy stared at Rabighan, who smiled at him. Daddy ignored it.

“Rabighan is the Moslems’ holy month,” he said at last. “Who is *this*?”

“His name is Rabighan,” I repeated. “He’s my friend.”

“Her *close* friend,” added Mama.

“We’re in love!” I blurted out.

Daddy blinked his eyes. “How can you be in love?” he said. “He’s a vegetable!”

“But he’s the most gorgeous, intelligent vegetable I’ve ever met!”

“You don’t *meet* vegetables,” said Daddy. “You buy them at the market and then you eat them with salad dressing.”

“I resent that!” said Rabighan.

“You keep out of this!” snapped Daddy. He glared at Rabighan. “And while I’m thinking of it, where’s your *yarmulka*?”

“My what?” asked Rabighan.

“Hah!” said Daddy. “I knew it! You’re outta here!”

“You can’t talk to him like that!” I said fiercely. “I’m going to marry him!”

I thought Mama was going to faint, but Daddy just looked stern.

“The hell you are!” he said.

“You’re just biased against vegetables!” I cried.

“I’ve got nothing against vegetables,” he said. “Some of my favorite meals are vegetables.”

“Then what have you got against Rabighan? You don’t even know him!”

“I know everything I have to know.”

“You used to tell me that when I grew up I could marry whoever I wanted!” I sobbed. “You never said anything about vegetables!”

“I don’t care that he’s a vegetable!” said Daddy. “I care that he’s a *goy*!”

There was a sudden silence.

Finally Rabighan spoke up. “What is a *goy*?” he asked.

“You are,” said Daddy. “A *goy* is anyone that’s not Jewish,” he explained, as if that was the worst thing in the universe.

“You mean I could marry a Jewish vegetable?” I asked sarcastically.

“Find one and we’ll talk,” he said.

Mama finally spoke up. “I’m afraid you’ll have to go now, Mr. Rabighan. I’d invite you to stay for supper, but we’re probably eating a bunch of your relatives.”

She closed the door in his face and then turned to me. “Couldn’t you see he wasn’t our kind, Gertrude?”

“This isn’t over,” I promised her as I ran off to my bedroom. “Not by a long shot!”

The last thing I heard before I slammed the door was my father complaining: “What’s the world coming to when your own daughter brings one of *them* home for supper?”

*Walk me down to school, baby.*

*Everybody’s acting deaf and blind—*

*Until the turn and say*

*“Why don’t you stick to your own kind?”*

—Society’s Child

## ***Naugustus 6***

I cried myself to sleep last night. Daddy can be so unreasonable.

This morning I cut classes and looked all over the campus until I found Rabighan. Most of the kids just averted their eyes and pretended we weren’t together.

“I’m sorry they treated you so bad, baby,” I said sympathetically, taking hold of one of his six arms. “I hope you didn’t take it too hard.”

“A vegetable has no ego,” he said.

“No ego?”

“None.”

A frightening thought occurred to me. “Does that mean we can’t ... uh ... well, you know?”

He stared at me curiously but didn’t say anything. It’s like he had no idea what I was trying to ask him.

“Never mind,” I said. “I just want you to know that no matter what Daddy says, nothing’s going to keep us apart.”

I held his arm tighter, to show how much I loved him.

It broke off in my hands.

“Ohmygod!” I said. “Are you all right? Should I get you to a hospital?”

“I’m fine,” said Rabighan.

“But your arm ...” I said, holding it up for him to see.

“I’ll just grow another one.”

“You can do that?”

“Of course.”

I decided not to mention it to Daddy. He’d just point out that Jewish boys hardly ever grow back body parts.

“Hiya, Trudy,” said Benny Yingleman as he walked toward us. “What have you got in your hands there?”

“Oh, nothing,” I said, trying to hide Rabighan’s arm behind my back.

“That’s some boyfriend you’ve got yourself,” he said with a nasty smile. “Most plants just shed leaves.”

“Yeah?” I said heatedly. “Well, he can grow anything to any size he wants whenever he wants.” I gave him a withering look of contempt mixed with pity. “Can *you* do that?”

“Are you guessing, or is that a first-hand observation?” asked Abe Silverman, who I didn’t know was coming up behind us but obviously heard every word I said.

“Why don’t you leave us alone!” I screamed.

“Hey, are we asking to come along on one of your dates?” said Abe.

“Where does he take you, Trudy?” asked Benny. “The biology department’s greenhouse, or do you just find a cozy swamp somewhere?”

I turned to Rabighan. “Are you just going to stand there and let them tease you like that?”

He looked confused. “I thought they were teasing *you*.”

“It’s the same thing!” I snapped. “We’re one flesh and one soul!”

“Actually, she’s got the math right,” said Benny. “He hasn’t got any flesh ...”

“... and no vegetable has a soul,” concluded Abe.

“He’s got more soul than *you* do!” I said furiously.

“You think so?” said Abe. He turned to Rabighan. “Hey, Veggie—where do you guys go when you die?”

“We don’t go anywhere when we die,” answered Rabighan. “Our limbs no longer function.” He looked curious. “Do you continue to ambulate after death?”

Abe shot me a triumphant grin. “See?”

“All I see are a bunch of bigots teasing the most beautiful, most perfect thing in the universe,” I said.

They just laughed and kept on walking.

“I hate them!” I muttered.

“I thought they were your friends,” said Rabighan.

“I thought so, too,” I said. “I was wrong.” I turned to him. “Once we’re married, let’s leave Society and go to a world where people will accept us.”

“You keep using that term,” he said. “What is married?”

“You’re joking, right?” I said.

“I am a vegetable,” he said. “Very few vegetables know how to make jokes.” He paused. “What is married?” he asked again.

“It’s a ceremony that will make us man and wife.”

“I will become a wife?”

“No, silly!” I laughed. “I will be the wife.”

“Then this ceremony—it will make me into a man?” he asked uneasily. “It sounds painful.”

“You don’t understand,” I replied. “It’s a beautiful ceremony, and when it’s over we will spend the rest of our lives together.”

He stopped in his tracks. “But that’s horrible!” he said.

Suddenly he didn’t look quite so beautiful. “What’s so horrible about spending the rest of your life with me?” I demanded.

“You will die in another seventy or eighty years,” he answered. “And if I am to share the rest of my life with you, then that’s when I will die, too.” He paused. “But if I am not married, then I can expect to live at least two millennia, perhaps three if I find some exceptionally favorable soil in which to root.”

“What are you talking about?”

“My adolescence will only last another few centuries,” he said. “After that, I will find a planet with acceptable rainfall and the proper nutrients in the soil and extend my roots into it. I will then delve silently into the universal and ageless questions of philosophy and examine the eternal verities, and if I should

be fortunate enough to gain some new insights, I will pass them along to my seedlings.”

