

WINTER SOLSTICE
by Mike Resnick

It is not easy to live backwards in time, even when you are Merlin the Magnificent. You would think it would be otherwise, that you would remember all the wonders of the future, but those memories grow dim and fade more quickly than you might suppose. I know that Gallahad will win his duel tomorrow, but already the name of his son has left me. In fact, does he even have a son? Will he live long enough to pass on his noble blood? I think perhaps he may, I think that I have held his grandchild upon my knee, but I am not sure. It is all slipping away from me.

Once I knew all the secrets of the universe. With no more than a thought I could bring Time to a stop, reverse it in its course, twist it around my finger like a piece of string. By force of will alone I could pass among the stars and the galaxies. I could create life out of nothingness, and turn living, breathing worlds into dust.

Time passed -- though not the way it passes for you -- and I could no longer do these things. But I could isolate a DNA molecule and perform microsurgery on it, and I could produce the equations that allowed us to traverse the wormholes in space, and I could plot the orbit of an electron.

Still more time slipped away, and although these gifts deserted me, I could create penicillin out of bread mold, and comprehend both the General and Special Theories of Relativity, and I could fly between the continents.

But all that has gone, and I remember it as one remembers a dream, on those occasions I can remember it at all. There was -- there someday will be, there may come to you -- a disease of the aged, in which you lose portions of your mind, pieces of your past, thoughts you've thought and feelings you've felt, until all that's left is the primal _id_, screaming silently for warmth and nourishment. You see parts of yourself vanishing, you try to pull them back from oblivion, you fail, and all the while you realize what is happening to you until even that perception, that realization, is lost. I will weep for you in another millennia, but now your lost faces fade from my memory, your desperation recedes from the stage of my mind, and soon I will remember nothing of you. Everything is drifting away on the wind, eluding my frantic efforts to clutch it and bring it back to me.

I am writing this down so that someday someone -- possibly even _you_ -- will read it and will know that I was a good and

moral man, that I did my best under circumstances that a more compassionate God might not have forced upon me, that even as events and places slipped away from me, I did not shirk my duties, I served my people as best I could.

They come to me, my people, and they say, It hurts, Merlin. They say, Cast a spell and make the pain go away. They say, My baby burns with fever, and my milk has dried up. Do something, Merlin, they say; you are the greatest wizard in the kingdom, the greatest wizard who has ever lived. Surely you can do something.

Even Arthur seeks me out. The war goes badly, he confides to me; the heathen fight against baptism, the knights have fallen to battling amongst themselves, he distrusts his queen. He reminds me that I am his personal wizard, that I am his most trusted friend, that it was I who taught him the secret of Excalibur (but that was many years ago, and of course I know nothing of it yet). I look at him thoughtfully, and though I know an Arthur who is bent with age and beaten down by the caprices of Fate, an Arthur who has lost his Guinevere and his Round Table and all his dreams of Camelot, I can summon no compassion, no sympathy for this young man who is speaking to me. He is a stranger, as he will be yesterday, as he will be last week.

An old woman comes to see me in the early afternoon. Her arm is torn and miscolored, the stench of it makes my eyes water, the flies are thick around her.

I cannot stand the pain any longer, Merlin, she weeps. It is like childbirth, but it does not go away. You are my only hope, Merlin. Cast your mystic spell, charge me what you will, but make the pain cease.

I look at her arm, where the badger has ripped it with his claws, and I want to turn my head away and retch. I finally force myself to examine it. I have a sense that I need something, I am not sure what, something to attach to the front of my face, or if not my whole face then at least across my nose and mouth, but I cannot recall what it is.

The arm is swollen to almost twice its normal size, and although the wound is halfway between her elbow and her shoulder, she shrieks in agony when I gently manipulate her fingers. I want to give her something for her pain. Vague visions come to mind, images of something long and slender and needlelike flash briefly before my eyes. There must be something I can do, I think, something I can give her, some miracle that I employed when I was younger and the world was older, but I can no longer remember what it is.

