

ABSENT THEE FROM FELICITY AWHILE...

by Somtow Sucharitkul

Here's a variation on a theme that a few courageous writers have tackled before—with a certain dread and a shock of horror. Live life over again? Yes, and then again, no. But this story manages to turn a new direction. The right to achieve adulthood in a cosmic community must be learned.

1

You remember silence, don't you?

There were many silences once: silence for a great speech, silence before an outburst of thunderous applause, silence after laughter. Silence is gone forever, now. When you listen to the places where the silence used to be, you hear the soft insidious buzzing, like a swarm of distant flies, that proclaims the end of man's solitude...

For me, it happened like this: It was opening night, and Hamlet was just dying, and I was watching from the wings, being already dead, of course, as Guildenstern. I wanted to stay for curtain call anyway, even though I knew the audience wouldn't notice. It hadn't been too long since my first job, and I was new in New York. But here everything revolved around Sir Francis FitzHenry, brought over from England at ridiculous expense with his new title clinging to him like wrapping paper.

Everything else was as low-budget as possible, including me. They did a stark, empty staging, ostensibly as a sop to modernism, but really because the backers were penniless after paying FitzHenry's advance, and so Sir Francis was laid out on a barren proscenium with nothing but an old leather armchair for Claudius's throne and a garish green spot on him. Not that there was any of that Joseph Papp-type avant-garde rubbish. Everything was straight. Me, I didn't know what people saw in Sir Francis FitzHenry till I saw him live—I'd only seen him in that ridiculous Fellini remake of *Ben Hur*—but he was dynamite, just the right thing for the old Jewish ladies.

There he was, then, making his final scene so heartrending I

could have drowned in an ocean of molasses; arranging himself into elaborate poses that could have been plucked from the Acropolis; and uttering each iambic pentameter as though he were the New York Philharmonic and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir all rolled into one. And they were lapping it up, what with the swing away from the really modern interpretations. He was a triumph of the old school, there on that stage turning the other actors into ornamental papier-mache all around him.

He had just gotten, you know, to that line:

Absent thee from felicity awhile...

To tell my story.

and was just about to fall, with consummate grace, into Horatio's arms. You could feel the collective catch of breath, the palpable silence, and I was thinking, *What could ever top that, my God?...* and I had that good feeling you get when you know you're going to be drawing your paycheck for at least another year or so. And maybe Gail would come back, even.

Then—

Buzz, buzz, buzz, buzz. "What's wrong?" I turned to the little stage manager, who was wildly pushing buttons. The buzzing came, louder and louder. You couldn't hear a word Horatio was saying. The buzzing kept coming, from every direction now, hurting my ears. Sir Francis sat up in mid-tumble and glared balefully at the wings, then the first scream could be heard above the racket, and I finally had the nerve to poke my head out and saw the tumult in the audience...

"For Chrissakes, why doesn't someone turn on the house lights?" Claudius had risen from where he was sprawled dead and was stomping around the stage. The buzzing became more and more intense, and now there were scattered shrieks of terror and the thunder of an incipient stampede mixed into the buzzing, and I cursed loudly about the one dim spotlight. The screaming came

continuously. People were trooping all over the stage and were tripping on swords and shields, a lady-in-waiting hurtled into me and squished makeup onto my cloak, corpses were groping around in the dark, and finally I found the right switch where the stage manager had run away and all the lights came on and the leather armchair went whizzing into the flies.

I caught one word amid all this commotion—

Aliens.

A few minutes later everybody knew everything. Messages were being piped into our minds somehow. At first they just said *don't panic, don't panic* and were hypnotically soothing, but then it all became more bewildering as the enormity of it all sank in. I noticed that the audience were sitting down again, and the buzzing had died down to an insistent whisper. Everything was returning to a surface normal, but stiff, somehow; artificial. They were all sitting, a row of glassy-eyed mannequins in expensive clothes, under the glare of the house lights, and we knew we were all hearing the same thing in our minds.

They were bringing us the gift of immortality, they said. They were some kind of galactic federation. No, we wouldn't really be able to understand what they were, but they would not harm us. In return for their gift, they were exacting one small favor from us. They would try to explain it in our terms. Apparently something like a sort of hyperspatial junior high school was doing a project on uncivilized planets, something like "one day in the life of a barbarian world." The solar system was now in some kind of time loop, and would we be kind enough to repeat the same day over and over again for a while, with two hours off from 6 to 8 every morning, while their kids came over and studied everything in detail. We were very lucky, they added; it was an excellent deal. No, there wasn't anything we could do about it

I wondered to myself, how long is "over and over again for a while"?

