Jubilee

by Tim Pratt

Rough hands shook me awake, and I swam up out of my dream — bodies pressed against walls, people stampeding across a train platform, Sara torn away by the crowd — into the darkness of my childhood bedroom. I wanted to say "You shouldn't shake someone with post–traumatic stress syndrome and survivor's guilt awake in the middle of the night," but all that came out was a sleep–choked nonsense syllable, "Muh?"

"Andy, come on, now. Jubilee, just past Barefoot Creek."

The man in my childhood bedroom, hand on my shoulder, was Bill Waters. I hadn't seen him in ten years, since I headed west right after high school graduation, but he hadn't changed much, still football–player big, running a little to fat, with narrowed eyes and a big grin.

I swung my legs out of bed, blinking, and Mom chose that moment to flip on the lights, dazzling me.

"C'mon," Bill said again. "I got a thermos of coffee for you, but we've got to go. Your mama's got that big old cooler ready for us."

"'kay," I mumbled, wondering what time it was. Three, four a.m.? I was still scrambled from the plane ride and the time change, three hours lost in the trip from California to Alabama, and hadn't been sleeping much anyway since what happened with Sara in the train station, underground. I was exhausted. When the first shots were fired on the platform, I'd started running, and in some respects I felt like I hadn't stopped running since.

I pulled on a pair of jeans and a shirt, the clothes I'd worn on the plane, and went to the doorway, where Bill waited impatiently. My Mom hovered in the background, the way she had for most of my childhood. My dad had died when I was young, and my Mom had always been something like a ghost, too. Still, home was the only place I'd known to go, after my life got trampled. I kissed Mom on the cheek. "You coming?"

"No, no," she murmured. "I'll clean what you bring. Go on now."

Two minutes later I was in Bill's enormous truck, zooming down the dark back roads toward Barefoot Creek, the waters of Mobile Bay occasionally visible through breaks in the trees to the west.

"We were all real sorry to hear about your girl," Bill said. "We were looking forward to meeting her."

"Thanks," I said, though I wouldn't have thought to introduce her to Bill, even if he did live next door to Mom, now. We'd never been friends. Or enemies, exactly — I was just somebody Bill beat up in junior high and ignored in high school. And now we were grown up, and he was taking me to a jubilee. Hell of a way to come home.

"Not too many people here yet," Bill said, satisfied, pulling the truck off to the side of the road. I remembered him as the kind of person who went to an all–you–can–eat buffet and loaded up his plate with a towering mountain of food, as if supplies were going to run out, or as if someone else might get the choicest bits. At a jubilee, there was plenty to go around, but Bill was still pleased to beat the rush. I was, too, but only because I didn't want to talk to anybody. I only wanted to sleep for a week and be spared consciousness and memory. Dragging me out of bed and to the jubilee was a classic example of Southern therapy, community outreach to take my mind off tragedy. I could appreciate it, in a way. Back in San Francisco, none of my neighbors even knew me, and none of them bothered to ask where that woman I lived with was lately, or why I was crying on the sidewalk. They just walked around me. In San Francisco, I'd wished for comfort and sympathy, but now that I was back home, I only wanted to be left alone.

Bill got out of the truck and went around back, and I followed. The air was warm and moist, a breeze coming in from the east, the smell of the bay so familiar and long–forgotten it made my bones ache. When I looked up I could see mosquitoes buzzing against the face of the half–moon. Bill took a cooler out of the pickup, along with a few big net bags and a long three–tined spear; a gig, for frogging or spear–fishing in the shallows. I helped with the cooler and, holding it between us, we crossed the road and followed Barefoot Creek (a two–foot–wide trickle) down to the gritty sand shore of Mobile Bay. Here in the moonlight, the shore seemed scattered with diamonds, a shimmering field of sparkling silver along the edge of the black water. The shallow water boiled with life.

Thousands of fish — dead, dying, or flopping in the shallows — littered the shore. A dozen people in their nightgowns, pajamas, or hastily–thrown–on street clothes moved along the shore, bending, exclaiming, whistling, laughing. Some had flashlights, but most worked by moonlight, scooping up flounder, blue crab, and shrimp. Some carried coolers, while others improvised with washtub or trash bags. One woman, armed with a gig, speared three flatfish in one strike, a wriggling kebab that she raised up for a moment before depositing her catch in a basket. More people were arriving now, and the voices and laughter multiplied. This was a jubilee, as I remembered them, a pre–dawn beach–party to celebrate the mysterious bounty of the bay.

"Lorrie Perkins was sleepin' out on the pier," Bill said, gesturing toward a little spur of wood and pilings jutting out into the bay, just long enough to accommodate a small boat. "The water was real calm yesterday, so he thought it might be a good night for a jubilee." We set down the cooler. "He called me, and some other people, it looks like, and I figured you wouldn't want to miss it. Some luck, this happening the first night you get home, huh?"