I must do more than mask her pain, this much I still know, for infection has set in. The smell becomes stronger as I probe and she screams. Gang, I think suddenly: the word for her condition begins with gang -- but there is another syllable and I cannot recall it, and even if I could recall it I can no longer cure it.

But she must have some surcease from her agony, she believes in my powers and she is suffering and my heart goes out to her. I mumble a chant, half-whispering and half-singing. She thinks I am calling up my ethereal servants from the Netherworld, that I am bringing my magic to bear on the problem, and because she needs to believe in something, in anything, because she is suffering such agony, I do not tell her that what I am really saying is God, just this one time, let me remember. Once, years, eons from now, I could have cured her; give me back the knowledge just for an hour, even for a minute. I did not ask to live backward in Time, but it is my curse and I have willingly borne it -- but don't let this poor old woman die because of it. Let me cure her, and then You

can ransack my mind and take back my memories.

But God does not answer, and the woman keeps screaming, and finally I gently plaster mud on the wound to keep the flies away. There should be medicine too, it comes in bottles -- (_bottles?_ Is that the right word?) -- but I don't know how to make it, I don't even remember its color or shape or texture, and I give the woman a root, and mutter a spell over it, and tell her to sleep with it between her breasts and to believe in its healing powers and soon the pain will subside.

She believes me -- there is no earthly reason why she should, but I can see in her eyes that she does -- and then she kisses my hands and presses the root to her bosom and wanders off, and somehow, for some reason, she does seem to be in less discomfort, though the stench of the wound lingers long after she has gone.

Then it is Lancelot's turn. Next week or next month he will slay the Black Knight, but first I must bless his sword. He talks of things we said to each other yesterday, things of which I have no recollection, and I think of things we will say to each other tomorrow.

I stare into his dark brown eyes, for I alone know his secret, and I wonder if I should tell Arthur. I know they will fight a war over it, but I do not remember if I am the catalyst or if Guenivere herself confesses her infidelities, and I can no longer recall the outcome. I concentrate and try to see the future, but all I see is a city of towering steel and glass structures, and I cannot see Arthur or Lancelot anywhere, and then the image vanishes, and I still do not know whether I am to go to Arthur with my secret knowledge or keep my silence.

I realize that it has all happened, that the Round Table and the knights and even Arthur will soon be dust no matter what I say or do, but they are living forward in Time and this is of momentous import to them, even though I have watched it all pass and vanish before my eyes.

Lancelot is speaking now, wondering about the strength of his faith, the purity of his virtue, filled with self-doubt. He is not afraid to die at the hands of the Black Knight, but he is afraid to face his God if the reason for his death lies within himself. I continue to stare at him, this man who daily feels the bond of our friendship growing stronger while I daily find that I know him less and less, and finally I lay a hand on his shoulder and assure him that he will be victorious, that I have had a vision of the Black Knight lying dead upon the field of battle as Lancelot raises his bloody sword in victorious triumph.

Are you sure, Merlin, he asks doubtfully.

I tell him that I am sure. I could tell him more, tell him that I have seen the future, that I am losing it as quickly as I am learning the past, but he has problems of his own -- and so, I realize, have I, for as I know less and less I must pave the way for that youthful Merlin who will remember nothing at all. It is he that I must consider -- I speak of him in the third person, for I know nothing of him, and he can barely remember me, nor will he know Arthur or Lancelot or even the dark and twisted Modred -- for as each of my days passes and Time continues to unwind, he will be less able to cope, less able to define even the problems he will face, let alone the solutions. I must give him a weapon with which to defend himself, a weapon that he can use and manipulate no matter how little he remembers of me, and the weapon I choose is superstition. Where once I worked miracles that were codified in books and natural law, now as their secrets vanish one

by one, I must replace them with miracles that bedazzle the eye and terrify the heart, for only by securing the past can I guarantee the future, and I have already lived the future. I hope I was a good man, I would like to think I was, but I do not know. I examine my mind, I try to probe for weaknesses as I probe my patients' bodies, searching for sources of infection, but I am only the sum of my experience, and my experience has vanished and I will have to settle for hoping that I disgraced neither myself nor my God.