They answered it for me. “Oh, nothing much. About seven million of your years.” I felt rather short-changed, though I realized that it was nothing in comparison with immortality.

And, standing there stock-still and not knowing what to think, I saw the most amazing sight. We all saw the aliens as gossamer veils of light that drifted and danced across the field of vision, almost imperceptible, miniature auroras that sparkled and vanished... I saw Sir Francis’s face through a gauze of shimmering blue lights. I wanted to touch them so badly; I reached out and my hand passed right through one without feeling a thing. Then they were gone.

We turned off the house lights—we had until midnight—and went on with the play. The buzzing subsided almost completely, but was very obviously there all the time, so everybody gabbled their lines and tried to cut in quickly between speeches to cover up the noise. The applause was perfunctory, and Sir Francis seemed considerably distressed that he had been so easily upstaged.

I walked home at a few minutes to midnight. I saw peculiar poles with colored metallic knobs on them, all along Broadway every couple of blocks, like giant parking meters. The streets were virtually empty, and there were a couple of overturned Yellow cabs and an old Chevy sticking out of a store window. It had been too much for some, I supposed. But I was so confused about what had happened, I tried to think about nothing but Gail and about the bad thing that had happened that morning.

I climbed up the dirty staircase to my efficiency above an Indian grocery store and jumped into bed with all my clothes on, thinking about the bad thing between me and Gail, and at midnight I suddenly noticed I was in pyjamas and she was lying there beside me, and there was a sudden jerk of dislocation and I knew that it wasn’t *today* anymore, it was *yesterday*, it was all true. I squeezed my eyes tightly and wished I was dead.

2

I woke up around 11 o'clock. Gail stirred uneasily. We made love, like machines. I kept trying to pull myself away, knowing what was coming. Whatever the aliens had done, it had turned me into a needle in a groove, following the line of least resistance.

We got up and had breakfast. She wore her ominous dishevelled look, strands of black hair fishnetting her startlingly blue eyes.

“John?”

The dinette table seemed as wide as all space. She seemed incredibly unreachable, like the stars. “Umm?” I found myself saying in a banal voice. I knew what she was going to say; I knew what I was going to do. But whatever it was dealt only with appearances. In my thoughts I was free, as though I were somehow outside the whole thing, experiencing my own past as a recording. I wondered at my own detachment.

“John, I’m leaving you.”

Anger rose in me. I got up, knocking over the coffee mug and shouting, “What for, who with?” like an idiot before going off into incoherent cursing.

“Francis FitzHenry has asked me to stay with him—in his suite at the Plaza!”

The anger welled up again. Blindly, I slapped her face. She went white, then red, and then she said quietly, dangerously: “You’re too petty, John. That’s why you’re going to be a Guildenstern for the rest of your life.” That hurt.

Then she walked out of my life.

I shaved and walked slowly over to the theater. We played to a full house. The aliens came. Sir Francis seemed considerably distressed that he had been so easily upstaged. I walked home, casually noting the two overturned Yellow cabs and the old Chevy stuck in a store window, past the overgrown parking meters, to my efficiency above an Indian grocery store, and threw myself fully clothed on the bed. I fell asleep.

I woke up around 11 o'clock, Gail stirred uneasily. We made love mechanically, and I knew that the two people who were lying there together had become totally divorced from themselves, and were going through preordained motions that bore no relationship whatsoever to what was in their minds. And there was no way of communicating.

We ate breakfast. She wore her ominous dishevelled look, and I desperately wanted to apologize to her, but when I tried to speak my facial muscles were frozen and the buzzing seemed to get louder, drowning my thoughts. Was the buzzing an external sound, or was it some mental monitor to enforce the status quo?

“I’m leaving you.”

Anger rose in me. I quenched it at once, but it made no difference either to my posture or to my words.

“Francis FitzHenry has asked me to stay with him—in his suite at the Plaza!”

I slapped her face. Suddenly the veils of light came, caressing the musty stale air of my apartment, touching the dust and making it sparkle, like a golden snow between the two of us. They faded. We had been watched; we were trapped in a galactic Peyton Place.

“You’re too petty, John. That’s why you’re going to be a Guildenstern for the rest of your life.” And walked out of my life. It hurt me more every time. I was doomed to be a Guildenstern in

this play too, a Guildenstern for the old ladies and a Guildenstern for the veils of light. It was hell.