"Sure is," I said, and Bill went off toward the water, gig in hand, hailing friends, then set to work spearing the masses of bewildered, jostling fish.

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Jubilees only happened once or twice a summer, if that, and some years they didn't happen at all. For as long as anyone could remember, there were mass fish–suicides on the shores of Mobile Bay. Sometimes they stretched for a mile or more, but this one was smaller, only a few hundred yards of fish–littered beach, and even so, there was enough for anyone who cared to come. Most of these people would skip

work tomorrow and spend all day cleaning fish. For the poor folk around here, a jubilee was a genuine mana–from–heaven miracle, and though everyone would be sick of fish pretty soon, boredom was heaps better than hunger. I'd spent plenty of summer nights as a kid laying out on piers with a sleeping bag it was too hot to need, watching the water and the late–night flounder giggers, hoping to see the ripples in the water and the onrushing silvery flow that heralded a jubilee. Jubilees were wonderful things, almost as exciting as that one winter it snowed, and for the same reason — a glorious, chaotic upset of natural order, being out in the middle of the night instead of sleeping, seeing the barbers and fry cooks and schoolteachers and town councilmen all together, laughing, reaping the bay's bounty. It was paradise for a kid.

Why had I never stopped to think what it must be like for the fish?

It wasn't like the fish decided to give themselves up for the good of the humans on the shore. Something drove them out of the bay. I thought unavoidably of the panic in the train station, the man with a gun on the platform — not even a terrorist, just a man who decided to kill as many people as he could — and the people surging out in all directions, heedless, rushing for safety anyplace it might be found.

I slapped at a mosquito on my neck and walked down the beach. I had no interest in getting my feet wet or feeling fish in my hands, or wriggling on the end of a spear, and the sight of those fish flopping madly in their hundreds made me dizzy. Nor did I want to talk to old acquaintances, and anyway, their sympathy would take a backseat to the fish. Shortly after dawn, probably, this cornucopia would dry up, and any surviving fish would swim back to the depths of the bay. These people had to gig while the gigging was good.

When I was a kid, I hadn't thought much about why the fish and shrimp and crabs fled the bay for the shore. And while I hadn't exactly followed the science with a close eye, I gathered that the current theory involved decaying algae on the bay floor, somehow robbing a localized area of oxygen and creating a floating dead–zone, a bubble of killing water that moved, driving the denizens of the bay before it — at least, until they hit the shore.

I tried to visualize such a thing, a space of pure negation, a submerged, invisible bubble of suffocation moving beneath the waves. It seemed improbable, too complicated, like there must be a more straightforward reason for the fish to flee, something even worse than flopping in the shallows, waiting to be speared.

I kept walking down the beach, sand crunching under my shoes, the voices behind me fading into distance, the boiling water calming down as I passed the edges of the jubilee. I stood and looked at the moonlight on the water, wondering if I'd made the right choice. Sara and I had long ago bought tickets to fly back here, and when the morning came I just . . . took the flight. I'd done the funeral. Work understood — we were between deadlines — and the vacation was already booked. I'd needed to go somewhere. I'd already bought a handgun. I knew when Barrett Wayne Johnston was being arraigned. I'd started thinking about ways to smuggle the pistol through courthouse security. Planning the murder of Sara's killer had, strangely, helped keep me sane, giving me a purpose and a problem to work out. But instead of following through, I'd left my gun in our too–empty apartment and flown home.

I'd run home to mama, and I would miss my chance to put a bullet in Barrett Wayne Johnston, one bullet to make up for all the ones he'd fired into that crowd. I knew coming home was prudence, the smart thing, not throwing my life away, but it felt like cowardice, and anyway, it was hard not to believe my life had ended when Sara's did.

I heard a strange sound, just loud enough to jostle me out of my thoughts. A mewl, sort of, an animal kind of whine. I cocked my head, listening for it, but heard nothing.

"Hey, Andy," Bill said, startling me. I didn't like him coming upon me unawares. He'd done it when we were in junior high, just before knocking me down, or trying to shove my head in the toilet, or wrenching my arms behind me and kicking me repeatedly in the ass. It had been nothing personal — I was a victim, he was a predator. Surely that had changed? Mom liked Bill — he'd given her a deal on a car from his lot, and helped her carry her groceries in sometimes. But it was hard to look at him without seeing the grinning bastard who'd held my face in the dirt. He held the gig casually, across his shoulder. "You all right? Don't want any fish?"

I just shook my head. "No, I appreciate you bringing me out here, but I just want to be alone."

Bill remained oblivious to simple social cues. "Pretty broken up about your girl, I expect. Your mama showed me pictures, she was real pretty."

I nodded. She had been.

"That Johnston fella even made the news down here," Bill said. "Shot all them people, just bad luck your girl was there."