After Lancelot leaves I get to my feet and walk around the castle, my mind filled with strange images, fleeting pictures that seem to make sense until I concentrate on them and then I find them incomprehensible. There are enormous armies clashing, armies larger than the entire populace of Arthur's kingdom, and I know that I have seen them, I have actually stood on the battlefield, perhaps I even fought for one side or the other, but I do not recognize the colors they are wearing, and they use weaponry that seems like magic, true magic, to me.

I remember huge spacefaring ships, ships that sail the starways with neither canvas nor masts, and for a moment I think that this must surely be a dream, and then I seem to find myself standing at a small window, gazing out at the stars as we rush by them, and I see the rocky surfaces and swirling colors of distant worlds, and then I am back in the castle, and I feel a tremendous sense of poignancy and loss, as if I know that even the dream will never visit me again.

I decide to concentrate, to force myself to remember, but no images come to me, and I begin to feel like a foolish old man. Why am I doing this, I wonder. It was a dream and not a memory, for everyone knows that the stars are nothing but lights that God uses to illuminate the night sky, and they are tacked onto a cloak of black velvet, and the moment I realize this, I can no longer even recall what the starfaring ships looked like, and I know that soon I will not even remember that I once dreamed of them.

I continued to wander the castle, touching familiar objects to reassure myself: this pillar was here yesterday, it will be here tomorrow, it is eternal, it will be here forever. I find comfort in the constancy of physical things, things that are not as ephemeral as my memories, things that cannot be ripped from the Earth as easily as my past has been ripped from me. I stop before the church and read a small plaque. It is written in French, and it says that This Church was something by Arthur, King of the Britains. The fourth word makes no sense to me, and this distresses me, because I have always been able to read the plaque before, and then I remember that tomorrow morning I will ask Sir Hector whether the word means built or constructed, and he will reply that it means dedicated, and I will know that for the rest of my life.

But now I feel a sense of panic, because I am not only losing images and memories, I am actually losing words, and I wonder if the day will come when people will speak to me and I will understand nothing of what they are saying and will merely stare at them in mute confusion, my eyes as large and gentle and devoid of intelligence as a cow's. I know that all I have lost so far is a single French word, but it distresses me, because in the future I will speak French fluently, as well as German, and Italian, and...and I know there is another language, I will be able to speak it and read it and write it, but suddenly it eludes me, and I realize that another ability, another memory, yet another integral piece of myself has fallen into the abyss, never to be retrieved.

I turn away from the plaque, and I go back to my quarters, looking neither right nor left for fear of seeing some building, some artifact that has no place in my memory, something that reeks of permanence and yet is unknown to me, and I find a scullery maid waiting for me. She is young and very pretty, and I will know her name tomorrow, will roll it around on my mouth and marvel at the melody it makes even coming forth from my old lips, but I look at her and the fact dawns upon me that I cannot recall who she is. I hope I have not slept with her -- I have a feeling that as I grow younger I will commit more than my share of indiscretions -- only because I do not wish to hurt her feelings, and there is no logical way to explain to her than I cannot remember her, that the ecstasies of last night and last week and last year are still unknown to me.

But she is not here as a lover, she has come as a suppliant, she had a child, a son, who is standing in the shadows behind my door, and now she summons him forth and he hobbles over to me. I look down at him, and I see that he is a clubfoot: his ankle is misshapen, his foot is turned inward, and he is very obviously ashamed of his deformity.

Can you help him, asks the scullery maid; can you make him run like other little boys? I will give you everything I have, anything you ask, if you can make him like the other children.

I look at the boy, and then at his mother, and then once more at the boy. He is so very young, he has seen nothing of the world, and I wish that I could do something to help him, but I no longer know what to do. There was a time when I knew, there will come a time when no child must limp through his life in pain and humiliation, I know this is so, I know that someday I will be able to cure far worse maladies than a clubfoot, at least I think I know this, but all that I know for sure is that the boy was born a cripple and will live a cripple and will die a cripple, and there is nothing I can do about it.

You are crying, Merlin, says the scullery maid. Does the sight of my child so offend you?