I shaved and walked slowly over to the theater. We played to a full house. The aliens came; Sir Francis seemed considerably distressed that he had been so easily upstaged. I walked home, past the overturned cars and the gigantic parking meters that had materialized out of nowhere.

As I fell asleep, just before midnight, a thought surfaced: we were supposed to have two free hours every morning, weren't we? For months now, I had slept through those two hours.

I resolved to force myself to wake up at six.

3

I jerked myself awake at 6:30, snaked into unostentatious jeans and a T-shirt, and came down.

The brilliant summer morning hit me between the eyes. It had been autumn the previous night. Everything was to wonder at: the trash drifting down the sidewalk in the breeze, the briskness of the air, the clarity of the sunlight...

Two tramps were leaning against the first of the alien poles. They had their eyes closed and were very peaceful, so I crept away. Portholes exuded smoke, people jostled each other, and everything seemed astonishingly normal, except for the insistent buzzing.

Another of the poles had a man in a scruffy three-piece suit and blatantly orange tie, holding up a sign on which was scrawled VON DANIKEN LIVES! He had acquired a squalid-looking

collection of onlookers, whom I joined for a moment.

“... man, these critters built the *Pyramids!* They built the *Empire State Building!* They’re the Gods! Alexander the Great was one! Richard M. Nixon was one! God was one!... and you, too, can be saved, if only you’ll just throw a quarter on the altar of repentance! Hallelujah! Thank you, ma’am...”

I walked on.

At the next extraterrestrial parking meter a group of Hare Krishna types was dancing round and round like they had a missionary in the pot. In the middle a scrawny, bespectacled shaven man was caressing the shaft, which was glowing a dull crimson. He seemed transfigured, almost beautiful, much more like the real thing than Sir Francis FitzHenry could ever be. I watched for a long time, fascinated, my mind dulled by the hypnotic repetitiveness of their chanting.

They ceased, jolting me from my reverie. The lanky one came up to me and started to whisper confidentially, intensely. “Did you know they’re only a few microns thick? Did you know that they’re called the *T’ tat?* Did you know they have a shared consciousness that works over vast reaches of space-time? Did you know they’ve reached an incredibly high evolutionary phase, huh?”

“You don’t talk like a Hare Krishna person.”

“Hey!... oh, the clothes, you mean. Actually, I have a Ph.D. from M.I.T. I *talk* to them, you know.”

“No kidding!”

“Hey, really! Listen, come here,” he pulled me roughly over to the pole, which had stopped glowing. “Just sit down here, relax now, touch the pole. Totem pole, divine antenna, whatever. Can’t you hear anything... ?”

Hello.

I was shivering. The voice was so close; it was speaking inside

me. I drew back quickly.

“Hey, did you know they have many doctors, that each color shows their status based on age? Did you know that, huh? Did you know they don’t join up with the collective consciousness until they’re almost half a billion years old, that they have these learning centers all over the galaxy, that they originally crossed over from the Great Nebula in Andromeda? No kidding, man!”

I didn’t know what he was talking about.

“Here, touch it again, it isn’t so bad the second time.” He was twitching all over, a bundle of nerves. “Sorry I’m acting like this. It’s my only chance to act normal, you see, the rest of the day I’m either stoned or asleep, according to the script I can’t wait till we all wake up!”

I reached out. *Hello.*

“Isn’t there any way we can *resist* them?”

“What for? Don’t you want to live forever? This is just a sort of Purgatory, isn’t it? We all get to go to heaven.”

“But suppose I wanted to, you know, contradict them, or something.”

“Dunno. They can’t control *everything*.” He paused for a moment, but then launched himself into a stream of information again, as though I’d fed him another quarter.

“I have the general equations worked out.” He flashed a bit of paper in front of my face, then thrust it back into his pocket—“but you obviously have to be in control of unified field theory, and even then there’s the power source to worry about. I have a couple of theories—f’instance, if they had sort of a portable mini-quasar, like, a miniature white hole worming through space-time into a transdimensional universe, they could tap the energy, you see, and—”

He had lost me. I touched the pole, and his voice faded into

nothingness. The buzzing intensified. *Hello.*

“We’re just dirt to you, laboratory animals,” I said bitterly. “I wish it was back to the way it was.”

You can’t help being a lower being, you know. There’s nothing you or I can do about that.

“Well, will you tell me one thing?” It suddenly occurred to me that everyone had left The Hare Krishnas, hands linked, had gone dancing off.

Sure.

“Is this thing really worth it, for us? Seven million years is a long, long, time; it’s the same as eternity for all practical purposes.”