"Sara wasn't shot," I said, digging my heel in the sand. "Johnston isn't even being charged with her murder. The crowd killed her."

"How's that?"

I didn't want to say it, but Bill had to hear it, apparently — had to have it spelled out. "She got trampled, Bill. When Johnston started shooting, everybody started running, and she got pulled away from me by the crowd. She tripped, or someone pushed her, who knows, and then they . . . stepped on her. A lot of people. Someone broke her neck. They called it an accident." She'd been so bloody, so bruised when I went to identify her . . . I couldn't stand to think about that, to remember it.

"Accident? Fuck that," Bill said. "It's that Johnston's fault, he started the panic. I'd've killed that fucker."

I could only shrug.

I heard that mewl again, louder, this time. A sound like a cat, maybe, but wetter. "Did you hear that?"

"I didn't hear shit," Bill said, too loudly. "Except for my neighbors whoopin' and hollerin' and getting all the biggest flounder. Let's get back."

I ignored him and went down the beach, toward the water, and the sound. Something glowed in the sand, a faint green shimmer, not like a reflection — more like something with its own inherent light. "What the hell," I murmured, wishing Sara were here. She'd been in grad school, studying marine biology, so she might have known — but she wasn't here. Instead of meeting my relatives and announcing our engagement, she was just ashes scattered in the Pacific, leaving me without so much as a grave to visit.

I knelt, and there was a creature partially covered by sand, unlike anything I'd ever seen. It was as big as a two–year–old kid, smooth–skinned, with long froglike legs, a lumpily oblong body, and big black eyes. Lacy fins hung limp from its legs and sides, and glowing green algae covered its body in spiraling, swooping patterns that seemed almost artistic. I was astonished. "Bill, have you ever seen anything like this?"

Bill looked down, grunted noncommittally, said "Sometimes we get weird shit washed up here. Probably some frog that got toxic waste on it or something. It's no good to eat, I'll tell you that, and you probably oughtta get away from it before you get radiation or something."

I frowned. That kind of mutation happened in comic books, not real life, though I wasn't surprised that Bill didn't understand the distinction. I reached down and brushed sand away from the thing, trying to get a better look at it.

The thing blinked, or at least moved clear membranes across its eyes, and I jumped back, startled to discover it was alive. It moved, two forelimbs appearing from underneath it, dragging itself out of the sand that half–buried it, toward the bay.

"Just leave it," Bill said, "there's flounder going to waste, and blue crabs, your mama said you love blue crab —"

The creature had little hands, and a great ragged gash in its side.

And there beside it, sticking out of the sand, was a tiny spear made of wood, with a bit of jaggedly broken driftglass for a point. The spear was over a foot long, decorated with phosphorescent algae. Black blood covered its tip.

"What the hell —" I began, and then Bill slammed his gig down, right through the crawling thing's back, and flung it far out into the bay in one smooth motion. I reached for the little spear, and Bill kicked my hand aside, making me gasp, then snatched up the spear and hurled it into the bay, too. He knelt, took a handful of sand, and started scouring the hand that had touched the spear. "You don't need to mess with shit like this, Andy. Your mama asked me to give you some attention, bring you to the jubilee and try to cheer you up, but you had to go wandering off. Now just . . . forget about that ugly fish you found. You left home, went out to California, and this ain't no business of yours anymore."

My hand stung where he'd kicked it, and I stood up, wishing I was a few inches taller, a lot more muscular. Wishing I had my never–fired gun. "What was that thing, Bill?"

"Somethin' nasty. We see 'em, every few years, and we don't touch 'em with our bare hands. We just kill them and fling them back into the bay. They don't make good eatin' — I heard eatin' them makes you go crazy, that's what some of the old folks say — and they've got that mold all over them. You'd know all this, if your daddy had lived, or if you'd stayed around long enough for somebody else here to treat you like a man." He shook his head. "We get the jubilees. Best not to think about why. What does it matter? They're just fish. Come on back, now, and I'll take you home after a while."

I stepped away from him. "I'll make my own way home."

Bill spat. "Hell with you, then. You ain't changed a bit." He walked off, spear over his shoulder, still rubbing his sand–scrubbed hand against his pant leg.

I looked down at my own hand, where I'd touched the little spear–bearer. Glowing green algae nestled in the palm of my hand.

I walked back, high up the beach, away from the water. I found Mr. McIntish, ancient as always, carefully lowering a basket of fish into the sagging bed of his pickup. "Can I get a ride home?" I asked.

He looked at me oddly, but nodded, and we got in the truck.

"We were all real sorry to hear about your girl," he said, and I murmured thanks. I'd forgotten about this aspect of small towns, everyone knowing everyone's business. I wondered if he knew about the thing I'd found on the beach, the spear–bearing things that lived in the Bay, or if that was a secret only some men knew.