And suddenly I realized what a fool I had been, what kind of a future I had almost let myself in for—no dancing, no holo theaters, no pizza, just standing around *thinking*. With each passing second, he was looking less like the most gorgeous lover in the galaxy and more like an animated fern.

“All right, Rabighan,” I said. “It’s time to admit that we came very close to making a terrible mistake. Let’s be mature and shake hands and walk away from each other and not look back.” I even forced a tear for dramatic purposes, but it caught in my half-inch eyelash and never rolled down my cheek.

“If that is your wish,” he said. “But I would prefer not to shake hands.”

“Why not?” I mean, if I could touch a goy, what was his problem?

“I really can’t spare any more.”

*Can’t see you anymore.*

*No, I don’t want to see you any more, baby.*

—Society’s Child

### ***Naugustus 39***

I think I’m in love—and this time I know it’s the Real Thing.

My God, he’s just *BEAUTIFUL!!!!*

His name is Krffix, and he can’t be away from water for more than an hour at a time, but that’s okay—I’ve always thought it would be neat to live by the seashore.

The problem is that the world is filled with small-minded bigots, but at least I’ve had some experience with them, thanks to the time I spent with—what was his name now?—Rasputin? Ramses? Oh, well, I know who I mean.

Back to Krffix. We can put a shirt on him, so Daddy won’t notice the scales right away, and if we say he’s an artist, he can wear an ascot and cover his gills and nobody will think anything

of it. As for his nose ... well, he can always tell people that he lost it in the war.

He never blinks, which can be a little disconcerting at first, but after you get used to it, it just makes him look very intellectual, like he's concentrating on whatever people are saying to him.

Okay, he eats worms—but if I tell Daddy they're kosher worms, how can he object?

Mrs. Krffix. Mrs. Morning Glory Krffix. *I like it!!!*

I wonder if he's willing to convert?

*I was editing an anthology of stories told in the first persons of aliens titled, appropriately enough, I, ALIEN, and my friend and fellow Cincinnati Steve Leigh had turned in a story titled “You,” which encouraged me to come up with one I could title “Me.”*

## ME

**I**n the beginning I created the heavens and the Earth. Well, not really. That’s just folklore. In point of fact I’m a fourth-level apprentice Star Maker, and my assignment was to create a nebula out in the boonies, so to speak. Nothing special; I won’t be qualified for Advanced Creating for eons yet.

So they called it the Milky Way, which struck me as myopic at best, since I made a lot more red and blue stars than milky white ones. And for the longest time this particular race, which calls itself Man, thought it was at the center of all creation. (Actually, the mollusks that dwell in the oceans of Phrynx, seven billion light years away, are at the center of all creation, but let it pass.)

Anyway, this ugly little race soon covered the entire planet, which was not really what I had in mind when I built the place—I’ve always had soft spots for the koala bear and the gnu—and before long these annoying bipeds got notions above and beyond their station and actually declared that they were

created in *my* image. As if I would settle for only two eyes, or teeth that decayed, or an appalling lack of wings.

The nerve of these creatures is amazing. They feel that if they implore me to intervene in their lives, everything will turn out well. They call it praying; me, I call it *nagging*.

Their science is as twisted as their religion. For the longest time they believed that the dinosaurs died out because they were too dumb and slow to survive. Can you imagine that? The average Allosaurus or Utahraptor could give Carl Lewis a 60-yard head start and still beat him in a 100-yard race.

And then there was all the excitement over Isaac Newton's three laws. You think a stegosaur or even a woolly mammoth couldn't get hit on the head ten or twelve times by falling apples and conclude that apples fall *down* rather than *up*? I mean, how the hell bright did Newton have to be, anyway? Every animal I ever created except Man figured out very early on that the intelligent thing to do is to not stand under trees that possess ripe fruits or inconsiderate birds.

But then—you're never going to believe this—they change their minds and decide that what really killed the dinosaurs was a fluke of chance, a stray comet that crashed into the planet 65 million years ago. Now remember, this is a race that believes in predestination, in reincarnation, in prayer, in ghosts and Santa Claus and the tooth fairy, in all things supernatural. And yet when they finally get proof of a power greater than their own—I threw the asteroid at a Tyrannosaur in the Yucatan in a fit of pique after it ate my favorite slippers—they absolutely refuse to accept it. No, it couldn't possibly be due to an all-powerful alien being who might or might not answer to the name of God, it had to be a stray comet from the Oort Cloud. Like, who the hell do they think *created* the Oort Cloud in the first place? I'd have been happy to use a comet, but it just so happened that I was in the system and an asteroid was much handier.

Oh, well, no one ever said intelligence was a survival trait.

You wouldn't think one race could be so contradictory. They kill the man they call the Prince of Peace, and then they

hand out these million-dollar peace prizes in the name of the guy who invented dynamite. When they go to war, they actually believe they're slaughtering each other in *my* name, as if with 127 billion worlds to tend I give a damn who wins each little battle they fight.

Still, you have to admire certain aspects of their character. For example, when I manifested my presence on Grybyon II, every last inhabitant keeled over and died from the sheer thrill of meeting their maker. Yet the last time I set foot on Earth, I was immediately panhandled by three grifters along Fifth Avenue, mugged in a back alley off 49<sup>th</sup> Street, and given free tickets to Letterman. When I explained that I was a fourth-level Star Maker, the few people who were paying attention immediately wanted to know what the job paid and if medical benefits were included. Finally I decided to lower myself to their comprehension level and announced in front of nine Men that I was God. Five of them called me a liar, two more said they were atheists and therefore I couldn't exist and I was probably just a manifestation of Buddha, the eighth claimed it was a Republican trick, and the ninth wanted to know what I had against the Chicago White Sox.

There are millennia when I feel like I just want to throw everything back into the primal soup and start all over again. Then I remember that it's just the one mistake I made, this race of Man, that's giving me fits, and that the rest of the galaxy's shaping up really well.

In fact, my Instructor gave me a B-minus, which isn't bad considering this is only my second galaxy. I really wanted to add a third spiral arm, but for some reason he insisted that galaxies have to be bilaterally symmetrical.

I'm especially proud of the Brilx Effect, which you can still see from any spot in the galaxy. I got an A for concept, an A-minus for artistic visualization, but he gave me only a D-plus for execution when he found out I wiped out 73 races when Brilx went supernova.

He likes the black hole at the center. It gives everything balance, he says, and utilizes a certain felicity of visual expression. I hope he never finds out that I created it because I'd used up all my building materials out on the Rim.

He never quite understood the Greater and Lesser Magellanic Clouds. How could he? He wasn't around the afternoon I ate all that bad chili. Serves me right for trying temporal food. I'd have dispersed the gas clouds and saved myself millions of years of embarrassment and teasing by the other apprentices, but you know the rules: you create it, you have to incorporate it.