No, I say, it does not offend me.

Then why do you cry, she asks.

I cry because there is nothing else I can do but cry, I reply. I cry for the life your son will never know, and for the life that I have forgotten.

I do not understand, she says.

Nor do I, I answer.

Does this mean you will not help my son, she asks.

I do not know what it means. I see her face growing older and thinner and more bitter, so I know that she will visit me again and again, but I cannot see her son at all, and I do not know if I will help him, or if I do, exactly how I will help him. I close my eyes and concentrate, and try to remember the future. Is there a cure? Do men still limp on the Moon? Do old men still weep because they cannot help? I try, but it has slipped away again.

I must think about this problem, I say at last. Come back tomorrow, and perhaps I will have a solution.

You mean a spell, she asks eagerly.

Yes, a spell, I say.

She calls the child to her, and together they leave, and I realize that she will come back alone tonight, for I am sure, at least I am almost sure, that I will know her name tomorrow. It will be Marian, or Miranda, something beginning with an M, or possibly Elizabeth. But I think, I am really almost certain, that she will return, for her face is more real to me now than it was

when she stood before me. Or is it that she has not stood before me yet? It gets more and more difficult to separate the events from the memories, and the memories from the dreams.

I concentrate on her face, this Marian or Miranda, and it is another face I see, a lovely face with pale blue eyes and high cheekbones, a strong jaw and long auburn hair. It meant something to me once, this face, I feel a sense of warmth and caring and loss when I see it, but I don't know why. I have an instinctive feeling that this face meant, will mean, more to me than any other, that it will bring me both happiness and sorrow beyond any that I've ever known. There is a name that goes with it, it is not Marion or Miriam (or is it?), I grasp futilely for it, and the more frantically I grasp the more rapidly it recedes.

Did I love her, the owner of this face? Will we bring joy and comfort to one another, will we produce sturdy, healthy children to comfort us in our old age? I don't know, because my old age has been spent, and hers is yet to come, and I have forgotten what she does not yet know.

I concentrate on the image of her face. How will we meet? What draws me to you? There must be a hundred little mannerisms, foibles as often as virtues, that will endear you to me. Why can I not remember a single one of them? How will you live, and how will you die? Will I be there to comfort you, and once you're lost, who will be there to comfort me? Is it better than I can no longer recall the answers to these questions?

I feel if I concentrate hard enough, things will come back to me. No face was ever so important to me, not even Arthur's, and so I block out all other thoughts and close my eyes and conjure up her face (yes, conjure; I am Merlin, am I not?) -- but now I am not so certain that it is her face. Was the jaw thus or so? Were her eyes really that pale, her hair that auburn? I am filled with doubt, and I imagine her with eyes that were a deeper blue, hair that was lighter and shorter, a more delicate nose -- and I realize that I have never seen this face before, that I was deluded by my self-doubts, that my memory has not failed me completely, and I attempt to paint her portrait on the canvas of my mind once again, but I cannot, the proportions are wrong, the colors are askew, and even so I cling to this approximation, for once I have lost it I have lost her forever. I concentrate on the eyes, making them larger, bluer, paler, and finally I am pleased with them, but now they are in a face that I no longer know, her true face as elusive now as her name and her life.

I sit back on my chair and I sigh. I do not know how long I have been sitting here, trying to remember a face -- a woman's face, I think, but I am no longer sure -- when I hear a cough, and I look up and Arthur is standing before me.

We must talk, my old friend and mentor, he says, drawing up his own chair and seating himself on it.

Must we, I ask.

He nods his head firmly. The Round Table is coming apart, he says, his voice concerned. The kingdom is in disarray.

You must assert yourself and put it in order, I say, wondering what he is talking about.

It's not that easy, he says.

It never is, I say.

I need Lancelot, says Arthur. He is the best of them, and after you he is my closest friend and advisor. He thinks I don't know what he is doing, but I know, though I pretend not to.

What do you propose to do about it, I ask.