"Were you down there with her, when it happened?"

"Yes sir," I said. Thinking about Sara wasn't easier than thinking about the creature from the beach, but it was different. "We were going to see a play, we were only going to ride the train a couple of stops . . ." I shook my head. "People panicked, started running. There was a sporting event or something happening that night, and lots of tourists, so the platform was packed. Sara and I got separated. I made it out. She . . . didn't." I remembered the panic, running with the crowd, like being something mindless, just part of a larger terrified organism as the mass of people pushed toward the stairs and escalators as shot after shot rang out.

I never even thought of Sara, while I was running.

I was all over bruises afterward — the marks were still fading — but I'd never fallen down, like Sara had. I'd made it out alive.

"Terrible thing," Mr. McIntish said, and I saw him glance at my hand, my green palm, and I turned it over in my lap.

"Son," he began.

"Just let me out here," I said. "I'd rather walk the last mile."

Back home, I avoided Mom, and went into the dusty bedroom I'd vacated a decade before. It was full of boxes, now, just storage space, but my bed remained, and I fell into it and slept. Awake, I grieved; to outrun grief, I'd plotted murder; murder abandoned, I only wanted to sleep. Even mysteries didn't entice me; they exhausted me.

Another dream, but not a crowded train platform this time. I was swimming in dark waters, currents warm and cold passing around me. I held a spear, and kicked in line with others like me — fast, devoted, faintly glowing. A wave of panicked fish boiled toward us, a wall of flashing terror, but my fellows and I swam against the current. We kicked steadily toward the vast thing that had risen up from the bay floor, as it did nearly every year. The thing of jaws and grasping. The thing that devoured, and worse. The thing all the fish fled from. The thing we had to try, once again, to kill.

I woke and lifted my hand before my face. The algae on my palm had shifted, and now formed a spiral, like the one on the spear–bearer's back. I traced the pattern, and little surges of sensation and image went through me: blood in the water, titanic blows, drowning in the air.

The next night I went out to a pier a few miles north, and sat on the weathered boards. I had a thermos of coffee, a blanket, and a pillow, but I sat awake and watched the water. I had my shoes off, and I held one in my hands upside–down, looking at the sole.

After the shooting at the train station, when I was above ground and first realizing Sara was gone, I'd looked down to discover I was leaving bloody footprints behind me. I'd stepped on someone down there, someone who'd been shot, maybe, or just knocked down, and in my fear, I hadn't even felt them underfoot. I vomited on the sidewalk, right onto a bloody smear from my shoes, but no one took any notice, because lots of people were throwing up, and cops were swarming everywhere.

I knew I probably hadn't stepped on Sara. The crowd had torn us apart. But. But I couldn't be sure. I'd cleaned my shoes, and gone on wearing them, but now I flung first one shoe, and then the other, into the bay. I started to shiver, though the night wasn't cold. Sara. She should have been here. The jubilee would have amazed her. My mother, always more comfortable with women than men (even her own, only son) would have liked her, probably. I sat, crying, on the pier, and couldn't help thinking what Bill would say if he saw me weeping.

I lay back on the cold boards, gazing up at the hard stars and the half–eaten–by–darkness moon. Grief was a dark mass moving inside me, sucking the air out of my body, and I fled before it. I looked at the algae on my hand, the delicate starburst shape it had assumed.

I could leave, and fly home, where my gun waited. I'd never fired it, but it was loaded, for Barrett Wayne Johnston, or maybe for someone else who deserved to die.

Or I could go buy a fishing gig, and get some scuba gear, though I hadn't gone diving in years. I could take a boat out tomorrow, onto the bay, and dive under the waves. I could look for faint green glows beneath me, and try to find a monster I could actually kill.

About the author:
Tim Pratt's stories have appeared in *The Best American Short Stories*, *The Year's Best Fantasy*, and other nice places. His first novel, *The Strange Adventures of Rangergirl*, came out in late 2005. His new collection, *Hart & Boot & Other Stories*, will appear in Summer 2006. He lives in Oakland, California, with his wife Heather Shaw, and together they co–edit a literary 'zine called Flytrap.

About the artist:
John Jude Palencar's award–winning paintings have appeared on hundreds of book covers in over thirty countries, in publications including *TIME Magazine*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, *National Geographic Magazine and Television*, and *IDEA Magazine* in Japan. His paintings have been featured in the exhibition "Images of Ireland" held at the National Museum in Dublin; in the exhibition "As Seen From Ohio: Nine Illustrators" at the Centro Cultural Recoleta in Argentina; in "The Spectrum Retrospective Exhibition" held at The Society of Illustrators Museum of American Illustration in New York City; and in group exhibitions at university museums and galleries across the U.S. To see more of John Jude's distinctive paintings, please visit his website. A 2006 calendar of his work is currently available in most bookstores and on Amazon.com.