Which brings me back to Man. I knew the moment I set things in motion that eventually Man would evolve, and while I couldn't foresee just how aggravating he would be, I know he wasn't going to rank up there with my finer creations like the grubworm and the amoeba. I tried to turn the place into a water world and start over, but I'd only gotten 40 days into it when my Instructor made me stop and gave me a long, boring lecture on planetary irrigation.

Then I figured, well, eventually Man's going to want to reach the stars, and I decided to have pity on my other creations and make it as difficult as possible for him, so I got my Instructor's permission to move Sol and its planets way the hell out on one of the spiral arms. Until Man figures out how to break those ridiculous laws of relativity I saddled him with, I can't see him reaching anything farther away than Alpha Centauri, and he's going to have more than his share of difficulties communicating with the Chyksi that he finds there. I mean, what do you say to five different genders of two-mile-long fur-covered snakes whose sole topics of conversation are local politics and how to avoid friction burns?

I'm sorry to be writing this so slowly, but I'm receiving an average of 16 prayers a nanosecond, almost all of them from Earth. I get so tired of this what-have-you-done-for-me-lately attitude. I mean, if it weren't for my subtle backstage manipulations, Men still wouldn't have Muenster cheese, or

electric toothbrushes, or mascara, or unsecured hedge funds. But do they thank me for all this wealth of treasure? No, it's "Make my pimples go away" and "Make Anaconda Copper go up seven points" and "Kill the Israelis" and "Kill the Palestinians" and "Find me the perfect woman and make sure she's not looking for the perfect man." And I know that no matter what I do, there'll be five billion new requests tomorrow.

Why can't they be more like the Kabroni of Beta Calpurnicus III? "Thanks for the beautiful sunset, God." "Hey, God, we really like that new mountain range." "God old buddy, can you make any more exotic dancers like Mol Kwi Kchanga? She's really neat!" They're such appreciative, easy-going folk, the Kabroni.

Not that I demand servility. Take the Budubudu of Naboodi. "Hey, if you're listening, buzz off and leave us alone." "We didn't need you way back when, and we don't need you now." "Show up and we're gonna have roast Star Maker for dinner." Okay, they're hardly worshipful, but on the other hand, I only hear from maybe half a dozen of them on any given day.

Anyway, my Instructor says that we'll let this galaxy play out for a few billion years, and if Man doesn't spoil everything, my next assignment will be a much larger, more complex nebula cluster four vibratory levels removed from here, and that I'll get to use really interesting building blocks, like heavy metals and egg whites and just about anything I can think of. My life forms won't have to be carbon-based, and my first task will be to make a race of crystalline methane breathers who won't shatter the first time I get annoyed and yell at them. (Yeah, I had a little problem on a frigid world out by Aldebaran. I'm not allowed to play with methane any more without supervision. I still say it wasn't my fault. All I did was sneeze.)

The other day I asked him if this time I could create a race that really *was* in my image, and he just looked at me for the longest time and then burst out laughing. I guess that meant No.

I don't know why not. I think I'm exceptionally handsome, especially compared to the other apprentices. All fourteen limbs

are in fine proportion, I have eyes and ears everywhere, wings for every conceivable type of atmosphere, extraordinarily cute dimples, and a fine rich baritone voice when I sing in the shower. A race could do a lot worse than be created in my image. All right, so I don't have any nostrils and my feet have opposable thumbs (a feature I borrowed for the chimpanzee and the gorilla)—but consider the advantages of never having a stuffed nose again, and think of the savings on shoes. And if they don't like the warts, they can have them burned off (a process *I* allowed them to invent.)

Not only that, but we're smart. I doubt that a single member of my race ever flunked trigonometry or formal dancing. How's *that* for bright? Okay, so most of us don't get passing grades in Keynesian economics, but what do you have to know about Keynes to make change? I can read an entire library in a single night. ("There's a difference between reading and *comprehending*," says my Instructor smugly. Hell, I'll bet *he* flunked Keynesian economics, too.)

No, when all is said and done, my race is clearly the finest looking, brightest, and most admirable in the universe. It's simply no contest.

Damn. Since writing that last sentence, I just got a new prayer in from some kid in Mexico City. Begins the usual way: "Dear God, how are you? I am fine. I hate to bother you, this is not for me, but I have this friend, I won't tell you his name, who has a hard time scoring with girls, and I wonder if you could give me some words of heavenly wisdom to pass on to him."

Pretty usual up to that point. But then came the clinker: "While I've got your attention, I have a question for you. All my life my mother and father and priest have been telling me that God made me, and I don't have any serious problem with that. But if you made me, maybe you could tell me: who made you? Yours truly, Manual Acaro."

I *hate* questions I can't answer. Okay for you, kid. Let me see: Manual Acaro. That's six letters and five, right? All right,

Manuel Acaro, Mexico City gets a 6.5 Richter earthquake tomorrow morning.

Bother me again and I'll give you hives. How's *that* for a manifestation of Godly power?

Sometimes I really wonder where this arrogant self-centered race gets all its petty annoying tendencies from, anyway.



*Who doesn't love the movie Casablanca? And who doesn't wish Rick had found a way to stay with Ilsa? Hell, I'll bet even Rick wished that, and to prove it, here's my evidence.*

## HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU KID

**I** came to Casablanca for the waters.” Renault almost guffaws. “Waters? What waters? We’re in the desert.”

I shrug. “I was misinformed,” I say.

Renault gives me a look.

*Okay, pal, I think, I'm keeping my end of the bargain, I gave you a hell of a line, one they'll be quoting for months. Just remember that when she shows up.*

Then Renault lays it on me: he’s making an arrest tonight. At Rick’s. Okay, so he knows about Ugarte. Big deal. He acts like he’s doing me a favor, as if we need the publicity.

“We know there are many exit visas sold in this cafe,” he continues, “but we know you have never sold one. That is the reason we permit you to remain open.”

“I thought it was because we let you win at roulette.” *Oh, I'm in rare form tonight. There's another quotable line for you. Now just remember who your friends are.*

“That is another reason,” agrees Renault amiably.

Then comes The Moment. He mentions Victor Lazlo. I act impressed. I'm doing my job, playing my role, piling up points. Why admit that I hate the son of a bitch, that he's got the brains of a flea and the personal magnetism of a fire hydrant, that he speaks only in platitudes?

I start wondering: how can I score a bonus point? Then the perfect solution hits me, and I offer to bet that Lazlo escapes.

I can see in Renault's eyes that he knows that Lazlo can never be confined to Casablanca, that he'll find a way to leave, but he's got his agenda and his priorities, just as I have mine, and he takes the bet.

Then he goes off to arrest Ugarte. Poor little bastard with the poached-egg eyes and the high nasal whine. He wasn't a bad guy, not when you compare him to the rest of the scum that inhabit this godforsaken city in the sand. Sure, he lied and he cheated and he took what didn't belong to him—but show me a resident of Casablanca who doesn't do the same thing. Hell, Ferrari buys and sells human beings, and Renault buys and sells the favors of half the human race. All Ugarte did was kill and rob some Nazis.