He turns to me, his eyes tortured. I don't know, he says. I love them both, I don't want to bring harm to them, but the

important thing is not me or Lancelot or the queen, but the Round Table. I built it to last for all eternity, and it must survive.

Nothing lasts for eternity, I say.

Ideals do, he replies with conviction. There is Good and there is Evil, and those who believe in the Good must stand up and be counted.

Isn't that what you have done, I ask.

Yes, says Arthur, but until now the choice was an easy one. Now I do not know which road to take. If I stop feigning ignorance, then I must kill Lancelot and burn the queen at the stake, and this will surely destroy the Round Table. He pauses and looks at me. Tell me the truth, Merlin, he says, would Lancelot be a better king than I? I must know, for if it will save the Round Table, I will step aside and he can have it all -- the throne, the queen, Camelot. But I must be sure.

Who can say what the future holds, I reply.

You can, he says. At least, when I was a young man, you told me that you could.

Did I, I ask curiously. I must have been mistaken. The future is as unknowable as the past.

But everyone knows the past, he says. It is the future that men fear.

Men fear the unknown, wherever it may lie, I say.

I think that only cowards fear the unknown, says Arthur. When I was a young man and I was building the Table, I could not wait for the future to arrive. I used to awaken an hour before sunrise and lay there in my bed, trembling with excitement, eager to see what new triumphs each day would bring me. Suddenly he sighs and seems to age before my eyes. But I am not that man anymore, he continues after a thoughtful silence, and now I fear the future. I fear for Guenivere, and for Lancelot, and for the Round Table.

That is not what you fear, I say.

What do you mean, he asks.

You fear what all men fear, I say.

I do not understand you, says Arthur.

Yes, you do, I reply. And now you fear even to admit to your fears.

He takes a deep breath and stares unblinking into my eyes, for he is truly a brave and honorable man. All right, he says at last. I fear for _me_.

That is only natural, I say.

He shakes his head. It does not _feel_ natural, Merlin, he says.

Oh, I say.

I have failed, Merlin, he continues. Everything is dissolving around me -- the Round Table and the reasons for it. I have lived the best life I could, but evidently I did not live it well enough. Now all that is left to me is my death -- he pauses uncomfortably -- and I fear that I will die no better than I have lived.

My heart goes out to him, this young man that I do not know but will know someday, and I lay a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

I am a king, he continues, and if a king does nothing else, he must die well and nobly.

You will die well, my lord, I say.

Will I, he asks uncertainly. Will I die in battle, fighting for what I believe when all others have left my side -- or will I die a feeble old man, drooling, incontinent, no longer even aware of my surroundings?

I decide to try once more to look into the future, to put his mind at ease. I close my eyes and I peer ahead, and I see not a mindless babbling old man, but a mindless mewling baby, and that baby is myself.

Arthur tries to look ahead to the future he fears, and I, traveling in the opposite direction, look ahead to the future _I_ fear, and I realize that there is no difference, that this is the humiliating state in which man both enters and leaves the world, and that he had better learn to cherish the time in between, for it is all that he has.

I tell Arthur again that he shall die the death he wants, and finally he leaves, and I am alone with my thoughts. I hope I can face my fate with the same courage that Arthur will face his, but I doubt that I can, for Arthur can only guess at his while I can see mine with frightening clarity. I try to remember how Arthur's life actually does end, but it is gone, dissipated in the mists of Time, and I realize that there are very few pieces of myself left to lose before I become that crying, mindless baby, a creature of nothing but appetites and fears. It is not the end that disturbs me, but the knowledge of the end, the terrible awareness of it happening to me while I watch helpless, almost an observer at the disintegration of whatever it is that has made me Merlin.

A young man walks by my door and waves to me. I cannot recall ever seeing him before.

Sir Pellinore stops to thank me. For what? I don't remember.

It is almost dark. I am expecting someone, I think it is a woman, I can almost picture her face. I think I should tidy up the bedroom before she arrives, and I suddenly realize that I don't remember where the bedroom is. I must write this down while I still possess the gift of literacy.

Everything is slipping away, drifting on the wind.

Please, somebody, help me.

I'm frightened.

-- The End --