Hah! Fat lot you know.

“You didn’t answer my question.”

All in good time. But it’s almost 8 o’clock. Hold on, you’ll be dislocated back to yesterday in a few seconds. You’re pretty lucky, you know; in some parts of the world the two hours’ grace comes at some ridiculous time and nobody ever gets up.

“Goodbye.”

Goodbye.

I woke up around 11 o’clock. Gail stirred uneasily. We made love mechanically, like machines, with living sheets of light, only a few microns thick, darting between us, weaving delicately transient patterns in the air, and I felt hollow, transparent, empty.

I met Amy Schechter in Grand Central Station, coming out of the autumn night into a biting blizzard of a winter morning.

We were both standing at a doughnut stand. I looked at her, helpless, frail, as she stared into a cup of cold coffee. I had seen her before, but this morning there were just the two of us. She suddenly looked up at me. Her eyes were brown and lost.

“Hi. Amy.”

“John.”

A pause, full of noisome buzzing, fell between us.

For a while, I watched the breath-haze form and dissipate about her face, wanting to make conversation, but I couldn't think what to say.

“Will you talk to me? Nobody ever does, they always back off, as if they knew.”

“Okay.”

“I've been standing here for five years, waiting for my train. Sometimes I come an hour or so before 8 o'clock, you know, just to stand around. There's nothing for me at where I'm staying.” Her voice was really small, hard to hear against the buzzing.

“Where are you going?”

“Oh, Havertown, Pennsylvania. You've never heard of it.” I hadn't. “It's sort of a suburb of Philadelphia,” she added helpfully. “My folks live there.”

“Buy you a doughnut?”

“You must be joking!” She laughed quickly and stopped herself, then cast her eyes down as though scrutinizing a hypothetical insect in her styrofoam cup. Then she turned her back on me, hugging her shaggy old coat to her thin body, and crumpled

the cup firmly and threw it into the garbage.

“Wait, come back! We’ve got an hour and a half, you know, before you have to leave—”

“Oh, so it’s score and run? Nothing doing, friend.”

“Well, I *will* buy you a doughnut then.”

“Oh, all right. A romantic memory,” she added cynically, “when I’ll be dead by dinner anyway.”

“*Hub?*”

She came closer. We were almost touching, both leaning against the grubby counter. “I’m one of the ghosts, you know,” she said.

“I don’t get it.”

“What do *you* do every day?”

“My girlfriend walks out on me, then I play a poor third fiddle to a pretentious British actor in *Hamlet*.”

“Lucky. In *my* script, the train crashes into an eighteen-wheeler 25 miles outside of Philadelphia. Smash! Everybody dead. And then every morning I find myself at the station again. I was pretty muddled at first, the aliens never made any announcements to *me* while I was lying in the wreckage. So I do it all over and over again. One day I may even enjoy it.”

It didn’t sink in. “Chocolate covered?” I asked inanely.

“Yeah.”

There was another pause. I realized how much I needed another person, not Gail, how much I needed someone real...

“We should get to know each other, maybe,” I ventured. “After it’s all over, maybe we could—”

“No, Joke. Nothing doing. I’m a ghost. I’m not immortal,

don't you see! The whole deal ignores me completely! I'm dead already, dead, permanently dead! You don't get to be part of the deal if you die sometime during the day, you have to survive through till midnight, don't you see?"

"... oh God." I saw.

"They've just left me in the show to make everything as accurate as can be. I'm an echo. I'm nothing."

I didn't say a word. I just grabbed her and kissed her, right there in the middle of the doughnut stand. She was quite cold, like marble, like stone.

"Come on," she said. We found a short-time hotel around the block; I paid the eight dollars and we clung together urgently, desperately, for a terribly brief time.

I woke up at around 11 o'clock. Gail stirred uneasily. As I went through the motions for the thousandth time I was thinking all the time, *this isn't fair, this isn't fair*. Gail was alive, she was going to live forever, and she's just like a machine, she might just as well be dead. Amy, now, she was dead, but so *alive!* Then I realized a terrible truth: *Immortality kills!* I was very bitter and very angry. I felt cheated, and the buzzing sounded louder, like a warning, and I knew then that I was going to try and do something dreadful. ("They can't control *everything*," wasn't that what the Kirshna freak had said?)

I struggled, trying to push myself out of the groove, trying to change a little bit of one little movement, but always falling back to the immutable past...

We got up and had breakfast. She wore her ominous dishevelled look, strands of black hair fishnetting her startling blue eyes.