He runs up to me, the doomed little man in his sweat-stained white suit, the gendarmes hot on his tail, and begs me to help him, hide him, do *something* for him. I can't, of course; there are twenty French cops waving their guns at us ... but it gives me a chance to add to the persona I've been building so carefully. I push Ugarte away, right into the arms of Renault's men, and brush myself off, uttering some crowd-pleasing drivel about how I stick my neck out for no one. The trick is to say it with insincere sincerity, so that everyone knows I'm going to stick my neck out for someone sooner or later.

I let Renault introduce me to the head Kraut and the obsequious Kraut and the pizza eater who can't stop talking, and then Sam starts playing The Song and I know Ilsa's here. I pretend I don't, I walk up to him and start demanding that he quit playing, and then I see her. She's a big girl, taller than I remember, and I'm glad they've got me wearing lifts; it wouldn't

do to have her tower over me. Her perfume is as sweet and delicate as I remember, her eyes are as blue, her cheekbones as high, her skin as smooth. It still surprises me how such a large woman can be so feminine.

Our eyes meet, and that old feeling is still there. Suddenly I don't care that she deserted me in Paris, I'd sell everything I've got to Ferrari or anyone else if she'd agree to go away with me; hell, I'd even toss Sam into the bargain. She left me once, but it won't happen again, not this time. I've done everything asked of me. I started the casino, I've come up with line after line that people will quote, I've created a persona that men will want to emulate and women will want to seduce. I'm five feet seven, I smoke like a chimney, I'm starting to go bald—and I'm a romantic hero. Now fair is fair. This time she's got to stay with me, this time we have a happy ending. *You owe me that, pal, and I expect you to pay your debts.* Maybe you can even clean things up so we can go back to the States. If not, then Australia, or maybe Rio or Bahia—someplace, *any* place that this goddamned war hasn't reached.

I look at her again, and I remember the way she melted in my arms, the smell and taste and feel of her when I kissed her. And I think of our last morning in Paris. She wore blue, the Germans wore guns. I like the sound of it, but at the last moment *He* jerks me around and changes it. "The Germans wore gray," I find myself saying. "You wore blue." *Okay, I admit, it's better your way. But I'm trying, damn it; surely you can see that I'm trying.*

Then she hits me between the eyes with it—she's married to Lazlo.

"That sexless speechmaker?" I want to say. "I'll bet he hasn't touched you in six months." But I don't, I manage to look shocked. And I'm thinking, *That was a low blow, pal. I'm walking the line for you, I'm pulling my weight, and this is how you thank me? You'd better get your act together quick, or I'm not the only one who will suffer. I don't have to be cynical and sardonic, you know; I can keep my mouth shut just as easily—and don't you forget it.*

She walks off with the King of the Platitudes, and I stay behind to brood. Sam closes the place up and starts playing The Song, while I wonder aloud why out of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world she walked into mine—and the second the words leave my mouth, I know I've given him another line that he'll be taking bows for five years from now.

*I'm making you famous, I think. I've never been better than I am tonight. You want to thank me? Give me the girl, and this time let me keep her.*

Isa stops by to pay me a secret visit and tell me why she married Lazlo, as if I give a damn. So she's lived with him for the past year. Who cares? There aren't any virgins left in the world, not in the middle of all this killing. We all have flings, and the dumb ones marry them. All I care about is that she's back, and I have to make sure that this time she stays.

I lie and tell her that Ugarte only gave me one letter of transit, not two. I can get Lazlo out of the country, but she'll have to stay until I can figure a way to get us out together. It doesn't seem to bother her. She left me once, she says, and she hasn't the strength to do it again. Just the words I want to hear.

I know I can take her to bed right now, and it's been a long time, but *He* says No, not yet, we have to build more tension, Lazlo's only a block away and Strasser's goons might break in at any moment, and even Renault could sell you out for the right price.

So we just talk. I'm so pissed that I go out of my way to speak in monosyllables. *No more quotes for you, pal, not until you meet me halfway.*

An hour before dawn I send her back to Lazlo, half-hoping she'll walk in on him with one of the bimbos who set up shop under the gas lamps along the street ... but I know it won't happen: this guy's too much in love with himself to waste his attentions on anyone else. Then, when the sun comes up, I walk over to the Blue Parrot and offer to sell out to Ferrari. He practically drools at the chance to buy Rick's.

I tell him he's got to keep Sam, and he agrees. Then I decide to do my good deed for the day—I don't figure stealing Lazlo's wife really counts as one—so I tell him that Sam gets a quarter of the profits. He grins and tells me he knows Sam gets only ten percent, but he's worth a quarter and a quarter's what he'll get. I grimace. He agreed too fast. That means with Ferrari doing the books Rick's won't show a profit for the next ten years, and poor Sam will be working his ass off for twenty bucks a week and tips—but I haven't got time to worry about that, because I'm trying to get all my ducks in a row before the grand climax.

Before long I'm at the airport with Renault. I've told Ilsa to get Lazlo here, to tell him there are two letters of transit and they're for the pair of them. It's going to be interesting to see his face when he finds out we're putting him on the plane all by himself. My guess is that as soon as he figures out that he'll still be able to spout off in front of an audience he won't argue, he'll just grab his letter, kiss Ilsa good-bye, and go.

I still don't know which side Renault's on—the one with the most willing women, probably—so I take his gun away and turn mine on him. He seems more amused than frightened.

Suddenly Ilsa and Lazlo appear out of the fog, just as the plane to Lisbon begins warming up its engines. I hand him an envelope with one letter, and he doesn't even look at it, he just thanks me and tells me this time our side will win.

I want to sneer and say, "I ain't on your side, sweetheart!" but something—*someone*—stops me. He goes off to check the luggage, and I turn to Ilsa.

"We're together forever now, baby." That's what I *want* to say. But what comes out is some speech about how the problems of three people don't come to a hill of beans, and that he needs her for his work.

I check my pocket. The other letter of transit is gone, and I know with a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach that Lazlo has both of them.

*No! I want to scream. I did my job! I played my part, I gave you all the quotes you can handle, I let Ugarte go down the tubes and I'm*

*arranging for Lalzo to get out in one piece. I won, damn it! I deserve her!*

Ilsa looks at me with tears in her eyes. “And I said I would never leave you!” she says.

*Then don't!* I try to say. *I hope you don't think I'm doing all this for the bozo you married.* But the words catch in my throat, and instead I'm telling her that we'll always have Paris.

She's about to say something else, but I just give her a loving smile and find myself saying, “Here's looking at you, kid.”

*Great. The dumbest thing I've said in years, and it's the one everyone will remember.*

Then they're on the plane, and I turn around and Major Strasser's there. He's got no reason in the world to be at the airport except to make me look even more heroic. *Fuck you, pal,* I say silently. *If I don't get the girl, you don't get a John Wayne gunfight.* I shoot Strasser down in cold blood just as the plane takes off.

It's obvious that we need a memorable line, something to break the tension.

*Think of your own line. I'm not playing any more.*

Finally Renault says, “Round up the usual suspects.”

*Not bad. I'd have done better, but not bad.*

There's nothing left to do. We start walking off into the fog. He says something about going to Brazzaville. Just what I always wanted: a garrison with no electricity, no running water, and no women except for the ones who wear those huge plates in their lips.

*Give me a break,* I try to say. What comes out is, “Louie, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

Then it's over, and I'm in limbo. I analyze what I did, what I said, what I could have done better, or at least differently. I've got to prepare, to think of subtle ways to manipulate Him as He manipulates me. I've got a little time to get ready: there'll be the newsreel, and a couple of cartoons, and the coming attractions, and then we start it all over again.

Only this time I'll get the girl.

*I grew up on Edgar Rice Burroughs, especially the Martian tales. I love Carol, to whom I have been married for 52 years as I write these words, and it is my fondest wish that I die first, because I don't think life would be at all interesting or enjoyable without her. I combined the two—ERB's Mars and Carol—in this story, which was a Hugo nominee (And lost to another of my stories, though to this day I prefer this one.).*

## A PRINCESS OF EARTH

**W**hen Lisa died I felt like my soul had been ripped out of my body, and what was left wasn't worth the powder to blow it to hell. To this day I don't even know what she died of; the doctors tried to tell me why she had collapsed and what had killed her, but I just tuned them out. She was dead and I would never talk to her or touch her again, never share a million unimportant things with her, and that was the only fact that mattered. I didn't even go to the funeral; I couldn't bear to look at her in her coffin.

I quit my job—we'd been counting the days to my retirement so we could finally spend all our time together—and I considered selling the house and moving to a smaller place, but in the end I couldn't do it. There was too much of her there, things I'd lose forever if I moved away.

I left her clothes in the closet, just the way they'd always been. Her hairbrush and her perfume and her lipstick remained

on the vanity where she'd kept them neatly lined up. There was a painting of a New England landscape that I'd never liked much, but since she had loved it I left it hanging where it was. I had my favorite photos of her blown up and framed, and put them on every table and counter and shelf in the house.

I had no desire to be with other people, so I spent most of my days catching up on my reading. Well, let me amend that. I started a lot of books; I finished almost none of them. It was the same thing with movies: I'd rent a few, begin playing them, and usually turn them off within fifteen or twenty minutes. Friends would invite me out, I'd refuse, and after awhile they stopped calling. I barely noticed.

Winter came, a seemingly endless series of bleak days and frigid nights. It was the first time since I'd married Lisa that I didn't bring a Christmas tree home to decorate. There just didn't seem much sense to it. We'd never had any children, she wasn't there to share it, and I wasn't going to have any visitors.

As it turned out, I was wrong about the visitor: I spotted him maybe an hour before midnight, wandering naked across my back yard during the worst blizzard of the season.

At first I thought I was hallucinating. Five inches of snow had fallen, and the wind chill was something like ten below zero. I stared in disbelief for a full minute, and when he didn't disappear, I put on my coat, climbed into my boots, grabbed a blanket, and rushed outside. When I reached him he seemed half-frozen. I threw the blanket around him and led him back into the house.

I rubbed his arms and legs vigorously with a towel, then sat him down in the kitchen and poured him some hot coffee. It took him a few minutes to stop shivering, but finally he reached out for the cup. He warmed his hands on it, then lifted it and took a sip.

"Thank you," he whispered hoarsely.

Once I was that sure he wasn't going to die, I stood back and took a look at him. He was actually pretty good-looking now that his color was returning. He might have been thirty,

maybe a couple of years older. Lean body, dark hair, gray eyes. A couple of scars, but I couldn't tell what they were from, or how fresh they were. They could have been from one of the wars in Iraq, or old sports injuries, or perhaps just the wind whipping frozen bushes against him a few minutes ago.

"Are you feeling better?" I asked.

He nodded. "Yes, I'll be all right soon."

"What the hell were you doing out there without any clothes on?"

"Trying to get home," he said with an ironic smile.

"I haven't seen you around," I said. "Do you live near here?"

"No."

"Is there someone who can pick you up and take you there?"

He seemed about to answer me, then changed his mind and just shook his head.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"John." He took another swallow from the cup and made a face.

"Yeah, I know," I said. "The coffee's pretty awful. Lisa made it better."

"Lisa?"

"My wife," I said. "She died last year."

We were both silent for a couple of minutes, and I noticed still more color returning to his face.

"Where did you leave your clothes?" I asked.

"They're very far away."

"Just how far did you walk in this blizzard?"

"I don't know."

"Okay," I said in exasperation. "Who do I call—the cops, the hospital, or the nearest asylum?"

"Don't call anyone," said John. "I'll be all right soon, and then I'll leave."

"Dressed like that? In this weather?"

He seemed surprised. "I'd forgotten. I guess I'll have to wait here until it's over. I'm sorry to impose, but ..."

“What the hell,” I said. “I’ve been alone a long time and I’m sure Lisa would say I could use a little company, even from a naked stranger. At any rate she wouldn’t want me to throw you out in the cold on Christmas Eve.” I stared at him. “I just hope you’re not dangerous.”

“Not to my friends.”

“I figure pulling you out of the snow and giving you shelter qualifies as an act of friendship,” I said. “Just what the hell you were doing out there and what happened to your clothes?”

“It’s a long story.”

“It’s a long night, and I’ve got nothing to do.”

“All right,” said John with a shrug. “I am a very old man; how old I do not know. Possibly I am a hundred, possibly more; but I can’t tell because I have never aged as other men, nor do I remember any childhood.”

“Stop,” I said.

“What is it?”

“I don’t know what game you’re playing, but I’ve heard that before—a long, long time ago. I don’t know where, but I’ve heard it.”

He shook his head. “No, you haven’t. But perhaps you’ve *read* it before.”

I searched through my memory, mentally scanning the bookshelves of my youth—and there I found it, right between *The Wizard of Oz* and *King Solomon’s Mines*. “God, it’s been close to half a century! I loved that book when I was growing up.”

“Thank you,” said John.

“What am I thanking you for?”

“I wrote it.”

“Sure you did,” I said. “I read the damned thing fifty years ago, and it was an old book then. Look at yourself in a mirror.”

“Nevertheless.”

*Wonderful*, I thought. *Just what I needed on Christmas Eve. Other people get carolers; I get you.* Aloud I said: “It wasn’t written by a John. It was written by an Edgar.”

“He *published* it. I wrote it.”

“Sure,” I said. “And your last name is Carter, right?”

“Yes, it is.”

“I should have called the loony bin to begin with.”

“They couldn’t get here until morning,” said John. “Trust me: you’re perfectly safe.”