"John?"

"Umm?"

“John, I’m leaving you.”

“What for, who with?”

“Francis FitzHenry has asked me to stay with him—in his suite at the Plaza!”

I lifted my hand, then willed with every ounce of strength I could dredge up from every hidden source.

I didn’t slap her face.

A look of utter bewilderment crossed her face, just for one split second, and I looked at her and she looked at me, her emotions unfathomable; and then the whole thing swung grotesquely back to the original track, and she said quietly, dangerously, “You’re too petty, John. That’s why you’re going to be a Guildenstern for the rest of your life.” As though nothing were different. That hurt.

Then she walked out of my life.

But I had changed something! And we had communicated; for a split second something had passed between us!

The buzzing became a roar. I walked slowly to the theater, bathed in the glow of a hundred diaphanous wisps of light

5

It was a couple of minutes before 8 when the phone rang in my apartment. I decided to make a run for it, so I made for the kitchenette in the nude.

“Yeah?”

“This is Michael, John.” Michael played Horatio. He was sobbing, all broken up. I didn’t know him very well, so I played it cool. “John, I’m going to do something terrible! I can’t stand it, you’re the first person I could get through to this morning, I’m going to try and—”

I woke up around 11 o’clock. Gail stirred uneasily. We had breakfast, and I didn’t slap her face.

It seemed too natural. I realized that I had changed the pattern. This is the way it would always be from now on.

I had never slapped her face.

A look of utter bewilderment... but it was no longer a communication, it was just a reflex, part of the pattern, and then she said quietly, dangerously, “You’re too petty, John. That’s why you’re going to be a Guildenstern for the rest of your life.”

That hurt. Then she walked out of my life.

I went to the theater. There was Sir Francis, making his final scene so heartrending I could have drowned in a sea of molasses; arranging himself into elaborate poses that could have been plucked from the Acropolis; and uttering each iambic pentameter as though he were the New York Philharmonic and the Mormon Tabernacle Choir all rolled into one. He was dying, and he clutched at Horatio, and he said, measuring each phrase for the right mixture of honey and gall—

Absent thee from felicity awhile...

To tell my story.

and was just about to fall, with consummate grace, into Horatio’s arms, and you could feel the collective catch of breath, the palpable silence except for the quiet buzzing, when Horatio drew a revolver from his doublet and emptied it into Sir Francis’s stomach.

After the aliens departed from the theater, the play went on,

since Hamlet was dead anyway, and afterwards I walked home. I saw peculiar poles with metallic knobs on them, all along Broadway every couple of blocks, and there were a couple of overturned Yellow cabs, but the old Chevy was gone from the store window. Good for them.

In the morning I met Amy. I told her about what had happened.

“When you get to just before your accident, try to jump out of the car or something. Keep trying, Amy, just keep trying.”

She chewed her doughnut, deliberating. “I don’t know.”

“Well, we’ve got another six million, nine hundred thousand, nine hundred and ninety-four years to try in. So keep at it, okay?”

She seemed unconvinced.

“Just for me, try.”

I kissed her quickly on the forehead and she disappeared into the crowd that was heading towards the platform.

6

The pole was glowing a pale crimson when I touched it.

Hello.

I couldn’t contain my rage, “You bastards! Well, we’re not powerless after all, we’ve got free will, we *can* change things. We can ruin your high school project completely, rats that we are!”

Oh. Well, that too is one of the things under study at the moment.

“Well, let me tell you something. I don’t want your immortality! Because I’d have to give up being a person. Being a person means changing all the time, not being indifferent, and you’re changing us into machines.”

Oh? And do you deny that you’ve changed?

It was true. I had changed. I wasn’t going to be a Guildenstern for the rest of my life anymore. I was going to fight them; I was going to learn everything I could about them so I could try and twist it against them; I was going to be a real human being.

There are things you can’t do anything about. You’re in a transitional stage, you see. With immortality will come a change in perspectives. You won’t feel the same anymore about your barbarian ways, Earthling.

I had to laugh. “Where did you learn to talk like that?”

We monitored your science fiction TV broadcasts.

The picture of these alien schoolkids, clustering around a television set in some galactic suburbia somewhere in the sky... I laughed and laughed and laughed.

But then, seriously: “I’m still going to fight you, you know. For the sake of being human.” I had a new fuel to use, after all, against them. Love. Revenge. Heroism. I was thinking of Amy. The good old-fashioned stuff of drama.

Go ahead.

I woke up around 11 o’clock.