“The assurances of a guy who walks around naked in a snowstorm and thinks he’s John Carter of Mars aren’t exactly coin of the realm,” I said. The second I said it I kind of tensed and told myself I should be humoring him, that I was a 64-year-old man with high blood pressure and worse cholesterol and he looked like a cruiserweight boxer. Then I realized that I didn’t really care whether he killed me or not, that I’d just been going through the motions of living since Lisa had died, and I decided not to humor him after all. If he picked up a kitchen knife and ran me through, Warlord of Mars style, at least it would put an end to the aching loneliness that had been my constant companion for almost a year.

“So why do you think you’re John Carter?” I asked him.

“Because I am.”

“Why not Buck Rogers or Flash Gordon—or the Scarlet Pimpernel for that matter?”

“Why aren’t you Doc Savage or the Shadow?” he replied. “Or James Bond for that matter?”

“I never claimed to be a fictional character,” I said.

“Neither did I. I am John Carter, formerly of Virginia, and I am trying to return to my princess.”

“Stark naked in a blizzard?”

“My clothes do not survive the transition, and I am not responsible for the weather,” he said.

“That’s a reasonably rational explanation for a crazy man.”

He stared at me. “The woman I love more than life itself is millions of miles from here. Is it so crazy to want to return to her?”

“No,” I admitted. “It’s not crazy to want to be with her. But it’s crazy to think she’s on Mars.”

“Where do *you* think she is?” he asked.

“How the hell should *I* know?” I shot back. “But I know nothing’s on Mars except a bunch of rocks. It’s below zero in the summer, there’s no oxygen, and if anything ever lived there, it died out fifty or sixty million years ago. What have you got to say to that?”

“I have spent close to a century on Barsoom. Perhaps it is some other world than the one you know as Mars. Perhaps when I traverse the void, I also traverse the eons. I’m not interested in explanations, only in results. As long as I can once again hold my incomparable princess in my arms, I’ll leave the answers to the scientists and the philosophers.”

“And the psychiatrists,” I added.

He looked grimly amused. “So if you had your way, I would be locked away in an institution until they convinced me that the woman I love doesn’t exist and that my entire life has been a meaningless fantasy. You strike me as a very unhappy man; would that make you happier?”

“I’m just a realistic man,” I said. “When I was a kid, I wanted so badly to believe *A Princess of Mars* was true that I used to stand in my back yard every night and reach my hands out to Mars, just the way you did. I kept waiting to get whisked away from the mundane life I’d been living and transported to Barsoom.” I paused. “It never happened. All I got from all that reaching was sore shoulders and a lot of teasing from friends who didn’t read books.”

“Perhaps you had no reason to go to Barsoom,” he said. “You were a child, with your entire life ahead of you. I think that Barsoom can be very choosy about who it allows to visit.”

“So now you’re saying that a planet is sentient?”

“I have no idea if it is,” replied John. “Do you know for an absolute fact that it isn’t?”

I stared at him irritably. “You’re better at this than I am,” I said. “You sound so fucking reasonable. Of course, you’ve had a lot more practice.”

“More practice at what?”

“Fooling people by sounding normal.”

“More practice than you?”

“See?” I said. “That’s what I mean. You’ve got an answer for everything, and if you don’t, then you respond with a question that’ll make *me* sound like a fool if I answer it. But *I* wasn’t wandering around naked in a blizzard in the middle of the night, and I don’t think I live on Mars.”

“Do you feel better now?” he said.

“Not much,” I admitted. “You want some more coffee?”

“Actually, what I’d like to do is walk around a little and get some life back in my limbs.”

“Outside?”

He shook his head. “No, not outside.”

“Fine,” I said, getting up. “It’s not as big or stately as a Martian palace, but I’ll give you the chef’s tour.”

He got to his feet, adjusted the blanket around himself, and fell into step behind me. I led him into the living room, then stopped.

“Are you still cold?”

“A little.”

“I think I’ll light a fire,” I said. “I haven’t used the damned fireplace all winter. I might as well get my money’s worth.”

“It’s not necessary,” he said. “I’ll be all right.”

“It’s no bother,” I said, opening the screen and tossing a couple of logs onto the grate. “Look around while I’m doing it.”

“You’re not afraid I might rob you?”

“Have you got any pockets to put your loot in?” I asked.

He smiled at that. “I guess it’s my good luck that I’m not a thief.”

I spent the next couple of minutes positioning the kindling and starting the fire. I don’t know which rooms he’d seen, but he was just returning when I straightened up.

“You must have loved her very much,” he said. “You’ve turned the house into a shrine to her.”

“Whether you’re John Carter or merely think you’re John Carter, you should be able to understand what I felt.”

“How long has she been gone?”

“She died last February,” I said, then added bitterly: “On Valentine’s Day.”

“She was a lovely woman.”

“Most people just get older,” I said. “She got more beautiful every day. To me, anyway.”

“I know.”

“How could you know? You never met her, never saw her.”

“I know because my princess grows more beautiful with every passing moment. When you are truly in love, your princess always grows more beautiful.”

“And if she’s Barsoomian, she stays young for a thousand years, give or take,” I said, remembering the book.

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps? Don’t you know?”

“Does it really make a difference, as long as she remains young and beautiful in my eyes?”

“That’s pretty philosophical for a guy who thinks he makes his living lopping off heads with a longsword,” I said.

“I want nothing more than to live in peace,” he replied, sitting in the armchair that was closest to the fire. “I resent every second that I am away from my Dejah Thoris.”

“I envy you,” I said.

“I thought I was supposed to be insane,” he said wryly.

“You are. It makes no difference. Whether your Dejah Thoris is real or whether she’s a figment of a deranged mind, you believe she exists and that you’re going to join her. My Lisa is dead; I’ll never see her again.”

He made no reply, but simply stared at me.

“You may be crazy as a loon,” I continued, seating myself on the sofa, “but you’re convinced you’re going to see your Princess of Mars. I’d give up every last vestige of sanity if I could believe, even for a minute, that I would see my Princess of Earth one more time.”

“I admire your courage,” said John.

“Courage?” I repeated, surprised.

“If my princess were to die, I would have no desire to live another day, even another moment, without her.”

“It has nothing to do with a desire to live.”

“Then what is it?”

I shrugged. “Instinct. Inertia. I don’t know. I certainly haven’t enjoyed being alive the past year.”

“And yet you have not ended it.”

“Maybe it’s not courage at all,” I said. “Maybe it’s cowardice.”

“Or maybe there is a reason.”

“For living? I can’t give you one.”

“Then perhaps it was Fate that I should appear at your house.”

“You didn’t magically appear,” I said. “You walked here from wherever it was you left your clothes.”

“No,” he said, shaking his head firmly. “One moment I was strolling through the gardens of my palace in Helium, hand in hand with my princess, and the next I was standing in your yard, without my harness or my weapons. I tried to return, but I couldn’t see Barsoom through the swirling snow, and if I can’t see it I can’t reach out to it.”

“You’ve got a smooth answer for everything,” I said wearily. “I’ll bet you ace all your Rorschach tests, too.”

“You know all your neighbors,” said John. “Have you ever seen me before? How far do you think a naked man could get in this blizzard? Have the police come by to warn you of an escaped madman?”

“It’s a terrible night to be out, even for the police, and you seem like a harmless enough madman,” I replied.

“Now who has the smooth answer?”

“Okay, fine—you’re John Carter, and Dejah Thoris is up there somewhere waiting for you, and it was Fate that brought you here, and tomorrow morning a very worried man won’t show up looking for his missing cousin or brother.”

“You have my books,” he said. “Some of them anyway. I saw them on a shelf in your study. Use them. Ask me anything you want.”

“What would that prove? There’s probably a thousand kids who can recite them word for word.”

“Then I guess we’ll spend the night in silence.”

“No,” I said. “I’ll ask you some questions—but the answers won’t be in the books.”

“Fine.”

“All right,” I said. “How can you be so smitten with a woman who was hatched from an egg?”

“How can you love a woman of Irish or Polish or Brazilian descent?” he asked. “How can you love a black woman, or a red one, or a white one? How can you love a Christian or a Jew? I love my princess because of what she is, not what she might have been.” He paused. “Why are you smiling?”

“I was thinking that we’re growing a perceptive crop of madmen this year.”

He gestured to one of Lisa’s photos. “I take it she had nothing in common with you.”

“She had everything in common with me,” I said. “Except heritage and religion and upbringing. Odd, isn’t it?”

“Why should it be?” he asked. “I never thought it was odd to love a Martian woman.”

“I suppose if you can believe there are people on Mars, even people who have hatched from eggs, it’s easy enough to believe you love one of them.”

“Why do you feel it’s so insane to believe in a better world, a world of grace and chivalry, of manners and nobility? And why should I not love the most perfect woman that world has to offer? Would it not be mad to feel otherwise? Once you met your princess, would it have been rational to cast her aside?”

“We’re not talking about my princess,” I said irritably.

“We are talking about love.”

“Lots of people fall in love. No one else has had to go to Mars because of it.”

“And now we are talking about the sacrifices one makes for love.” He smiled ruefully. “For example, here I am, in the

middle of the night, 40 million miles from my princess, with a man who thinks I belong in an asylum.”

“Why did you come back from Mars, then?” I asked.

“It was not an act of volition.” He paused, as if remembering. “The first time it happened, I thought the Almighty must be testing me as He had tested Job. I spent ten long years here before I could return.”

“And you never once questioned if it had really happened?”

“The ancient cities, the dead sea bottoms, the battles, the fierce green-skinned warriors, I could have imagined them. But I could never have imagined my love for my princess; it remained with me every minute of every day—the sound of her voice, the feel of her skin, the scent of her hair. No, I could not have invented that.”

“It must have been a comfort during your exile,” I said.

“A comfort and a torture,” he replied. “To look up in the sky every day and know that she and the son I had never seen were so unthinkably far away.”

“But you never doubted?”

“Never,” he said. “I still remember the last words I wrote: ‘I believe that they are waiting for me, and something tells me I shall soon know.’”

“True or not, at least you could believe it,” I said. “You didn’t watch your princess die in front of you.”

He stared at me, as if trying to decide what to say next. Finally he spoke. “I have died many times, and if Providence wills it, I shall die again tomorrow.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Only my consciousness can traverse the void between worlds,” he said. “My body remains behind, a lifeless hulk.”

“And it doesn’t decay or rot, it just waits for you to return?” I said sarcastically.

“I can’t explain it,” he said. “I can only take advantage of it.”

“And this is supposed to comfort me—that a madman who thinks he’s John Carter is hinting that my Lisa might somehow be alive on Mars?”

“It would comfort *me*,” he said.

“Yeah, but you’re crazy.”

“Is it crazy to think she might have done what I did?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

“If you had a terminal disease, would it be crazy to seek out every quack in the world who thought he could cure it rather than to sit around passively waiting to die?”

“So now you’re a quack instead of a madman?”

“No,” he said. “I’m just a man who is less afraid of death than of losing his princess.”

“Bully for you,” I said. “I’ve already lost mine.”

“For ten months. I lost mine for ten years.”

“There’s a difference,” I pointed out. “Mine’s dead; yours wasn’t.”

“There’s another difference,” he replied. “I had the courage to find mine.”

“Mine isn’t lost. I know exactly where she is.”

He shook his head. “You know where the unimportant part of her is.”

I sighed deeply. “I’d settle for your madness if I had your faith.”

“You don’t need faith. You only need the courage to believe, not that something is true, but that it is possible.”

“Courage is for Warlords,” I replied, “not for 64-year-old widowers.”

“Every man has untapped wells of courage,” he said. “Maybe your princess is not on Barsoom. Maybe there is no Barsoom, and I am every bit as crazy as you think I am. Are you really content to accept things as they are, or have you the courage to hope that I’m right?”

“Of course I hope you’re right,” I said irritably. “So what?”

“Hope leads to belief, and belief leads to action.”

“It leads to the funny farm.”

He looked at me, a sad expression on his face. “Was your princess perfect?”

“In every way,” I said promptly.

“And did she love you?”

I saw his next question coming, but I couldn't help answering him. “Yes.”

“Could a perfect princess have loved a coward or a madman?” he said.

“Enough!” I snapped. “It's been hard enough staying sane these last ten months. Then you come along and make the alternative sound too attractive. I can't spend the rest of my life thinking that I'll somehow find a way to see her again!”

“Why not?”

At first I thought he was kidding. Then I saw that he wasn't.

“Aside from the fact that it's crazy, if I bought into it I wouldn't accomplish a damned thing.”

“What are you accomplishing now?” he asked.

“Nothing,” I admitted, suddenly deflated. “I get up each morning and all I do is wait for the day to drag to a close so I can go to sleep and not see her face in front of me until I wake up again.”

“And you consider this the rational behavior of a sane man?”

“Of a realistic man,” I replied. “She's gone and she's not coming back.”

“Reality is greatly overrated,” he responded. “A realist sees silicon; a madman sees a machine that can think. A realist sees bread mold; a madman sees a drug that miraculously cures infection. A realist looks at the stars and asks, why bother? A madman looks at those same stars and asks, why not bother?” He paused and stared intently at me. “A realist would say, My princess is dead. A madman would say, John Carter found a way to overcome death, so why couldn't she?”

“I wish I could say that.”

“But?” he said.

“I'm not a madman.”

“I feel very sorry for you.”

“I don't feel sorry for *you*,” I replied.

“Oh? What do you feel?”

“Envy,” I said. “They’ll come by tonight or tomorrow or the next day to pick you up and take you back to wherever you wandered off from, and you will believe just as devoutly then as you do now. You’ll know beyond any doubt that your princess is waiting for you. You’ll spend your every waking moment trying to escape, trying to get back to Barsoom. You’ll have belief and hope and purpose, which is a pretty impressive triumvirate. I wish I had any one of them.”

“They’re not unattainable.”

“Maybe not to Warlords, but they are to aging widowers with bad knees and worse blood pressure,” I said, getting to my feet. He looked at me curiously. “I’ve had enough craziness for one night,” I told him. “I’m going to bed. You can sleep on the sofa if you want, but if I were you I’d leave before they came looking for me. If you go to the basement you’ll find some clothes and an old pair of boots you can have, and you can take my coat from the hall closet.”

“Thank you for your hospitality,” he said as I walked to the staircase. “I’m sorry to have brought back painful memories of your princess.”

“I cherish my memories,” I replied. “Only the present is painful.”

I climbed the stairs and lay down on the bed, still dressed, and fell asleep to visions of Lisa alive and smiling, as I did every night.

When I awoke in the morning and went downstairs he was gone. At first I thought he’d taken my advice and gotten a head start on his keepers—but then I looked out the window and saw him, right where I’d spotted him the night before.

He was face-down in the snow, his arms stretched out in front of him, naked as the day he was born. I knew before I checked for a pulse that he was dead. I wish I could say that he had a happy smile on his face, but he didn’t; he looked as cold and uncomfortable as when I’d first found him.

I called the police, who showed up within the hour and took him away. They told me they had no reports of any nut cases escaping from the local asylum.

I checked in with them a few times in the next week. They simply couldn't identify him. His fingerprints and DNA weren't on file anywhere, and he didn't match any missing persons descriptions. I'm not sure when they closed the file on him, but nobody showed up to claim the body and they finally planted him, with no name on his headstone, in the same cemetery where Lisa was buried.

I visited Lisa every day, as usual, and I started visiting John's grave as well. I don't know why. He'd gotten me thinking crazy, uncomfortable thoughts that I couldn't shake, blurring the line between wishes and possibilities, and I resented it. More to the point, I resented him: he died with the absolute knowledge that he would soon see his princess, while I lived with the absolute knowledge that I would never again see mine.

I couldn't help wondering which of us was truly the sane one—the one who made reality conform by the sheer force of his belief, or the one who settled for old memories because he lacked the courage to try to create new ones.

As the days passed I found myself dwelling more and more on what John had said, turning it over in my mind again and again—and then, on February 13, I read an item in the newspaper that tomorrow Mars would be closer to Earth than at any time in the next sixteen years.

I turned my computer on for the first time in months and verified the item on a couple of Internet news services. I thought about it for a while, and about John, and about Lisa. Then I phoned the Salvation Army and left a message on their answering device, giving them my address and telling them that I would leave the house unlocked and they were welcome to everything in it—clothes, food, furniture, anything they wanted.

I've spent the past three hours writing these words, so that whoever reads them will know that what I am about to do I am doing willingly, even joyfully, and that far from giving in to depression I am, at long last, yielding to hope.

It's almost three in the morning. The snow stopped falling at midnight, the sky is clear, and Mars should come into view in

any moment now. A few minutes ago I gathered my favorite photos of Lisa; they're lined up on the desk right beside me, and she seems more beautiful than ever.

Very soon I'll take off my clothes, fold them neatly on my desk chair, and walk out into the yard. Then it's just a matter of spotting what I'm looking for. Is it Mars? Barsoom? Something else? It makes no difference. Only a realist sees things as they are, and it was John who showed me the limitations of reality—and how could someone as perfect as my princess not transcend those limitations?

I believe she is waiting for me, and something tells me I shall soon know.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mike Resnick is, according to Locus, the all-time leading award winner, living or dead, for short science fiction. He has won 5 Hugos from a record 36 nominations, as well as a Nebula and other major awards in the USA, France, Poland, Catalonia, Croatia, Japan and Spain. He is the author of 75 novels, 25 collections, almost 300 stories, and 3 screenplays, and has edited 41 anthologies. He is currently the editor of *Galaxy's Edge* magazine and the *Stellar Guild* line of books.



# FIRST PERSON PECULIAR COPYRIGHT DATA

Entire contents copyright (c) 2014 Kirinyaga, Inc.

Introduction

Copyright Gregory Benford 2014

The Wizard of West 34<sup>th</sup> Street

Copyright © 2012 by Mike Resnick

First appeared in the December, 2012 *Asimov's*

The Gefilte Fish Girl

Copyright © 1997 by Mike Resnick

First appeared in the April, 1997 *F&SF*

The Revealed Truth

Copyright © 2013 by Mike Resnick

First appeared in *Dark Faith: Invocations*

Me and My Shadow

Copyright © 1984 by Mike Resnick

First appeared in *Unauthorized Autobiographies*

The Adventure of the Pearly Gates

Copyright © 1995 by Mike Resnick

First appeared in *Sherlock Holmes in Space*

A Little Night Music  
Copyright © 1991 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in *The Ultimate Dracula*

Down Memory Lane  
Copyright © 2005 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in the April, 2005 *Asimov's*

Will the Last Person to Leave the Planet Please Shut off the Sun?  
Copyright © 1992 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in *Will the Last Person to Leave the Planet  
Please Shut Off the Sun?*

The Kemosabee  
Copyright © 1994 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in *Tales of the Great Turtle*

Old MacDonald Had a Farm  
Copyright © 2001 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in the September, 2001 *Asimov's*

Mrs. Hood Unloads  
Copyright © 1991 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in *The Fantastic Robin Hood*

Blue  
Copyright © 1978 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in 1978 *Hunting Dog Magazine*

Catastrophe Baker and a Canticle for Leibowitz  
Copyright © 2009 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in *The New Space Opera II*

How I Wrote the New Testament, Brought Forth the Renaissance,  
and Birdied the 17<sup>th</sup> Hole at Pebble Beach  
Copyright © 1990 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in June/July 1990 *Aboriginal SF*

The Sacred Tree  
Copyright © 2012 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in the March, 2012 *Daily Science Fiction*

The Evening Line  
Copyright © 2013 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in *Rip-Off*

Cobbling Together a Solution  
Copyright © 2004 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in the October, 2004 *Amazing Stories*

Beachcomber  
Copyright © 1980 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in *Chrysalis 8*

The Enhancement  
Copyright © 2013 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in *Impossible Futures*

Society's Goy  
Copyright © 2003 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in *Stars*

Stalking the Zombie  
Copyright © 2012 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in *Stalking the Zombie*

Me  
Copyright © 2005 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in *I, Alien*

Here's Looking at You, Kid  
Copyright © 2003 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in the April, 2003 *Asimov's*

A Princess of Earth  
Copyright © 2004 by Mike Resnick  
First appeared in the December, 2004 *Asimov's*



